

BE STILL

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made ...

ROMANS 1:20 (NIV)

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

PSALM 19:1-4A

In the comic strip “Peanuts,” Snoopy’s brother Spike, the one who lives in the desert, is sitting with his back against a cactus, writing a letter. The letter says, “At night the sun goes down, and the stars come out; and then in the morning the sun comes up again. It’s so exciting to live in the desert.”

Can it be that the daily blessings and evidences of God in our world are taken for granted? Are we allowing busy lives and the chaotic state of affairs in the world to blind us to God’s reminders that He is faithful and His presence is with us each moment of every day?

When was the last time any of us enjoyed a stunning sunrise or breathtaking sunset, or did some nighttime stargazing? Just last night I went for a walk enjoying the crispness of the late winter air and the brightness of the stars and the moon in the cloudless sky. As I walked, I found myself stopping, being still, to marvel and take in the awesome light show God was providing. As I started walking again, I found myself softly singing “How Great Thou Art” for what I had just witnessed. I returned home refreshed and renewed.

Lent is a season where we are invited to become refocused on God and those blessings all around us. I pray that as God’s people we don’t become so used to all we have, including the beauty of nature, that we become blinded to the wonders that God has placed all around us. As Anne Frank wrote, “Think of all the beauty still left around you, and be happy.”

Let’s make it a priority as we journey through these 40 days of Lent to “be still and know” that God is God (Psalm 46:10). Let’s take time to pause, reflect, appreciate, and enjoy all God graciously extends to us.

Lord, help us, as Zechariah 2:13 says, to “Be still before the LORD.”

REV. DR. JAMES BOLTON
PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

JOY IN JESUS

My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you — I whom you have delivered.

PSALM 71:23 (NIV)

Oh what joy we can have at the end of this Lenten season! Oh what joy awaits us with Jesus! We can be so thankful for this time to prepare us for our future in eternity. As the Bible tells us, Jesus did His part on the cross for our sins so that when it's our turn to leave this earth, we may have new bodies and be in a wonderful place with Him. But first we must prepare ourselves by learning what a great life we can have in Jesus here by having a loving relationship with Him now and by learning what it means to be truly free. We can leave all our cares and worries with Him in prayer and live our lives according to His will. If we really try to please Him and have great faith in Him, we are not bound by the trials of this world. We will have trials, but He helps us to get through them.

I remember when I had my two knees replaced at the same time, and because of a severe allergic reaction to some medication, my kidneys began to fail. The medical team told me I had about a year to live. But friends told me they had prayer going up for me all over the country. That was more than eight years ago. After the medicine I took for a year and a half was completed, I got back half the function of each kidney, and I have been doing well — great, in fact.

But I know the Lord had everything to do with it. The joy that surrounded me during the time I was ill was amazing! I told my pastors that I was so full of heavenly joy that I couldn't wait to go to heaven and see Jesus. In fact, I told this to almost everyone I met. Oh, the joy that awaits us there!

But let's get back down to Earth for this Lenten season. We need to prepare ourselves by our faith, love, and caring for each other. We need to follow in His footsteps, showing His love and expressing our joy to those we meet. We need to care for the lost and needy. But we need to have God in our hearts first before we can reach out to others. Are we full of heavenly joy yet?

Heavenly Father, please give us Jesus' love and joy so we can run the race here, and help us to share it with our loved ones. Help us to know the true freedom that comes with that joy. Thank you, Jesus, for going to that cross with our sins on your shoulders so we may be free. Amen.

SANDRA HAWN-HANES
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

PEACE THROUGH FAITH

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 (NRSV)

As I read these verses, I ponder the complexity and depth of the meaning woven into the words. I wonder if I am able to do justice to these verses and capture the writer's intent and God's divine meaning. As I sit here and write this devotional, I ask myself, "Why do I feel the need to preface myself? Why do I need to warn people that I may not give them what they want?"

Is this humility in me, or is it pride? I want to warn people of my mistakes before they can point them out.

And this brings me back to the meaning of the words, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." As humans, we strive to understand, define, figure out, and grasp the Word of God, and often in this process we put God in a box. But there's something truly beautiful about the limitations of our understanding and the mystery of God.

As I read this, I feel like God is gently tapping me on the shoulder, saying, "Hey, look up. Remember who I am? Remember who you are? You don't have to understand it all. Just learn to trust me."

But what does that mean? What does it mean to set my mind on things above and trust my Creator? Learning to do this is an ongoing journey, but my soul finds joy knowing Christ finds value and purpose in who I am. Recognizing this doesn't make the problems of the world fade away, but it does bring me a sense of peace I can't explain.

I pray, O Lord, that the peace I have received from you may enable me to share that peace with others. In this season of Lent may I find peace through faith. Amen.

PASTOR RICHARD WORKMAN
ZION COMMUNITY CHURCH

PURGED IN THE FIRE

But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and like launderers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness.

MALACHI 3:2-3 (NKJV)

For a short time I worked for a custom jewelry maker. He showed me in his lab how he melted gold to purify it. Did you know that pure gold is almost transparent when heated, yet it is a soft, beautiful metal when molded and cooled?

During the refining or purifying procedure, the dross or impurities that ruin its value rise to the surface of the molten metal and are burned away, leaving a purer product. This process is repeated again and again, each time with hotter fire. The gold could not endure the latter heat until it had been purged of some of its dross. This makes gold more malleable, but also the purer gold is softer and able to wear away faster. Quite a lengthy process on the road to purity.

This same process is used by God in His children. It is not a painless operation, and it happens again and again. Fire is serious, yet God's love is refining, not destroying, but perfecting. We're made in the image of God, and when gold is pure, the Refiner can see His image in it.

This reminds me that each of us is filled with impurities. Do you ever feel as if you've been through the fire and that it's getting more fearsome the older you become? ME TOO! Does this mean I'm getting closer to perfection? I sure hope so. And I'm certainly glad God didn't start with the highest heat for my refining. He knows exactly what I can endure. Sometimes I think the more I learn, the harder it becomes to be who God wants me to be. I still do the things I don't want to do, just as Paul lamented in Romans 7:15-19.

We all face the fires of refinement. However, we have to be in the Refiner's hand before He can start the process. The only way to be there is to realize you are a sinner full of dross, you need to be sorry for your sins, and you need to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Can the Refiner see His reflection (image) in you — His gold?

Precious Lord, I know I still need a lot of refining. Please help me through the fires that I may finally reflect your image. In the precious name of Jesus, Amen.

PASTOR SHERRY ZAPPOLA
NEW HOPE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

LESSON FROM A LICENSE PLATE

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

MATTHEW 5:16 (NIV)

I recently had the opportunity to become a resident of South Carolina where my husband and I plan to eventually retire full time. Naturally, part of the process entailed getting a South Carolina driver's license and license plates. I was pretty excited when I found out I had a choice between two tags, at no additional cost. One of the plates said "In God We Trust" at the top. That was a no brainer — I trust God, so I might as well put it on my license plate.

Some time later I was leaving a store and was walking through the parking lot looking for my car. When I finally found it, I took special notice of my new plate and suddenly began thinking, "What am I trying to say by having a plate that says I trust God? What do other people think when they see me get out of my car? What do they think when they see me driving on the road?"

I suddenly realized that if I'm going to have that tag, then I'd better be prepared to live up to what it says about me. If my vehicle is now an ambassador for Christ, then I'd better be sure the person driving it is as well. I need to be mindful that when I drive, I'm being courteous, considerate, and kind to others on the road. I need to remember when I step out of the car that people are watching me to see what a person who trusts God acts like. Am I being loving, helpful, joyful, patient, self-controlled? Do I act like a disciple of Jesus?

We shouldn't need a license plate to show others we're Christians. If we let the love of Jesus shine through us, they will surely know.

Lord, remind us that we are your ambassadors here. Let our words and actions show others we love you and are dedicated to showing them your love as well.

DIANE SIZEMORE
TRINITY UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SEEING THE RAINBOWS

Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.

GENESIS 9:16 (NIV)

One Monday morning, Facebook was abuzz with pictures of a rare double rainbow that had appeared over Pitman the previous afternoon. Our neighbor had even posted a picture showing the rainbow arching above our house. I never saw it. The rainbow had the audacity to appear on Sunday afternoon during my weekly Sunday nap!

It reminded me that we miss out on moments of God's grace unless we keep our spiritual eyes open. It's so easy to keep our eyes focused on our own daily routines and problems. But God usually appears to us in quiet, subtle ways: an unexpected phone call, a sudden hug, a rediscovered card or letter, or in things we easily dismiss as "coincidences" or try to explain away with scientific theories.

Yes, rainbows are caused by drops of water that diffuse the sunlight into its primary colors. We can explain rainbows.

But Genesis 9:16 gives us an image of God being reminded by a rainbow. We can't explain that; certainly God doesn't need any reminders. But maybe this passage points out that WE need reminders. If we are to constantly remember God's covenant of forgiveness and love, we need to open the window and look for the rainbows. We need to search the sky by praying, by reading the Bible, and by pondering "coincidences" instead of dismissing them.

During this season of Lent, remember our covenant with God: that even though our sinful nature keeps pulling our eyes closed to Him, God remembers the rainbow of His Son's sacrifice, and He forgets our sin.

O God, how do I keep missing you? You speak to me, but I keep hearing the noise of my life instead of your still, small voice of love. I need your Holy Spirit. Clear my eyes and tune my ears. Take away the distractions that block my view of you, and replace them with a hunger to seek you in every detail of life.

LARRY BAKELY

PITMAN UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

GOD'S OLYMPICS – PASSING THE TORCH

As for you my son, be strong through the grace that is ours in union with Christ Jesus. Take the teachings you have heard me proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people who will be able to teach others also. An athlete who runs in a race cannot win the prize unless he obeys the rules.

2 TIMOTHY 2:1-2, 5 (GNB)

In 2018 my wife and I will mark 50 years as members of our church. Looking back over those years, we can see our faith growing through worship, service, Bible studies, and fellowship. In thinking about this experience, we realized that we are different Christian people today. As in every part of life, there have been peaks and valleys. Many good times and a few dark times have come and gone. God and fellow Christians were there to guide and help us. Through it all we have learned the joy of the Christian life. But what about the next 50 years? Who will take the torch and continue God's work?

Consider the Olympians who train to become the best through years of hard work and sacrifice. As young people they are trained and coached by former Olympians. Of course, the athletes must be dedicated, willing to persevere, and truly believe in their quest. They don't all win medals, but they are a part of a group that continues the cause of sportsmanship and dedication. They are living examples!

In today's world some churches are closing their doors and merging with other congregations. There are many reasons for this, including rural churches with small congregations, population changes, and unfortunately, some for lack of leadership.

We who have been in church for many years need to help and encourage all members, especially those who have received the torch. While doing this we need to recognize that others may have different ideas and ways of doing God's work. In Romans 12:1-13, Paul explains that we all have a place in God's church. Over the years his words have encouraged me and enabled my faith to grow.

Heavenly Father, we pray that your love and compassion will bring us together to be many, yet one in Christ. Amen.

GEORGE H. ARMSTRONG
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