

Abundantly Called

We have been abundantly blessed. Our country and communities are so richly blessed, allowing us to take much for granted - clean water, food, fuel for our cars, jobs, homes - the list is long and full.

How do we view our abundance as a Call to Action?

Messiah calls us to action with this year's Stewardship Campaign, *Mission in Action*. The wider Lutheran Church calls us to action with the 2025 Churchwide gathering theme *For the Life of the World*.

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"The church is the church only when it exists for others."

Jesus calls us to action as his hands and heart in the world:

"You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven." - - Matthew 5:14a, 16

Our community calls us to action through the inspired words and reflections of our writers in these Lent Devotionals.

We thank you, our writers, and the leadership team efforts of Elizabeth Crummy, Annette Durkin, Pastor Renee Kiel and Pastor Dan O'Brien. We hope you are inspired, reflective, humbled, provoked, renewed and called to action. - - Soli Deo gloria



FEBRUARY 18 | ASH WEDNESDAY

Called

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven. - - Matthew 5:14a, 16

Blessings and may the love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

The theme of this year's Lent Devotionals is "Abundantly Called" and this is reflected in our opening scripture passage.

I was quick to choose this topic and passage because I have been touched as I read the book *Where There Is Love, There Is God* by Mother Teresa. Who better illustrates the light of the world than Mother Teresa, a person who let her light shine before others, and whose good works gave glory to God in Heaven.

Mother Teresa's light was constantly made visible by her commitment to those she served, the poorest of the poor. Her good work comforted those she helped. She served as an extension of God's love and devotion to those in need. She did this not to bring glory to herself, but to give glory to God in heaven.

We are all called to do the good works of Jesus Christ. Let this Lenten season be a reminder of our calling to help others and continue Jesus' glorious works!



Prayer: I close prayer with a saying by Mother Teresa: The fruit of silence is prayer. The fruit of prayer is faith. The fruit of faith is love. The fruit of love is service. And the fruit of service is peace. Amen.

Rich Valenta is retired from the fire service. He has been a member of Messiah for eleven years. Rich has four wonderful grown adult children and has been blessed with five amazing grandchildren!

Share

FEBRUARY 19



And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?"
In reply, John said to them, "Whoever has two coats
must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has
food must do likewise." - - Luke 3:10-11

At some point in our lives, most of us have been encouraged to 'share.' As a child, I can remember being told to share with my brothers and, likewise, they were to share with me. However, as we grow older, the focus shifts from sharing to acquiring. Use your time to get ahead, use your talent to better your status and amass your treasure to secure your future seems to be the message.

Then at some point you realize you have achieved what you thought you needed, but are left with an empty feeling inside. Is this it? Is this all there is? Am I loved by those around me? How do I make my life meaningful?

In today's verse, the people are seeking baptism to turn their lives around and become part of something more meaningful. Isn't this what we all want for ourselves?

John's advice seems simple and straightforward... share what you have. His advice made me think of my own hall closet and the multitude of coats I have collected over the years. I have tried to share, but could I do more? Probably.

This past year I have become involved as a volunteer at St. Stephen's Food Pantry. I truly enjoy my time either helping in the office or assisting clients. The pantry serves a vital need in our community and is always in need of volunteers and donations.

This is only one of the many opportunities offered here at Messiah to 'share.' We can all share our time, talent and treasures through various groups and activities.



Prayer: Heavenly father, help me to share my time, talent, and treasures (including food or a coat) with those who have none. Amen.

Bonnie Eastman has been a member since 2003 with husband Charlie. She enjoys traveling and spending time with their two children and six grandchildren.



FEBRUARY 20

Help

Then Jesus will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me." -- Matthew 25:40

This one verse in Matthew formed a song we sang while doing the stations of the cross. In the darkness, we would walk from one station to the next, contemplating and observing the crucifixion story in real time. After a pause we would sing:

Whatsoever you do
to the least of my children,
that you do unto me.

Simone Weil, a 20th-century French philosopher, political activist, and mystic, elaborated on the story of Jesus telling his followers, "I was naked, and you clothed me" (see Matthew 25:31-46) in her book *Gravity and Grace*. She observed that the people who cared for the poor were "in a state which made it impossible for them not to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked; they could not help doing it because the compassion of Christ was in them."

The act of preparing a meal at Healing House, sewing a boomerang bag, visiting someone in need, or offering our particular gift to the world where it is needed is serving Christ. This is what we are meant to do. Living our fullest lives, making wise decisions, helping others without ceasing, and loving others as God loves us is our opportunity in today's world. Christ's compassion is within us, so we help!



Prayer: Whatsoever you do
to the least of my children,
that you do unto me. Amen.

Mark Petersen's family consists of his wife Peggy and their two adult daughters who have married wonderful people and given them four amazing grandchildren. They all live in the Madison area. Mark is a retired pastor who makes candles and serves as a spiritual director. The people of Messiah are dear to his whole family!

Serve

FEBRUARY 21

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,
serve one another with whatever gift each of you has
received. - 1 Peter 4:10



Others. We exist to serve others.

A few months ago I had the chance to attend a Sunday service in which Pastor Jeff preached these words. Honestly, I do not recall the details of the homily and I could not tell you when it was, but I do know one thing: those were the exact words I needed to hear. They actually made me feel lighter.

This stage of my life is chaotic and messy and busy. I am a mom, a wife, a teacher, a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, a friend. It is busy and it is easy to complain about all the commitments. I often feel like I have a lot to do and I don't know if I am doing any of it correctly. But here's the thing, I do live in abundance. The things that often cause me stress are in fact all blessings in my life. My children, my job, my house are all gifts. That sermon that day reminded me of something: I don't always need to know what I am doing. I just have to be willing to show up and be kind.

Peter reminds us to "maintain constant love for one another" and to "be hospitable without complaining." So do the small things: hold the door, read the extra story, call that family member or give that teammate a ride to practice. The message is simple and achievable, sometimes we just need the reminder to be present, to help out and to share.



Prayer: Thank you God for all that is beautiful in our lives. Remind us that we are meant to live like you: to share, to show love, and be present in the lives of others. Amen.

Brittany Rusch is the Children and Family Ministry Coordinator at Messiah. She lives in Stoughton with her husband and three children.



FEBRUARY 22

Courage

Keep alert; stand firm in the faith; be courageous;
be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

-- 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

I was raised in a home filled with a lot of love and quite possibly, equal amounts of teasing. Being who I was (and am) I had hurt feelings most of the time. "You wear your heart on your sleeve" was the platitude my mom often responded with when I came to her in tears. Feelings were viewed as weakness. Quick wit and cutting remarks were socially acceptable.

Toxic words, programs and politics surround us. It is almost impossible to ignore and/or avoid and yet, sometimes we join in with our own complaints or ill-timed jokes. I can certainly deliver witty, sassy remarks, but it feels healthier to take a deep breath and reset as my sensitive heart calls me to do better.

Maybe we can find the courage to compliment, be more aware of others' needs and carve out the time necessary to have vulnerable, honest conversations. These conversations (when brave enough to "wear my heart on my sleeve"), have become the path to authentic, loving relationships for me.



Prayer: Dear God, let all I do and say be said and done in love. Amen.

Becky Skibo is mom to Matt and Sadie and feels abundantly blessed to be in Madison at Messiah.

Generosity

FEBRUARY 23

They are to do good, to be rich in good works,
generous, and ready to share. -- 1 Timothy 6:18



I first chose this verse because I wanted to write about the generosity of the Messiah community (an easy task). Whether it be time given, talents shared, or money donated, Messiah members are ministering to the homeless and defending the marginalized. Members have provided monetary assistance to rebuild a home, feed people devastated by natural disasters and get kids to classes at Kennedy School. Members have given their time to work at Second Harvest, serve meals at Triangle Community and visit the homebound. There is so much more I could list.

1 Timothy chapter 6 is telling us that God gives us so much and wants us to share our wealth with others willingly. God wants us to be focused on him, not our wealth, and to use our wealth to help others and do good works.

But fear holds me back. Will I have "enough" to get me through life without becoming a burden to someone? Will some medical issue come up causing financial hardship? Am I making the right decisions in managing whatever money I have? No one knows the future, so I must try to let go of that fear and give generously and trust in God.

And as I was preparing this writing for the booklet, God sent a message. The Madison Area Jail Ministry sent a request to Messiah for help with people transitioning back to the community. God was telling me to be generous again.



Prayer: Lord, thank you for the many blessings you have given me. Open my heart and ease my fears so that I can be generous and willingly share these blessings with others, living as Jesus instructed us. Amen.

Karen Verhagen and husband Dick have been married for 41 years, and members of Messiah for over 30 years. They have one son Michael and two granddaughters. Karen is the leader for the Community Outreach Team and was previously a council member and on the Pastoral Call Committee.



FEBRUARY 24

Action

Little children, let us love not in word or speech,
but in deed and truth. -- 1 John 3:18

Jesus is telling us not to merely say we love each other, but to show love by our actions. As I pondered the meaning of 1 John 3:18, I struggled to recall loving actions I performed this week. It was easy to remember times I showed compassionate love toward my family... but it became increasingly difficult when I stretched beyond my inner circle into our world of violence and children's disengagement.

I feel compassion for the children from a local church school in Madison who suffered the excruciating pain of gun violence. What action have I shown? Sometimes I think: I'm just an elderly woman—let the younger generation take over. Hmmm. I can still show compassion in deed and truth for these students facing mental health challenges for which I have no reference. Even though I do not have the skills to do it myself, I CAN project an idea for my church family to generate a project to lift up Generation Alpha—brought up in the digital age.

School age children in 2025 need a platform for interacting with a live person for emotional support and fruitful debate—not an AI. Much deeper compassionate action is required.

Messiah Lutheran is a leader and force in our community. Our children are a talented and loving body of action and our congregation has technical experts. Our ministry and support staff hearts are tuned into problems of the younger community outside Messiah.

My step in compassionate action is to encourage someone who feels called to become involved in creating a Messiah podcast for youth which would reach beyond the hearts of Messiah and tune into the youth of Madison. Children could bring emotions and questions to a safe environment that would debate critical questions facing Generation Alpha.



Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father: Let me grow in compassionate action to help the Alpha generation in their struggles. Lord, be there, be peace in the chaos. Amen.

Sharon Goff was a middle school teacher.

Heal

FEBRUARY 25



The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. - - James 5:15

It's not about outcomes, but opportunities. This is how God (Morgan Freeman) explains prayer in the movie *Evan Almighty*. Prayer is not about outcomes, but opportunities.

This was an "aha" moment for me, a self-proclaimed prayer struggler and stumbler. I've always struggled with prayer and this verse made me realize that I was going about it all wrong. I was always looking for the outcomes and most often, the outcomes were what I thought I needed or wanted. In praying like this, I wasn't leaving any room for God to be God.

Prayer is a dialogue and a relationship that is not one-sided. So often I would pray and I would list off all of the things that I wanted God to do or all the things that I needed God to fix in my life. My prayers sounded like a Christmas list full of wants and needs with the expectation that God operates like Santa Claus and just delivers whatever I ask for.

I was too focused on the outcomes and not the opportunities that come from prayer and faith in God. When you have faith that God is listening and acting, prayer becomes more focused on the opportunities. If you pray for courage, look for the opportunities that God provides for you to be courageous. If you pray for forgiveness, look for opportunities to forgive; for restoration, to restore; for healing, to heal.

When we pray, we place our trust in God, that God hears, cares, and acts. We just need to look for the opportunities that come as God answers.



Prayer: Thank you for reminding me that prayer is not about getting everything I want, but about opening my heart to the opportunities you provide. Help me to trust that you hear me and that you are working in ways I may not always see. Help me see the opportunities you place before me. Amen.

Teresa Palumbo is Messiah's Youth and Family coordinator.



FEBRUARY 26

Encourage

Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up our neighbor. -- Romans 15:2

In Romans 15, Paul reminds us that faith is never meant to be self-centered. Our calling as Christians is to look beyond ourselves and seek the good of others—to build them up in love. This is the heart of the Christian community.

Martin Luther often taught that our daily vocations—as relatives, friends, workers, or church members—are opportunities to serve our neighbors. Encouragement becomes one of the simplest and most powerful ways to do this. A kind word, a listening ear, a gentle act of service—these are holy works when done in Christ's name.

In a time when discouragement can spread quickly, the community shines brightest when its members speak words that build, forgive, and unite. When we encourage and strengthen others, we mirror God's grace and become instruments of His peace.

For today—ask yourself:

- Who around me needs to be built up—in faith, hope, or courage?
- What small act of kindness or word or grace could I offer today?
- How can I build up rather than criticize, listen rather than speak, give rather than take?

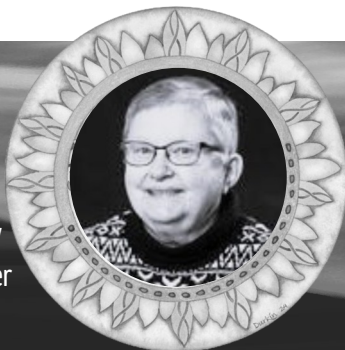


Prayer: Gracious Lord, Thank You for the people who have encouraged me in my journey. Help me to be a source of strength and hope to others. Open my eyes to those who are weary, and give me the words and actions to build them up. May my encouragement reflect Your grace and draw others closer to You. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Annette Salm tries to live her life to encourage. She has been a member of Messiah for about ten years and feels the sense of community that comes with being a member from her two homes in Appleton, WI and Avon Park, FL.

Support

FEBRUARY 27



For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. -- Matthew 25:35

About 40 years ago Mim and I were living in Chicago and God gave us the perfect opportunity to demonstrate the loving hospitality described in Matthew 25:35. Unfortunately, we failed miserably. Here's what happened.

One very cold wintry morning, I bundled up in my heavy winter coat to walk three blocks to the El station to take the train to work in the Loop. I opened the door to the indoor stairway of our two-flat and smelled cigarette smoke. I asked Mim to help me find the source of the smoke. We cautiously walked down the stairway and unlocked the door to the entryway and saw a homeless man sleeping in the entryway. We quickly shut the door and locked it again.

We ran back upstairs to our apartment and locked that door too. We were afraid. We called the police to report him, and waited about half an hour for a squad car to drive up. Two officers came to the entryway, yanked the man up, pushed him into the street, and yelled to never come back.

That was the day we saw Jesus hungry, and we didn't give him anything to eat. We saw him thirsty, and we didn't give him anything to drink. We saw him as a stranger, and we didn't welcome him.

We could have given him a cup of coffee; we already had some made. We could have given him breakfast; we had plenty of food. We could have invited him to stay in the entryway, out of the cold wind for a while. But we didn't do any of those things. Obviously, we still had more to learn about hospitality.



Prayer: Thank you, God, for giving us opportunities to be kind and helpful to our neighbors. Help us to recognize these opportunities, and to help our neighbors. Amen.

Marian Korth is one of the organists at Messiah. She and her wife Mim Jacobson live in Cambridge.



FEBRUARY 28

Pray

Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that God in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. -- Mark 11:25

This reminds me of a scene in *Evan Almighty*. God (Morgan Freeman) tasks Evan with building an ark in modern day Washington, D.C. Everyone thinks he's crazy, but Evan does it anyway. His wife ends up in a conversation with God who asks, "If someone prays for patience, does God give them patience or the opportunity to be patient? Does God give courage or the opportunity to be courageous? If someone prays for their family to be closer, does God zap them with warm, fuzzy feelings, or the opportunity to love each other?"

God doesn't always give us exactly what we pray for, but gives us the opportunity to be the person we should be. We must have a "fake it 'til you make it" mentality. God's going to give us what we need, not what we want. It's on us to use our abilities to work with God's gracious gifts to get that outcome, working towards what we've asked for. If we pray for justice, work for justice. If we pray for the planet, work to make it a better place.

As we pray, remember our connection to all of God's people. If any have wronged us, first forgive them, so that God may forgive us. Anytime we come to God asking for blessing, we should start with forgiveness of all and strengthening our bond with each other. Then may we ask God for our needs and wants.



Prayer: Lord, help me to forgive those who have trespassed against me. Guide me to be the hands of action with the things I ask of You. Give me the opportunity to be a better person and supporter of Your people. Amen.

Glenn Schmitz and his wife Mary have attended Messiah for about twelve years. You can usually find them with their children Jonah and Violet at the 8:15 AM service. Glenn volunteers for YOW and has taught Sunday School and served on the church council.

Bless

MARCH 1

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. -- Romans 12:14



This verse is very meaningful and holds a special place in my heart. The world that we live in today is full of fear and that fear turns to hate, which is a very hard thing to watch happen to so many different people. Responding to hate with hate is never a good response.

This verse is telling us that even if we have a problem with somebody, we should never retaliate with ill will or speak badly about them to another person. We need to treat everyone with the respect that they deserve and work respectfully to solve the problem.

I currently work at UPS, and there are a lot of people employed there who have immigrated to the United States from countries all across the world, mainly from countries in South America. These wonderful people have shared with me their discomfort and unease with how the United States is being run right now, but instead of lashing out, they are treating the ones who cause them harm with respect and love, hoping to receive the same in return from their example.

The world needs more of this love and compassion before hate completely takes over. By treating everyone with the respect and love that we deserve, there will be no more room for hate to grow in struggling communities or within places where individuals hold massive amounts of power.



Prayer: Let us pray for the ones who are struggling to stay warm during these winter months, the ones who speak badly of us, and the ones who need a desperate escape to a safe home. Amen.

Matthew Uselman currently works at UPS as a supervisor for the pre-load area of the operation. He is currently studying animal sciences at Madison Area Technical College and loves petting his favorite dog, George!



MARCH 2

Inspire

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them,
because it is God who goes with you, who will not fail
you or forsake you. - Deuteronomy 31:6

In August of 2024 my life got turned upside down with the loss of my wife Diane.

Diane and I would often talk about legacies and what we would want for each of us to leave behind when we go to live with the Lord.

Diane had an extremely deep heart. She was active in justice and assisting friends in need. She reeked of kindness. She would help anyone in need and would often put her abundance of love in front of her own needs. These things are what I will remember her for. This is her legacy.

Let's ask ourselves what kind of legacy do we want to leave?

I call all of us to be like her because sharing our love, our talents, and our gifts that God has put in front of us will make our church, our community, our world a better place.

During this time of turmoil in our world and the many false teachings that do not support the kindness and love that Jesus has provided us, I often remind myself of the phrase "What would Jesus do?" Will you join me in living a life like Jesus and building the legacies that Jesus expects us to leave?

Let's honor God by sharing our talents, comforts, and ties for the better of our church, community, and world.

Revelation 22:12 says "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done."



Prayer: Glory to God! Amen.

Roger Marty is a retired widower who lives on the north edge of McFarland. He has been a member of Messiah for two years and a long-time friend. Prior to retirement Roger was a software developer for the WI Housing & Economic Development Agency (WHEDA) and before that, self-employed as a farmer. A few of his many interests are golf, ballroom dancing, woodworking, stained glass making, and of course, being a Packer and Badger fan!

Build

MARCH 3



The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. - 2 Corinthians 9:6

In this passage, Paul is giving a gentle reminder to the Corinthians of their prior commitment to support their fellow Christians. The Corinthians had made a promise to the Christian community in Jerusalem to provide a generous financial gift, which this community was counting on. Paul sensed that the Corinthians were wavering. He reminded them that this gift was much more than just a monetary transaction to support their fellow Christians. It was an expression of God's love being made through them to others.

Paul was trying to make the point that just like when a farmer plants more seeds to yield a harvest which is much more bountiful, this is also true of the spiritual gifts that we make in our community. When we give generously, our gifts will multiply. This is true not only for those receiving the gifts, but also for the giver as well. The next verse, 2 Corinthians 9:7, states that God loves a cheerful giver. We should dedicate ourselves to sowing bountifully not because it is an obligation, but to share the abundance God's generosity has provided us.

Over the years through my employer, I have had the opportunity to volunteer two or three times a year for Habitat for Humanity and various food banks. I always find the experience uplifting. I can always see that the other volunteers feel the same way. Giving to serve a purpose larger than yourself brings our greatest rewards.



Prayer: Lord help us to recognize how fortunate we are and the abundance that you have provided. Help us to see the unique opportunities we have to share our blessings with others. Amen.

Jim Breitbach lives in Cottage Grove with his wife Barb and their son Ben who is currently attending Carroll University in Waukesha. They also have two dogs, Bella and Ivy.



MARCH 4

Create

For we are God's co-workers, working together;
you are God's field, God's building.

-- 1 Corinthians 3:9

Paul is attempting to bring people together who were following two different spiritual leaders, based on the people's preference for one or the other. The people were spending their time arguing over each group and had forgotten that their real work was to serve God, not their leader. One leader wasn't better than the other, as long as the goal was the same: building God's kingdom on earth.

How very current this sounds politically: two parties, both professing to put our country first. We the people have become split in two arguing over the details of each party, forgetting the goal of furthering the ideals of our country for the greater good of all citizens and the world.

Division like this interferes with the focus of this reading. How can we create when we spend our time arguing about who has the better ideas? We must know that our work is instrumental in building and growing God's community on earth. But God has final say in what is actually produced. We are but God's hands. Imagine what we could do, together in unity as God wishes us to be!

I have seen at Messiah that we know what our job is; we know we need each other to work together to shine God's light out into our community. Maybe even into the world? Either way, we do what we think is right and let God decide. We continually work at creating new ways to reach out to those in need, either materially or spiritually. Whatever we do, I hope God says, "It's good."



Prayer: Lord, please heal our divisions and focus us on what our goal should really be: working together to create a better world for all of us, in your name. Amen.

Joan Andrusz still considers herself a "newbie" at Messiah, but is so happy to be involved in the Senior Choir, Women's Ministry, and RIC, along with her other interests and hobbies.

Sacrifice

MARCH 5



This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. -- John 15:12-13

This is one of my favorite passages in John's Gospel. I see it as the core of who and what we are called to be as Christians. In the verses surrounding this one, Jesus speaks to his disciples, saying that he no longer calls them servants, but friends. That is who we are to God. That is who we are called to be to one another.

These words come amid Jesus' farewell discourse. He knows the sacrifice he is about to make for his friends, for us. But I think he shares this message at this moment because he does not want to walk that path alone. We can't do life alone. Nor are we created to.

As our society constantly polarizes and demonizes people who are "different," we must stand together, we must be allies and advocates—God's presence—for one another.

In our first creation story, we hear God bless three things: creatures, humans, and rest. The rest that God blesses includes the rest we have in and with each other. My friends, remember to find good rest in the love we share between each other. For when we are friends to each other, we discover the courage within us to risk even our lives to be God's presence to those who need us desperately.



Prayer: Holy One, as I journey through life, help me to always see you in the face of those I encounter. Guide me to befriend even my enemies, trusting it is your love which binds this world together. And give me the courage to be an ally, an advocate - a friend - to those who need me desperately. Amen.

Dan O'Brien is the Associate Pastor at Messiah. One of Dan's deepest joys is being able to walk alongside the people! He also loves traveling, especially road trips, and getting to explore the world around us—bonus if it's a motorcycle route!



MARCH 6

Teach

And what you have heard from me through many witnesses, entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well. -- 2 Timothy 2:2

In my career as a teacher, athletic trainer and physical therapist, I have had the honor of working with great teachers for the past 30+ years: the ones who make you feel seen, heard and loved no matter what the subject that is being taught. The one trait they all have is admitting that the children are the ones who are the best teachers, and they learn every day from them.

I agree wholeheartedly with this statement; so many of my students and athletes have taught me of God's love. One special athlete truly taught me to trust in God. He had had a string of injuries and was finally getting back on the field. I was a bit nervous as the most recent injury was a concussion, and it had been a long road to recovery. I kept going up to him at the game and checking in. At halftime, he stopped me and asked why I kept asking him if he was OK. I had no answer except my own insecurity. His reply, words from a 17-year-old boy, changed my outlook: "We have completed the process and trust the process, now we need to trust in God to guide us." That single moment changed my perspective on my profession. I can only take people so far; we have to trust God to take us the rest of the way.



Prayer: Thank you God for helping us realize that everyone is a teacher of your love. Amen.

Julie Neppi is wife to Phil and mom to Dora. Their family attends the 10:30 AM service and she enjoys serving communion and attending church family events.

Learn

MARCH 7



Call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

-- Jeremiah 33:3

Jeremiah 33:3 is the Promise of Restoration. Jeremiah was in the courtyard, and the word of the Lord came to him. The Lord told Jeremiah to “call to him and he would tell him great and hidden things.”

I love Messiah for the opportunities to learn about our religion, cultures, community, people, etc. I have been a part of two book studies—*One Coin Found* and *Transforming*—and have had two times recently when I felt called upon with the Lord speaking through me.

The first time, I was on an airplane returning from a trip, and I was reading *Transforming*. There was a young woman sitting next to me and she asked what book I was reading. This began our conversation about accepting all genders. She told me, “I don’t know what I am.” I asked if she would like my book, and that I could get another one from my church.

Then just two days later, a friend told me her nephew revealed that he was trans and was now to be known as she, and had already had surgeries. Some of her family were having a hard time understanding and accepting this. I told her about both books and she was very appreciative and would share them with her family.

Messiah offers so many learning experiences in our ministries. Without having my Messiah family, this would not have happened. We are so lucky to be a part of the Messiah Community.



Prayer: El Shaddai—“God Almighty!” Give thanks for the Lord is good and love endures forever. Turn our adversities into learning, our failures into “stepping stones,” and our despair into hope. Amen.

Nancy Battist and her husband Dan are retired and “happily active” in our Messiah faith community. They have two daughters and one son who all have loving partners.



MARCH 8

Invite

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of God the Creator,
Savior and Holy Spirit. -- Matthew 28:19

When I read this verse, I thought of Billy Graham, a modern-day disciple who brought thousands of people to Christ during his lifetime and continues even after his death. It blows my mind that this verse puts each of us at that level of discipleship. But regardless of who we are, as Christians, this verse calls us to invite people to know Jesus in a new way.

Inviting others to follow Jesus can be a bit scary. Initial thoughts might be, "I don't know my Bible that well. What if they ask me questions I can't answer? What if they think I'm crazy when I share that Jesus died on a cross for all people to receive the gift of Eternal Life?"

People may have doubts and decline your invitation. But don't give up. Discipleship is like gardening: you plant the seed in the soil (extend an invitation to know Jesus), water it (continue to encourage the person), and wait. Finally, a green sprout appears, and you continue to nurture that plant (into a new believer).

You don't have to be a theological genius to be a disciple. Encourage someone to be a Christian by the way you live your life. People are watching and noticing how you treat others: when you smile at someone in the store or hold a door for someone to enter before you. Remember the saying, some days you are the only Bible someone will read. Think of it this way, how can you possibly keep a gift like Eternal Life to yourself!



Prayer: Jesus, I pray that you would help me see the people you have placed in my life that need to know and love you. Give me words to share to plant seeds of invitation and may my actions always reflect your love. Amen.

Holly Tunak has been a member since 2010 along with her husband, Clyde. Her hobbies include biking, walking their dog Luna, gardening, reading and camping.

Forgive

MARCH 9



Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

-- Ephesians 4:32

Growing up in the Lutheran church, asking for God's forgiveness was a part of the congregation's communal liturgy. We confessed our sin and asked for forgiveness as a group; we received pardon and absolution as a group.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity at a retreat to confess my sin to another individual. She was a "church friend"—not my pastor. She listened to me intently, and we were quiet for a bit. Then she made the sign of the cross on my forehead and spoke words of forgiveness and absolution—never breaking eye contact with me. I was leveled. While there might be good theological reasons for confessing aloud together, I realized I had a few seeds of doubt about whether some particular sin—held in the privacy of my own mind and heart—actually would be within the reach of God's forgiveness. Does God really mean even *this secret sin* is forgiven? Would God really forgive even *that particular dark thought*?

Speaking the details aloud to another individual, knowing they were actually heard—with nothing glossed over, nothing held back—was profoundly freeing. I appreciated the power of the confessional in the Catholic tradition. I began to seek out times of individual confession and absolution with my Lutheran pastors. And I now always take it to heart—without doubt—when our pastors declare to all of us standing together the entire forgiveness of all our sins.



Prayer: Merciful God, help us to trust that you already know the deepest and darkest parts of our lives, that nothing is hidden to you, and that nothing is beyond the reach of the bright light of your forgiveness and love. Amen.

Pam Shellberg is the director of spiritual nourishment at Holy Wisdom Monastery in Middleton, WI.



MARCH 10

Love

By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another. -- John 13:35

This past summer I was serving scrambled eggs to my six-year-old grandson Wes at our cabin in the Adirondacks. His four-year-old sister Ada, my sister Cathy, and her husband Barry were there, too. We were laughing, talking and enjoying each other's company when out of nowhere Wes asked, "Grandma, is LOVE made of molecules?" Flummoxed, I thought, "What does he mean?" "I think he was asking, "Is LOVE real?"

In this passage, Jesus challenges his disciples. They are eating a meal together before Passover and Jesus knows a friend in the room will betray him. He shares this revolutionary idea: You will be known as my disciples if you love one another.

Just like Wes, I think Jesus was sitting at table basking in the comfort of love being shared, while at the same time knowing that one of his friends would not live up to his "new commandment."

The commandment seems easy: just love one another. But, what does REAL LOVE look like? It is freely given, shared with all, unconditional, nonjudgemental. It brings joy. It can be trusted by our children and grandchildren, our friends and neighbors. It is given to the poor, the sick, the mentally challenged. It is offered to prisoners, drug addicts, prostitutes, and others on our streets. It is shared beyond the confines of our kitchen table.

In our precious moment at the island counter, the love shared was definitely real. I don't know if it was made of molecules, but it was real. In the love we freely share, we are disciples. That REAL LOVE changes lives, one by one.



Prayer: Let REAL LOVE flow from me to those I encounter in my day-to-day interactions. Help me be a disciple of Christ—that everyone will know me by my love. Amen.

Mary Marshall is in awe of the love shared through active ministry by Messiah members—and grateful for Messiah's transformational Sunday services and ongoing education opportunities.

Follow

MARCH 11



Again, Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." -- John 8:12

During the Covid pandemic, it seemed like a cloud settled over the world at large, and certainly over many of our own small worlds. People were tired and angry, anxious and scared. The loss of life was devastating. It was easy to be overwhelmed by the darkness of it all.

One morning a few months into the lockdowns as I was walking into work, I noticed a chalk drawing on one of the sidewalks leading to the children's hospital lobby. Someone had drawn a bright yellow sun, and the words "If you can't see the sunshine, be the sunshine." Underneath, it listed a name, an age (3) and a diagnosis (Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia).

That drawing stayed with me as I went about my day. I imagined how the family of that child must be feeling—sad, helpless, angry and frustrated. How difficult it must be for them to not be pulled into darkness. Yet despite the circumstances, they were able to focus on the light that their child is bringing light into this world.

Despite their sadness and exhaustion, they took the time to share this message, this light in a simple chalk drawing on a sidewalk that will be seen by strangers walking to work, to an appointment, to a treatment, to visit a loved one. And despite what challenges these strangers are facing, some will internalize this message. When they face darkness, they will choose to shine. Through love, kindness, generosity, humor, patience, and listening, they will be the sunshine for those who can't see it.



Prayer: God, you sent Jesus to be the light of the world. Help us to remember that we are each born with your light inside our hearts. Help us to magnify this light through acts of love and kindness, so that others may experience the warmth and beauty of your love. Amen.

Kaylee Herfel lives in Monona with her husband Joe and her three children Rileigh, Will and Maeve.



MARCH 12

Change

Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed;
defend the orphan; plead for the widow. -- Isaiah 1:17

There is a beautiful synchronicity in the pairing of the theme word "change" with the words from the prophet Isaiah. The words of Isaiah 1:17 are part of a longer passage (vv. 10-22) in which the prophet calls out the people of Judah, on behalf of God, for their religious superficiality.

God is tired of their burnt offerings and blood sacrifices, their incense and the theatrical performances which they try to pass for worship. God could not be clearer about what is desired—seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow. The words for Judah are words for us because then and now, God wants a change in behaviors and priorities; God longs for our change of heart. Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that this kind of change is accomplished only by prayer, but here, too, only by a change in our orientation toward prayer.

"But it is a dangerous error, surely very widespread among Christians, to think that the heart can pray by itself. For then we confuse wishes, hopes, sighs, laments, rejoicings—all of which the heart can do by itself—with prayer. And we confuse earth and heaven, man and God... If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray."



Prayer: Gracious God, help us to pray not according to our own hearts but according to yours, and then may we please you with our efforts on behalf of the widows, orphans, and oppressed of our times.
Amen.

Pam Shellberg has been a member of Messiah for several years along with her partner Judy (Messiah's executive administrative assistant). She loves to read, cuddle with their dog, Lucy, and spend time with her great-nephew and great-nieces.

Release

MARCH 13



For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another. -- Galatians 5:13

In this passage a Pharisee scribe, also said to be a lawyer, tried to trick Jesus into making an error by asking him to prioritize one from out of the many, many commandments. He asked, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.'" At its core, Biblical selflessness involves these two commandments. All else flows from them with no need to choose.

We need to look no further than Moses for proof. He consistently put the needs of the Israelites before his own. At one point, after the people sinned by making a golden calf, Moses pleaded with God to forgive them, saying, "But if not, please blot me out of the book you have written for their sake" (Exodus 32:32). Moses is characterized by his commitment to doing God's will as well as the humility, self-sacrifice, and love he showed to his fellow citizens.

As you continue your Lenten journey, let Moses be a reminder to you of how we too can live a life of selflessness. Through our acts of kindness, large or small, we can all live out Jesus' great commandments.



Prayer: Heavenly Father, help me to live a life of selflessness. Like Moses, let me show through my actions the love I have for those I encounter. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Rich Valenta is retired from the fire service. He has been a member of Messiah for eleven years. Rich has four wonderful grown adult children and has been blessed with five amazing grandchildren!



MARCH 14

Repent

Render your hearts and not your clothing. Return to God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.

-- Joel 2:13

I recently read a book called *Six Dimes and a Nickel* by Damon West. The story is about Damon who gets sentenced to 65 years for leading a burglary ring but due to good behavior gets paroled after only seven years. Since he emerged from prison, he has led a wonderful life as a keynote speaker and credits his second chance at life to his renewed faith.

Joel has to be one of the shortest books in the Bible at only three chapters. While it's a short book, the message is powerful. A swarm of locusts covered Israel and destroyed all the crops. Life for everyone was going to be terrible. However, the Lord promised that if the people would return back to him, he would forgive them and bless them once again.

The book of Joel is a great reminder to me that God is always there for us. It's easy to become stressed and overwhelmed with life, kids, work, etc. However, I've found that when I take a second and pray for guidance and acknowledge that God has a plan for what is going on in my life, I always feel more at peace.

Damon's story is the ultimate example of Joel 2:13 as Damon returned to God and God has blessed him many times over. Hopefully we can all be like Damon and remember to come back to God when things aren't going well.



Prayer: Thank you, Lord, that you are a God whose greatest desire is to reconcile sinners back into your loving arms. I need You, Lord. I trust and love You, Lord. Amen.

Matt Gitzlaff has served on the Church Council for three years and is currently serving as president. His wife Brittany and kids Henry and Sam have been members at Messiah since before the kids were born and attend the 10:30AM worship service.

Increase

MARCH 15



According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder, I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Let each builder choose with care how to build on it. -- 1 Corinthians 3:10

For me there are two very challenging pieces to this passage; letting go and picking up.

How much faith does it take to put down a foundation and let others build upon it? Letting go to let others build the church, the community of Christ, must have been a very difficult and scary step for Paul to take. For the early community of Christians, it must have been equally challenging and scary to accept the responsibility that was handed to them. The responsibility to move forward and build on the foundation left to them by Paul was immense.

To move forward must have taken a tremendous amount of faith and love. I wonder how often I make the selfish choice of not letting go, or not picking up?

Long ago my father, a bricklayer in his early years, taught me the saying: "Form follows function." If we can deliver on our function of faith and love, I guess the form will take care of itself.



Prayer: Help me to let go so others can grow and build with the faith and love so desperately needed in our world. Open my eyes and heart to accept the responsibility to build on the foundation that others have laid for me. Amen.

John Uselman is married to Elizabeth Crummy and recently retired. He is excited to be a new member of SAM and the Wednesday morning Bible study group. John is spending a lot of time building furniture and learning to use his lathe.



MARCH 16

Accompany

And I will ask God, and God will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees her nor knows her. You know her because the Spirit abides with you, and will be in you. -- John 14:16-17

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that there will come a time when He will no longer be with them. While His presence on earth is limited, He comforts them by explaining how He can be present to the entire world through the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit during Lent reawakens our faith, creating more awareness of the presence of God in our lives and guiding us to embody the fruits of the Spirit that Paul identifies in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The Holy Spirit accompanies us as we take time to reflect on our misdeeds and renew our faith, not only during the Lenten season but all our lives. It's essential to accept this spiritual growth and guidance with humility and grace, with a pledge to walk wiser with the Spirit. This is why we focus on the need to accompany, for there is a duality that is critical to our spiritual growth. While the Holy Spirit is with us, we can only embody the fruits of the Spirit if we accompany others on their journey. By practicing simple acts of love, kindness, and compassion we let others know the Spirit exists and will abide in them. We are empowered to live out our faith through service, and the Messiah community offers numerous opportunities to make a difference in the world. To accompany others is a great gift and responsibility, all guided by the power of the Holy Spirit.



Prayer: Holy Spirit, you accompany us always with wisdom and compassion. Guide us to the fruits of the Spirit through acts of love and kindness, that we may share those gifts with others and make your Spirit known. Amen.

Jeff Stadtmueller and his wife Paula have been Messiah members for nine years, and you'll see them generally at the Saturday service. They are thrilled to be involved and part of the Messiah community.

Speak

MARCH 17



So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. - Ephesians 4:25

This Bible verse is summarized in part by the saying "honesty is the best policy." As Christians, we learn that sins of lying and deceit will be forgiven, but we also need to realize the importance of asking for forgiveness from God and our neighbors.

I am a recovering alcoholic. In recovery (a lifelong process) and in following the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous, I became more aware of how honesty with myself and others takes courage and commitment. The tenth step of this program states: "continued to take personal inventory of ourselves and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." Instead of blaming others for my errors, making up excuses for my behaviors and always trying to be "right," I found it is OK to make mistakes, to be "wrong." Furthermore it is OK to admit it! What a relief that was—the burden of trying to be perfect all the time was lifted. However, going a step further takes more courage: to admit to another and to myself that I messed up and to ask for forgiveness.

My parents were missionaries in India, where I was born. I did not speak English until after we returned to the States. At an early age, I gained an appreciation for different languages and different manners of speaking. Yet, the intention and intonation of the spoken words in all languages can relay the same messages: anger, fear, hatred, love, kindness, understanding.

We make daily choices in how we speak and behave. None of us is perfect in what we say and do ("actions speak louder than words!"). May we all strive for speaking and behaving in ways to impart love, kindness and understanding.



Prayer: Dear Lord: Help us to speak honestly with one another and guide us in selecting words and actions that flow from a loving heart. Amen.

Jan Hagen has been a member of Messiah for three years and enjoys hiking, dancing, pickleball and swimming.



MARCH 18

Listen

My child, be attentive to my words; incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them escape from your sight; keep them within your heart. -- Proverbs 4:20-21

On the website *Spirituality and Practice, Resources for Spiritual Journeys*, listening is described as a spiritual practice. "It is an essential part of the discernment process whereby we identify God's messages for us. Listening enables us to tune in to others and our inner voices of intuition and conscience."

As a telephone triage nurse, I took a call late one PM shift from a patient who called often and had spoken with many of my colleagues and myself in the past. He would frequently speak in loud and perceived angry tones which increased in volume when the nurse attempted to ask assessment questions. This often ended in frustration on both sides.

This particular call started the same. I silently lifted a prayer to God for guidance in actually helping him with what was hurting him, not just getting through the call. As he started to ramp up his volume and harsh words, I became very quiet and just listened. I let him go and get out all of the words he needed to say. As he started to run out of steam, he noticed I wasn't interrupting him or interjecting questions, and the call became silent. Then quietly I heard him almost whisper, "I can't help it." I said, "I know you can't."

We connected. At that moment, he identified that this was something he struggled with and he knew he needed help. From there, we were able to come up with a plan to get him to see his provider. Listening to that inner voice guiding me to stay silent made the difference this time.



Prayer: Dear God, help me to practice listening and hearing with your ears and with your heart and to not just get my words out. Amen.

Carol Otterson and her husband John live in Stoughton. They regularly attend and serve at the Saturday night service.

Lead

MARCH 19

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. -- James 1:22



This verse encourages ALL people into action on what they hear from God's teaching instead of just listening to it. Listening without action leads to self-deception. Self-deception is a fear, and we have heard Pastor Jeff share multiple times that fear is the opposite of FAITH.

When I 100% retired this past year, I was longing to become more active in the life of Messiah. It brought me back to Matthew West's song "Do Something." But the question was, what did God want me to do? During my last teaching experience at St. Ann's Catholic School, every Thursday morning the men gathered for a men's Bible study across from my classroom. As I listened, I began thinking, "What if one was started here at Messiah?"

After prayer and consideration, we began the first lesson during the Lenten season of 2025. Facilitating this study has been challenging but very rewarding in my personal growth as a Christian and learning about Lutheran theology. As the group grows not just in numbers but in our faith, it reminds me that in James 1:22-25, this passage highlights that genuine saving grace is ACTIVE and leads to transformation, not just knowledge.



Prayer: Give us, O God, the courage and determination to put into practice the teachings we receive. May our actions be our reflection of our faith in You, showing the world the transforming power of Your LOVE. Amen.

Ray Robinson can be seen with his wife Kathy and their grandchildren, Kallum and Mira at the late service on Sundays. Ray loves spending time with family and friends.



MARCH 20

Restore

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

-- Isaiah 58:6

As a child, one of my favorite adventures was a visit to Old World Wisconsin, stepping back into a world that reminded me of Little House on the Prairie. Each house had something new to learn, complete with hands-on experiences that help the audience empathize with our ancestors and the struggles of subsistence farming.

Of particular fascination to me were the farm animals, complete with period-appropriate tools and tasks, like the horse-drawn wagons and the oxen plowing fields. It's one thing to see a yoke hanging on a museum wall—another to see it in action on an ox bigger than you!

An ox's yoke is heavy, but a good farmer ensures the ox is not pushed beyond its limits. A fortunate farmer might have a second ox to ensure neither is overworked. Ask yourself: how can I find ways to remove or break the yokes of those around me? When you see the difficulties of life weighing down another person, do you offer platitudes, or do you find ways to bear it with them?



Prayer: Provider God, reveal the yokes of those around me, that I might find ways to share the burden, making it lighter for everyone. Amen.

Jessica Newberry lives with her husband and two cats on Madison's far east side. She enjoys learning, reading, and the joys of a good meal.

Dream

MARCH 21

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God. -- Matthew 5:9



The Beatitudes. As a non-Bible-reader (something I'm working on!), even I am familiar with these teachings of Jesus.

When I saw the focus word, I thought about a lifelong dream I had: to perform music in front of an audience. When the second opportunity arose (I had chickened out the first time), I vowed to go for it. I had been in church choirs—which I don't consider a performance—for years, so it wasn't as scary.

Saying yes to this started my journey to various types of performances with several different people, all wonderful learning experiences. But on this journey I also learned that people aren't always what they seem, don't always do what they say, and can be very self-centered. I almost lost my love of music, but I thank God I got over it and didn't let my negative experiences steal my joy!

How does this relate to being a peacemaker? In order to move forward, I had to forgive. I had to make peace within myself, because there was no closure to be had with those who had wronged or disappointed me. I approach my new opportunity to sing at Messiah with no goals except to contribute what I can, meet people, and learn new things. I no longer aspire to perform outside of church; I have achieved and made peace with that dream. My musical journey led me back to church, and it's truly where I feel I belong.



Prayer: Lord, please remind us that by making peace within ourselves, we can be better at being peacemakers out in the world. Amen.

Joan Andrusz still considers herself a "newbie" at Messiah, but is so happy to be involved in the Senior Choir, Women's Ministry, and RIC, along with her other interests and hobbies.



MARCH 22

Reconcile

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you,
live peaceably with all. -- Romans 12:18

For me, this verse is a continuation of my 2025 Lent Devotional—The Transformative Power of God's Love—from Romans 12:2 which focused "on the message of the sermon, letting the Holy Spirit connect the message with our hearts—a spiritual transformation. That transformation extends beyond our service and into our daily lives to live the change."

A Living Sacrifice, a new life.

From Romans 12:2 the next section, Romans 12:9-21, is titled "Love," where we find today's reading 12:18.

First of all, these verses convey that God's love is all encompassing. It is freely given to you and to those you encounter—family, friends, and importantly, strangers. We are given opportunities, each and every day, to show and share our love by our interactions with others.

When we use our God-given gift of love to direct our actions and decisions toward peace, we are given the chance to live in harmony with one another, to choose peace and forgiveness rather than engage in revenge. We are given the opportunity to choose the transformative power of God's love.

Part of that choice involves reconciliation. Whether you are giving or receiving forgiveness, reconciling with one another is the final step on your path to daily peace.

The key message of Romans 12:18 is the final phrase "to live in peace with everyone." It sets up the closing verse of the chapter, Romans 12:21—"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."



Prayer: "Jesus loves me this I know because he came to tell me so. Jesus loves me I am glad may I never make him sad."

(Written by me for my 1st Communion Prayer)

Kathy Digman and her husband Michael have been members of Messiah for more than thirty years. They have one daughter Erin (Airyn) who lives in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Choose

MARCH 23



Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to do it. -- Proverbs 3:27

I, like many, find myself asking two questions before making a big purchase: is there free shipping, and is this going to make my life easier? Convenience is sacred in a world that is constantly pushing for more: more work, more renown, more money, more friends, more time.

Why use the oven when an air fryer is less clean-up? Why go to the gym when I can have a walkpad under my desk at home and multi-task? Why go to the store if I can order delivery straight to my house and skip the errand?

If you read the verse directly after this one, it cautions us to not tell a neighbor to return tomorrow for something you can easily provide today. How often do we put off the “right” thing to do when there is an easier or more comfortable choice available? How often do we know we can make someone else’s life easier, but are unwilling to pay the cost of time, attention, or pride?

Throughout your day, pause and reflect on the choices before you. While it may be easier to drive from work to a community event, consider: is there someone you know who would benefit from a ride? While you might rather spend a night by yourself, is there someone who needs a warm hello and a conversation over the phone? How can you choose good today, even at the price of convenience?



Prayer: God of time, help me to see the good before me, and move me to choose good over easy. Amen.

Jessica Newberry lives with her husband and two cats on Madison’s far east side. She enjoys learning, reading, and the joys of a good meal.



MARCH 24

Believe

Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son
of the living God." -- Matthew 16:15-16

Jesus' question to His disciples is one that has been around for generations and is present in our own hearts today. Just as the disciples were challenged to reflect on their beliefs, we too are invited to consider what this question means for our own faith and identity.

Peter's answer is a confession of faith that is at the center of the Christian life. We echo it every Sunday in our creeds, proclaiming that Jesus is not just a teacher, prophet, or example, but our Savior and Lord.

This confession is the foundation of grace. We are not saved by our own words or wisdom, but by trusting in the One who gave Himself for us. Our faith begins and ends in Jesus—the Christ who took our sin to the cross and rose to give us new life.

This confession also shapes how we live. When we genuinely believe that Jesus is the living Son of God, our priorities change. We seek to follow Him with humility, serve others with love, and share His hope with a world still asking who He is.

In a world full of competing voices and shifting truths, Lent calls us back to the core of our faith: belief in Jesus as the Christ. This belief anchors us in grace.



Prayer: Lord Jesus, strengthen my faith to confess You boldly in word and deed. Help me to live as people who know and trust Your saving grace. Let my life bear witness to who You are—our Savior and our Hope. Amen

Annette Salm has built on her strong belief in God during her ten years as a member of Messiah. She splits her time between Appleton, WI and Avon Park, FL with her wife.

Risk

MARCH 25



The Son of God came not to be served but to serve
and to give his life as a ransom for many.

-- Matthew 20:28

Verse 28 ends the context passage of Matthew 20:20-28 where Jesus uses this to correct the disciples' misunderstanding of greatness, teaching that the greatest among them should be the one who serves. Service to God is a great risk that we take as believers among those who do not understand Jesus' teaching of humbleness, sacrificial service to others.

In Revelation 22:1-5 as Jesus is the tree of life that produces fruit (His church) for nourishment and leaves (individuals) for healing, we are called to provide for the physical and spiritual needs of others and be about the "healing of the nations."

Serving God through Jesus and the Spirit sometimes requires us to go outside our comfort zone. Throughout my ministry I have been called to serve God in different states and different locations within a state. With each move comes a risk: a new job, finding a home to live, school for children, and being welcomed into a new community, whether neighborhood or church.

My biggest risk to this point was chaperoning my first Messiah youth mission trip to the Northern Cheyenne Indian reservation in Lame Deer, Montana. I hardly knew anyone, except my wife Kathy. I had no idea what was going to happen, what our living quarters would be, or even if we would be accepted by the local people. Throughout the week, God was able to use me and every one of those who were on that trip. I was accepted for who I was and God showed me that if you trust in Him alone, He will bless you and reward you for the risks we take as we serve Him.

So take a risk for God and serve Him somehow, someway, today.



Prayer: Dear God, call me to action so that I can follow your example of humble service. Amen.

Ray Robinson can be seen with his wife Kathy and their grandchildren, Kallum and Mira at the 10:30 AM service on Sundays. Ray loves spending time with family and friends.



MARCH 26

Commit

Commit your work to God, and your plans will be established -- Proverbs 16:3

Sometimes I get so frustrated with myself and the work I need to be doing because I procrastinate and don't get off to a very good start. I then try to do too much in a certain amount of time and things don't get handled very well. I need to do exactly what this devotion is saying to me: commit.

Of all the virtues, I have frequently lacked patience. I will promise myself that I will take a minute to step back, slow down and think about how I can get my work done. I need to give myself time to think about the work that lies ahead of me, to commit it to God with a prayer and then to put my trust in him. This is because I am giving my work to him at this point and I believe that he can help me.

Big or small, whatever the work I need to do and get done, I will try always to remember this devotional and take a deep breath—maybe more than one—and distract myself with something else for a short time. I will then see if I can feel God giving me a push or hear him whisper some encouraging words to me that will move me to go forward and get my tasks accomplished.



Prayer: Dear God, I promise that I will put this devotion into practice in my life from now on and let you know that I am letting you and your power give me the help that I need at this time and in my future days as well. Amen.

Mary Jo Feeney Gebhardt is fortunate to come from a big family, and they all get along. She has wonderful friends and she loves spending time with all of them. She likes to read and knit and she enjoys working in her yard. Mary Jo also wants to always keep learning.

Tell

MARCH 27



I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to
all generations. -- Psalm 89:1

One of my favorite hymns for telling everyone about God's love and faithfulness throughout all history is "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" (written in 1714 by Isaac Watts). We all need to be reminded from time to time that just as God has faithfully helped us in the past, God will continue to be with us and help us now and in the future.

O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.

Over the centuries, thousands of hymn writers have created new songs, many of them inspired by the original Psalms in the Bible. "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" (written in 1923 by Thomas Chisholm), is a twentieth-century version of Psalm 89:1. It tells the world about God's faithfulness to all generations.

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not;
as thou has been, thou forever will be.
Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed thy hand hath provided;
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.



Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your gift of music.
May we forever sing of your love and faithfulness.
Amen.

Marian Korth is one of the organists at Messiah. She and her wife, Mim Jacobson, live in Cambridge.



MARCH 28

Welcome

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress them. They shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. -- Leviticus 19:33-34

I was looking for a reading that fit me and the first three I looked at were already taken so I turned to the date of my birthday and found the perfect match for me. After 22 years as a member of Messiah, I found myself living in three different communities in three years. The second one was an excellent assisted living facility but located in a small community. Most of the residents were former members of that community and I was clearly an alien. It was not unusual for residents at the table to lean toward each other and whisper. I don't know if they read this text, but it didn't take much time for this community to reach out to this new guy to become part of the community, and I can tell you it made a huge difference to me to feel a part of the community.

There are several times in the New Testament when Jesus reminds his followers that God has called his followers to be God's lovers in the world using agape—one of the three words for love in the Greek language. For me that has always meant starting with loving other followers of Jesus. In my 15 years as a campus pastor, I often found myself working together with a variety of campus pastors on Bible studies and retreats. I discovered we had much more in common than differences. It was one of the best parts of being a campus pastor.



Prayer: Gracious God, Help me always to be kind to the stranger in our midst and to always be willing to share the love of Jesus. Amen.

Gil Splett and his wife Carolyn sold their B&B in 2002 and joined Messiah. She would have been 90 years old in July of this year.

Grow

MARCH 29 | PALM SUNDAY



So that you may walk worthy of the Lord, and be fully pleasing to God as you bear fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God. -- Colossians 1:10

There are at least 36 different kinds of trees mentioned in the Bible. They appear in nearly every major theological event. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil appears in the Garden of Eden; wood from the cedar is used to construct the temple; the olive tree is named in both the Old and New Testaments; the fig tree is important in Jesus' teachings. Trees appear literally as material objects and also symbolically to represent life, wisdom, and growth.

The "Tree of Life" is found at the beginning and end of the Bible in Genesis and the book of Revelation, where it represents Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Some consider Christ as the Tree of Life, while others consider the cross the Tree of Life. Remembering a verse from the song we sing on Good Friday...

Tree of Life and awesome mystery,
in your death we are reborn;
though you die in all of hist'ry,
still you rise with every morn,
still you rise with every morn.



Prayer: I pray that our journey through Lent has been a journey of life, wisdom and growth, moving from death to rebirth as we bear fruit in good works and grow in the knowledge of God. Amen.

Judy Armelin has been working as Messiah's Office Administrator for the past four years. She lives in Sun Prairie with her partner, Pam Shellberg and their cocker spaniel, Lucy.



MARCH 30

Humble

The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted. - - Matthew 23:11-12

How you do anything is how you do everything.

John Wooden, UCLA's former men's basketball coach, is arguably one of the best coaches ever. He won multiple National Championships. But Wooden had a reputation for being humble. What did he do daily? He picked up the trash in the locker room. He did it because it was the right thing to do, and he modeled the behavior he expected from his players. In doing so, he made his players better people.

There's someone in the Messiah community that lives by those same principles. I've traveled with Phil Nepl on many mission trips, and youth activities. Wherever we go, and whoever we serve, I always hear Phil say "let's leave it better than we found it." It doesn't matter that it's not our trash. It doesn't matter that we didn't leave those clothes there. It doesn't matter that we're going to be a little late because we have an extra job to do. Doing the right thing, doing what's considered the lowliest job, and truly serving others, this is being humble. I know he's helping make our kids better people.

This verse says that the humble will be exalted, but I think the truly humble would say "I don't need to be exalted, I just want to leave the world better than I found it."



Prayer: Please let me be humble. Let me set aside my pride and my ego to serve others in any way they need. Amen.

Clark Kellogg is Messiah's streaming coordinator and works at UW Madison's Waisman Center. He's the happy husband of Messiah's youth & family ministry coordinator Teresa Palumbo.

Resist

MARCH 31

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. -- James 4:7



In October I was visiting a cathedral in Otranto, a town on the coast of southern Italy. Monks installed a mosaic floor there between 1163 and 1165. The mosaic functions as a narrative, visually telling the story of humanity, sin, and salvation from beginning to end. It filled the entire cathedral floor and displayed the Tree of Life in all its glory.

In one corner of the cathedral was a chapel bearing the skulls of 800 men beheaded by the Ottomans in a 1480 raid after they refused to convert to Islam. In total, 12,000 of the 22,000 Christians living there were murdered.

In another corner a young child was being baptized and her screams filled the cathedral. The well-dressed parents and supportive family were smiling as they welcomed this new member into their faith.

In another corner, the mosaic on the floor portrayed a father and mother holding three children. Directly next to this scene, on the other side of the Tree of Life branch, was a mosaic of Infernus and Satan. The mosaic artist seemed to be asking "do you choose good or evil?" Remember, back then, no one could read and mosaics were used to tell Bible stories.

As I stood there, the Tree of Life became alive. Faith can support both good and evil. An innocent child. A religious war. A loving family. The Devil and Infernus. The challenge continues in 2025. Resist evil. Love as Christ loved. Choose love.



Prayer: When the devil comes, help me resist the temptation to be selfish, judgmental, and mean. Help me choose love—especially when that is challenging. Amen.

Mary Marshall loves to travel with her husband, Doug. Challenging adventures keep her mind open to a more just and loving world.



APRIL 1

Nurture

Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:11

We are called by God to nurture each other. But what does this mean? To nurture oneself spiritually is to actively care for and cultivate one's inner self and spiritual growth. This is done not only through prayer, meditation, gratitude, and community building, but also the intentional act of guiding others in their spiritual journey. This happens abundantly here.

Members of Messiah Lutheran Church ELCA, a welcoming and inclusive church, are blessed to find encouragement and support on their spiritual journeys through inspiring homilies at services, religious instruction at Bible and book studies, classes and retreats, and ongoing support of each other. My first Lenten season with Messiah was a most meaningful one, inspired by the Lenten devotions written by our very own members. We thrive, too, through our community outreach efforts and participation in various activities offered for the young, the seniors and everyone in between.

In our faith community, I've witnessed the love that thrives here for God, the love that flows from God to us, to each other, to our faith community and to the community at large. It nurtures us in the many ways we choose to participate. I've enjoyed getting to know members at book studies, the Women's conversation group, volunteering with the Boomerang and Dignity Projects and having lunch with the Women's Lunch Bunch. The kindness, compassion and support given to me as I seek a closer, loving relationship with God has enabled me to grow in my faith.

Let's continue to encourage one another and build each other up, as indeed we are doing.



Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the blessing of the Messiah faith community. May we continue to nurture each other, growing ever closer to you as you have taught us to do. Amen.

Jennine Kenny and her husband Larry have been members at Messiah since February 2025. Having moved from Milwaukee to be closer to family, they treasure time spent with loved ones.

Console

APRIL 2 | MAUNDY THURSDAY

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. -- Galatians 6:2



Many years ago, I volunteered to serve meals at a homeless shelter on Thanksgiving Day. I expected the experience to feel uplifting, but instead I left feeling flat and oddly empty. At first, I blamed myself. Maybe I didn't serve with the right spirit. Maybe my heart wasn't in the right place?

However, as the years have passed, I've grown to understand something important: not all service feels inspiring. Some acts of love are simply hard, tiring, or emotionally dry. (Just ask any parent of young children!) But the value of service doesn't rest on how it makes us feel.

Jesus taught this clearly. On the night before His death, He knelt down and washed His disciples' feet—an act of humble, ordinary, even uncomfortable service. Then He said, "Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another." It was His final command.

Serving others may or may not leave us glowing inside, but it is always pleasing to God. When we help a child of God, it makes God smile, and that is reason enough to rejoice—today and always.



Prayer: Jesus, give us hearts that care deeply for others, eyes that recognize hurt and need, and hands eager to serve. May our lives be a blessing to those around us and bring joy to our Father in heaven. Amen.

Renee Kiel is a retired ELCA pastor and Army chaplain. She lives with her husband David in Middleton. Their three sons all live and work in the Madison area, and they are looking forward to meeting their first grandchild this spring.



APRIL 3 | GOOD FRIDAY

Empower

Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights
of all the destitute. -- Proverbs 31:8

Speaking out is hard. There are so many reasons not to: false humility, fear of ridicule, it's not the right time, maybe someone else will come forward, I won't say the right thing. However, we empower others and provide a witness to Christ when we heed the call to action through acts of courage, love, kindness, caring, and justice. From the words of John Lewis, civil rights leader, and Hillel the Elder, a Rabbi living just before Jesus, "If not us, then who? If not now, then when?"

We are all destitute. We generally think of destitute as extreme poverty. It also references "poor in spirit," highlighting our complete dependence on God for life, salvation and mercy. Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In humbly acknowledging our need for grace and forgiveness, we build our relationship with God. On the cross, Jesus humbly died for our sins, following the will and plans of a loving God.

As we grow in grace through following Christ in right actions and in speaking out, others gain strength and affirmation. Anger and hostility are contagious, however, so is love, the message of the cross and Easter. From the brutality of the cross, Jesus spoke for everyone then and now in a clear message of redemption, love and forgiveness. Embrace being poor in spirit. Allow God to build you up, to speak through you.

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

"The Agony" George Herbert, 1633



Prayer: Loving God, empower me to speak and act with courage, love, kindness and care for others. Guide my actions through your transformative love. Amen.

Annette Durkin formerly of Madison, is an Associate Member of Messiah, living in Post Falls, Idaho. She is an artist, enjoying retirement time with her family.

Embrace

APRIL 4 | HOLY SATURDAY



Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as God is merciful. -- Luke 6:35-36

The “middle space” between Good Friday and Easter morning is Holy Saturday—a quiet day between loss and resurrection. It invites us to pause, to sit with what is unfinished, and to hold hope in tension with grief.

On February 5, 1994, the Markale Market in Sarajevo was filled with people searching for food in the midst of war. Without warning, a mortar shell struck the crowd, killing twenty-two people and wounding many others. Among those mourning was Vedran Smailović, a cellist from the Sarajevo Symphony. Heartbroken, he carried his cello and a chair to the bombed-out marketplace the next day.

There, surrounded by rubble, he played Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor—a lament for those who had died. For twenty-two days, he returned to that same spot, one concert for each of his lost friends. His act transformed the place of death into a sanctuary of life. The market no longer echoed only with grief, but also with beauty and love.

We, too, live much of life in “middle spaces”—between endings and beginnings, despair and renewal. In those places, the Risen Christ meets us. Hope takes shape not through denial, but through presence, compassion, and mercy.

To embrace the middle is to trust that resurrection is already stirring beneath the silence. When we dare to offer even a single note of kindness or forgiveness, we join the holy symphony of love that overcomes death.



Prayer: Risen One, give us courage to embrace the middle spaces of our lives, trusting your love to make all things new. Amen.

Mark Petersen’s family consists of his wife Peggy and their two adult daughters who have married wonderful people and given them four amazing grandchildren. They all live in the Madison area. Mark is a retired pastor who makes candles and serves as a spiritual director. The people of Messiah are dear to his whole family!



APRIL 5 | EASTER DAY

Shine

For it is the God who said, "Light will shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

-- 2 Corinthians 4:6

A little girl was visiting her grandmother's garden one spring morning. As the grandmother inspected her flowers, the little girl opened a rosebud with her own two hands. But no luck! As she pulled the petals open, they would tear, bruise, wilt or break off completely. In frustration, she said, "Grandma, I don't understand it at all. When God opens a flower, it looks so beautiful but when I try, it just comes apart." "Well, honey," grandma answered, "God is able to do it because God works from the inside out!"

God works from the inside out. That is the great message of Easter Sunday and what the disciples finally came to understand. God enters the tombs of our lives, the depths of our despair, and the centers of our darkness, and works from the inside out. We can imagine what those first followers of Jesus felt. They had watched their friend condemned, crucified and buried. Jesus wasn't the only one in the tomb—they were as well. Suddenly from the inside out, the stone was rolled away from Jesus' tomb, and from their tombs as well!

Easter promises there is something waiting to be born in each of our hearts. Whatever the tomb we are in—anxiety or depression, grief or worry, physical illness or personal trauma—whatever death we are facing, the God of life is always at work, moving, inspiring and healing. One day, the stone will be rolled away and from the inside out you will blossom again. On that day you will proclaim—Christ is Risen... Christ is risen indeed!



Prayer: O Divine One, thank you for loving me. Trusting in your power and grace, touch me with your healing spirit. In the deepest recesses of my heart, roll the stone away. Amen.

(St. Padre Pio 1887-1968)

Jeff Vanden Heuvel has been the pastor of the Messiah congregation since 2001. He is the husband of Melissa and father of Ben, Joey and Kobii.