

## Returning to God

“Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.” ~ *Joel 2:12 (NIV)*

**B**y the time Ash Wednesday arrives — just six weeks after New Year’s Day — those resolutions that people have made may already be broken. Resolutions seldom change, I believe, because they are often done out of a feeling of obligation or tradition instead of a change of mindset. The season of Lent, however, is an intentional season of returning — a time to pause, reflect, and realign our hearts with God.

Joel’s words remind us that repentance is not merely an external act but an inward transformation. God calls us to return with all our heart, not just with ritual or obligation. This means surrendering our distractions, our pride, and even our fears, and allowing God to renew us from within.

Fasting, weeping, and mourning are not ends in themselves; they are expressions of a deeper reality — a longing for God’s presence and a recognition of our need for His grace. In a world that prizes self-sufficiency, Lent invites us to embrace dependence on God. It is a season to strip away what hinders us and to rediscover the joy of communion with Him.

Perhaps this year, returning to God means forgiving someone who has hurt you, letting go of resentment, or carving out time for prayer in the midst of busyness. It might mean acknowledging areas where you’ve drifted and asking God to restore your soul. Whatever it looks like, know this: God’s invitation is not one of condemnation but of love. He longs for you to come home, to experience His mercy anew.

As you journey through Lent, let your heart be open to His voice. Let your fasting lead to feasting on His Word. Let your mourning turn into the joy of resurrection hope. Today, take one step closer to Him — He is waiting with open arms.

*Lord, draw me back to you with all my heart. Remove anything that keeps me from your presence. Teach me to trust your mercy and walk in your ways. May this Lenten season renew my spirit and deepen my love for you.*

Pastor Kim Wecht  
Chaplain, Pitman Manor

## When God Forgives, It Is Finished

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. ~ *Psalm 103:12 (NIV)*

I have many sewing gadgets. Recently, I was introduced to a turning tool. It's actually a set of graduated tubes with corresponding sticks used in the turning process. The directions on the package didn't make sense, and I needed help figuring out the tube's role in the turning process. I am a visual learner, so I jumped on YouTube. Sure enough, once I saw it demonstrated, I knew how to use them and was turning things right side out in no time.

I had a similar struggle with forgiveness many years ago. I had a tough childhood that led to my being a wayward teen, and I had plenty to be sorry for. I spent years asking and asking again for God's forgiveness. I had problems grasping that God could forgive me. What if I had left out a particular sin when I asked for forgiveness? What if I didn't pray right?

Then I remembered Luke 23 and the verses about the thief on the cross. He didn't have time to get the list correct. He knew he was wrong; he said so and Jesus promised him paradise that very day.

Billy Graham summed it up perfectly: "God's forgiveness is not just a casual statement; it is the complete blotting out of all dirt and degradation of our past, present, and future."

I may not understand why God is so loving and forgiving, but His Word is clear. He loves and He forgives. It is finished.

*Father, thank you for your gift of forgiveness.*

Kayt Marra

*Bethlehem Lutheran Church*

*Luke 23:39-43 (NIV)*

One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong."

Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

## Be Like Duct Tape

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. ~ *Philippians 4:13 (NKJV)*

**Y**ou may not know this, but the duct tape we use today was originally called “duck tape.” It was invented by Johnson and Johnson during World War II to provide a waterproof seal on ammunition boxes. Water rolled off it just like water rolls off a duck’s back.

As Christians we can learn some things from duct tape and relate them to our faith and journey. For instance:

1. We need to stick to the main thing. John 15:4-5 tells us, “Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”
2. We need to be strong and flexible. Ephesians 6:10-11 says to “Finally be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes.” We must constantly adjust to the many situations that confront us each day.
3. We must hold things together. As 1 Timothy 3:4-5 states: “He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?”
4. We should not be exposed to the wrong elements. As 2 Timothy 2:22 tells us: “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” Even duct tape wears out when exposed to bad elements. We as Christians will wear down if we hang around with the wrong people.
5. We should not see ourselves as the solution to all situations. Colossians 1:17 tells us, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” We sometimes think we can fix all things and all people. We have to remind ourselves to point everything and everyone to Christ.

So be versatile, flexible, and useful like duct tape, relying on God to lead you in the way He wants you to go.

*Father, we need to have it locked in our minds that we cannot find the solution for everything and everybody. Instead we need to rely on you to do just that.*

Ted Frett

*Pitman Church of the Nazarene*

## A Tale of Two Brothers

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

~ Romans 15:13 (NIV)

This is the true story of two brothers entwined in life and death. My husband, Larry, had a medical issue that he refused to address. Finally, I managed to get him to go to Urgent Care. From there he was swiftly sent to a number of physicians. He had a PET scan, and the end result was major abdominal surgery, followed by immunotherapy for melanoma. For two years he continued on with life and seemed to be winning his battle. Unfortunately, his final PET scan showed the spread of his tumor. His oncologist changed his treatment and seemingly overnight, Larry was unsteady on his feet, falling, and not hungry, barely eating.

Larry's brother, Lee, in the meantime had come for a visit after Larry's surgery. He then had gone on a cruise and became extremely ill at sea. He disembarked in Oslo, Norway, went to the Emergency Department, and then directly home with a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Treatments started, and he did well.

Too soon, Larry lost his battle with melanoma and went to be with the Lord in October 2023. Lee came to the memorial service, looking a bit peaked. In January, Lee was failing rapidly. Coming out of a coma before he died, he told his wife that he had seen Larry, and Larry had told him, "It wasn't so bad — just the last two weeks."

Quite an acknowledgment from Lee, someone who had believed death was just that ... the end! Whether Lee dreamed Larry's visit, or whether it actually happened, we can find out someday in heaven. But however it happened, I believe in his last minutes that Lee received hope that there truly is life after death.

Jesus' triumphant victory over death and the grave show His power to conquer sin and offer eternal life to all who believe.

*Lord, I thank you that Lee was somehow given hope. I pray that all who read this will truly have faith and trust in God that there is eternal life.*

Ginny Green

*Evangelical United Methodist Church*

## Trip of a Lifetime

Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moth and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven ... where your treasure is there your heart will be also.

~ *Matthew 6:19-21 (CEB)*

Last year three individuals I knew well died within three days of each other. All were younger than I. My reaction was that life was too short. It was time to stop talking about it and actually plan the vacation that would take my children and their families and me to Disney World.

When the surprise was revealed at our annual Christmas gathering, we began planning the final details to fully enjoy all the entertainment the resort had to offer. Much to my dismay, the amount of money I had already spent on the top-shelf adventure was not realistically going to allow most of the key rides to be part of our experience without hours upon hours of waiting in lines. The alternative was to spend another significant chunk of money to basically skip the lines. That night I went to bed saddened that instead of an all-expenses-paid trip of a lifetime, I had given my kids a gift that would essentially require them to shell out money that they simply didn't have at that time.

The following morning, as I opened my eyes and put my feet on the carpet, God called me out. I was swept with the very distinct conviction that my response to those unexpected deaths last year should have been making sure my family members were ready for the true trip of a lifetime — the one that would have my children and grandchildren confidently saying they would be in heaven when their earthly days were through. This would be the trip that includes knowing Jesus as their personal Savior, understanding that His grace and mercy promises eternal life, and that His sacrificial gift prepared a place for us in His Father's house.

Plans are done, invoices are paid, and the family vacation is unfolding as this devotional is being prepared. That won't change. But now, sharing my faith in a way that results in their one-way ticket to eternity needs to happen with the same zeal and enthusiasm.

*Heavenly Father, I ask that you help me focus my attention on what truly matters. Help me to have the desires of my heart be the treasures that will be stored in heaven, not on earth.*

Angele Cooper

*First United Methodist Church of Glassboro*

## The Blessing of Listening and Obeying

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you what path to take.

~ Proverbs 3:5-6 (NLT)

Last spring as I was out taking a walk, I ran into my neighbor Phyllis. As we were chatting, she said, “I think you and I should lead a women’s Bible study for the neighborhood ladies. Why don’t you pray about it?” I said, “Uh ... okay.” So I prayed a few times and decided my leading a Bible study was not a great idea. I hoped she would forget about it. I knew I was not qualified or knowledgeable enough to do this.

During the summer, Phyllis called me and said she was ready to discuss the details. I had determined that I could be the host, have people meet at my house, make refreshments, and all would be good. She could be the teacher and do the lesson. After all, she is a pastor’s wife.

When we got together, she was well prepared, and the more I listened, the more I liked what she was saying. We could take turns leading and going to each other’s homes. When I asked what study we would be doing, she said, “Women of the Bible.” I asked what book we would be using, and she said, “The Bible.” (And she had a few other resources.)

I was thinking, *Whoa! I’ve never led a group without a book, series, video, or study guide.* But I suddenly felt very much at peace with the idea and agreed to start in September. I found just studying the Bible and focusing more on what it had to say about the chosen topic was very interesting. God’s Word showed me everything I needed to make my lessons.

Needless to say, we now have 12 women who meet monthly to study the Bible together. It’s a wonderfully unique group from all different denominations and churches. I am being blessed getting to know these women, sharing our spiritual walks, and learning more about the Bible. It was a very good reminder that God does not call the qualified. He qualifies the called. And He isn’t interested in your ability — just your availability. He wants to bless us when we listen to Him and follow what He’s called us to do.

*Thank you, Lord, for pursuing us even when we are trying to avoid your will, and for always blessing us when we listen to you and obey.*

Diane Sizemore  
First Methodist Church Myrtle Beach

## It Don't Come Easy

Consider it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you encounter various trials.  
~ James 1:2 (NASB)

Remember the Ringo Starr song, “It Don’t Come Easy”? “Got to pay your dues if you wanna sing the blues, and you know it don’t come easy.” That’s how the song begins. Catchy tune, but I’m not sure I like the message. Why do I have to pay the dues? And what do you mean that it won’t come easy?

I recently heard a children’s sermon by a pastor who was telling the kids about the monarch butterfly and its emergence out of the chrysalis. The pastor emphasized to the kids that it is never a good idea to help a butterfly out of the chrysalis. In the case of the monarch, certain chemicals are released that strengthen the wings. To ensure that the wings dry in the correct position and have the correct strength, no part of the process can be omitted. And this whole process is a struggle, a bit of a hardship for the butterfly in order for it to be able to be strong and fly.

And what an incredible flight for those monarchs that overcome the struggle! The strong embark on a wonderful journey of up to 3,000 miles across our great United States into Mexico, where they gather with millions of other strong monarch butterflies. But if they bypass the initial struggle, they would never experience the magnificent gathering in Mexico.

So — it “don’t come easy” for a monarch butterfly! But what does that have to do with us? A lot!

Life is a struggle. Let’s be honest! It “don’t come easy” for any of us! And if we read the Bible, we see character after character, including Jesus, who struggled and suffered, sometimes unimaginably. And yet, through their sorrows, each achieved God’s glorious purpose for their lives.

As we continually emerge from the chrysalis of this life, are we listening to worldly messages that seek to convince us that there’s no reason to stick with our spiritual disciplines? That we can just do the minimum, and that’s enough to still “fly” into the kingdom?

Remember the monarch butterfly that avoided the struggle? It never made it to the magnificent gathering in Mexico.

No — it “don’t come easy” on this journey to resurrection life. But the rewards of leaning on Jesus through all of the struggles are eternally out of this world!

*Lord, thank you for strengthening me through the trials in my life.*

Gilda Picioccio  
Lititz United Methodist Church