April 9 Passion/Palm Sunday: The Triumphant Entry - On Palm Sunday Christians celebrate the triumphant entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, the week before his death and resurrection. The Bible reveals that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowds greeted him by waving palm branches and covering his path with palm branches. Immediately following this great time of celebration in the ministry of Jesus, he begins his journey to the cross.

April 13 Maundy Thursday - 7:00 PM: Maundy Thursday commemorates Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples and the commandment to love one another. This will be a beautiful and moving worship experience with the sharing of Holy Communion.

April 14 Good Friday: A Tenebrae Service - 7:00 PM: Tenebrae is a word derived from Latin meaning “darkness.” Through word and music, this service dramatizes the suffering, death, and burial of Jesus Christ. This experience will add a sense of holiness and depth to your holy week observance. April 15 Saturday Service as usual at 5:00 PM.

Celebrate Easter April 16 - Easter Sunday Sunrise Service - 6:30 AM - Sharlot Hall Amphitheater: Led by Rev. Misty Howick (dress warmly and celebrate the “son”rise).

Easter Breakfast (Youth Fundraiser) 7:30-8:30 AM - Esther Hall: Tickets: $7 The breakfast will have a complete menu, cooked and served by the youth. The $7 donation/person (with discounts for families and those with limited means) will help to underwrite the youth’s Summer Mission Trip.

Worship Services 9 & 11* AM - Agape Hall: The sanctuary itself will speak of the victorious resurrection of our Lord. The two services will be filled with glorious music and a great sermon. What a wonderful celebration!

*Change of time to allow for ease of parking
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Through much of my childhood, though we would observe Lent, Ash Wednesday went unnoted. Then a new young pastor came to our church and he had an Ash Wednesday service complete with ashes. Because my family was pretty much at the church if the doors were open we went to the service and I ended up on my knees with the first of many sooty foreheads.

Lately, in the United Methodist Church, Ash Wednesday has become a major event. Pastor friends have taken to offering ashes in public places (imagine ashes at the courthouse). I have seen drive through ashes. I personally would take ashes to the business I frequented in Tempe to impose upon those who were working and might not be able to get to church.

Ashes have forever been a sign of repentance. The King of Nineveh, in the book of Jonah, used ashes as a sign of mourning his sins. Ashes and sackcloth are signs of mourning or being sorry. So, when we think of ashes we often think of sin. This is a good connection when it leads us to turning toward God, asking for forgiveness, and praying to do better.

The other symbol of Ash Wednesday is dust. “Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return” is what is said as ashes are imposed. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust” are the traditional funeral words. We understand that we are formed in God’s own image and are made of dust. As Joni Mitchel says, “we are stardust”. God scoops up the dust, breathes life into us, and calls us “good”.

While Ash Wednesday is a time of repentance and forgiveness it is also a time of reflecting on our life, our death, and our life beyond death. It is about contemplating the shortness of life and the vastness of eternity. It is realizing the finite nature of our humanness and the infinite nature of our reality in God. Ash Wednesday is a time to mull over the depravity of ashes, but also the holiness of dust in whatever form we may find it.

With prayers for a Holy Lent,

Rev. Dan Hurlbert
My friend, Sissie

She introduced herself as “Sissie.” I wasn’t sure where the nickname came from, her brothers and family, or how friendly she was to everyone, acting like everyone’s sister. Her legal name was Tricia, but I came to know and love her as Sissie. She had a big laugh, and a big heart. She worked two jobs at a DMV and at a grocery store. She liked sports cars and taking care of her South American husband. She loved cooking when she could afford the time to cook. She talked about her husband and their struggles with him not knowing the English language very well, and how love ultimately conquered any language barriers they had between them. Sissie was devoted to God. At one point, Sissie stopped coming to church regularly at the small parish I worked at on the Jersey Coast. I knew that she was busy, but I sensed it was something else. I needed a liturgist for a Sunday coming up and I called her. “I have felt disconnected from God…” she started, “how did you know that I needed this call? How did you know I was looking for God to invite me back in?” Sissie listened for God and she continued to answer God’s call to help. One day I decided to promote a church family event by going door to door with flyers. She said she would help, no matter how long it would take. We talked about life and whether I should have or not, I expressed to her my doubts about being a pastor. “God is working in you, and whether you know it or not, you are a pastor to me,” she said. Sissie and I continued to support each other spiritually until I moved away to Japan. She kept in touch by Facebook and when my kids were born I dreamt of the day I could have her meet them. In November 2015, I was flashing through my favorite social media when I saw a report from the town I pastored on the Jersey Shore. A drunk driving accident made the front page of the paper. My friend, Sissie, had been found dead at the scene, the victim of a senseless, horrible crime. Sunflowers filled my mind as I thought of her and her favorite flower. How could someone be taken from the world like that? Why her? I was in shock.

Darkness happens to us in large, awful, life shattering events, or sometimes quiet, lonely times. When we grieve we wish the world would stop and grieve with us, that we wouldn’t be left feeling alone in the dark. We wish we wouldn’t have to enter the world speeding by when all we are capable of doing is remembering a fond friend and missing the absence of their presence with us.

Lent reminds us that we are all on a temporary journey. This world is not our final home or resting place. There is great love, laughter, and adventure to be had, but also pain, suffering and loss. Through Jesus, we know that God shines a light on, in and through the darkness. We are made aware of the darkness when Jesus is scorned, beaten and put to death. The whole world goes dark. Jesus reminds us to be the light on the hill, to reflect God’s light within us. Jesus remains a guiding light for us when we feel consumed by the dark.

One thing I learned from my friend’s death, is that it is okay to spend some time in the dark, but, sunflowers cannot grow in the dark, and neither can we. May God show you the warmth and light that is God’s love this Lent and always.

-Rev Misty Howick
Indeed, you are my lamp, O Lord, the Lord lightens my darkness.

- 2 Samuel 22:29

We all know by now that we cannot always trust technology. We can however, ALWAYS trust our Holy GPS (God's Positioning System). I can feel upside down and in the dark and I don’t even know why. Our Holy GPS is at the ready at all times and PRAYEVER is our Ink. God knows where we are, when we've been and where we are going. We can however be overwhelmed by events in our country and world, sometimes feeling upside down and in the dark. George is our Holy GPS (God's Positioning System). Our first instinct is to do the same.

One evening after dark, I drove back to my parents' senior community after having visited with our kids. I was on I-25, cars zooming all around me and for a few minutes I felt completely lured around. Like Dr. Feel-good upside down and in the dark. Bad combo. !

Merciful and loving Lord, may we remember that you are our light in the darkness, our right-side-up. During this season of Lent, may we practice connecting to you throughout.

Upset Down and in the Dark

2017 Lenten Devotional  From Darkness Into Light  3
The maneuvering involved in transitioning “from darkness into light” can be elusive and subject to heavy-duty thinking, which I’m not very good at. So, wimp that I am, I resorted to seeking help from some of the lyricists in The United Methodist Hymnal for guidance. Granted, the approach is a magnanimous cop-out on my part, so feel free to break out the wet noodles. And please don’t come down too hard on me, but rather keep in mind that forgiveness is a tried and true Christian staple. So here goes:

“Rise, Shine, You People” – page 187: “Come, celebrate, your banners high unfurling, your songs and prayers against the darkness hurling. To all the world go out and tell the story of Jesus’ glory.”

“Beams of Heaven as I Go” – page 524: “Beams of heaven as I go, through this wilderness below, guide my feet in peaceful ways, turn my midnights into days. When in the darkness I would grope, faith always sees a star of hope, and soon from all life’s grief and danger I shall be free someday.”

“Christ Is the World’s Light” – page 188: “Christ is the world’s light, Christ and none other; born in our darkness, he became our brother. If we have seen him, we have seen the Father: Glory to God on high!”

“O Gladsome Light” – page 686: “As fades the day’s last light we see the lamps of night, our common hymn outpouring, O God of might unknown, you, the incarnate Son, and Spirit blest adoring.”

“Arise, Shine Out, Your Light Has Come” – page 725: “Above earth’s valleys, thick with night, high on your walls the dawn appears, and history shall dry its tears, as nations march toward your light.”

“Give to the Winds Thy Fears” – page 129: “Through waves and clouds and storms, God gently clears thy way; wait thou God’s time; so shall this night soon end in joyous day.”

“All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night” – Page 682: “All praise to thee, my God, this night, for all the blessings of the light! Keep me, O keep me, king of kings, beneath thine own almighty wings.”

“Abide with Me” – page 700: “Abide with me; fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail and comforts flee, help of the helpless, O abide with me.”

--- Jerry Jackson
Arise, shine; for your light has come
And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

Isaiah 60:1

During recovery from recent surgery, I have had ample time to sit quietly in the early morning and observe the coming of day. As the pitch black of night turned to pale gray, silhouettes of trees appeared on the hill behind the house. Then daylight revealed individual bushes, rocks and the waking creatures of the forest - squirrels and birds, occasionally deer and javalina. As the hours turned to “reasonable”, neighbors appeared walking a variety of dogs. Finally the sun blazed across our little valley, bringing warmth & clarity to every leaf and pine needle and creature, human and otherwise. The new day had arrived, full of opportunity and hope.

This steady progression, repeated daily, made me think about our spiritual journeys. Many of us begin in the darkness of ignorance about our God and his loving plan for our lives. Someone or something may shed light on the subject and we may see bare outlines of His beautiful creation. We may see individual parts of the world close to home but not understand our part in caring for them. We may see people in a superficial way, not understanding their needs or pain. It is not until God’s glorious Son breaks into our lives that we begin to experience the warmth and clarity of Gods plan for us.

As we begin another season of Lent, may we reflect on where our faith journey has brought us. We may still be in darkness, brought on by ignorance or rejection, or perhaps by tragedy, sickness or loss. We may think we see, but have not fully accepted the Son, the risen Christ, as the guiding light for our lives. May we, as followers of Christ, bask in the light and warmth of the Son’s presence each and every day. May we seek always to share these blessings of light and love with those who are struggling with darkness.

Lord Jesus, I thank you for your sacrifice of love which brought light into my life. Enable me to see clearly those around me and be a reflection of your light in my contacts with them.

—Cathy Shepherd
Darkness to Light

...because the darkness is passing away and the true Light is already shining.

1 John 2:8b

The year following my husband’s death was full of activity, but shrouded in fog. I was alone now. It was up to me to fulfill the plans we had already made. I sold our home, bought another one close to my mother, and orchestrated my move from Pennsylvania to Michigan. I seemed to be doing everything right as I joined and became involved in church and jumped into community activities. Staying busy kept the darkness at bay. I knew in my head and in my heart that God was still with me, but I couldn’t feel His presence as I had before.

Then, about a year later, driving up the hill toward my new home in the late afternoon, I was struck by the panorama spread out in front of me. The sky seemed to be exploding with fluffy, silver rimmed clouds. I pulled over to watch as the clouds moved past, slowly revealing the bright light of the sun that had been there all along.

Be still and know that I am God. I closed my eyes and felt God’s light in my heart as warm as that sun in the sky. It had been there all along, of course. I had let the clouds of worry and grief and busyness block it. I needed the vision of sun and clouds to remind me that, while I had been trying to figure out and create my new life, He was there, even when I couldn’t see Him clearly, guiding and helping me all along the way, and ready to give me back the joy of his presence as soon as I could quiet myself enough to accept it.

Thank you, Lord, for your Light that can pierce every darkness.

—Pat Batta
Closed to Open

What is darkness besides the absence of light? Why do we sometimes fear the dark? Why is dark used as an adjective to describe undesirable behavior or situations? Is darkness more than just the absence of light?

Even if we understand how darkness comes to be, we are psychologically influenced more negatively than positively when it descends. ie: get home before dark or don’t drive at night. Does danger really lurk out there because of darkness?

I suggest that we self-impose an imagined danger from what we cannot see as well as feeling out of control of the moment. So, our lives are affected no matter what, and we probably don’t feel rewarded by the gift of eye lids which can create darkness when we wish it, nor the prolonged shut-eye so important to health related sleep.

Because we are more comfortable, knowledgeable and aware during light time, we automatically favor it over darkness; but if it weren’t for the dark, we would not be so enlightened, cheered and cognizant when it is lifted. The dependable, timely quality of darkness has to count as one of our blessings to be cherished.

Just don’t say “Boo” to anyone in the dark.

—Jean Phillips
Jesus said, “...let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things that you do and praise your Father who is in heaven”.

(Matthew 5:16)

All of us have what we rightfully call “dark days”, but there may well be periods of more prolonged darkness. Pat and I have experienced pain and gloom because of experiences a child was living through. Sometimes those shattering periods were the result of choices the child had made.

In the midst of darkness we have experienced the support and love of parents whom we discovered had dealt with similar situations. In moments when we might have expected people to pull away, they have pulled close! We are, indeed, the family of God through Jesus Christ. Paul wrote about the church being one body with many members. First Corinthians 12:26 says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it”.

Jesus demonstrated how love can triumph over evil. Even suffering the agony of the cross, he forgave those who tortured him. Dead, he rose to life and demonstrated that he had conquered death, not only for himself but for us as well!

Days may certainly seem dark at times, but we have Jesus who continues to shine light on life’s pathways. Following the account in the Gospel of John where Jesus tells the woman caught in adultery (the man in the case is not mentioned) to go and sin no more (8:11). Jesus says to those in earshot, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life”. (8:12)

—Rev. Dick Unkenholz
Life and Immortality Through the Gospel

“This Grace was given us in Christ Jesus from the beginning of time but has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.” (II Timothy 1:9-11)

It seems probable that Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy from his prison cell in Rome where he was being held as a prisoner. Paul realized that his chance of being released before death are slim as he is encouraging Timothy to continue his work. He urges Timothy to continue to be faithful to true Christian teachings.

Paul begins by saying that love is the essence of the eternal nature of God. This grace allowed Paul to remain fearless in his captivity. Jesus had taught that death was not to be feared. He had taught “unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains a single seed. And if it dies it produces many seeds (John 12:24)”. The ancient world feared death or if they did not fear it, regarded it as extinction. In his teaching, Jesus indicated that death is as actually the way to life, not separating us from God, but bring persons into God’s near presence.

Life and immortality have been linked together as two aspects of one reality. Paul said that Christ has bridged the gaps between the two aspects of human experience. We do not begin to understand life until it’s meaning has been brought to light for us in Christ.

Knowing the veracity of this gospel laid three necessities on Paul. He was made a herald—one who brought the announcement of the good news. It made him an apostle—one who is “sent out”. He was sent to represent Christ to all persons. It made him a teacher. A teacher is one who consistently explains and lives the message, even more than an evangelist or emissary.

The narrative of the gospel emboldened Paul to involve himself in the propagation of his faith. As followers of Christ, should we do less?

— Rev. George Randle
"You are the light of the world. A city on top of a hill can’t be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel. Instead, they put it on top of a lampstand, and it shines on all who are in the house." --Matthew 5:14-15 (CEB)

The best, and perhaps only way, to correctly interpret and understand a particular passage of scripture, such as that above in Matthew’s Gospel, is to see what comes immediately before it. Who, for example, is Jesus talking to when he says “You are the light of the world?” If we considered his words in isolation, as though speaking a truth without precedent, it would be easy to assume that he might be speaking to those who actually live at the top of a hill or in a penthouse in the tallest high-rise. Those, in other words, who are seen as “winners,” those who have “made it” to some top in human achievement. Don’t we all like and admire winners, people like Tom Brady? Isn’t this what human life is all about, to be winners? We usually aspire to be winners ourselves. How many millions of people put down a dollar or whatever it costs every week in a desire to win the lottery? Isn’t the goal in human life to gain as much as we can so that we can live as comfortably as we can? Or, perhaps, to become popular, well known, looked up to? Isn’t it best to not be seen or considered as losers? How about becoming President, to be seen often (on television perhaps!) as someone great, someone who has authority, someone who has power at his or her command? Consider, on the other hand, what comes before Jesus’ words that “You are the light of the world.” Who is he talking to? His words come near the beginning of what is known in Matthew’s Gospel as “the Sermon on The Mount.” He begins with the Beatitudes, a description of what it means to be “happy.” (See Matthew 5:3-12 in the Common English Bible!) His words are directed, not to those who are winners in human achievement, but to those who, in worldly terms, might be seen or considered as losers! Those who are at the bottom, those who are hopeless, those who grieve, those who are humble, those who hunger and thirst to do what is right, those who show mercy, etc., etc., etc. You, Jesus says, are the “Light of the world!” This means for us, when we live in the Jesus “Way,” our lives become transformed in a radical way, often seen in worldly terms as losers, those who often fail, those who are helpless, those who can’t “make it.” And yet, we find strangely, that it is the way of a true and happy Life. It is the Way that somehow, without our knowing how, why or when, gives light in the lives of others. This is why Jesus says that we are to let the light of our lives shine as peace makers by being lovers of others, friend and foe alike, not to seek recognition and glory for ourselves as winners, but to give all glory to our loving God and Father who reigns “on earth as in heaven.”

Loving God, let the light of your unconditional love so shine in our lives that others might be enabled to see the way to a true and happy life, and to you be the glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—Rev. Bob Fiske
OUR TREASURE

Scripture: Matthew 6:19-21

A recent issue of our church's devotional publications, Alive Now, focused on the treasures we have in our lives, emphasizing particularly those of an eternal nature.

Reflection on President's Day brought me to the faith experiences of those early Christian founders of our country, particularly during the time of the Continental Congress and the formation of our country's Constitution.

Although not broadly published currently, research revealed the writers were Christians primarily, as demonstrated in so many of their other writings in addition to the Constitution itself.

As the Congress met, they included scripture and prayer, and formed Bible study groups among them.

There was an especially challenging moment in the creation of the document when the Body could not agree. It was John Adams who described that moment. The deliberations stopped. Psalm 35 was read in its entirety. That somewhat lengthy Psalm was a prayer for protection and care from the enemies that surrounded them, a message of trust in God.

In Adams' own words of the event, "I never saw a greater effect upon an audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that morning," for it was at that point that all the disagreements of the Congress ceased and consensus on this country's Constitution was reached.

The act of incorporating prayer and scripture into this major event brought the light of Christ into the hearts of believers, a light in the darkness that would illuminate the lives of all of us to this day...

Prayer: God of our lives, come into our hearts and minds with every event we experience. May we then pass that light on to others who may find themselves in darkness. Amen

—Rev. Carol Mumford
HAIKU for Lent

From darkness to light
Our Lenten passage now goes
Smiling and laughing

Learning to trust God
We lean on Him to see light
Because he sent Jesus

Breathe and pray all day
God loves us we are learning
Now He shows the way

Let go and let God
I am reminded each day
I am grateful, Lord.

I learned about Haiku at a Girl Scout Convention and love that it’s so simple to compose. Articles for Lent were needed and this was pretty easy to do. Thanks God.

Haiku has 3 lines with the first and last line having only 5 syllables and the middle one having 7, just in case you didn’t know.

—Phyllis Rhyner
Remember the Song?

“Since Jesus came into my heart, since Jesus came into my heart,
Floods of joy over my soul like the sea billows roll, Since Jesus came into my heart.”
I was 15 when I really began to feel the difference between the world’s darkness and His Light.

Psalm 18:28 reminds us “You light a lamp for me. The Lord, my God, lights up my darkness.”

In John 1:5 we read :”The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can never extinguish it “

What wonderful gifts Our Father has given us.

We all can remember our” befores” and “afters” and enjoy our todays because of His great gifts of salvation, blessings and guidance through the years. From young to older, from shorter to taller, from sickness to health, from turmoil to peace, He is by our side. From earth’s to heaven’s peace with our Father and Son and Holy Spirit is our daily goal now.

What wonderful promises and gifts are His.

Do you remember singing “This little light of mine. I’m going to let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine ? Shine all over the neighborhoods, I’m going to let it shine…….”

Let it shine ‘til Jesus comes, I’m going to let it shine,……I won’t let Satan blow it out, I’m going to let it shine…….”

Our Father’s Light is the gift we share with the world through the ages. Let’s keep it shining every day till He comes again.

No more darkness….His Loving Light is always shining.

—Barb Polk
A LITTLE BIRD TOLD ME

Two small plaques have hung in our home for decades, since I inherited them from my grandmother. The first contains the picture of two bear cubs. One of them is slumped down and is obviously depressed. The other cub is standing upright and seems hopeful as he says to the other, “Cheer up! The worst is yet to come!”

When I was young I could not understand the significance of that remark but it was so catchy I enjoyed repeating it. “Cheer up! The worst is yet to come!” As I matured I realized the bear cubs were sounding quite hopeless; that beyond the catchy words lay a very bleak future.

Our nation and the world are in such turmoil these days it is easy to be drawn down into a dark mood. When friends meet it has always been the custom to discuss each other’s medical conditions, but these days politics arrest the conversation. One would wish to return to medical reports. Then I remember my grandmother’s plaques.

The other one of the two carries something of the same theme as the first: look up and cheer up. However on the second plaque there is a light shining through the darkness. It pictures some of our common birds on the branch of a tree in the spring and they are talking together. They quote a simple poem by Elizabeth Cheney.

*Said the Robin to the Sparrow*  
I should really like to know  
Why these anxious human beings  
Rush around and worry so.

*Said the Sparrow to the Robin,*  
Friend, I think that it must be  
They have no heavenly Father  
Such as cares for you and me.

_The bears had only a slogan: “Cheer up the worst is yet to come.”_  
_The birds had a person to turn to, the Heavenly Father. He is the light in our darkness._

—Rev. Stan Brown
I quietly said “Amen!” to myself when I read the title of a column by Annie in the Daily Courier not long ago: “It’s not always easy to forgive.” The newspaper counselor was trying to give advice to a father who couldn’t forgive a family member who had molested his teenage daughter.

As people of faith our problem is that Jesus told us to forgive “even as we are forgiven” in that model prayer. And he forgave Peter even though Peter had denied knowing him. He forgave the woman caught in adultery and stopped those who were ready to kill her by asking the one who is without sin to throw the first stone. On the cross Jesus cried out to God to forgive those shouting for his crucifixion because they really didn’t understand what they were doing. Yet for most of us, our anger, our sense of betrayal, our hurt over an action taken by someone we liked, loved, respected, trusted… this sensation of being wronged usually overcomes any desire to forgive.

I carried a grudge against a fellow clergyman who lied to me and several of my church leaders. Then God spoke to me through a friend. “How can you preach and teach love,” the friend asked, “if you carry such bitter thoughts about another child of God?” A light flashed into my darkness. I forgave my colleague and the Lord released me from my bitterness. A grudge, I have learned, never hurts the other person; but it does poison my soul.

“Anger is a wasted emotion,” declared a New York City policeman who was shot three times by a teenager. Detective Steven McDonald survived although he was paralyzed from the neck down for the rest of his life. Yet he forgave his shooter. “I forgive him and hope that he can find peace and purpose in his life,” and he wrote to the boy imprisoned for the attack. A devout Catholic, McDonald envisioned that when the shooter was released from prison they could travel the nation telling their stories to audiences and bringing them a message of hope. Not to be. The shooter died from a motorcycle accident two days after his release from prison.

Yet it can be done—we can forgive those who have wronged us. We can feel the release of that anger and find joy and calmness and light in our darkness. And we can pray sincerely, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

—Rev. Clyde Chesnutt
His Light Forever Shines Within Us

Hearts had grown cold. They had eyes but they could not see. They had ears that were deaf to my word. Only a few who followed me really heard. My death was eminent because of it. People wanted to kill and bury what they did not understand. They feared my words, they mocked my followers, they tortured and imprisoned my apostles. It seemed that evil had triumphed against the earth. All seemed dark.

There was no love within them, my crucifiers. They had no heart left in them, it had died out long ago, though once it had been a burning flame.

I had come to set them free from their darkness, from their coldness. But only a few listened.

And when my life was spent, hanging on the cross, and when I perished, my soul rose again on the third day, and the people were astonished that I rose again from my grave, without a scratch, and walked out of my tomb into the light.

Then they listened. Then they believed. Then their eyes began to open. Then their ears began to hear my voice. Then their hearts opened to the light that was given them, And only then did I give them peace and rest, comfort and caring, and friends full of sharing.

And only then did they receive my true wisdom. True wisdom flows through the heart and not through the mind. When the heart opens, the body and the mind then follow, and people are then truly and fully healed.

My sacrifice for the people of this earth was the only thing that could open up their hearts. They saw the immense love and light I brought forth within my resurrection. No man had ever done it and no man could ever do it, so they saw I must be God.

It is love that heals this earth, not money or possessions or success. I am a perfect example of this. They will never forget my love in doing this for them, in making this sacrifice for them.

It is love that heals the earth, and I am that love. I will always be that love, shining in their hearts forevermore. I will live on in their hearts. I will show them the way, the truth and the light of the Christ who was resurrected.

There was no other way to do it but for me to live on inside their hearts, as the holy resurrected spirit, giving them direction and faith, healing them with my love, lighting a path before them, being their candle in the dark wilderness of man’s cruelty and hate, walking beside them even still till the end of the age, till the end of the world.

I am forever present with them. I will never leave them. I will never forsake them. I will always shine within them.

“I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” (John 14:15-21, CEB).

—Marla Gable
BELIEVING IS SEEING

‘Jesus and his disciples came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch and heal him. Taking the blind man’s hand, Jesus led him out of the village. After spitting on his eyes and laying his hands on the man he asked him, ‘Do you see anything?’ The man looked up and said, ‘I see people. They look like trees, only they are walking around.’ Then Jesus placed his hands on the man’s eyes again. He looked with his eyes wide open, his sight was restored, and he could see everything clearly.’” —Mark 8:22-25 (CEB)

What does it mean, as spoken of in the story of a blind man being healed or “made whole,” to “see everything clearly?” The Light of God’s unconditional love, working through Jesus as the Christ or incarnated Human One, works on the healing of a man living in the darkness of his blindness. Jesus, at first, seems to bring about only one kind of healing, perhaps that of our common physical eyesight. That clearly, however, is not enough. The man says he sees people, but they look like trees walking around. He needs further healing that of the inner Light of God’s love which shines always and everywhere in our creaturely lives, even when we seem to live in the darkness of our limited human vision. Only then was the blind man enabled to “see everything clearly.” But, once again, what does that mean? Is the blind man’s condition, I wonder, that of all our lives? Haven’t we all had, at one time or more, that which we call an “ah ha” moment? A moment when we have the proverbial light bulb above our heads, when some truth dawns on us and we say with exclamation, ‘I see!’ It is something we might call seeing with the light of IN sight. The problem is, however, that IN Sight is often blocked within us and our darkened vision. We don’t see clearly as spiritual human beings because we try to see through our personal pre-judgements (prejudices). We see dualistically. Other people are either black or white, good or bad, gay or straight, liberal or conservative, rich or poor, this or that, or in some way as being in a particular category. We all have difficulty, in other words, in seeing others as simply flawed human beings like ourselves. This is what I think the story of the blind man is all about. It is about our all too worldly tendency of trying to “put people in their place.” We see people, but as “objects” rather than as “subjects” like ourselves. The scriptures are constantly reminding us, in one way or another, that our loving God does not see us as we appear to be on the outside, but as we are outside and inside. God sees through our differences and accepts us in all our diversity. (Read Psalm 139) Indeed, if we take seriously the unconditional love constantly flowing from God into our lives we are enabled to see clearly that all of creation has been brought into being with diversity in mind. In every human encounter we can only say that, “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Loving God, grant us the grace of IN sight to see clearly that You are present in all of creation, and that we have never, and can never, be separated from Your loving reality in whom we live and breathe and have our being. To you be all the glory. Amen.

—Rev. Bob Fiske
Read John 1:1-5.

My Dutch grandmother had a saying that “with butter and cream you can make rocks taste good”! While I suppose the saying is not entirely applicable, it does lead into the reminder that with the Light (see John 1:1) in our lives, the darkness is dispelled!

John writes: “Christ’s life is the light that shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.” (John 1:5  The Living Bible)

There are many kinds of darkness in our world today. Debilitating diseases such as cancer, losses of jobs, family members, marriages—the list is endless but the promise of Light is eternal.

How do we access that Light in our lives? We seek the Light—our Christ—as our Light in our daily walk with Jesus.

Will there be times of darkness? Of course! But as we seek the Light,

‘In Him there is no darkness at all,
The night and the day are both alike,
The Lamb is the light of the city of God,
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.’

Kathleen Thomsen 1966

United Methodist Hymnal 206

Prayer:  Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus TODAY. Amen.

—Pat Unkenholz
“During the Christmas season we think of the Christ child called Jesus. Perhaps one of the most important events of his adult life was when he took a disciple or two and went to a place of solitude to be alone to meditate and pray. Early in my college experience I met Ted, a fellow college student. We became close friends and one evening Ted invited me to go with him to Letchworth State Park in western New York. By choice we had waited until it was dark and had come to an understanding that in the park we were not to carry on a conversation, but were to listen to its sounds, inhale its fragrances, and to look at the stars and moon. We were to meditate, then leave, and drive back the 30 some miles to our college without speaking, but to think of what we had experienced that night.

Later I became a night watchman at the college, walking in and out of building. I should have paid the college for the privilege, for on those nights when I could see the “man” in the moon I practiced the art of meditation that Ted had taught me.

Still now, over the years when the moon is full and the sky is clear, I often go out and wander by myself or sit in silence and let everything in nature about me speak to me.

Ted’s wife called me early this year and informed me of his death. I regret that I never thanked him for introducing me to this experience. Incidentally, Ted was the best man at our wedding.

Christmas is a time for us to remember what and who has blessed us, and then make sure that they know how they have enriched our lives.”

This was taken from a 2014 Christmas letter from Dick and Rachel Bower.
—Submitted by Jean Hazlett
Road Trip

John 1: 4-5  “4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Hebrews 12: 3  “3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

The Lenten theme brought back my only experience of total darkness.

I was about ten years of age...and I was with my family on a car trip through New Mexico, and driving behind my uncle and his wife, Auntie Maude. I couldn’t understand why we always had to follow Uncle Burrell. Daddy had to keep an eye on his older brother because he had diabetes. I knew that Uncle Burrell carried a good-sized candy bar in his glove compartment as a safeguard connected with his sugar levels.

The main goal of the trip was to visit Carlsbad Caverns. Mother and Daddy, and my sister and I, would walk through several levels of awe-inspiring huge rooms to get to the larges, and deepest area of all the caverns. We waited for Uncle Burrell and Auntie Maude to arrive by elevator.

Then we were seated in a huge theater-sized room and the guide said they would be turning off ALL the lights. I had never experienced anything like the darkness in that deep tunnel. There were about fifty or sixty people in our group, and we were totally quiet...and a little uneasy! The blackness sort of enclosed us! The far down a dark, dark passage way we saw a pinpoint of light and my ears picked up the faint sound of music, “Rock of Ages”. It was quite far away, and the tiny glow was a thrill to see. Gradually the light and the music increased until it surrounded us.

It was thrilling! First, total blackness. Then that pinpoint of light! Dramatic! Life changing! I've never forgotten the feeling I had of that total blackness, followed by the excitement of that pinpoint of light!

It belongs to Jesus. He is our pinpoint of light!

—by Mary Ellen Dyer
Another perspective of Darkness

At the Desert Southwest Clergy “Gathering” in Tucson, Arizona there is a labyrinth. A labyrinth is a spiritual tool one can use to connect with God. I have walked labyrinths since I was young and always found the monotonous journey of following a single path very relaxing and releasing so that I can hear God. One night after dinner and our closing session I decided to walk it. It is just off the parking lot in the desert facing beautiful rocky outcrops. Of course, since it was so late at night, it was pitch black. I had my trusty phone flashlight, so I was set. I turned my light on and walked. At one point, I thought, what a shame it is to use this flashlight. So I turned it off. AHHHH! It was so dark I couldn’t see a thing! I turned it back on. When I got to the center of the labyrinth there were a couple places to sit. I turned off the flashlight and sat. The stars were bright and beautiful. The temperature was wonderful. I noticed a couple of things about darkness while I was sitting there.

1. After you sit in the dark for awhile, it does not look pitch black. You might understand this as one’s eyes adjusting to the dark. Theologically, maybe it would be good to sit in the dark a little while sometimes. Perhaps this means to sit in those feelings of loneliness or grief, or maybe it means to be with sinners and outcasts long enough to be able to see with their eyes. I cannot help but to think of those times when my kids get out of bed at night and turn the bathroom light on and cry out because it is too bright. Sometimes I wonder if our messages in the church hurt those we want to reach most because we are using words of judgment and condemnation which are painful. How can we talk to others about God and sin without bringing up feelings of fear and guilt? Also, when we sit in the dark, we can see the low embers of light that are shining as best they can. Are there people in our communities reflecting the light of God who could use support and encouragement to continue on?

2. The other thing I learned sitting there and then getting up and starting back again is that light produces shadows and shadows look differently because of where the light is shining. From one angle I thought I was looking at a large, long-legged spider. However, when I moved my light around, I found I was looking at a small grassy weed. When we learn about the different ways that God meets people, we shine a light on different aspects of who God is. How can we use this image of light in the darkness to understand ourselves, others and God in new ways?

—Rev. Misty Howick
An Affirming Flame

On the eve of World II, the British poet W.H. Auden wrote a poem that also seems to speak to our turbulent world today. In the last part of the poem “September 1, 1939” Auden wrote:

Defenseless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

We persons of faith can do that, can’t we? Show an “affirming flame”? Whenever we show compassion to the poor, wherever we write a check to the church or a charitable organization, whenever we offer our love to a despondent person, isn’t that flashing a just message? Bringing light into the darkness that surrounds another person or group of persons is showing an affirming flame. Speaking up for the rights of people wronged by other individuals or groups is flashing a light that offers hope to those in despair.

That’s essentially the message that Jesus gave to his disciples after the resurrection. “Go into the world and proclaim my message of God’s love. Do the things that I have taught you—speaking love to the lost, healing the sick, caring for the widow, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, standing up for the neglected and oppressed.” It’s these little acts of mercy and conversations about faith that make people feel alive again. The poet mentions “points of light”—that’s what these simple actions are. Although small in significance, act by act, person by person, they soon burst into an affirming flame that transforms the kingdom of this earth into the Kingdom of Heaven.

When Jesus died on the cross, the world of his followers was certainly plunged into darkness. Yet God turned it into the brightest light the world has ever seen as Jesus was raised from the dead. All at once the faithful realized that the black earth is not our end but instead heralds a new beginning. Suddenly our small acts of mercy and words of comfort become the hallmark of a kingdom of love.

As the poet yearned to join the company who show an affirming flame amidst the bleak times in which he lived, so we, by our belief in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and our efforts to serve in his name, can show a blazing light that triumphs over any darkness. Hallelujah!

—Rev. Clyde Chesnutt
During my middle-school years I had a close friend whose father was president of a large corporation. I had heard about him from my friend but had never seen him. Because of his position I imagined him to be an awesome figure, and I wondered what he was really like. Then my friend invited me for dinner at his house and I sat at the table looking at this impressive father figure. I found he was a warm-hearted person; he called me by my name; we talked face to face. Then in the midst of dinner he said something that made me and his son blush. He had heard that the two of us had gotten into some trouble a few weeks before and had been taken down to the police station. I sat there stunned as the incident flooded back to mind and my face grew red with embarrassment. My friend and I had been out in the neighborhood one evening and ended up at the commuter train station. We made a lot of noise banging on the gum machine hoping loose coins would fall out. The station master lived in the back and called the police. We were whisked off to the police station where they scared us by putting flood lights on us, taking our finger prints, asking lots of questions, and then taking each of us home. I was so grateful they dropped us off in front of our houses and did not confront our parents. However, it seems my friend’s father knew the police captain who informed him about the incident. At dinner that evening the subject was abruptly dropped. Embarrassment and fear had been our punishment. The father of my friend was obviously forgiving.

There were times after that I was in the presence of my friend’s father, only because I was a friend of his son. Corporate empires responded to his orders; thousands of people depended on him for their living; scores of people wanted to know him but had no way to get near him. However, as a friend of his son I had an avenue into his presence. I sat at his table.

It has been a wonderful adventure knowing Jesus as a best friend who brings me into the presence of the Father God. There may be shadows of guilt or clouds of wrong choices troubling me, but knowing Jesus brings me daily into the light of Heaven, as I reaffirm Christ’s own words, “If you knew me you would know my Father also.” John 8:19

—Rev. Stan Brown
Because We Are Human, Continued

—Submitted by Rich Poynter

In mid-February, Pastor Misty delivered a wonderful sermon, “Because We Are Human”. I have decided to continue its theme of befriending strangers and immigrants.

She related how her husband Jeff had unknowingly gotten on the wrong train when taking classes in New York. When he noticed his unfamiliarity with the communities the train was passing by, he asked several passengers if he could use their phone for a short call. All said no or ignored him except for one who was willing, after she finished the call she was on. When she kept talking, he hopped off at the next stop to figure out how to get home. People’s reluctance to help, coupled with a wrong-way train, fed his growing anxiety.

After 20 hours of traveling, Misty arrived in Japan two weeks after Jeff. She was fortunate to board the first train to her final destination. When she remarked that she needed to make a call, her elderly seatmate offered her phone. What a difference between the responses of strangers on the two trains!

In the summer of 1967, I asked two good friends, Richard and Rick, to accompany me on a three-week driving trip through the South and up the eastern seaboard. We arrived in a Mississippi town in which blacks were boycotting white-owned stores. We were eager to better understand race relations. We stood outside of a small drab coffee shop which we knew was for African Americans. I wanted to go in, but the two Richards hesitated. I walked up the steps to the entrance, opened the door, and slowly entered. Within seconds, every conversation stopped and all eyes were upon me. I was met with frowns of incredulity and unnerving silence. My heart and mind were racing as I turned slightly in the futile hope of finding a friendly face. I headed to the door and down the stairs. I should not have intruded on their privacy, but I learned viscerally the sting of being unwelcome in a “foreign” town.

By contrast, when I had my first visit with people in my Peace Corps village in Panama, I was warmly welcomed, even with halting Spanish. What a difference between the two foreign encounters!

Because we are human, we all know the good feeling of a smile, a handshake, a hug, a drink of water, a thanks for trying to speak the language. Likewise, we all know the bad feeling of a frown, a cold shoulder, a negative gesture, a harsh remark.

Whether you are a newcomer at church, work, or the gym; or, you are a recently arrived immigrant trying to speak the language, wouldn’t it be wonderful to be welcomed as if you already belonged because the love of the Lord was already at work? Let’s turn the cold shoulder of a dark night into the welcome warmth of a sunlit day.

Mark 12:31a

In answering which are the most important commandments, Jesus said, “The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself.”
Experiencing Spiritual Growth Thru a Touch of Spirit

Do you see what I see?
A glimpse of spirit taking form,
Hues of rainbows on butterfly wings,
Wisps of clouds, currents to escape.

Do you hear what I hear?
Listen to a stirring breeze,
Rustling leaves,
Echoes of laughter and song,
A thundering clap, a quite hush.

Do you feel what I feel?
The dawning principle of life,
A heartbeat embodies in the physical senses,
Celebrated in all creation.

Do you smell what I smell?
The budding essence of garden splendor,
Wafting aromas, tantalizing tastes,
Familiar perfumes of things near and dear.

Do you know what I know?
That a perpetual creative force emanates comfort.
Life evolving spirit is freely given to embrace,
The root of existence is infinite.

—D.J. Reid
Scripture text: Genesis 1: 3-4

3 And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.
4 God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

The Groundhog Day tradition has its origin in a German legend that says if a furry rodent casts a shadow on Feb. 2, winter continues. If not, spring comes early.

On February 2, 2017, a cold but sunny day, Punxsutawney Phil saw his shadow on Thursday morning, predicting six more weeks of winter during Groundhog Day festivities at Gobbler's Knob, a small hill just outside Phil's hometown. Members of the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club's Inner Circle revealed Phil's forecast by poem, as is tradition.

It's mighty cold weather, you've been braving.
Is it more winter or is it spring that you're craving?
Since you've been up all night and starting to tottle,
I, Punxsutawney Phil, shall not dawdle,
My faithful followers,
I could clearly see a beautiful, perfect shadow of me.
Six more weeks of winter, it shall be!"

And just as fast as he saw his shadow, he went back to hiding underground, shaking at the thought of coming outside in the daylight to face his shadow.

To me this is a little backward – If it’s a dark and gloomy day and there is not a sign of a shadow, I want to go back to bed and not go anywhere. But when the sun is shining brightly and my shadow is following me, I’m ready to be out in nature taking in the fresh air, joyful for the bright light of the sunshine and warmth.

Our lives can also take this path. When things are not going well for our family due to illness or strife of some kind, we feel we are in the darkness of our lives. But as the Book of Genesis begins, God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.” So when I see my shadow, I know there is a Light behind me holding me up through any dark days I may have.
From Darkness to Light - Rebirth

Read: John 3: 1-14
I assure you that whoever does not received the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.

At the age of thirty I was lost, drowning in a sea of alcohol. I found the way out of my dilemma by without reservation admitting my powerlessness over my drinking and asking God to release me from bondage to alcohol. God answered my prayer.

A few decades later I am a sober, productive member of society. Only by relying on the grace of God and the help, inspiration and laughter of sober friends have I been blessed with the opportunity to marry, raise children, and watch my grandchildren grow into their teenage years. I was able to be with my mother and hold on to her as she passed away a few years ago. I have been blessed with a caring family.

Only by what I learned at church as a child and as a teen did I realize that there is a God so powerful and so loving that he could give me a brand new life, and so personal to me he wanted to do exactly that if I would only approach him with a childlike faith and ask for help.

Thought for the Day:
God wants a personal relationship with each one of us.

Prayer:
Thank you, Jesus, for the gift of rebirth. Amen.

Prayer Focus:
For courage to ask for help from God and our fellow man when we need help.

—by Rod Scott
(This is an updated version of my Upper Room meditation published on 1/3/2012)
Shine God’s Light

Genesis 1:2 “and darkness was upon the face of the earth”

Sometime ago I was standing in line at a local store and noticed that the check-out clerk seemed unhappy. She was frowning with a turned down mouth and a grey countenance. Then someone said something to her and my, what a change. She suddenly brightened and turned on a beautiful smile. People do look better when they smile! The darkness was chased away. It seems as though the ”Darth Vader” mood catches us and pulls to the “dark side” of life. That is so quickly dispersed with a smile that is the result of someone passing on the light of love.

John 1:5 “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

I wish I knew what was said to the clerk that brightened her life and brought forth that shining beautiful smile. Whatever was said made her day at that moment. We know that employees are trained to be friendly and say to customers, “have a nice day”. It may just be a routine without much feeling behind it. Lately, I have been replying to this, with “and you have a lot of good days.” The response is always a positive one. You get lots of smiles that way.

Wouldn’t it be grand if we knew just at the right time, what to say and do, to help shine God’s light to others? Actually, Jesus said we can do just that, by loving god with all our strength and our neighbors as ourselves.

Genesis 1:3 “And god said, let there be light”

Help us, Lord of Light to be always aware of the light and grant us power to use it wherever we go. Thank you for that light of love.
Amen.

—by Rev. Lloyd Ewart
From a black hole in infinity a cosmic signal beeps
Is this a sign of the creative force that never sleeps?

The mote seen in everyone’s eye is but a speck of dust,
Forming the universe beyond the earth’s crust.

We reflect on images of life through mortal illusion,
Renewed through perpetual motion, a spirited fusion.

Illumined disciples set no limits where faith abounds
Through the dark side of nature, God’s omnipotence astounds.

Promises of heaven on earth, we chance for that perfect blend,

As we complete our cycle from birth to death, only our thoughts ascend.

A Poem by D.J. Reid
LIVES THAT SHINE IN THE DARK

We who were ordained as pastors in the United Methodist Church were asked a series of questions about our intentions and our commitment. They were historic questions, posed by the founder of our denomination John Wesley. Two of those questions are mind-blowers: Are you going on to perfection? Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life?

It is one thing to say I am “going on” to perfection, implying that I am not there yet. But then to say I expect to become perfect takes a second thought. Luther gives us help here when he points out that you do not have to command a stone lying in the sun to become warm. We Christians are those who run out of the dark house into the sunshine and allow it to warm us through and through. Our calling in the church is not to become specimens of holiness, preening ourselves before the mirror. Our calling is to be so consumed with God that we forget ourselves and do his will as second nature.

That second nature is outlined in what the Scripture calls the “fruits of the Spirit.” In Galatians 5:22 we read, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

In other words, these qualities of life are not anything we can conjure up, but when they are present they evidence the presence of God. They are his fruits, not ours. Wherever I see these evidences of “perfection” I know that God is present and at work in those persons no matter what they say they believe or don’t believe.

A Christian is one who is experiencing the Savior being formed in his or her soul. It is a miracle when we see this almost instantaneous change take place in a person’s life.

When my son was seventeen years old he was on a money kick. He worked hard maintaining neighbor’s yards and he saved, putting every penny away. His plan was to have $1,000 saved by a certain date. He would sit in his room surrounded by papers, figuring up how much interest he would have by age eighty-five. Then in the space of two days he fell in love. We could tell by the dreamy look and the silly smile. The paper work was forgotten, the miser melted in the heat of a warm heart. There was a trip to the bank, a withdrawal of money for gas, food, gifts and cards. This new love consumed all other loves. The materialism and plans to buy a car were all transformed. In a few hours his life and dreams had changed by the vision of perfection he saw in a girl.

When we behold a vision of the holiness of God it changes our lives. We acknowledge that the Heavenly Father is holy and we are to become absorbed in His holiness. This is to say that our lives do not depend on our goodness but upon God’s goodness. He is the holy God, the perfect Father, and I bask in the light of His holiness while I quit worrying about myself. The fruits of the Holy Spirit become our second nature, and become a beacon of hope in our troubled world.

—Rev. Stan Brown
Jeremiah 29:11

For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope for your future.

I recently had an opportunity to drive three older members of our church to Phoenix to attend Pastor Dan’s memorial service for his wife Susan. It was a wonderful opportunity for fellowship, to hear stories about their lives and to connect. While I was driving, I blurted out “Does anyone know Jeremiah 29:11?” I was so surprised at the response. They were not familiar with this verse.

It was the reminder that God had given that verse to me years ago as a promise. I was in my early 30’s, struggling with the decision to divorce my husband due to alcoholism and domestic violence. Eventually I faced single parenting my two children ages 9 and 10, after their father was killed in a car accident due to his alcoholism. I felt a lot of fear as I faced being alone. I didn’t know how I was going to make it. I didn’t have an education or degree and little ability to make a good living. I cleaned houses for an income. During this time, I started seeing this verse in homes, hanging on walls in frames or pictures. This happened so often I noticed it was God talking to me. So I memorized the verse, and claimed this promise over my life, and over the lives of my children.

The verse is still my anchor with all of life’s ups and downs. It is a powerful promise. It has sustained me through the hard work of completing my education, starting a career in social work, raising my children, letting them go to live their own lives, another marriage that ended in divorce, my own recovery from addiction for 22 years, and moving to another state. The list goes on!

Easter is the most wonderful time of this promise. Christ’s death and resurrection is our “hope” we can all claim for our future. If you have not found your own life verse, perhaps yours also can be Jeremiah 29:11.

—Sharon Bowen
On behalf of the darkness . . .

No early riser I.

Three trips to Maui, and I have yet to join the Haleakala sunrise vigil.

Not a single item on my bucket list requires being awake before 10 a.m.

And I happily agree with Patrick Dennis’ Auntie Mame that 9 a.m. is obviously “The Middle of the Night” (capitalization on purpose!!)

So I am inclined to be more drawn to the ebony essence of the darker hours. For years, my most productive times were between 10 p.m. and 2 a.m.

Without the distraction of the daylight, one is more open to contemplate mysteries, probe possibilities, listen more intently for that small, still voice.

And yet a certain amount of light provides a focal point.

On my last visit to Maui, my bedroom window looked up to Haleakala and all the pinpoints of light that dotted the way up the mountainside at night.

Awakening during the night – ah, the vagaries of time changes - I used them to count all the wondrous things I had seen each day, all the things for which I was grateful. (Fortunately, there are many lights along that road!!)

And there are many such “lights” to be found in our daily routines: most recently one appeared on tiny hot pink Post-It, carefully inscribed with a daisy drawn by the 6-year-old girl in the next restaurant booth. Shyly offered, at the end of my somewhat trying day, it lit the rest of my evening. Other lights are the amazing folks I get to work with here in the office, both staff and those who come on various errands and activities. Among good “flashes” are the passages of wisdom that pop up unexpectedly – often when most needed – Julian of Norwich, Francis of Assisi, and even totally unanticipated sources like “Pickles” and Amy Farrah Fowler.

No need to be blinded by the light: a little can be just what is needed.

Thank you, gracious Lord, for being a light unto my convoluted path!

—Donna Gaddy

2017 Lenten Devotional
From Darkness Into Light
A Smile…
A Song…
    A fresh lingering scent,
    Omens of Life well spent.

The Birds…
The Clouds…
    The galaxy in the dark sky,
    The totems we remember by.

Our Badge…
Our Mark…
    Our emblem on our family tree,
    Our character speaks identity.

God’s Love…
God’s Grace…
    God’s representation of Divine,
    God’s Cross as an eternal sign.

—D.J. Reid
One can imagine the grief Mary Magdalene must have felt as she stood beside an empty tomb. Not only had she lost a revered Master by his cruel death on a cross but now his body was gone. She had come to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning while it was still dark, expecting to find his body wrapped in cloths only to be shocked to see the tomb empty (John 20:1-18).

Each of us has been touched by grief, the loss of a loved one, a beloved parent, a dear friend, haven’t we? We, through our own experience, can imagine even across the centuries the deep sadness and despondency Mary Magdalene must have felt. Grief is universal; for loss weaves throughout our lives, not only in large ways but small ones, too.

Counselors tell us that grieving is a process, not a one time event, and that each person moves through the experience at his/her own pace. We find final acceptance of our loss in differing ways. A good friend in the Phoenix area said that her divorced husband who had recently died came to her in a dream. They reconciled, talked about the good times they’d had together and the children they’d raised. That dream was closure for her; she felt relieved and encouraged about herself, her faith, and her life.

I believe the moment for me was when I began to receive letters from people who knew sorrow in their own lives. As Associate Editor of the United Methodist Reporter I had written a column about my grief at the death of my 15-year-old son in a car accident. The response from readers across the country was overwhelming. A couple from Kansas whom I did not know wrote a tender letter and said that persons I’d never meet were praying for me. And suddenly I knew that I wasn’t alone in my loss; the community of faith was holding me in their love.

Mary Magdalene’s sorrow turned to joy when she realized that the man she thought was the gardener was actually her Master, risen from the dead. She spread the word and from that darkness-turned-to-light encounter in the garden, believers for thousands of years have known that our loss is not permanent. Even though our loved ones do not return to us, the Easter experience promises us that sometime in the unknown future, we will join them in the presence of Christ our Lord in the Kingdom of God our Creator. Praise the Lord: Christ is risen!

—Rev. Clyde Chesnutt
DARING THE DARKNESS

It was a summer night; I was fifteen years old and visiting my grandparent’s cottage on Lake Michigan. Feeling an urge to be alone and walk in the woods I went out into the pitch darkness to walk the glen road behind the house. I felt my way along the sandy rut when suddenly a pinpoint of starlight penetrated the tree branches and illuminated isolated stumps on either side of my path. Then the blackness closed around me again and I had to step cautiously to stay on the road. The crack of a twig sounded, and I fought an imaginary monster that was ready to leap out of the shadow, or maybe it was a bear.

The adventure of challenging the darkness kept me walking on rather than retreating to the house. I sang to myself, but in a whisper so as not to cover any warning noises. If only there could be a friend there beside me, someone to put a hand on my shoulder and say, “Don’t worry, I know this road in the dark. I know where the roots protrude and where the holes are and the turns. I’ll take you safely through.”

So many people feel alone like that, in a dark forest wishing someone was with them who knows the way. Even as a teenager, thanks to my parent’s faith and an upbringing in the church, I knew firsthand the experience of God’s Presence even in the dark.

When I find myself “in the dark” – facing difficult decisions, or a crisis or an illness in the family, times like that – hymns bubble up from the storehouse of my soul, especially hymns I learned growing up summers at that cottage on Lake Michigan when every Sunday night the community held a sing. On that walk in the dark along the glen road I was quietly singing one of those hymns, “Jesus is all the world to me, my life, my joy, my all. He is my strength from day to day, without Him I would fall. When I am sad to Him I go; no other one can cheer me so. When I am sad He makes me glad. He’s my friend.”

We want to share with those who walk in dark places the word in John 8:12, “When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

—Rev. Stan Brown
On the morning of January 9, 1966 I was 16 years old. We had been in Montgomery a few months and were scheduled to move again soon to the D. C. area. As part of our family’s “church shopping” process we were looking for a church home that felt right for us. We went to Westminster Presbyterian Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The minister was also visiting the church for the first time. The sermon was titled “The Truth of Christianity”. The Serenity Prayer was on the cover of the Sunday bulletin. I did not know it at the time, but the congregation was struggling with the issue of segregation versus desegregation in their all white church.

About a year earlier our family had volunteered to be one of the families to desegregate a black church in Colorado Springs, Colorado. This desegregation process was arranged by the Methodist Church of Colorado Springs and a nearby black church and involved about three families from each church volunteering for the exchange. Our family of five enjoyed attending the black church that Sunday morning. The sermon was good, people were friendly, and the desegregation process had begun!

One year later it was a tense time at Sidney Lanier High School in Montgomery where I was starting my junior year. The sixteen black students started class one week after the white students so that the white students could get settled in and gather in the auditorium to hear a message from the principal whose central message was, “Everyone relax. Calm down. Our school has a long, proud history, and we will get through this somehow.” On the first day of the second week of class the black students arrived each with their own federal marshal to escort them from class to class and then wait in the hallway to safely escort them to the next class an hour later.

Two years earlier four white men who were KKK members had planted fifteen sticks of dynamite with a time device under the steps of a black church in Alabama. They succeeded in murdering four little girls and injuring twenty-two others on a Sunday morning. Less than six months before our first day of school, Mrs. Viola Liuzzo had been shot to death by KKK members because she came down from Chicago to support civil rights for African Americans by joining a civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Suffice it to say there was a feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop in my high school with the sixteen black students and their federal marshals. No one knew what would happen next. At the end of the week there had been no violent episodes and the marshals went away.

I still have the church bulletin from that Sunday morning framed above my desk as I write this more than fifty years later. The Serenity Prayer on the cover was the typical abridged version. Below is the original prayer as presented by Reverend Richard Niebuhr:

(Continued on page 37)
God, give us grace to accept with serenity
The things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
Which should be changed,
And the Wisdom to distinguish
The one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,

Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,

Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
The Serenity Prayer was written for a Sunday morning sermon and was in no way directed at recovering alcoholics. Reverend Niebuhr was sharing with his congregation a prayer he had written much the same as Saint Francis wrote a prayer and shared it with his brothers and sisters in Christ. The teachings of Reverend Niebuhr influenced the heart of reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer the Christian martyr who died in resisting the Nazis in Germany during World War II.

The process of going from darkness, repression, and murder to repress marginalized citizens has moved forward painfully at times in our country. Within a few months of the murder of Mrs. Liuzzo, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. Half a century later there are still an extremely limited number of voting places in the neighborhoods in south, central and west Phoenix where I used to teach. People sometimes wait in line for twelve hours and still never get the opportunity to vote before the polls close. The promise of the Voting Rights Act has not been fulfilled in Arizona. Some progress has been made. The question remains when will we as a society fulfill the dream of the Christian martyr Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and move from darkness to light?

—Rod Scott

I Have A Dream