

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2020

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NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2020

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THE UPPER ROOM®

WHERE THE WORLD MEETS TO PRAY

Stephen D. Bryant, Publisher

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COVER ART INTERPRETATION



Visitation

Artist: John Meng-Frecker
(USA, Contemporary)

Interpreter: Kathryn A. Kimball,
**Curator, The Upper Room Chapel/
Christian Art Museum**

The first chapter of Luke tells the amazing story of Elizabeth, who, once unable to conceive, was expecting a child. Luke 1:39-45 describes Mary's visit to Elizabeth and Elizabeth's elation at being visited by the mother of the Lord. Mary greeted her cousin Elizabeth, and — at the sound of Mary's voice — Elizabeth felt her baby leap within her womb.

Though titled, "Visitation," this painting could easily be called, "Gifts of Joy." The golden sunlight is a visual representation of God's love poured out through the Holy Spirit. God's love surrounds the women and even floods the house and spills from the doorway. These were ordinary women leading ordinary lives until the Holy Spirit visited them. Elizabeth would give birth to John the Baptist and Mary to Jesus, God's Son. Imagine the joy each woman must have felt!

We see God working through ordinary people in scripture time and time again. God can work through each of us as well. Perhaps the art on the cover invites us to respond to a nudge by the Holy Spirit to call a friend, visit a family member, or to serve in a charity. The Christmas season is filled with opportunities to share our gifts with others. What gifts can we give? May we remember that the Holy Spirit continues to visit us in our day-to-day lives, inviting us to acts of mercy, compassion, and love. May the Holy Spirit visit and bless you this holy season.

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Seeking the Christ Child

So [the shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

— Luke 2:16 (NRSV)

I was terribly lonely my first semester of college. I was attending a school several hours from home and knew no one before setting foot on campus. Desperately wishing for the familiarity of home and the support and reassurance of lifelong friends, I was not actively seeking to build a new life at school. Finally, at the urging of my mother, I began to look for ways to fill my lonely hours. I did odd jobs around campus, spent time getting to know my professors, and attended some club meetings. As I built new relationships my loneliness ebbed, and I began to feel more connected to my new home. When I went seeking new relationships and endeavors, I found life-giving friendships and a new sense of purpose.

In this issue, many writers describe feelings of loneliness and the unique ways they search for companionship and contentment in the midst of those feelings. The result for these writers — and for me — is a deeper relationship with God who came to us as a baby that first Christmas.

In the Gospel accounts of the Christmas story, none of the key players stumbled upon the Christ child by accident. Encountering Christ required action and effort. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the census, the shepherds got up from the field and went to see the child in the manger, the magi followed a star to the place where Jesus lay. Each person had to make a decision to seek this child of God. But all who did found a gift beyond their expectations; they found the Light of the World.

This season, let us go out to renew friendships and show compassion to our neighbors. In so doing, I believe we will find the Christ child once again.

— Lindsay Gray
Editorial Director



From the Archives

The following Christmas Worship outline was printed in the November-December 1963 issue of *The Upper Room*.

Christmas Worship Service for Family Use

For this service you will need a stand, or small table, or worship center. If you have a crèche set up, remove all the contents except the empty manger and Mary and Joseph. If you do not have a crèche, fill a small box with dry grass as a manger and place Mary and Joseph beside it at one end. Set up an unlighted candle behind the crèche or box manger. Have on hand figurines representing the baby Jesus, shepherds, and wise men. Also Bibles and hymnals, or booklets of Christmas carols, will be needed. The carols may be read or sung. One verse of each will be satisfactory. Let each person in the family know what his or her part will be. Adapt the service to your family.

Prayer Carol: "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"

Read Luke 2:1-7.

Place the figurine of the baby Jesus in the manger.

Light the candle.

Carol: "O Little Town of Bethlehem"

Read Luke 2:8-16.

Place the figurines of the shepherds about the manger.

Carol: "The First Noel"

While the shepherds are being removed from the manger scene, read Luke 2:20.

Read Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11.

Place the figurines of the wise men about the manger.

Carol: "As with Gladness Men of Old"

Use the Christmas Day meditation (see p. 66) and offer your family prayers.

Carol: "Fairest Lord Jesus"

— Russell Q. Chilcote

Where the World Meets to Pray

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This year marks 40 years of distributing *El Aposento Alto*, the Spanish edition of *The Upper Room*, in the Dominican Republic.

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A Quechua radio version of *The Upper Room* was broadcast in Cuzco, Perú, as a pilot program to reach cultures and societies with oral traditions.

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WONDERFULLY MADE

READ Psalm 139:1-14*

SUN
NOV 1
2020

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

— Psalm 139:14 (NIV)

Growing up as a dark-skinned boy, I endured constant pain from bullies who would call me “charcoal boy.” These taunts seriously affected my self-esteem and self-confidence. I would come home from school dejected and in tears. I became angry with God for making me dark and — as I thought at the time — ugly. I was envious of my lighter-skinned friends. I struggled to accept myself.

Now, I know better: God is black. God is fair. God is yellow-skinned. God is brown. God is short. God is tall. God is man. God is woman. I believe so because God made us and exclaimed that we are very good.

Foretelling the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the scripture says, “He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isa. 53:2).

When we reject our own or someone else’s physical appearance, we reject God’s

wonderful creation. Regardless of how we look, we are beautiful and precious in God’s sight, made in God’s image. Praise God, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I am a beautiful creation
of God.

Prayer: O Lord, thank you for making us in your wonderful image. When the world makes us doubt it, remind us of our beauty as your children. Amen.

Wati Mollier (Nagaland, India)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE BEING BULLIED

* The Bible readings are selected with great care, and we urge you to include the suggested reading in your devotional time.

MON
NOV 2
2020

A NEW WAY TO SERVE

READ 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

Paul said, "My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

— Acts 20:24 (NIV)

When I became a Christian 25 years ago, I took seriously Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19: "Go and make disciples of all nations." I worked as an interpreter with the many foreign missionaries that came to my hometown of Saint Petersburg, Russia.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God can show me new ways to serve.

When I moved to the United States, my interpretation ministry ended. I was living on a farm and raising four children; I could

not go on a mission. I read Galatians 6:2, "Carry each other's burdens," and I asked God to reveal ways I could work for others and for God.

Soon I learned about a woman making quilts and selling them at a charity auction. Proceeds from that auction would be used to build wells in arid areas. I believed that God wanted me to help this woman in her work by giving her several boxes of quilt fabric. Later I learned that the quilt made out of my fabric was sold for the amount necessary to build one well. I praised the Lord, who not only calls us to participate in missions but also shows each of us unique ways to do so.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to understand how we can help to share your good news with all people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Tatiana Claudy (Indiana, USA)

DRENCHED IN GRACE

TUES
NOV 3
2020

READ 2 Kings 5:1-14

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and
renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

— Psalm 51:10 (NIV)

In today's reading, Naaman went to Elisha hoping to be healed of leprosy. Naaman was disappointed when Elisha conveyed a message through his servant to wash seven times in the river in order to be healed. The instructions sounded like a joke. But Naaman's servants reminded him that he would have been willing to follow complicated instructions and questioned why he wouldn't perform the simple task requested of him. After following Elisha's orders, Naaman came out of the water of the Jordan rejoicing and healed.

As a widow who is well acquainted with the "disease" of loneliness, I know how quickly its episodes can turn feverish. My mind can be overcome with longing for someone or something to make me

feel less lonesome. The story of Naaman reminds me that the remedy for loneliness is not found by seeking noteworthy objects

or accomplishing grand tasks. My loneliness can be cured by simply drenching myself in God's river of grace.

I have found that the best way to "drench" myself is to consistently pray Psalm 51:10. This practice brings me out of my loneliness joyful — dripping with grace and restored in mind and spirit.

Prayer: Healer of our souls, teach us to soak ourselves in your grace during our times of need. Renew a steadfast spirit within us. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Praying scripture leads
me to God's grace.

Virginia Jelinek (Texas, USA)

WED
NOV 4
2020

A SPIRITUAL PLUMB

READ 1 John 3:16-24

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

— Galatians 5:25 (NRSV)

When I was a teenager, my father often took me to help him in his trade, bricklaying. While helping him, the instruments that most fascinated me were the plumb and the level. A plumb is a type of pendulum, and a level is a kind of ruler with a reservoir filled with liquid. We would use the plumb to make sure the wall was aligned vertically and the level to make sure it was aligned horizontally.

Both instruments are crucial in determining the alignment of a house or wall. A structure must have good vertical and horizontal alignments in order to remain standing for a long time. If either alignment is ignored, a structure cannot withstand temperature changes, strong winds, or water.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I can deepen my relationship with God by caring for others.

We can think about our relationships in similar terms. Our relationship with God shapes the kind of relationships we have with others. And we need a spiritual plumb and level to help us remain in right relationship with God and others. The word of God, prayer, and remaining in communion with Christ act as our plumb and level and help keep us aligned.

Prayer: Blessed God, we recognize your call to love our neighbors. Help us to see you in those around us and to strengthen our relationship with others and with you. Amen.

Domingos José Cazombo (Luanda, Angola)

WATERED BY THE WORD

THUR
NOV 5
2020

READ Psalm 1:1-6

*They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season, and
their leaves do not wither.*

— Psalm 1:3 (NRSV)

In the spring of 2017, tour groups from all over the world were drawn to a desert area in the United States. The attraction was radiant carpets of wildflowers that had not been seen in 20 years. Seeds that had been dormant for decades for lack of water had germinated because of an unusually wet winter. This resulted in fields of brilliant orange poppies, desert lilies, blazing stars, and the tall, spiny ocotillo.

How vital water is to our existence! In today's reading, the psalmist uses the analogy of water to teach us how to be spiritually healthy and productive. Those who study God's word and follow God's law will thrive and bear fruit. Without the word, they would be like the desert in a dry year.

How well do I keep my soul watered? What seeds lie dormant in my heart for lack of spiritual water? If I watered those seeds by meditating on the word of God, what beauty might I bring to a dry and thirsty world?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the privilege of serving you. Help us to refresh a spiritually dry and thirsty world. Amen.

Madeline Peterson (Nebraska, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE EXPERIENCING THE EFFECTS
OF CLIMATE CHANGE

FRI
NOV 6
2020

TAKEN AWAY

READ Isaiah 6:1-7

The seraph touched my mouth with [a live coal] and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

— Isaiah 6:7 (NRSV)

As I write this, I have 246 days remaining until I am released from prison. In preparation for my return to society, I pray that God will help me release my guilt. I know that I must do so in order to live an abundant life and find peace and joy.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God can free me to move forward with joy.

I think of Isaiah who felt guilty as he stood before God. Isaiah said, "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). But

scripture says that Isaiah's sins were blotted out. Once God took away Isaiah's guilt, Isaiah was ready to go and do God's work.

Guilt can be all-consuming. It is like a chain that keeps us in one place, unable to move forward. With guilt, we may struggle to find peace or joy; we might find it difficult to have healthy relationships; we might not live abundant lives. And we probably aren't able to participate fully in God's work. However, God can take away our guilt and break the chains that hold us back. When we release our guilt to God, we can be like Isaiah and live abundant lives, sent by God to do God's work.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for taking away our guilt. Help us to do your work with confidence. Amen.

Steve Wakefield (Georgia, USA)

SERVING WITH SINCERITY

SAT
NOV 7
2020

READ 1 Peter 4:1-11

If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

— 1 Peter 4:11 (NIV)

One of the leaders in my Christian fellowship asked if I wanted to help with small fellowship groups for children. At first I was reluctant because I had no experience serving children. I had grown up in a non-Christian family and had not attended Sunday school as a child. But my leader encouraged me and convinced me to serve.

I tried to serve with all my heart. After a while, I found that serving children was not as difficult as I had thought. It is fun and has its own challenges.

Serving others does not require that we have certain skills or even prior experience. Serving only requires a willing heart and a desire to learn. When our hearts want to serve with love and sincerity, God can use us and will help us. We do not need to worry about whether we are capable or have everything we need in our ministry. If we joyfully do God's work, God will provide whatever we need. When we try our best, we can let God take care of the rest.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
All I need to serve God is a sincere and loving heart.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for opportunities to serve you. Teach us to love and serve those to whom you guide us. Amen.

Meliana Santoso (East Java, Indonesia)

SUN
NOV 8
2020

ACTS OF LOVE

READ John 13:31-35

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

— John 13:35 (NIV)

When I was in nursing school, I spent a few weeks working on the pediatric floor at a hospital in Georgia. One of the patients I took care of was a young girl with a burned arm. Day after day, I cared for her wound, removing the old bandage, washing her burn with saline solution, and placing

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God's love can work through me all the time.

a new bandage on her arm. Every time I took care of the girl, I asked God to help me be gentle and kind to her. I told her how brave she was and that her arm was getting

better and would soon be as good as new.

I took care of her for only about a week. On my last day on that floor, I was saying goodbye to my patients. The girl motioned for me to bend down next to her. She kissed me on the cheek and said, "Thank you."

Although it has been 40 years, I still remember that little girl. Love and kindness are precious gifts that everyone can share with others. Jesus told his disciples that their love was the mark that the world would see. I tended the little girl's burned arm, but God gave me the love and kindness to minister to her in a gentle and kind manner. Because God loved me first, I am able to share God's love with others.

Prayer: Dear Lord, because you loved us first, we are able to love others. Help us to find opportunities to share your love every day. Amen.

Michael A. Campbell (Tennessee, USA)

GOD CARRIES ALL

MON
NOV 9
2020

READ Psalm 23:1-3

[The LORD] restores my soul.

— Psalm 23:3 (NRSV)

One night I woke up around midnight feeling anxious, and everything just snowballed from there. I was worrying about areas where I felt like a failure. My long list of responsibilities loomed over me, and I could not find peace. Finally, I prayed for God's help, and Psalm 23 came to mind. This psalm has always been a soothing balm for me as I visualize God's green pastures and still waters. But this time God showed me something different.

Verses two and three do not begin with the pronoun *I* but with the pronoun *he*, meaning God. While I had been wrestling with all the things that *I* had not been doing, the psalm was showing me that *God* is the one who is in charge of the doing. I do not restore my own soul. I do not lead myself in paths of righteousness. I do not fulfill any of the promises here — not one! It is God who does the guiding, providing, restoring, and all other good things. I had been struggling needlessly with burdens that were not mine to carry.

The heavy weights of worry and anxiety began to be replaced by peace, and I was able to go back to sleep. Nothing was left for me to worry over. God had it all covered.

Prayer: Good Shepherd, thank you for reminding us that we are not in charge. Help us to find peace in you. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
The Shepherd carries all my burdens.

Belle Todd (Texas, USA)

TUES
NOV 10
2020

GOD'S PROMISES

READ 2 Peter 3:8-18

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

— 2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

As a teenager I was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) through Al-Anon, a fellowship that offers a program of recovery for family and friends of alcoholics. My mom was an active contributor to the local Al-Anon support group and brought me to meetings because of the deteriorating relationship between me and my dad, who was an alcoholic.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I can trust in God's promises.

Throughout my adult life, I have overcome many trials and tribulations including excessive drinking. I

have attempted to make deals and to negotiate with God in exchange for a healthier and more abundant life. By the grace of God, I finally decided to address my excessive drinking by joining an AA program.

This faith-based program and my own spiritual journey have reaffirmed for me that God makes promises and keeps them. I now see my exposure to Al-Anon as a teenager as a "God thing" that helped me know how to address my alcoholism. I trust God's words in Jeremiah 29:11 that God wants to give me hope and a future, because God revealed to me a path to salvation. We can trust God's promise to us: "I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Gen. 28:15).

Prayer: Dear God, you have always kept your promises. Help us to keep our promises to you, to ourselves, and to others. Amen.

Kevin Gamble (Ohio, USA)

SHARING THE SPIRIT

WED
NOV 11
2020

READ 2 Kings 2:1-12

Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

— 2 Kings 2:9 (NRSV)

Recently, I received an email regarding a friend who was struggling with serious issues after surgery. "Please join us in prayer tomorrow at 9:10 AM," the message said. Usually I would rather pray with someone face-to-face than online, but that day was different. Friends from all over responded to the call. They emailed, they tweeted, they posted the invitation on Facebook. Like all the others, I set a reminder to be in prayer at 9:10.

I thought of Elisha, who followed Elijah from Bethel to Jericho to Jordan. Time and time again, people said to him, "Do you know that today the LORD will take your master away from you?" And Elisha answered, "Yes, I know; be silent." True friends, no matter how far away they live, never leave us. They are there in joy and sorrow, in life and death.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Prayer extends beyond all boundaries.

When the time arrived, we gathered online to pray for our friend. Like Elisha, who begged for a double share of Elijah's spirit, we prayed that God would bless our friend with Christ's spirit of eternal life. May we have the strength and courage always to be present, heart and soul, with those we love.

Prayer: Dear God, grant us the guidance of your spirit to remain faithful to family and friends. Amen.

Patricia Marks (Georgia, USA)

THUR
NOV 12
2020

GOD'S ABIDING LOVE

READ Isaiah 41:8-10

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

— Isaiah 41:10 (NIV)

I was born with a withered Achilles tendon, and I walk with a limp. My parents took me to many doctors in search of a remedy to no avail. Despairing, I concluded that I would walk with a limp for the rest of my life.

When I was 15, I began suffering back pains. I told my mother I was ready to see a specialist and that if I needed to

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

God provides strength in weakness.

undergo surgery, I would be willing to endure it. She confided that my health had been the focus of her constant prayers all these years.

Learning of my mother's constant prayers for me prompted me to think about the ways God's provision has been evident throughout my life — from the medical care I received to the resources needed for the surgery to allowing me to pursue my studies and be at the top of my class. Today I am 22 years old. I praise and thank God because in my disability I have gained a greater understanding of God's grace. I will always depend on God and know that God's power is made perfect in weakness.

Prayer: Creator God, thank you for guiding us in our daily journey and for continuing to sustain us. Refresh our spirits with your abiding love. Amen.

Isaías Natanael Parra Almeida (Pichincha, Ecuador)

STRONG ROOTS

FRI
NOV 13
2020

READ Ezekiel 2:8 – 3:3

Happy are those who . . . delight . . . in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.

— Psalm 1:1-2 (NRSV)

The young live oak tree in our front yard was struggling. Battered by Hurricane Florence, it was leaning to one side and on the verge of being uprooted. My husband and I had staked it to help it stand upright, but every time a strong gust of wind stirred we had to stake it again. Finally, after about three months, the root system became fully entrenched and the tree could stand alone.

Watching that tree endure the aftermath of the storm reminded me of the importance of staying grounded in the word of God on a daily basis. In Psalm 1, the writer calls us to meditate on God's word in order to bear good fruit that ripens and matures. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of eating the word so that it could feed and transform the Israelites into the people God created them to be.

Spiritual disciplines are the means of grace that enable us to send out deep roots, to anchor us in God's word. The faithful practice

of worship, prayer, and service can help fuel the grace we need to thrive as co-workers with God. Then, as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, we can shine brightly and our good works will glorify our Father in heaven (see Matt. 5:16).

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The Bible keeps me rooted in
God, in whose image
I was created.

Prayer: Gracious Father, show us how to take in your word openly, humbly, and attentively. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Judith Brown (North Carolina, USA)

FEED THE HUNGRY

READ Matthew 14:13-21

“Bring them here to me,” [Jesus] said. . . . [The people] all ate and were satisfied.

— Matthew 14:18, 20 (NIV)

My wife grew up in northwest Indiana. Her mother, Miriam, was a teacher and housewife, and her father, Henry, was a farmer and the local postmaster. Their modest home faced the railroad tracks. In 1929, the United States stock market crashed, which contributed to an economic depression. Many people were out of work, and the economy did not begin to recover until years later. Many people had no place to live or sleep and some “rode the rails,” living in boxcars and stopping to eat where they could. Miriam always provided food and drink to those who showed up at her door. Soon word spread among the folks in the cars that they could stop and be fed on her porch.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What is God calling me to do to help feed those who are hungry?

Miriam lived out the message, “Bring the hungry to me, and I will feed them.” Miriam’s story reminds me of the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Jesus fed the people who came to hear his message by turning five loaves of bread and two fish into enough food for everyone. While Miriam couldn’t multiply her food, she knew that she could help feed the hungry. And she did so in the name of Jesus.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for people who care for others in your name. Help us to act when we see opportunities to serve others. Amen.

Charles Heath (Hawaii, USA)

Real people. Real stories. Real faith.



Nancy Lewis-Shelton (p. 30) is a retired educator who volunteers with the food bank at her church.



John Bown (p. 24) enjoys reading, movies, and outdoor activities.



Merry Gultom (p. 29) has taught many different grade levels both in churches and in public schools.



Retired marketing executive Griffith Harlow (p. 57) volunteers as a tutor to disadvantaged children.



Tom Johnson (p. 28) was once an avid surfer. He now enjoys skiing, camping and traveling with his wife.



Susan Stombaugh (p. 36) is an office manager at an accounting firm where her daughter is the CPA and her boss.



Jon Goeringer (p. 31) is a retired minister. He now enjoys writing and researching the Bible in a theological way.



Mabel Ninan (p. 44) is a Christian nonfiction writer who enjoys reading and dancing. Pizza is her least favorite food.

Share YOUR story today!

The people pictured on this page did.

See devotional.upperroom.org/guidelines for writers guidelines or send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to the editorial office address (p. 1).
Submit online: submissions.upperroom.org

SUN
NOV 15
2020

GLIMPSES OF GOD'S POWER

READ Genesis 2:4-9, 15

What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

— Psalm 8:4-5 (NRSV)

Warm spring days often bring badgers out early, so my husband and I set out on our first badger watch of the year with great anticipation, hoping to catch sight of one. On this occasion, however, the badgers didn't come — but it wasn't a wasted evening. As I stood in silence, just waiting, I was struck by the brilliance of our Creator.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
In creation, I see just a small fragment of God's greatness.

I stood behind an enormous oak that hid me from view. I have read that oak trees can live up to a thousand years, and I felt dwarfed by its powers of endurance.

Then I realized that as God looked at the scene, God placed significance on me, not the tree. God is the Ancient of Days, and that tree represents no more than a breath in God's eternal plan. Meanwhile, God's people are greatly valued, crowned with glory and honor. Like the psalmist, I wondered, *Why us?*

I am astonished that God cares for us. As I spend time in the natural world, I am constantly rejoicing at how big God is and how incredible it is that God should delight in us.

Prayer: Creator of all, we see your fingerprints throughout creation. Thank you for the daily encouragement this awareness gives us. Amen.

Caroline Greville (England, United Kingdom)

Prayer Focus: TO REMEMBER THAT I AM
SIGNIFICANT TO GOD

WHAT CAN I DO?

READ Exodus 35:20-35

MON
NOV 16
2020

*We, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.
We have gifts that differ according to the
grace given to us.*

— Romans 12:5-6 (NRSV)

I don't enjoy cooking or washing dishes. So when members of the church prepare dinner each night of revival meetings, I don't volunteer. "Are you going to be here to help?" the dinner director asked.

Ugh, I thought. I told her we had somewhere else

to be. But it turned out that we were able to leave early, and we arrived at church 15 minutes before the revival meeting started. I went to the kitchen to see if I could help and found six stressed women struggling to clean up in time to attend the service. "What can I do?" I asked.

"We need the tables washed," one answered. *I can do that*, I thought as I grabbed a wet towel and began to clean the messy tables. To my surprise we cleaned up on time, and I was glad I had offered to help.

That night reminded me of the Israelites building the tabernacle. Many willingly brought offerings. God gave specific talents to some, like Bezalel and Oholiab, engravers and embroiderers. Washing tables may not be as high on the gifted list as cooking for two hundred hungry people, but it was part of the ministry. Each of us working together provided revival attendees with filled bellies, ready to feast their souls on God's word.

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for giving us abilities that we can use in your service. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Lucinda J. Rollings (Indiana, USA)

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Each act of service I perform
is a gift to God.

TUES
NOV 17
2020

HUMILITY

READ Philippians 2:3-11

Haughty eyes and a proud heart — the unplowed field of the wicked — produce sin.

— Proverbs 21:4 (NIV)

One of my joys in retirement has been finding more time to read the Bible. I have been amazed by how many verses and stories pertain to humility. They have prompted me to reflect on how often my ego comes into play and manifests itself in negative ways. Pride has plagued humanity since

the beginning. And our culture constantly bombards us with messages that speak to gratifying our desires through possessions, appearance, or status.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I will look for opportunities to follow the example of Jesus.

What a contrast it is to reflect on the life of our Lord and Savior! Though his coming was heralded for centuries, Jesus' arrival was humble: in a stable and surrounded by animals. Everything Jesus did during his time on earth reflected humility, including his choice of disciples and people he associated with. His humility continued to the very end of his life on earth, when he submitted to the will of God, was arrested and tried as a criminal, and suffered torture and death on a cross.

Jesus' humble life provides a model for us to follow. Christ the King came not to be served, but to serve (see Matt. 20:28). We can embrace that attitude and strive to do the same.

Prayer: Dear Lord, when our pride and ego rise up, help us remember to model our lives after the humble example of Christ. Amen.

John D. Bown (Minnesota, USA)

THE CARD

WED
NOV 18
2020

READ Hebrews 10:19-25

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

— Hebrews 10:24 (NIV)

I am involved in two ministries at my church. It's not a large church, and it sometimes seems like a relatively small number of people do most of the work. So it is easy to feel underappreciated and unsupported. I was feeling this way recently and was growing increasingly bitter at the idea that so few seem to care about the church's ministries. Then I received a thank-you card expressing gratitude for all my efforts and for my willingness to serve God. That card changed my attitude.

First, it took my eyes off myself and put them where they belong — on God and God's sufficiency. Second, it lifted my lagging spirits. I faced my next ministry duties with a vigor I hadn't felt in a while. And third, it reminded me how vital it is to obey Hebrews 10:24: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

Spurring one another on can be as easy as an encouraging word after church, an email, a card, or a call. It can even be anonymous! A simple "I'm praying for you and the valuable service you are doing for the kingdom of God" can have a huge, positive impact on someone's life and faith. I know.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
A kind word can make a huge difference in God's kingdom.

Prayer: Dear Lord, keep us in tune with the needs of our brothers and sisters, and remind us to be generous with our encouragement. Amen.

Esther MacDonald (Quebec, Canada)

THUR
NOV 19
2020

SOMETHING NEW

READ 1 Peter 4:12-19

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

— 1 Peter 4:12 (NIV)

There is a legend about a cook preparing a meal one night about 2,000 years ago. As he stirred together a few ordinary kitchen ingredients, the mixture suddenly exploded, which led to the invention of fireworks.

Similarly, the unexpected hardships in my life have often led to the invention of something new in me. Though I may never fully understand why financial troubles or health issues arise, my hardships have humbled me and strengthened my character. They have opened my heart to see God's loving actions in my life, which time and time again have brought comfort and hope. I have learned to surrender more of myself to God when I face seemingly impossible circumstances. In turn, God has provided the guidance I desperately needed.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today I will look for evidence that God is creating something new in me.

God knows how to blend the messy circumstances in our lives to help us grow. When we trust the Master Inventor to create something new from the explosions that disrupt our lives, personal growth can take place.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your kindness and guidance through the unforeseen circumstances in our lives. Amen.

Doug Lim (California, USA)

A PILLAR OF FIRE

FRI
NOV 20
2020

READ Exodus 13:17-22

The LORD went ahead of them . . . by night in a pillar of fire to give them light.

— Exodus 13:21 (NIV)

Backyard bonfires are one of my favorite childhood memories. Recently, my neighbor had one in her yard. The air smelled like smoke from burning wood, and the dark summer sky glowed orange as flames crackled and popped. With the brilliant blaze emanating from my neighbor's yard, I reminisced about family gatherings and marshmallows toasted over a smoldering fire. I remember my father stoking the flames as a pillar of fire illuminated the sky.

Beyond my childhood memories, the bonfire brought to mind God's guiding the Israelites at night in the desert. God became a "pillar of fire to give them light" that kept "its place in front of the people" (Exod. 13:21-22). The Israelites received God's guidance by following a pillar of fire.

We receive God's guidance by practicing spiritual disciplines. After my husband had a heart attack,

I was lost in a "desert" of fear and anxiety. I received God's benevolent guidance through prayer, memorizing scripture, and writing in my journal. These practices led me to God's calming peace so I could cope with my husband's illness. God's word promises that "the LORD will guide you always" (Isa. 58:11). Whatever challenge we're facing, when we ask God to send light and truth to guide us (see Ps. 43:3), God's guiding light will shine on us.

Prayer: Faithful God, thank you for your guidance as we traverse life's unfamiliar paths. Amen.

Debra Pierce (Massachusetts, USA)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE RECOVERING FROM
A HEART ATTACK

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
What spiritual disciplines help me to follow God's light?

FORGIVENESS

READ Psalm 103:1-13

[The LORD] does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. . . . as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

— Psalm 103:10, 12 (NRSV)

I've said and done many things I'm not proud of in my life. When I consider these transgressions, I wish I could go back in time and skip committing them in the first place. But I cannot retract my hurtful words or actions, and I cannot

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

No matter my past, God's loving mercy is for me.

reasonably anticipate forgiveness from those I have offended. However, I can make a commitment to do better going forward.

When I read Psalm 103, I imagine David isolated, living with the consequences of his own quite serious transgressions, for which he offers no excuses. The words of the psalm make me believe that David regretted his misbehavior but took solace in knowing that God removes and casts our sins away from us "as far as the east is from the west." I like this perspective: that from God's viewpoint our sins are out of sight.

So when we have misgivings over our past iniquities, we don't have to dwell on them. Instead of living in fear of retribution, we can focus on God's loving mercy and kindness.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for your infinite patience and forgiveness. Help us to extend the same forgiveness to others that you have extended to us. Amen.

Tom Johnson (Nevada, USA)

READ Colossians 3:1-11

*If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here!*

— 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)

One morning I looked at my flowerpots, and I was sad to see that they were overgrown with grass and weeds because I had neglected them. I decided to tend to them, hoping to make them look more beautiful and well maintained. The growth of my plants had been stunted by the grass and weeds, so I pulled out all the weeds and added fertilizer to allow the plants to produce new, healthy growth.

When I finished fixing my flowerpots, I thought, *So it is with me spiritually. My life would be more beautiful if I were to get rid of the grass and weeds in me.* Worry, disappointment, and heartache can consume me. These “grasses” and “weeds” make it difficult for me to grow into a new creation in God. It is not always easy, but I want to continue to grow in faith so that I can glorify God through my life. I hope that as God’s children we can all welcome new growth in our faith and our lives.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What do I need to clear away so that I can grow spiritually today?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for encouraging us to grow. Help us as we strive to do our best for you. In the name of Jesus who taught us to pray, “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation” (Luke 11:2-4, NIV). Amen.

Merry Gultom (West Java, Indonesia)

MON
NOV 23
2020

GOD'S FAVOR

READ James 4:13-17

You do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life?

— James 4:14 (NIV)

During my training as a teacher, I had to implement a reward program in a classroom. Students earned tokens for good behavior and excellent work. These were traded on selected days for small prizes and privileges. My students quickly became obsessed with the rewards.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I do not have to earn
God's favor.

But I struggled as I watched the frustrated faces of students who failed to meet the academic and behavioral standards. The day after I finished collect-

ing data to complete my class requirements, I terminated the token program. A student who struggled with reading came to me and said, "Thanks. I hated those tokens." Much of society says that we gain power, possessions, and privileges by how we look, act, and perform. But that is not how we gain God's favor.

Not long ago, four words from James 4:14 caught my attention: "What is your life?" When I thought about my life, I realized it was time to reevaluate some of my choices. I prayed for guidance to know what to do with my God-given resources and how to follow God's will in using them. I often recall those four words. They are a reminder that my life must embrace knowing and following God's will.

Prayer: Dear God, grant us the strength to resist the appeals of worldly influences and learn to live for your purposes. Help us to understand your will for our lives. Amen.

Nancy Lewis-Shelton (Missouri, USA)

ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

TUES
NOV 24
2020

READ Matthew 22:34-40

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

— Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)

In the mid-1950s, I was a teenager working with some men loading turkeys for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. We worked hard putting the turkeys in crates and loading them on trucks, then we stopped to go to town for lunch. We all sat down at one big table, but the man who owned the restaurant came to us and said, "I can't serve that black man who is with you; he will have to eat in the back." I asked, "Why? Lafayette has been working with us all morning." The owner replied, "He can't eat in here." We asked the restaurant owner if we could all eat in the back together. When he said yes, we all moved to the back room.

That encounter upset me and has stayed with me all my life. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 that we are all one in Christ. We

are black, white, and a lot of other shades in between, and God created all of us. Knowing this and remembering Jesus' commandment in Matthew 22:37-39, shouldn't we all go out of our way to treat one another with love and respect? After all, we are all children of God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Any time I see discrimination against one of God's children, I will speak up.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to recognize discrimination and to go out of our way to treat one another with the love you have given us. Amen.

Jon C. Goeringer (Maryland, USA)

WED
NOV 25
2020

EVERY STEP

READ **Philippians 3:12-14**

*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning.*

— Lamentations 3:22-23 (NRSV)

I wear a fitness tracker on my wrist that logs the steps I take each day. Some days — like the time my family and I walked more than thirty thousand steps in New York City — I exceed my daily goal of ten thousand steps. But most days I fall way short. I often glance at my total step count at the end of the day and wish I had tried harder to meet my goal. But every morning the step counter begins at zero. No matter

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Each day is a new chance to walk with God.

what my count was the day before — two thousand or two hundred thousand — the next day is always a clean slate.

My walk with God is a lot like that. Some days I walk closely with God, aligning my steps with God's. Those are great days! But sometimes I follow my own agenda, barely checking to see if I am following God's path. The good news is that every day begins with a clean slate. If I've had a great day with God, I can't rest and coast through the next day — the count is at zero, and I have work to do for the kingdom. Similarly, on the days when I struggle in my walk with God, I can go to sleep knowing that tomorrow is a brand new day and offers me a fresh start.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for walking with us every day. Help us to align our steps with yours. Amen.

Carolyn Chapman (Missouri, USA)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE BEGINNING A NEW
FITNESS PRACTICE

ALWAYS GRATEFUL

THUR
NOV 26
2020

READ Luke 17:11-19

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him.

— Luke 17:15-16 (NIV)

In several countries around the world, including my home country of Brazil, people celebrate a day of thanksgiving. In the United States, Thanksgiving Day brings together family members, friends, and neighbors.

But we don't always find it easy or remember to express our gratitude. In today's reading, Jesus had healed ten lepers, but only one of them thanked him. Jesus asked, "Where are the other nine?"

We are invited to be grateful to God, not just on a special day or at mealtime, but always. We are called to live life as an expression

of gratitude for what God has done and will do and for the Holy Spirit, who is with us in all circumstances and knows our reality. When we have grateful hearts, we can welcome God's love and feel God's welcoming of us. Then as a response to God's love, we can make our lives, work, and service all offerings of thanks to God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
With a grateful heart, I can serve God and my neighbors.

Prayer: We are grateful, O God, for all that you are and all that you do. Give us a constant spirit of gratitude to you and one another, offering our lives and talents to you and our neighbors. Amen.

Nelson Luiz Campos Leite (São Paulo, Brazil)

FRI
NOV 27
2020

POWER IN WEAKNESS

READ 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

[The Lord] said to [Paul], "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

— 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NIV)

There's an old spiritual that begins: "I don't feel no ways tired." The song goes on to say that even though the road is not easy, God has been with us until now and will not abandon us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God can turn my weariness
into worship.

I wish I could say that the words to this song ring true for me all the time, but the truth is sometimes I do get tired along my Christian

journey. In fact, I admit that at times I have felt that God did leave me. But when reality sets in, I realize that it's me — operating on my own strength, my own agenda, and my flawed humanness — who has left God.

In truth, it is when I am tired and feeling alone that I should be most dependent on God. Paul confirms this in our scripture for today: "The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"

In those moments when I'm feeling defeated, I can find peace in the presence of God. My weariness never lasts because God, at the right time, steps in to surround me with love — love that will never let me go. Then I know that God didn't bring me this far to leave me.

Prayer: O Lord, when we grow weary, give us strength to continue, knowing your love and power will sustain us. Amen.

Kathy Gaillard (Wisconsin, USA)

GOD HELPS

SAT
NOV 28
2020

READ Psalm 121:1-8

*My help comes from the LORD, the maker
of heaven and earth.*

— Psalm 121:2 (CEB)

When I worked for the Gujarat Tract and Book Society, I was responsible for the distribution, promotion, and sales of literature. I once visited a church in South Gujarat to preach and to promote publications, including the Gujarati edition of *The Upper Room*. Early in the morning, when I reached the village, I needed to get to the church but had heavy parcels of literature with me. Waiting for a vehicle to take me to the church, I began to worry that I would be late. So I started praying for help.

As I prayed, I saw a young man passing by on a motorbike. He stopped near me and asked if I wanted a ride to the church.

I said yes, and he helped me reach my destination on time. The pastor welcomed me, and after the church service many people bought literature and Bibles, and many subscribed to *The Upper Room*.

I thanked God for helping me that day by sending that young man to get me to the church. As the psalmist reminds us, “[Our] help comes from the LORD.”

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Help from God comes in a
variety of ways.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the people you send to help us. Thank you for all the blessings you give us every day. Amen.

Chhotubhai Parmar (Gujarat, India)

SUN
NOV 29
2020

BROKEN PEOPLE

READ Matthew 1:18-23

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

— John 3:16 (NIV)

At the beginning of Advent, I brought my nativity set out of the attic to put on display and was sad to find that many of the figures were broken. The angel had only half a wing, the shepherd was missing a hand, a wise man had no foot, and the donkey had one lone ear. Only baby Jesus was intact and appeared unharmed. I'm

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Though I am broken, God loves me and can use me to accomplish great things.

not sure what happened. The figures were fine when I packed them away last January.

Initially I thought of purchasing a new nativity set. Then I realized that maybe God had a message for me. We are all broken people. But God can accomplish great works through us. When we repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness, God can give us new life despite our brokenness. Jesus' birth was all about bringing new life to the world.

I think that I will continue to display my imperfect nativity set as a reminder of God's great love for me. God loves us so much that Jesus came to take on the brokenness of this world. That's what Christmas is all about!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for loving us so much that you sent Jesus into the world so that we can have eternal life. Amen.

Susan L. Stombaugh (Ohio, USA)

A GENEROUS GIFT

MON
NOV 30
2020

READ John 21:15-17

Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

— Philippians 2:4-5 (NRSV)

I volunteer with an organization that provides meals to people in need. One day when I delivered a meal to Tom, I noticed a repairman approaching the home next door.

I learned that Tom had secretly paid to have his neighbor's broken hot water heater replaced, knowing they were unemployed, had young children, and had no funds to cover such a cost. I asked Tom why he didn't tell the family about his generous act, and he replied, "Because I want the credit to go to the Lord, not me."

Tom has a variety of health issues and lives with few amenities. He has a strong and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. For me, Tom's kind act and humility are perfect examples of what it means to be a Christian. If we wish to claim that title, we must consider how we will tend to Christ's lambs and feed God's sheep. By following in Christ's footsteps, we can extend God's blessings to others and show by example, with kind words and actions, the love of God for all people.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When done in love, my acts of service reflect God's mercy and grace.

Prayer: Gracious Lord, help us to glorify you as we serve others. Amen.

Robert E. Boertien (Oregon, USA)

TUES
DEC 1
2020

THE BLUE HYACINTH

READ 1 Thessalonians 5:12-21

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)

As I was walking through my neighborhood, I noticed a neglected garden with lots of weeds and dry soil. Then I spotted a beautiful blue hyacinth. It reminded me of the saying “Bloom where you are planted.” At times in my life that saying has encouraged me — times when I have found myself in a place or situation where I have not chosen to be. In such a time and place it's easy for me to give in to self-pity and complaining. The better choice, however, is to choose to bloom and flourish.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I can find joy in any circumstance by giving praise to God.

For me, the verses from 1 Thessalonians quoted above provide a model for how we can thrive in difficult situations — be they

related to work, finances, relationships, health, or home. First, we can think about all we have in Jesus to be joyful about. Second, we can pray constantly, honestly telling God our feelings and asking for God's help. After all, nothing lasting can be achieved on our own. Third, Paul says we are to be thankful for all the gifts God gives us each day. Joy returns when we praise God, who loves us wherever we are, no matter where we are planted.

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for your constant goodness. Be with us wherever we are today, and grant us joy and a thankful heart so that our lives honor you. Amen.

Ann Stewart (South Australia, Australia)

A FIRM PLACE

WED
DEC 2
2020

READ Matthew 7:21-28

*The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew
and beat on that house, but it did not fall,
because it had been founded on rock.*

— Matthew 7:25 (NRSV)

Years ago my wife and I received an ornamental wrought-iron and wooden bench as a gift. We placed it outside in a spot that was good for people-watching or personal reflection. But over the years, we forgot about the bench until it was time to move. We moved it three times to new homes where it would sit out in the elements, and slowly it fell into disrepair. The wooden parts began to rot, and some of the nuts and bolts fell out; but the wrought iron was still strong. One day my wife and I decided to refurbish the bench. When we finished, it looked almost new and made our entire yard look better!

Now I think about how that bench reflects my journey of faith. As a child I started out with a sturdy love of God. As I grew

up, I went down another path, thinking that what the world thought was acceptable had to be right. My sturdy love of God fell into disrepair. Fortunately I still had my wrought-iron frame of growing up in a home where God, church, and family were important. This has allowed me to begin the repair of my faith — to become more obedient to God, my family, and my church. My faith is now a firm place where I can rest and know the love of God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God's love is the sturdy frame
that can hold together faith
that is in disrepair.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for the sturdy framework of faith and Christian community that shapes our lives. Amen.

Chris Mewhirter (Nebraska, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE WORKING TO REBUILD THEIR FAITH 39

ADVENT WORSHIP LITANIES

Every year we busily prepare for the Christmas season: the cookies, the presents, seeing our families. This year in the midst of our preparations, I invite us to pay closer attention to God and to remember that Advent means “coming.” Let us prepare our hearts to receive Jesus on Christmas Day and to celebrate his arrival — God with us.

An Advent wreath in your home can be a wonderful reminder that God is with us. The candles on the wreath represent hope, peace, joy, and love. Invite your family to help light the candles and to look each week for symbols that remind us of the meaning of Advent — Emmanuel, God with us. In the rush of the Christmas season, may this sacred pause be a time of joy for you.*

First Sunday of Advent: Hope in God's Presence with Us

Speak: “Keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (Mark 13:35-37, NRSV).

Light the first candle, the candle of hope.

Read: Mark 13:24-37

Reflect: It’s tempting to hear Mark’s call to “keep awake” as a warning or threat. What if we heard these words as hopeful, as an invitation to set aside the Christmas lists, maybe decline a few party invitations, and to focus instead on keeping our hearts awake?

Do: Look for signs of God’s presence this week. Where is God already present? How is Jesus coming to you in this season?

Pray: God of the Present Moment, we hear your invitation to keep awake. When hope feels as fleeting as a bird, remind us that you are ever-present. We pray that hope lingers and makes a home in our lives this Advent. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent: Peace in Each Step of the Journey

Speak: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God” (Isa. 40:1).

Light the second candle, the candle of peace.

Read: Isaiah 40:1-11

Reflect: Isaiah calls the people to get up to a high mountain. For generations people have cried out as Isaiah does that the paths are crooked, the valleys too far down, and the mountains too high. We fear stumbling on uneven stretches of the journey. What if we could see it all from God’s perspective, that through it all God is the eternal source of peace?

Do: Each time you set out on a road or pathway today, pause and ask God to grant you peace. Driving to work, walking into the office, or taking the dog for a walk, remember God’s promise of peace.

Pray: God of our journeys, whether we walk with purpose or wander without clear direction, whether we are in a valley or on the mountaintop, grant us your eternal peace. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy Experienced and Shared

Speak: “Our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (Ps. 126:2-3).

Light the third candle, the candle of joy.

Read: Psalm 126:1-6 and 1 Thessalonians 5:12-22

Reflect: When was the last time you found it difficult to contain your joy? What did it feel like in your body and soul to be so joyful? First Thessalonians reminds us that rejoicing and prayer come when we are at peace in our communities, when we are encouraging the faint-hearted, when we are helping the weak, and being patient with everyone. What opportunities do you have to help others, be a peacemaker, and offer encouragement this season?

Do: Look for opportunities to rejoice, encourage, and help in your community.

Pray: God of laughter, expand our joy and help us to share it in our communities this week. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love Living Among Us

Speak: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb’” (Luke 1:41-42).

Light the fourth candle, the candle of love.

Read: Luke 1:39-56

Reflect: The love in this scripture is more than the love of a mother for her child. It’s the love of God who would come to dwell among us, demonstrating God’s great love for us.

Do: Each time you see a child this week, pray that love would be made real in action.

Pray: God of Love, continue to take on flesh and be made real in our families, in our communities, and in the world. Amen.

Christmas Eve/Christmas Day

Speak: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

Light the white candle, the candle of Christ’s light.

Read: John 1:1-18

Reflect: We have spent the last few weeks staying awake, looking for hope, offering peace, sharing joy, and embodying love. How can you imagine these daily acts of love bringing more light to the world?

Do: Each time you turn a light on or off this week, renew your covenant to live as a follower of the Light.

Pray: God of Light, grant us the courage to testify to the Light. May your hope, peace, joy, and love fill the earth. Amen.



— **Kara Lassen Oliver**
Executive Director of the Center for Christian
Spiritual Formation
The Upper Room

*Adapted from *Passing It On: How to Nurture Your Children’s Faith Season by Season* by Kara Lassen Oliver, Upper Room Books.

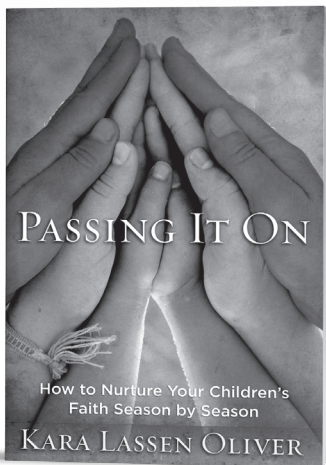
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THUR
DEC 3
2020

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

READ Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

Lord, you know everyone's heart.

— Acts 1:24 (NIV)

As a teenager, I struggled with acne. Every morning I obsessed over how to cover new zits on my face. I avoided getting too close when speaking with strangers, thinking they might be repulsed by my face. I prayed every night for God to take away my defects because I wanted people to like me. I saw myself through the eyes of others.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I will value in myself what God values — my heart.

Over the years, my faith grew and my prayers changed, even though I continued to struggle with acne. I stopped pleading with God to give me a glowing complexion

because I trusted that God loved me just the way God created me. All creation meets God's standards for perfection and beauty, and that includes me.

After Jesus' ascension into heaven, when the disciples wanted to choose someone to replace Judas Iscariot, they asked God, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen" (Acts 1:24). Matthias was chosen just as King David had been: for his heart.

God knows my thoughts, desires, plans, and ambitions. God is concerned with the condition of my heart — not my skin, weight, hair, or nails. Instead of fretting about how I look, I begin each day meditating on God's word and praying for more love, more faith, and more of God in my heart.

Prayer: Dear God, help us to value in ourselves what matters most to you. Help us to love and serve you without reservation. Amen.

Mabel Ninan (California, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE WHO ARE INSECURE
ABOUT THEIR LOOKS

PROMPTING

READ John 14:15-27

FRI
DEC 4
2020

The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

— John 14:26 (NIV)

Years ago, my family and I decided to foster young girls. Each time a girl returned to her parents or guardians, we felt the Holy Spirit leading us through the bittersweet moment. But after a while, we were emotionally spent, and I decided not to accept any more foster children.

Then one day a social worker called me at the school where I teach to ask if I could foster a four-year-old girl whose siblings had been placed with other foster families. I told the social worker I could not and hung up.

When I returned to my third-grade classroom, feeling distressed, one of my students gave me a big hug and said, “Teacher, you are so good.” I felt like someone had thrown a bucket of cold water in my face. *Me, good? I just said no to helping a four-year-old child.* It felt like the prompting of the Holy Spirit, so I called the social worker and said I would accept the child if they would work quickly to find her a permanent home.

A permanent placement with a different family never happened. It has been 14 years since the prompting of the Holy Spirit brought that small, fragile child into our home. She has grown into a beautiful young woman who has brought our family many blessings and has enriched our lives.

Prayer: Gracious God, help us to discern the prompting of the Holy Spirit and care for the most vulnerable among us. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
I serve Christ when I heed the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

Ana Sylvia Pedroza R. (Puerto Rico, USA)

PRESS PAUSE

READ Mark 6:30-46

[Jesus] went up on a mountainside to pray.

— Mark 6:46 (NIV)

In our fast-paced, busy, and loud world, we may find it challenging to rest. Overwhelming needs — spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and relational — surround us. We can easily fall into a pattern of constant “doing” because of the great need in the world.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
My service is stronger when I
make time to rest with God.

Yet Jesus took time away from his work to focus on his relationship with God. And he taught this truth to his disciples. In Mark 6,

we read how Jesus sent the disciples on a mission trip. Upon their return, he could have sent them to a new place to preach and perform miracles. Instead, he told them they needed time away to rest.

I have noticed that the more I do at the expense of my time in communion with God, the more likely I am to be stressed or overwhelmed. However, when I take time to pause and rest in my relationship with God, my renewed spirit helps me do God’s work in a way that cannot happen when I’m always on the move. I’m continuing to learn from the Master Teacher that I cannot run on empty — physically or spiritually.

Prayer: Dear Father, help us to follow the example of Jesus, who taught us that to be effective disciples we need rest. Help us as we seek to make resting with you a regular practice in our lives. Amen.

Kyle Bjerga (Illinois, USA)

NOT ALONE

SUN
DEC 6
2020

READ Isaiah 35:1-10

The body does not consist of one member but of many.

— 1 Corinthians 12:14 (NRSV)

I look forward to worshiping in community with my local congregation. I particularly love the special seasons of the church year, and I most want to be in church during Advent. The songs, the sermons, the decorations, and the music herald the coming of our Lord.

Last Advent, health problems kept me from attending services for several weeks. I felt alone and discouraged even though I knew my church family was praying for me. Sitting at home on a Sunday morning and feeling removed from the holiday season, I did what always encourages me — I opened my Bible.

As I read God's word, I felt encouraged. I wasn't alone after all! I realized again that I am part of a larger community, the body of Christ, and that believers

all over the world were joining together to celebrate the Lord. I lit my Advent candles, played my favorite Christmas hymns, and celebrated the Lord's birth with my siblings in Christ all over the world.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
No matter where I am, I am part of the body of Christ.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the community we find in you. Help us to feel connected to all our siblings in Christ, especially when we feel alone. Amen.

DeVonna R. Allison (Florida, USA)

Prayer Focus: THOSE LOOKING FOR A
CHURCH COMMUNITY

MON
DEC 7
2020

SOLID GROUND

READ Luke 6:46-49

Jesus said, “[Those who come to me and put my words into practice] are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it.”

— Luke 6:48 (NIV)

In the process of building our church’s new family center, we encountered problems with the foundation for the building. Without a solid foundation, the building would eventually develop weaknesses and the structure would not be supported. But the issue was resolved, and we now have a beautiful building for our church and community programs.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Today I will build a strong foundation through prayer and worship.

This reminded me of the solid foundation we need in our relationship with God.

Without this foundation, our faith, trust, and hope would eventually erode — we would become ineffective in our Christian life and in our relationship with God.

We can reinforce our spiritual foundation through daily devotions, reading scripture, worshiping with fellow believers, and building a personal relationship with God. Scripture tells us that those who build their house on sand will not hold up under the floods that are sure to come. However, those who build on solid rock can withstand anything that comes their way. Let us all make God, the Solid Rock, our foundation.

Prayer: Father God, help us to build our foundation on your word and to trust that with you we can withstand all circumstances. Amen.

Robert Cornell (Indiana, USA)

CALLING OUT

TUES
DEC 8
2020

READ Psalm 130:1-6

*Seek the LORD while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near.*

— Isaiah 55:6 (NRSV)

It can be hard to ask for help, but sometimes we have no choice. One time, my dad decided to repair a bedroom radiator valve by himself. Mum was out shopping, but on her return she heard Dad calling out from the bedroom, “Help! Help!” Dad was kneeling beside the radiator with his thumb pushed hard over the valve to stop the water from spurting out and soaking the bedroom carpet. Dad needed someone to help him and to call a plumber. He couldn’t do it alone; he needed to cry out for help.

God encourages us to call out for help — to cry, shout, or moan. I know that I can be reluctant to ask for the help I need, and my resistance is often self-defeating. But Isaiah 55:6 reminds us to call upon God. God has no conditions or limitations — we can call anytime, anywhere. What is stopping us? God is near, extending an open invitation to us all.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God hears when I call.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, help us to draw near to you and to trust that you will answer when we call out for help as we pray, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt. 6:9-13, NIV). Amen.

Hilary Allen (England, United Kingdom)

WED
DEC 9
2020

DON'T GIVE UP

READ Romans 5:1-5

We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

— 2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV)

According to my high school track coach, the worst thing you could do as a runner was to quit a race or be disqualified. One year I was at the regional meet where I had a chance to qualify for the state meet. I was really feeling the pressure — my legs were shaking on the starting line. I ran well for the first two laps of the race, and I knew I could pass the runner in front of me. But when it was time to move ahead, I felt even more pressure. Instead of passing my competitor, I fell off

the side of the track. I was disqualified. I usually tell people that I think I fainted, but in reality I simply panicked and quit.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God never gives up on me.

Paul knew that running the race of faith isn't always easy. There are challenges in following Jesus and even in just being human. But in today's quoted verse, Paul tells us not to give up.

After the race, my coach was disappointed. But he put his arm around me and said, "Let's focus on the next one." That made me want to try again, and I never gave up on another race. My coach's words remind me of the way God never loses faith in us. No matter what storms we're going through or what past experiences haunt us, God is drawing closer and will never leave. God never gives up on us.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for never giving up on us. Give us the strength to continue running the race, even when we are tired or afraid. Amen.

Adam Benson (North Carolina, USA)

GOD STILL AMAZES

THUR
DEC 10
2020

READ Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

— Luke 2:8-9 (NRSV)

Not long ago I was so amazed by a sunrise that I rushed out the back door in my pajamas with camera in hand. I wanted to capture a photograph before the colors faded. I was so captivated by the beauty that I didn't stop to think about what I looked like.

If I was so amazed by a sunrise, I try to imagine the amazement of the shepherds in today's reading. That night outside Bethlehem, as the shepherds were ready to drift off to sleep, suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared. They were more than amazed — they were terrified! But I think their most amazing encounter that night was not the angel but the baby to whom they were sent.

After they found Jesus lying in a manger, just as the angel had told them, they went out praising and glorifying God.

That night long ago was not just about angels, shepherds, and innkeepers. That night was about a message from God that was wrapped in swaddling cloths. The message was and is Jesus Christ, who has come to show us the very picture of God!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
There's great joy in watching
for God's surprises!

Prayer: O God, make us ready to share the good news of great joy with the people around us today. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Peter Caligiuri (Florida, USA)

READ Joshua 1:1-11

The LORD said, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

— Joshua 1:9 (NIV)

When my friend was asked to become a song leader in Christian fellowship, she asked me, “Sister, can I do this?” To encourage her, I said, “Yes, you can!” Despite her hesitations, she can now lead us well.

In today’s scripture reading, God encouraged Joshua. Several times God said to him, “Be strong and courageous!” Leading the Israelites in place of Moses was not an easy task. As Joshua carried out his new duty to lead the people into the land of Canaan, he was likely afraid. But when he heard God’s words of encouragement, his spirit awoke and his strength

rose. Joshua then ordered the officers of the people to prepare to take possession of the land God had promised to them.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Just as God encourages me, I can encourage others.

Like Joshua, God gives us words of encouragement. Whenever we feel our duties or responsibilities are heavy beyond our strength, God whispers to us, “Be strong and courageous!” Because God knows each of us, we can trust that if God says we are capable of something, then we are!

Prayer: God Almighty, thank you for encouraging us when we feel afraid and inadequate. Help us always to listen to you and to trust your guidance for our lives. Amen.

Linawati Santoso (East Java, Indonesia)

UNDESERVING

SAT
DEC 12
2020

READ Luke 6:27-36

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

— 1 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

The lab director was often difficult to get along with. She seemed bent on getting me fired, and with each new disagreement our conflict intensified. She and my other colleagues also butted heads often. Finally, after years of friction in our workplace, she was quitting her job.

As she struggled to pack her things, I watched in amazement as a Christian co-worker — who also had a difficult relationship with the director — began to help her pack.

Initially I thought, *What has she done to deserve any kindness?* But that led me to consider, *What have I done to deserve the grace shown to me by the Lord?* I remembered Abigail and her grace that softened David's heart. (See 1 Samuel 25:2-42.) I also remembered Peter, who denied knowing Jesus after his arrest. Yet Jesus forgave him. (See Luke 22:47-62; John 21:15-19.) And today's quoted scripture reminds us that we are all called to bless those who do evil to us.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
What would it look like to bless those who curse me?

Thinking on these things, I returned to my question: *What have I done to merit God's grace and forgiveness? Nothing.* So how could I question the lab director's merit in receiving even this smallest gesture of grace? I rose from my desk and helped her pack.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank you for forgiving us. Give us strength to follow your example of showing mercy. Amen.

Steve Smith (Texas, USA)

SUN
DEC 13
2020

GOD'S HELPING HANDS

READ Psalm 146:5-10

The LORD watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow.

— Psalm 146:9 (NIV)

One year as the Christmas season approached, some talented seamstresses created a set of costumes for the children of our church to wear while presenting the annual nativity play. The garments were well made and quite realistic. The pageant was a success, and I looked forward to using the costumes in children's church for years to come.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Even when I am unaware,
God can use me to meet
the needs of others.

After the holidays were over, a church member volunteered to launder the outfits and bring them back

to be packed away. Because of a mix-up, the costumes ended up on a rack of giveaway clothing at the food pantry we hold every week for people in the community. Many of the guests were delighted by the clothing and received the items gratefully. At the end of the day, not a single garment was left.

When I first heard that our costumes were gone, I was upset about the mistake. But then I realized that God had used our church to meet a need. How humbling it is to be a part of God's work in the world!

Prayer: Dear God, help us always to be aware of the needs of others and to do everything we can to meet those needs. Amen.

Betsy Mitchell (New York, USA)

IMPERFECT BUT USEFUL

MON
DEC 14
2020

READ 2 Timothy 2:20-25

Those who cleanse themselves . . . will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

— 2 Timothy 2:21 (NIV)

Sometimes it seems unlikely that God would use me in God's divine plan. How could someone as insignificant as me be of use to the Creator of the universe?

Yet because of God's grace for me, I have wanted to serve God above all else. As my faith has grown, I have felt that God has a purpose for me in different situations — like being of help to someone who has no one else to turn to.

At times we may think it's unlikely that God could use us to accomplish God's will. We may expect someone more kind, gentle, or loving to be God's instrument in the world — and in our neighborhood. Yet God can use us — whoever and wherever we are. The apostle Paul writes that Christians are "instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work."

We are imperfect, and we live in an imperfect world. But God will use us even if we feel unworthy and unlikely. Our value to God's work may not be apparent to us, but it's always clear to God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

My efforts are always
valuable to God.

Prayer: God of the universe, thank you for using us for your kingdom's work. Encourage us by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Peter Veugelaers (Wellington, New Zealand)

TUES
DEC 15
2020

LISTENING TO GOD

READ Revelation 3:18-24

Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention! . . . Listen carefully! God will evaluate you with the same standard you use to evaluate others. Indeed, you will receive even more.

— Mark 4:23-24 (CEB)

These days I have plenty of time for porch-sitting at my home in Mississippi. But life wasn't always this way. When I was 35, I struggled through a divorce and became a single mom of four children. I began getting up early in the morning so that I could have time to be alone and to listen to God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How can I listen to others the way God listens to me?

My children are now grown, but my early-morning time is still the

most important part of my day. It is my time to listen to the open, loving heart of God. As I sit quietly, a bird chirps or leaves rustle or raindrops pummel the roof. Once, as the sun rose, it cast a shadow in the shape of a cross on my cedar fence. As I see and hear God's presence in these sights and sounds, I open my heart to God's love.

From my years of talking with my heavenly Father, I now listen to others differently. Behind their words, I often hear broken, sad, and anxious hearts that sound a lot like mine did. I listen to their hearts because God has always listened to mine.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for teaching us how to listen to you. Help us to hear the hearts of others and show them your love and care. Amen.

Sarah Randall (Mississippi, USA)

WORKING WITH JESUS

WED
DEC 16
2020

READ 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water.

— Proverbs 11:25 (NRSV)

During one of my first mission trips to Mexico, we stayed in the minister's home next to the church and worked alongside the people in the community. Although the trip was nearly 30 years ago, I recall one Wednesday like it was yesterday.

While we worked, an elderly woman came to the nearby community well. She filled two buckets with water, then carefully placed them on a yoke across her shoulders. After just a few steps along the rocky path home, she stumbled and fell, spilling the water. A member from our team rushed off his ladder. He helped her up, brushed dirt off of her, refilled her buckets, and carried them to her home.

During a church service that evening, when we were asked to share where we had seen Christ that week, one man told about painting with Jesus, another said he did carpentry with Jesus, and then the elderly woman recounted how Jesus helped with her water. That experience continues to live with me as I ask daily, *How am I being Jesus?*

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Who has reflected Jesus' love to me lately?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you that even simple acts can be performed in Jesus' name. Help us to continuously share your love with others. Amen.

Griffith Harlow (North Carolina, USA)

THUR
DEC 17
2020

IMMANUEL

READ Isaiah 7:10-14

*The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,
and will call him Immanuel.*

— Isaiah 7:14 (NIV)

Each Christmas season I spend time reading and re-reading the Christmas story from the Bible. This year the story provided a particularly relevant truth. A month before Christmas, several family issues surfaced, and it seemed I would be spending much of the holiday season alone. A

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Christmas is about God's gift of love in Jesus.

friend and I had planned a quiet evening together a few days before Christmas, but then my friend canceled our plans because of a death in the family.

Early on December 23, I awoke and began asking God why I had to be alone this Christmas. I told God about how most of my family members were so busy with personal issues that I wouldn't get to see them, and that my close friend would no longer be available. During my fervent conversation with God, the word *Immanuel* surfaced, along with its meaning, "God with us." Instantly I understood the deeper meaning of Christmas. We love to have friends and family around for Christmas. But the greater celebration is that God in Christ came to be with each of us so that we are never alone.

Prayer: Lord God, when we feel lonely, remind us of your constant presence with us — not only at Christmas but at all times. Amen.

Steven Thompson (Iowa, USA)

A TRANSFORMING MOMENT

FRI
DEC 18
2020

READ 1 Corinthians 15:50-58

My dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

— 1 Corinthians 15:58 (NIV)

My parents serve in a few Christian communities, and they always take me with them to help in their ministry. Some time ago I began to feel that working in those communities was not for me. I told my parents that I was not invested in the work and did not feel the presence of God.

My father responded by telling me that the most important part of the ministry was to serve God and share the good news with others. He asked that I think about this purpose and reconsider my point of view. I felt frustrated and angry. I felt that serving God was becoming a burden for me.

Two days later while listening to music, a Christian song started playing. I closed my eyes as I listened. In that moment I felt a strong presence and heard the words “Serve me with gladness.” It was a transforming moment that I cannot fully explain, but God was with me in my time of doubt. That moment filled me with joy and inspired in me a genuine desire to continue working with my parents in community outreach ministries to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Even in times of doubt, God stands with me.

Prayer: Spirit of the living God, thank you for standing by us in our moments of doubt. Inspire us to live as true disciples and to use our voices to share your message with others. Amen.

Carolina Murgueytio (Pichincha, Ecuador)

WHY WORRY?

READ Matthew 6:25-34

Jesus said, *“Do not worry about your life. . . . Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”*

— Matthew 6:25, 27 (NRSV)

I worry about almost everything! When I feel overcome by worry, I look for signs of inspiration to help me cope. I found such inspiration in a most unlikely place this morning as I went out to walk our dog. A small bird was sleeping in a corner of the porch. He was dry and safe and brought to my mind the scripture for today.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

What reminders help me to stop worrying and trust God?

Jesus tells us not to worry. He tells us to look at the birds, which never sow nor reap because they are taken care of by God. I hope

to become more trusting and to worry less, especially about things that I cannot control. A loving, caring God looks over me and takes every step that I take. God has helped me deal with the effects of war, a devastating tornado, and many other challenges.

I am now in my mid-seventies, and I know that my future and all the worries that burden me are in God's hands. I am confident that God will care for me always.

I look forward each morning to seeing the little bird — a bird that Jesus says can remind me to cast my worries on God, who is the giver of peace and joy.

Prayer: Giver of peace and joy, help us to cast our worries on you and to be faithful no matter what difficulties may come. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Harold Lemley (Georgia, USA)

A DAUGHTER'S GIFT

SUN
DEC 20
2020

READ Deuteronomy 7:7-9

The LORD your God is the only true God . . . who keeps the covenant and proves loyal to everyone who loves him.

— Deuteronomy 7:9 (CEB)

When my daughter was in kindergarten, her school held a Christmas fair. One of the highlights was a shop where the children could select their own gifts for their parents and other relatives. Though moms and dads were not allowed in the room, I remember peeking in to see my daughter go from table to table to choose her presents for her dad, brother, and me.

On Christmas morning she could hardly wait to hand me my gift. As she presented it to me, she proudly said, "I picked this out all by myself for you, Mommy!" I opened my present and saw a little green frog sitting on a rocking chair, reading a newspaper with this headline: "World's Greatest Grandpa!" I loved it immediately. To this day, some 25 years later, that little frog sits on a shelf in my dining room.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
God delights in any gift of love.

I think God probably feels similar delight when we offer our gifts of serving God's children or spending time in prayer and worship. Our efforts may not be perfect, but when we offer them in love, God receives them joyfully. That little frog is a reminder to me of my love for my daughter and God's love for me.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the love that you so freely give to us, your children. May we always stay faithful to you in everything that we say and do. Amen.

Andrea Woronick (Connecticut, USA)

WORKING TOGETHER

READ Romans 12:1-8

By the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

— Romans 12:3 (NRSV)

I once read that the smartest leaders are those who realize their gifts *and* their limitations. Paul warns us not to think too highly of ourselves by assuming we can do everything on our own, and he uses himself as an example.

If anyone could have thought highly of himself, it was Paul. Paul was an educated man; he had been a lawyer, politician, and Pharisee. Yet, in spite of all his abilities and accomplishments, he admitted he needed the support of others

to accomplish his work for Christ. Paul knew his strengths and appreciated that others could build on what he had begun.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

My strengths and weaknesses are part of the body of Christ.

Paul writes that we must use sound judgment in our opinion of ourselves. We must think clearly about our limitations and believe that the Lord will bring us together with people who possess different strengths to help accomplish the work God has given us. When we understand that our combined faith and qualities can work together, we each will fulfill our purpose in serving the Lord.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to acknowledge both our strengths and weaknesses and to value the gifts others bring as we do your work together. Amen.

Nelson Nwosu (Anambra, Nigeria)

A MUCH-NEEDED GIFT

TUES
DEC 22
2020

READ Psalm 62:1-12

Be still, and know that I am God.

— Psalm 46:10 (NIV)

After a long day at work, I accidentally locked my keys and my phone in my car when I stopped to get gas.

After going into the gas station to call my husband, I went back outside to wait. It was going to be at least 40 minutes until he could bring the spare key. At first, I was frustrated. I had 40 minutes just to sit and wait without my phone to write emails or entertain myself. Then I realized that this quiet, uninterrupted downtime was an unexpected but much-needed gift from God.

As I sat there with nothing to do, I realized how often I have unplanned quiet moments. When the cable is out, my phone dies and I don't have a charger, my son's bus is running late, or I am waiting to see the doctor, the unproductive time can seem like an inconvenience. But each quiet moment gives me the opportunity to take a deep breath, refocus my thoughts, and just be with God.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When can I stop and spend a few minutes in God's presence?

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for being with us throughout our day. Help us to recognize and appreciate moments to be still in your presence. We pray as Jesus taught us, saying, "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" (Luke 11:2-4, KJV). Amen.

Julie Sipe (Pennsylvania, USA)

WED
DEC 23
2020

CHRISTMAS BLESSINGS

READ Isaiah 43:14-21

Do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.

— Isaiah 43:18-19 (NIV)

Many devotions around Christmas urge us to make time in our busy holiday schedules to talk to God, spend time in meditation, and read the Bible.

These are great suggestions, but my problem is that I am not busy. I am 86 years old, estranged from my family, have macular degeneration, and live alone. My Christmases are devoid of joyful activity. I used to spend the Christmas season

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I cannot recover the joys of the past, but I can have new joys with God in the present.

remembering the good times spent with family in previous years. But when I dwelled on the past, I ended up overwhelmed by tears and sadness.

Recently I have learned to turn my thoughts to the present and focus on how much God is blessing me right now. I live in a nice place, a grocery delivery service has started in my area, I go to the senior center for lunch a few days a week, and I have time to be with God and time to write.

So instead of pining for the past, I focus on the present and anticipate the future, knowing that the Christ of Bethlehem is with me and brings blessings day by day. I still miss my family and sometimes weep over them, but I have learned that we can enjoy the present when we begin to name the blessings God has given us today. It is a never-ending list that can bring us the joy of the Christmas season.

Prayer: Dear God, bring the fullness of your Son's birth to those who are alone. Amen.

Kenneth Claar (Idaho, USA)

THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS

THUR
DEC 24
2020

READ John 1:15-18

*“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”*

— Matthew 1:23 (NRSV)

As a pastor’s wife, I have helped with many Christmas pageants over the years. Memories abound of wise men with cardboard crowns, shepherds in striped robes, angels with paper wings and tinsel halos. But the pageant that touched my heart most was the time we

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Because of Jesus, we know
how much God loves us.

had a real baby play the part of Jesus. The infant must have been no more than a few months old. The young girl who played Mary held the baby gingerly on her lap, willing the child not to cry or wiggle out of her grasp.

As I stood behind the scene looking at that infant, the power and mystery of what God accomplished so long ago touched me in a whole new way. God, the creator of the universe, chose to become part of our human family as a helpless infant needing to be cared for and loved. Just as a baby brings joy and hope to new parents, Jesus brought hope to all humanity by revealing the depth of God’s love for us. As John 1:18 proclaims, “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” That is the miracle of Christmas: Jesus has come to show us the perfect image of God!

Prayer: Fill our hearts, O God, with thanksgiving and praise for the gift of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Nancy J. Clark (Michigan, USA)

FRI
DEC 25
2020

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

READ Luke 2:1-7

The angel said to [the shepherds], “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.

— Luke 2:10 (NRSV)

Christmas this year was different than previous seasons. I didn't join a choir, so I wasn't busy with rehearsals. Most of my family members and relatives couldn't come for Christmas, so I didn't prepare a party but went out for dinner instead. I did a little shopping, but it was not as hectic as other years.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
How am I seeking the Savior
this Christmas?

The most significant difference was that when I went to a Christmas service at church, I sat with other worshipers rather than with

a choir. I followed along with the service in serenity and solemnly listened to the sermon. Tears fell from my eyes when we sang “O Holy Night” and lit candles. I felt peaceful and grateful.

For a long time, Christmas was just an annual tradition with to-do lists and performances. This year, I experienced Christmas from another perspective as I let myself come as a person longing to see the Savior.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for giving us Jesus, your Son. Amen.

Juita Kartini (Jakarta Raya, Indonesia)

Check for the January-February issue of *The Upper Room* in your church. Or subscribe and free your copy for a visitor or new reader. (See p. 1.)

REFUGE IN THE STORM

READ Matthew 14:28-33

SAT
DEC 26
2020

The psalmist prayed, *“Let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, so that those who love your name may exult in you.”*

— Psalm 5:11 (NRSV)

A thousand-year rain settled over a small part of the county I live in and dumped an unbelievable amount of water in a very short time. I watched as roads were closed and dramatic rescues took place. The road in front of the restaurant where my wife and I had eaten earlier that day was now a raging river. The restaurant itself was now a refuge for people pulled from the flood.

The flooding reminded me of how unpredictable and tenuous life can be. We expect things to go smoothly. We want to believe that we can handle the situations we encounter. But deep down, we know that something may come along to overwhelm us. Our storms may appear in a hospital emergency room or around a kitchen table looking at a pile of bills or in talking with a child who has been bullied in school. Where do we go to find our refuge?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I will let my challenges remind me to take refuge in God's love.

I will admit there are times I have tried to face my storms with my own strength and willpower — we all do. It is in these moments that we need to reach for God, the refuge the psalmist speaks of. And when we reach for God, we may discover that our loving God is already reaching for us.

Prayer: O God, the depth of your love is beyond our imagination. Help us to remember that we are never alone. Amen.

Robert Sorozan (Pennsylvania, USA)

SUN
DEC 27
2020

OPPORTUNITIES EVERYWHERE

READ Colossians 4:2-6

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

— Colossians 4:5 (NIV)

After the worship service one Sunday, a young woman behind me tapped my shoulder. She told me she was visiting our church and that throughout the service, she sensed God telling her that the woman in front of her would pray with her. I was not going to let this opportunity pass me by. She told me of her need, and we held hands and prayed.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Prayer is a way I can show God's love to those around me.

Praying with and for people is one way to reach others for Christ, but it's not the only way. Maybe a local

food bank is in need of donations. Perhaps someone you know just returned home from the hospital and could use a meal or two. A new family may have moved in to the neighborhood, and a warm welcome could help them feel at home. Opportunities to show God's love are all around us — we just need to be attuned to them.

I still periodically pray for the woman from church and her request. It would be nice to know how that prayer may be answered, but I don't need to know. I do know that when we reach out to others with God's love, God will handle the rest. In the meantime, we can be alert and "make the most of every opportunity" that God places in our path.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help us to be aware of the opportunities you place before us. Please give us the courage to respond and share your love. Amen.

Lorraine Baldus (Michigan, USA)

Prayer Focus: SOMEONE WHO HAS ASKED FOR MY PRAYERS

CHARACTER FIRST

MON
DEC 28
2020

READ 1 Samuel 16:1-13

*The LORD does not look at the things people look at.
People look at the outward appearance,
but the LORD looks at the heart.*

— 1 Samuel 16:7 (NIV)

Almost 900 miles from home on a motorcycle trip, we rolled into a small town in Wyoming and found a nice lodge. It was a cool day, so we were wearing our leather gear, including chaps and bandannas. Some of us were unshaven, and I'm sure those in the lodge heard our motorcycles coming. We looked like rough bikers, but we didn't think anything of it.

When a few of us went into the office, the manager quoted what seemed like an extremely high price for a room and said it was not negotiable. We stepped away from the counter to talk it over, but not before he had glimpsed the shocked looks on our faces. "Come back over here," the manager said. "I tell you what. I'll give you a discount on one condition: you promise not to trash the place." We agreed, and later we all had a good laugh.

Our biker appearance sometimes seems to instill fear in people. But when we look only at outward appearances, we can be fooled. To people, David didn't look like a king. He didn't look like a warrior when he faced Goliath either, but God saw his potential. People look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. Wouldn't it be great if we could see people through God's eyes?

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY
Today I will try to see others
as God sees them.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for seeing our hearts. Help us to avoid judging others by their outward characteristics. Amen.

Bill McConnell (Kansas, USA)

TUES
DEC 29
2020

MERCY PICK

READ Ephesians 2:1-10

*Brothers and sisters, you are loved by God,
and we know that he has chosen you.*

— 1 Thessalonians 1:4 (CEB)

I still remember to this day the feeling of standing in grade-school gym class, waiting to be chosen by one of the two team captains. Right away, others more athletically gifted were picked. I watched with a sense of dread as the numbers dwindled and I remained, unchosen and unwanted. At last

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

How can I show mercy to others as God has shown mercy to me?

my name was called, only because the team captains had no other choice.

On a few rare occasions though, I was not one of the last ones picked. If one

of my friends was selected to be a team captain, she would always choose me sooner than my skills warranted. Her love for me led her to choose me so I wouldn't be one of the last chosen. I was a "mercy pick," spared from the humiliation of feeling unwanted.

This is how God chooses me. God's choosing isn't based on my skills, abilities, or behavior, but on God's mercy — out of love for me in spite of my weaknesses. My goodness is not my own but God's. I need to remain mindful of this truth as I look at others, because in God's eyes we are all mercy picks. We are all chosen because of how loving God is and not because of how good we are.

Prayer: Loving Father, thank you for showing us mercy beyond measure. Help us to extend to others the mercy we have received. Amen.

Shirla Andes (Indiana, USA)

GOD'S BEAUTIFUL CREATION

WED
DEC 30
2020

READ Psalm 134:1-3

*May the LORD bless you from Zion, he who is the
Maker of heaven and earth.*

— Psalm 134:3 (NIV)

A recent retreat I attended included a Sunday worship service that took place shortly after sunrise. I am not accustomed to rising so early on Sundays, so I was not looking forward to it. However, as I walked up the hill and saw the sun rising above a mountain ridge, I was stunned by the beauty of the view. The reflection of the sun's brilliant rays made the surface of the sea look like a golden mirror with birds gliding effortlessly over the surface. The cool breeze of the morning air refreshed me even more than coffee. My annoyance at getting up early was replaced by an incredible sense of peace.

Meditating and praying in church is one of the ways that I find peace and rest in my everyday life. But the beauty and wonder of God's creation remind me that we can find sanctuary in every corner of the earth. The Lord of all creation hears our prayers and has blessed us with the abundant beauty and resources of the earth, but we often fail to appreciate them. God's blessings are everywhere, and God is with us in every moment.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

I can enjoy God's creation
any time.

Prayer: Dear Lord, thank you for the blessing of this beautiful earth. Prompt us to be still in the busyness of our lives and to appreciate your blessings. Amen.

John Jen-Chiang (Hong Kong, China)

READ Joshua 4:1-7

Jesus said, *“Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

— Matthew 28:20 (NRSV)

I was driving our church shuttle bus, taking some of our members on a trip to Houston. When we travel, we have a backup SUV following us in case of a bus problem or a passenger emergency. As usual we made a stop at a restaurant along the way.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

When have I most recently sensed God’s presence?

As we were leaving, I wanted to be sure the SUV was behind us. However, I couldn’t see it in my side-view mirrors, and the bus

had no rearview mirror. I thought maybe the driver had not started yet or had gone on ahead of me. I circled around the restaurant twice looking for the SUV, but it was nowhere to be seen. Finally, I called the driver and asked, “Where are you?” He answered, “I’m right behind you, and I’m wondering why we keep circling the restaurant!” He was right there with me all the time!

Even though I cannot see God, I trust God’s promises. My trust is strengthened by remembering the many times I’ve seen God’s grace at work in my life. Sometimes God’s presence is apparent only in looking back on my life, so I find it helpful to remember the ways God has helped me in the past. Even though it is sometimes difficult to feel God’s presence, God promises to be with us always.

Prayer: Ever-present God, thank you for your promise always to be with us. During hard times, help us to remember your faithfulness to us. Amen.

Bob Peterson (Texas, USA)

AN EASY PLAN TO USE *The Upper Room* IN SMALL GROUPS

Christ is among us in fresh ways when we gather together, listening to God and to each other.

Once a week, gather with other believers to share a longer devotional time of about an hour. You may meet any time during the week and replace that day's reading with Wednesday's reading.

- Begin by reading the Bible passage on the Read line and the day's meditation, allowing silence for at least a minute afterward. Then ask members to turn to the questions for that date listed below or on one of the following pages.
- Ask someone to read aloud the questions one by one, giving each group member the opportunity to answer after each question. If anyone prefers not to answer a particular question, move on to the next person.
- Discuss how everyone thinks differently, and try to hear what the Holy Spirit may be saying to you in all this.
- Decide what you will do with God during the week.
- Be quiet and pray together.

For a more detailed meeting guide, see
www.upperroom.org/resources/a-guide-for-small-groups

NOVEMBER 4: *A Spiritual Plumb*

1. Describe a time when your relationship with God was deepened because you cared for others. How does that experience motivate you to continue caring for others?
2. How do you make sure that your spirit is in alignment with God and that you are in good relationship with others? How do those alignments help you stand firm in your faith?
3. What people or practices act as your spiritual plumb and level? What habits do you have that threaten to throw you out of alignment with God or with others? How do your plumb and level help you overcome those things?

4. What does it mean to you to live in the Spirit? How have you been blessed by the guiding of the Spirit?
5. Whom can you strengthen your relationship with today? How can you show God's love to that person?

NOVEMBER 11: *Sharing the Spirit*

1. Do you participate in an online prayer community? How does praying with that community differ from praying with others face-to-face?
2. When have you experienced the faithfulness of a true friend? How do you remain present in the lives of your friends and loved ones even if you don't live near them?
3. Today's writer prayed for her friend to be blessed with Christ's spirit of eternal life. Have you ever prayed a similar prayer? How do you remain faithful in the face of sadness like this?
4. When have you seen prayer extend beyond all boundaries? How are you encouraged by that experience?
5. What scripture passages remind you of the importance of staying faithful to those you love? What passages encourage you to continue to pray in difficult times?

NOVEMBER 18: *The Card*

1. When have you felt underappreciated and unsupported? How did you react in that situation? Who or what helped you through that time?
2. A thank-you card changed the writer's attitude. When has a kind gesture changed your attitude? How has that experience changed the way you show kindness to others?
3. Who in scripture serves as an example for you of spurring others toward love and good deeds? In what ways do you try to follow their example?
4. Today's writer lists several ways you can spur someone on. List some other ways you have effectively encouraged others. How does your church show appreciation to volunteers and leaders?

5. Who needs encouragement and appreciation from you today? What kind word or gesture can you offer them? How can you make a habit of encouraging others daily?

NOVEMBER 25: *Every Step*

1. What spiritual and physical goals do you try to achieve daily? How do you feel when you fall short of your goals? How do you feel when you achieve your goals?
2. How do you know when you are walking closely with God and when you are following your own agenda? Who or what brings you back to walking with God when you have strayed?
3. Are you encouraged to know that every day is a clean slate in your service with God, or do you find that disheartening? Why?
4. What prayers, spiritual practices, scripture passages, and people help you to align your steps with God's? What blessings do you gain when you follow God's guidance?
5. How does your faith community encourage you to accomplish your goals and to walk closely with God? How do you encourage others in your community to do the same?

DECEMBER 2: *A Firm Place*

1. Have you ever let something fall into disrepair? Were you able to refurbish it? What can this teach you about your faith?
2. Describe an object you feel best symbolizes your journey of faith. Why did you choose this object?
3. Today's writer describes how having a wrought-iron frame of growing up in a faithful home helped him return to his faith. What makes up the framework of your faith? How has that framework helped you in your life?
4. How does your Christian community shape your life? What other influences shape your life?
5. In what ways can you reach out and help someone who is working to rebuild their faith? What encouragement would you give to someone who is rebuilding their faith?

DECEMBER 9: *Don't Give Up*

1. How do you respond when you are under a lot of pressure? Do you ever want to give up? What helps you to persevere and stay calm?
2. What challenges have you experienced in following Jesus? What spiritual practices help you to feel renewed each day?
3. How do you feel knowing that God never gives up on us? What scripture passages help you remember this? When you feel abandoned, what helps remind you that God is with you?
4. What biblical characters continued running the race despite being tired or afraid? Where did they find their strength? What can you learn from them?
5. Today's writer was encouraged by his coach to focus on the next race. Who in your life helps you look past your mistakes and move forward in confidence? How can you help others do the same?

DECEMBER 16: *Working with Jesus*

1. When have you had the opportunity to serve alongside the people of a community? What did you learn from that experience and from the people of the community?
2. Where have you seen Christ this week? How have you been blessed by that example?
3. What simple acts have you performed in the name of Jesus recently? How do those small acts reflect the love of God?
4. In what ways do you reflect Christ's love to others? How do you use the opportunities God places before you to be Jesus to someone?
5. In what ways does your church reflect Jesus' love to those outside of your congregation? In what ways do people in your broader community reflect Jesus' love to you and your congregation?

DECEMBER 23: *Christmas Blessings*

1. Are you busy during this Christmas season, or do you have extra time on your hands? If you are busy, how do you make time to rest and be with God? If you are not busy right now, how can you use your spare time to grow closer to God?
2. Do you find it difficult to avoid dwelling on the past? What helps you to focus on the present and the future? How does your faith help you move on from the past?
3. How is God blessing you today? For which of these blessings are you most grateful? Why?
4. What scripture passages help you embrace the present and give you hope for the future? Why do those passages encourage you?
5. What does it mean to you to experience the fullness of Jesus' birth? How can you share the hope and joy of Christmas with those who are alone this year?

DECEMBER 30: *God's Beautiful Creation*

1. Describe a time when you did something you were not accustomed to or did not want to do but that you ended up finding great joy in. What did you learn from that experience?
2. What activities help you to fully enjoy and appreciate the beauty of God's creation? How can you find new ways to enjoy the beauty around you today?
3. Today's writer often finds peace and rest while meditating and praying in church. When and where do you most often find peace and rest?
4. What prayers and spiritual practices prompt you to be still? How do you take time to notice God's blessings around you?
5. How do you incorporate nature into your faith practice? What does the beauty and wonder of God's creation teach you about God, yourself, and the world?

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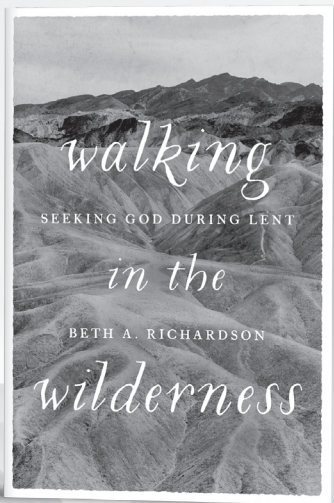
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Romans 15:13 (CEB)

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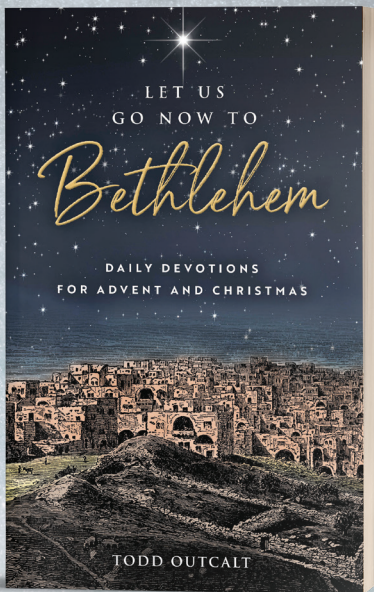
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MEET SOME OF OUR WRITERS

(Here and on p. 21.)



Doug Lim (p. 26) teaches religious education, volunteers as a chaplain, and serves in various other ministries.



Judith Brown (p. 19) worked as a book, magazine, and journal editor for The Salvation Army for several years.



Robert Sorozan (p. 67) is a member of his church chancel and bell choirs. He enjoys exploring new hiking trails.



Hilary Allen (p. 49) is a medical doctor in England. She volunteers as a street pastor and hospital chaplain.



Adam Benson (p. 50) is a United Methodist minister. He loves hiking, running, golf, and disc golf.



Carolina Murgueytio (p. 59) is a high school student who loves reading and playing guitar and ukulele. She belongs to her school soccer team.

