



the Tree and the Vine

A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
BY THE PEOPLE OF EASTBROOK CHURCH

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Introduction

Where are your favorite places to be outside in God's creation here in the Milwaukee area? As many of you probably know, I love hiking, and being out for a hike on the Ice Age Trail somewhere in the northern or southern units of the Kettle Moraine are treasured places for me. Walking amidst the beauty of God's creation on the rising and falling hills and undulating prairies of Wisconsin is soothing to me. Yes, I know it may not be as stunning as mountain peaks or coral reefs, but I still love it. There is something about finding beauty in my own environment, right where I am, that speaks to me in these spaces.

Perhaps that is why the Bible gives such significant attention to everyday aspects of creation to help us encounter God and life with God in fresh ways. Whether we hear Jesus' parables about soil and seed or consider the Revelation picture of a new heaven and new earth with trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations, the Bible is replete with reverent observances of the created world while also often connecting the creation with something more.

This year, our journey of Lent brings together organic images of creation found in two different parts of the Bible: the tree in Psalm 1 and the vine and branches in John 15. These two passages, while somewhat different, echo one another around two key themes about who Jesus is as the only truly righteous person who lives fully in God's way as God's Messiah and our invitation into a fruitful life with God overflowing from Jesus' life in us.

The forty-day journey of Lent offers an opportunity for us to give focused attention to Jesus, seeing in His life, death, and resurrection the unique, one-of-a-kind Messiah who has come to give life to us. Lent also is an invitation to consider how we are responding to God's invitation to a full life through Christ. Beginning on Ash Wednesday and carrying forward to Easter Sunday, this year we will walk through these two passages of Scripture that we might grow in awareness both of our need because of sin and God's remedy through Jesus Christ. Lent is a focused journey that calls us to turn away from sin—to repent—and to turn toward God—to be transformed like Christ into a full and fruitful life with God.

The devotional booklet you hold in your hands is a forty-day guide written by people within the Eastbrook Church family to help us draw near to Jesus Christ in Lent. I pray this journey together as a church draws us into a transforming encounter with Jesus—His life, His death, and His resurrection.

+ The peace of the Lord,



Matt Erickson
Senior Pastor, Eastbrook Church



HOW TO USE THIS DEVOTIONAL:

Each of the first six days of the week (Sunday-Friday) has a short devotional thought written by one of our Eastbrookers with questions at the end for deeper reflection.

On Saturdays, there is a page that will guide you through a different spiritual practice or discipline for the week. You will also find a web link you can visit to watch one of our pastors, church leaders, or staff members leading you through this particular practice. Even as we guide you through these practices, remember that the spiritual disciplines in and of themselves are not the goal. Rather, they are tools we use on our journey of sanctification as we aim to become more like Jesus Christ.

You should have also been prompted to pick up a plant with this devotional, or find a plant to use alongside your Lenten devotional. Since the theme of our study this Lent is rooted in Biblical imagery of plant life, we want to encourage you to also care for a plant during this season as you grow, learn, and engage in spiritual practices. You will find a prompt each Saturday that connects to the week's theme that will help you care for your plant. We pray that as you care for your plant, the words of Psalm 1 and John 15 will come alive for you in new and tangible ways.

Finally, you can also interact with the digital version of this devotional in a variety of ways: on the Eastbrook App, on Instagram, via daily emails, blog, or PDF. Find these options and links on our website at eastbrook.org/TreeAndVineDevo.



Preparing Our Hearts

READ JOEL 2:12-13

I grew up in a home where Catholics were mistrusted. I can't remember all the derogatory talk, but there was a feeling that Catholicism equaled "popery" and high church ritual equaled idolatry.

When I managed a Parish Nursing program, the chaplains would offer an Ash Wednesday service for all staff. After Easter the year before, they burned the palm fronds and guarded the ashes. Those ashes were "imposed" on our forehead when we walked up the aisle to the front of the chapel. *"From ashes to ashes and dust to dust"* was said as the dark sign of the Cross was made on our forehead. There was no music, preaching, or ornamentation, just a time of quiet reflection, prayer, and voluntary procession.

In Joel 2:12-13, the prophet speaks into a context of judgment. Locusts had destroyed the landscape, and foreign armies were attacking. Joel knew judgment was deserved from a just God because of idolatry, empty rituals, and lack of compassion. He called the people to gather and lament their sin—to fast, repent, and cry out to God. *"'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity."*

You will not find Ash Wednesday in Scripture. It became a practice of the Church in the 5th century to mark the beginning of Lent. It is a way of saying, "I am mortal. God created Adam from dust, and one day I will return to dust." It is a way of acknowledging that our hearts are "prone to wander" and to grieve our sinfulness and rebellion. It is a time to remember and enter Jesus' journey to the Cross and life eternal. As we observe Ash Wednesday, we join Christians all over the world, preparing our hearts for Easter's celebration.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *In addition to Ash Wednesday, today is Valentine's Day! Joel might say to us, "Don't try to give God flowers or a red, heart-shaped box of chocolates! He wants your whole heart." What does that mean to you?*
- *Are there any beliefs or rituals that make it hard for you to connect with this Lenten season? How can you overcome those and instead use this season as a time of deeper focus on God?*

Go Forward in Faith

READ HEBREWS 12:1-3

Who keeps an eye on you? Who is watching your activities? Do you remember parents, sitters, siblings or friends checking on you? Usually, when you're under inspection or have an audience you try harder or, at least, your behavior is better. I remember my father talking about Hebrews and the passage which precedes the challenge in today's devotion. He loved this section, as do I, because of the heroes of the faith it enumerates. Those heroes could sound like a crowd in judgment if this was a passage on its own, but it isn't really about somebody inspecting or judging you. It was all about the fact that the crowd had gone before you and led the way in faith.

With the encouragement of their example of faith before us, we know we haven't and won't be alone. More importantly, believers have the ultimate model and witness in our lives, Jesus. We have commands in these verses to lay aside the things that hold us back in our faith, especially sin, and to live with the endurance it takes to exercise faith for the whole time we have here. We are not left to figure it out on our own if we fix our eyes on Jesus keeping him as the ultimate example and goal.

With the author and perfecter of faith, our faith, we go forward day by day keeping our eyes on Him. We also have the crowd of witnesses that have gone before and have shown us through their lives and actions that He is faithful. Jesus dealt with opposition, persecution and betrayal and withstood it all, including the test of taking our sin to give us hope and life. As the great crowd of witnesses, we are meant to go forward in faith with the hope, knowledge and joy Jesus' work brings to us. In this Lenten season, bow before Him, see Him and His example and work. In joy, do not grow weary or lose heart.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How will you concentrate on the work of Jesus this season, both what He did for you and what He is doing in your life now?*
- *How do you think that effort will bring you closer to Him in the endurance of your faith?*

Kingdom Calculator

READ PHILIPPIANS 3:8-11

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Have you ever thrown away something valuable? When I first decided to move to the Middle East in 2018, I found myself in a predicament: could I give up my stuff? Maybe more than that, could I give up my life? As I began to give away my personal possessions and say goodbye to the people and places I loved, it was extremely difficult (and still is). Yet, something in the midst of suffering these losses surprised me: joy. On my fridge was a quote from the journal of Jim Elliot, a missionary killed on the field, which helped me define the reason for this joy: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

In our reading, Paul shares: "...I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ..." (v. 8b, NASB). When we give things up, we make the choice to consider, or calculate, them as loss. In society, we often focus on gain and try our best to avoid loss. Paul, however, demonstrates the upside-down kingdom of God by telling us that losing is actually gaining. No, he isn't overlooking the fact that experiencing these losses is suffering. Paul is simply re-fixing our eyes to the greater value of Christ. What do we gain in Christ, according to Paul? Righteousness that we couldn't earn, knowledge of Jesus, and the power of His resurrection. Notice, however, that we can't join in resurrection if we don't first share in "the form and pattern of His death" (v. 10b, N.T. Wright's *The New Testament for Everyone*).

Jesus often told His disciples that they would have to lose their lives to follow Him. During the Lenten season, we particularly remember this call as we journey to the Cross. I wonder what you have had to, and will have to, lay down to follow the call of Christ? Will you use the kingdom calculator? My prayer is that this season of giving up would bring us the true joy of Christ.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *During Lent, Christians around the world practice giving up something to help them remember and enter into what Christ gave up for us. Whether or not you choose to participate in this practice, take some time to reflect (alone and with others) on your own journey of following Christ.*
- *What have you given up to follow Him? What might you still need to lay aside?*
- *Be careful to notice if there is anything in your life that you value more than Christ. What steps might you need to take to prioritize Christ at the front and center of your life?*

Practice: Sabbath

Each Saturday during Lent, we will take some time as a church family to practice a different spiritual discipline or spiritual practice together. Today, we are practicing and learning about keeping the Sabbath. You may want to begin by reading through the written form in this devotional, or by watching a video of Pastor Matt guiding you through this spiritual practice online at eastbrook.org/TreeAndVineDevo.

WHAT IS SABBATH?

One of the most unique instructions in the Ten Commandments calls for God's people to a set apart day called the Sabbath. The word Sabbath literally means 'to stop' and the day reflected that (Exodus 20:8-11). Sabbath was an identifier of their relationship with God and a call to abstain from work in order to enter into worship and rest with God. To rescue people from legalism, Jesus later reminded people that "*the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath*" (Mark 2:27), also declaring that He was "*Lord of the sabbath*" (2:28). One Christian writer describes Sabbath as a day for "praying and playing," which can be a helpful guide for us.

HOW TO PRACTICE SABBATH?

There are many ideas for practicing Sabbath, but here are a few suggestions that may help us move toward:

Sabbath as a day – Set aside a day each week where you will "pray and play." Intentionally move away from tasks and to-do lists so that you can simply be with God. Read Scripture, journal, go for a walk, drink a cup of tea or coffee (by yourself or with a friend), take a nap. Do things that help you engage with God and with rest.

Sabbath in each day – The concept of Sabbath can also help us during each day. Consider setting aside some time each day during Lent to simply remind yourself that you are not defined by what you accomplish but by what God says about. Perhaps read a Scripture, like John 3:16 or 1 John 4:9-10, that helps you remember who you are in God.

Sabbath as letting go of worry – We can be so occupied with worry about what we need to do or what will come our way. Sabbath is in many ways an opportunity to let go of our worries and grab ahold of God in trust. When you worry, consider praying a simple prayer like, "I trust You, God," as you entrust that worry to the Lord.

Sabbath with kids – When our kids were young it was hard to figure out Sabbath. That's when we started hiking as part of our family Sabbath day. Getting our kids outside was refreshing for all of us, tiring for their little legs (which helped with naps), and gifted us with a different pattern for our days. Try something like that to help you enter into Sabbath as a family when you have young children.

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Caring for your Plant

AN INTRODUCTION

Congratulations on your new plant! Just as the practice of Sabbath revolves around nourishing our soul and providing it with the best care possible, this week our practice revolves around learning the best care for our plant. Put your new green friend in the brightest spot you can find—direct sunlight is great, a dark corner will make it sad. You will probably need to water your plant about once a week. Find the balance—we don't want the soil to dry out completely, and we don't want it to sit in water. If the top inch or so of your plant's soil is dry, it is due for some water. Avoid chilly windowsills and drafty areas.

As we learn to view the Sabbath as a tangible practice and a time of rest, you can approach your plant care in the same manner. Through the upcoming weeks, use the time you spend nourishing this little plant life as a time of peace, reflection, and rest. As God made us with an innate connection to His creation—created from the dirt, to live in a beautiful garden, and to be stewards of creation—so these growing leaves remind us of our connection with God's creation around us and that both it and our souls need care and tending.

The Planted Life

READ PSALM 1:1-3

*"Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers." (Psalm 1:1-3)*

The book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible is a collection of prayers and songs showing us what it looks like to live life with God. The psalms were used in the worship of the people of Israel and continue to be utilized in the Christian church as avenues of prayer and worship to God.

Psalm 1 sets the tone for the entire collection of psalms by contrasting two different ways of life: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Or, to put it another way, the way of a growing life with God or the way of an atrophied life apart from God. Psalm 1 begins with an important biblical word: *blessed*. The word 'blessed' basically means being happy or flourishing in the fullest sense of those words, including all the various aspects of our moral, mental, and physical lives. In simple terms, being 'blessed' means having the fullness of God's joy brought into our lives.

And that sense of being blessed comes when our life is, in a sense, planted in God. Throughout the psalms, both in Psalm 1 and in other places, the concept of being blessed is both a gift from God but also reflects how we choose to live our lives. On the one hand it is a direct gift from God of His goodness into our lives, while on the other hand it is the indirect result of God's guidance when we live life in a way that reflects God's truth. Either way, whether directly or indirectly, blessing is a gift from God.

So, as we begin the journey of Lent, let us consider with Psalm 1 what it means to live planted in God. True blessing will come from that place.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Each Sunday we include discussion questions on the sermon insert that can be used for deeper reflection and/or small group discussions. Take time to read through those questions today. You can find a digital version online at eastbrook.org/TreeandVine.*

An Important Choice

READ DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

Today's passage from Deuteronomy is part of Moses' address to the people of Israel before his death and their entry into the Promised Land. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, God is preparing them for the end of their journey through his appointed leader, Moses. As they get ready to cross the Jordan River, God is making it very clear to the people (and to us) that an important choice must be made. Set before all of us is *"life and prosperity on the one hand, and death and disaster on the other."* He goes on to tell us how to gain life and prosperity by loving God, walking in His ways, and obeying His laws and commands. How do we do this? Borrowing the imagery from Psalm 1, we do this by rooting our lives deep in the rich fertile soil that is the Word of God, and drinking in the living water that He provides through belief in His Son. If we do this, we shall live and be blessed by God and bring forth good fruit!

In his speech to the people, Moses recounts their story: from the escape from Egypt to wandering in the desert to this moment of truth. Moses tells of the times where the people of Israel chose 'the other hand' and experienced pain, suffering and death. He also foretells of times in the future when they will choose 'the other hand' and not follow God. I see myself here in the story, like the Israelites (and even Moses) often making the wrong choice and wandering from the God's path. But praise God that when His people fall, He provides a way back. If we turn to Him and follow Him, He will move us from death to life.

If we look at the passage preceding verse 15, it is like God can hear the people push back against the good news. But God through Moses reassures the people that *"what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach"* (v. 11) and that *"the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it"* (v. 14). God has made a way for us to experience His glorious kingdom in part here on earth today. We just need to choose Him, walk in his ways and live!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What does it practically look like in your life to live out the commands in verse 20, "listen to his voice" and "hold fast to him"?*

The Road Less Traveled

READ MATTHEW 7:13-14

Chances are you've heard Robert Frost's poem, "*The Road Not Taken*"—perhaps most famously, the last three lines:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.³

Whether or not Frost intended this, his narrator's walk in the "yellow wood" provides a wonderful analogy for our walk with God: a life following Him may not be easy, but it will make all the difference.

In today's brief yet powerful passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus issues a simple invitation: go with God to pursue life, rather than the ways of the world which ultimately lead to destruction. The gates leading to each path represent decisions we make every day: wide, broad gates are easier to get through and grant lots of people access at once, whereas small, narrow gates are more difficult to navigate and might deter some from entering.

Think about all of the decisions you make on any given day. What will I wear? Who will I ask for help with this task? What will I say in that meeting? How will I spend my free time? There is no shortage of "worldly wisdom" advising us on how to handle things—but sorting through that can often feel like looking at a bunch of different directional arrows tacked to a sign post!

Lucky for us, God gifted us with a clear roadmap: an example to follow (Jesus), a resource to reference when we need help (His Word), and way markers for support and encouragement (fellow believers). It may not be easy to follow the path of obedience to God, as it is often "the one less traveled by," but we certainly don't walk alone.

Inevitably, we will take wrong turns. But I don't think we're expected to do it perfectly; we are expected to give it our best shot, to aim in the same direction as our Creator, "*the way and the truth and the life*" (John 14:6). Big or small, choices become habits—it's up to us to take each step with Him in mind.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *When is a time in your life you were faced with a decision that came down to following God or following the path of the world? What helped you make that decision and how did your choice impact your life afterwards?*

False Gods

READ JOSHUA 24:14-15

As we explore the image and idea of being planted this week, my mind is drawn to the parable of the sower. I think especially of the seed that is thrown among the thorns where things like the worries of life, distractions, and other gods choke out the seeds from setting their roots down and growing. Joshua gives a clear statement of the need to throw away gods that the Israelites may have worshiped previously due to the influence of the cultures around them and serve Yahweh. In current times, there are other religions and idols that are left from past lives or ancestors. I have a distinct memory of my dad going to my grandma's house when I was young and throwing away the Buddhist idols that were in her house when she came to Christ. But more often, there are things like career/future aspirations, monetary stability, wanting to be liked or popular, and political or social ideologies that can become idols influenced by the culture around us that choke out our ability to be planted by God. As idols, those must be thrown away.

Joshua also highlights the clear choice to serve the Lord. As someone who grew up in a Christian home, I have found myself struggling with being assured of my salvation in different seasons of my life. My parents have clear conversion stories, but I found mine to be a more gradual process of sanctification. That difference in our faith experience can be a place where doubt creeps in. However, when referring to the choice to follow the Lord, Joshua uses the active language of "service". The choice to serve the Lord is a continuous thing. Not something done once and forgotten.

Finally, as we explore the imagery of being planted and a part of the vine as a church this Lenten season, I think it's so cool that Joshua is clear that it's not just him that is choosing to serve the Lord, but his whole family. I think that is a great reminder to walk in faith with a community of brothers and sisters around you so you can support each other in your journey.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *As you think about the decision in your life to follow and be planted firmly in Christ, what did you have to say, "no" to in order for that to happen?*
- *What are some things that your decision to follow Christ has led you to say, "no" to?*

Lessons from a Cottonwood

READ JEREMIAH 17:5-8

This past December my wife, Lisa, and I traveled to Southern Utah to visit several national parks. We marveled at vistas in Zion, Bryce, Canyonlands, and Arches; we stood in awe at patterns of red sandstone canyons, beauty in golden sunsets, eeriness of striated hoodoos, and massive stone arches. Additionally, we became acquainted with the Utah juniper and the Fremont cottonwood. The juniper is a desert tree—twisted trunk and often-dead branches struggle to guard moisture for its greenery—finding its home in arid cliff crevices and parched sandy soil; while the cottonwood flourishes on the banks of dry washes and trickling streams.

In Jeremiah 17:5-8, the prophet Jeremiah (650-570 BC) calls the Southern Kingdom of Judah to remember its predisposition for rebellious living and the sins of idolatry, empty religious ritual, and lack of mercy for the marginalized. He warns the people about judgment as he employs a desert metaphor that they will be *“like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes”* (v. 6). As the Utah juniper strains to survive in the desert, so Jeremiah reminds His people in the 7th century BC and us today that we can choose to live in desert places like the juniper, or flourish as the cottonwood with roots deep into the dry wash and stream bed. The cottonwood does not escape the arid heat of southern Utah but finds its water source deep down in the sandy soil; it flourishes because it is planted in a place where constant moisture can be found.

Jeremiah points to hope in the middle of his sobering words to Judah: *“But blessed is the man who trusts . . . whose confidence is in him . . . He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream”* (vs. 17:7a, 8a). Hope, as we find ourselves planted at the foot of the Cross, drawing from Jesus’ refreshing and sustaining presence in times of “heat” and “drought.”

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Name a “desert” place you may be in at this time. Can you apply Jeremiah’s words of hope to this arid place? Will you ask Him now?*
- *Is there someone in your sphere of influence with whom can you share the prophet’s words for their encouragement?*

Bearing Fruit

READ JOHN 12:20-25

I am a gardener; or at least I like to think that I am. Truth be told, I still have a lot to learn about planting and harvesting. In my attempt to be a more successful gardener, I have recently taken a closer look at seeds. I have learned some plant seeds are on the outside of the plant, and some deep inside. Some can reseed themselves easily, and some need to be harvested, cooled, and intentionally reseeded. Some seeds get planted deep in the ground in Fall, and some shallow when the temperature is warmer. Seed particulars can go on and on and on. However one characteristic all plants have in common is that without seeds, plant life wouldn't exist. The seed holds the key to life, and the plant has to give up its seed to acquire new life.

As Jesus was preparing His followers for His imminent death and trying to leave them with an understanding of its significance, He drew on the fact that His disciples understood that to bring new life, the wheat plant has to die and give up its seed. Jesus also made clear to them that just like the wheat plant, He would give up His life. Jesus said, all that want eternal life through Christ would have to surrender theirs. They would have to make a choice.

Hearing these words must have felt overwhelming to the first disciples especially prior to Jesus's death, resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. But we now have a deeper understanding of what Jesus was saying. Yet it is still a difficult choice for people today. What is it that stands in our way to giving our life completely over to God? What can we do to remove these barriers? Naming barriers and removing them are a good first step.

This year as Spring and the season of new life is upon us, may we choose for the first time, or renew again, our commitment to God to give over our lives to Him, to be lived for His glory. He is the Master Gardener who knows the type of seed we are, and exactly where, how, and when to plant us to bear fruit through Him. This choice can give us eternal life but it is ours to make.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What is an area of your life that you need to surrender to Christ, be it for the first time or again?*
- *What has been the toughest area of your life you had to surrender? How did God bless you because of it?*

Practice: Bible Memorization

WHY SHOULD WE MEMORIZE SCRIPTURE?

The Bible encourages us to deeply experience and treasure Scripture in our hearts, to love and walk in God's ways (Psalm 119:11, 103). The gospels reveal Jesus' memory of the Bible was His strength and comfort when He faced difficulties—like the temptation in the wilderness, tricky questions posed by Pharisees, and suffering on the Cross. Jesus rested on the authority of God's word, recalling it with perfect clarity, so that He was always ready to confidently reply, "it is written."

As a part of your practice this Saturday, we want to encourage you to memorize Psalm 1.

HOW TO MEMORIZE SCRIPTURE:

My favorite way to memorize Scripture is active and vocal. The reason I like this method is that it combines several points of contact for memory. If one memory fails, say the mind's eye, then the tongue or ear can assist with recall.

Prepare. *Pray that God would help you to understand and remember his word. I write my texts on notecards. This enables me to pull out my memory cards while doing other activities.*

Work in sections. *Say the first word out loud; then, the next word. Say these two words together. Keep adding one new word at time like this until you complete a sentence. Speak clearly. It's ok to exaggerate or overemphasize a word and involve gestures to help your memory.*

Add a bridge. *Once you've completed the first sentence, keep repeating it, and begin to add the first words of the next sentence. This will help your mind and tongue build a memory bridge between sentences.*

Work the next section. *Whether you are working in phrases or full sentences, memorize the next section of text. You can temporarily stop repeating the former sentence(s).*

Review. *Review all the sections of text you've worked on so far. Say them out loud a few times and brush up the weaker parts. Make it your goal to speak at the speed of thought.*

Repeat steps 3-5. *Add a bridge; focus on the new sentence; put it all together. When you're having trouble adding more, focus on what you've done. Don't rush forward too quickly without solidifying what you've memorized. Sleep on it.*

Practice. *Review your text daily at first. Once you are ready, share it with a friend or relative who can read along and note corrections.*

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Caring for your Plant

PLANTING

The love of God connects us deeply to Him and His desire for each of us to grow. Without that connection, we would flounder—foundationless and directionless. Psalm 1 reminds us that those who delight in the law of the Lord are like a tree planted by streams of water. Our plant needs a firm foundation, just as we need to plant ourselves firmly in the love of our Creator and in His law. And just as our plant's roots grow with proper care, our own lives yield fruit when we abide in the Lord.

To provide our plant with the best care for it to grow a strong foundation, we need to give its roots the ability to grow and flourish by repotting. You can purchase a pot, use a mug, or even a clean tin can. It's best if the vessel has drainage, but if not, just take extra care when you water it to give it just enough water that it will be partially dry within the next few days. When you remove the plant from its original pot, shake off the old dirt and loosen up the roots before placing in its new pot with fresh, moist potting soil. Relish the opportunity to care for your plant just as Christ cares for us.

The Connected Life

READ JOHN 15:1-17

Have you ever rubbed shoulders with a celebrity or some other important, recognizable, or well-known person? A few years ago I had the opportunity to meet with a person that is pretty recognizable in both the Christian and secular world. I was excited when the person gave me their number and said “feel free to call whenever.” I won’t lie, it actually made me feel important. But, when I tried to take him up on the offer to connect, I didn’t get anything back from the other end. Or, at least not in the way I was expecting. In the end, I found out from his secretary that he is a very busy person, in high demand, and doesn’t really have time.

In John 15 we are reading the words of arguably THE MOST FAMOUS MAN IN HISTORY! You could also add to that: the busiest, the most in demand, the most sought after, the most controversial, the Most High God!

Yet, in these verses, I hope you hear an invitation. I hope you see the calendar invite. I hope you are able to imagine Jesus saying these words to you, “*remain in me.*”

Let me put this phrase to in some other ways:

Stay with me. Don’t go anywhere else. Make yourself at home with me. Draw near to me. Come to me. Be with me. Let’s go for a walk. Let’s spend some time together. Give me your attention. Incline your ear to me. Let’s meet for coffee. Let’s hang out. Let’s get together.

There are so many awesome things about God. But, the most fascinating thing about God is that HE . . . wants to meet . . . with YOU! He wants to be with you. He’s not looking to just use you for His glory. He wants to partner with you. In fact the whole story of the Bible is God’s desire to connect with us. Meditate on these words: “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love*” (John 15:9).

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Each Sunday we include discussion questions on the sermon insert that can be used for deeper reflection and/or small group discussions. Take time to read through those questions today. You can find a digital version online at eastbrook.org/TreeandVine.*

A Gifted Community

READ EPHESIANS 4:11-16

My family began attending Eastbrook in the late 90s when I was ten years old. As a junior high student, I had incredible mentors at Eastbrook who poured into me as a young Christian and musician in ways that shaped the course of my life. Over 25 years later, I am still connected to this community, growing in faith and continually spurred on by many of the people who poured into me when I was in junior high. I became a music teacher in an urban school because of those at Eastbrook who recognized and encouraged my God-given gifts in music and teaching and helped me develop those skills as a young person. The intergenerational relationships of encouragement and connection at Eastbrook are a clear display of the body of Christ in action.

Ephesians 4:11-16 speaks about the giftings of Christians as teachers, apostles, pastors, prophets and evangelists, but how are these gifts cultivated? They are grown in the healthy soil of the community of the church, where we build one another up for the good work of bringing the kingdom of God on the earth. Just as the body has many parts with different functions, so do the varied gifts of the people of God serve different and meaningful purposes in both the church and the broader community. This is true fruitfulness.

As a young person at Eastbrook, I remember being inspired by 1 Timothy 4:12 which reads, *"Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and purity."* We have a responsibility to empower the younger generation of leaders in our church to use and develop their gifts. I pray that we will take up this intergenerational gift-growing work as a community *"so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith"* (v. 12-13).

FOR REFLECTION:

- *If you are a young person, what are you good at? How can you develop those gifts to serve others?*
- *If you are an older person, are you connecting with the younger generation of Eastbrook and encouraging them in their giftings?*

Everyone is Included

READ ROMANS 12:1-5

I remember when I was a little kid, my sister would get into trouble. I would think to myself, “I would never do that, I’m much more well-behaved, etc.” Other times, I would think that without my siblings, or whoever was causing a problem, it would be more peaceful. Although at the time I would think these things and truly believe they were true, I can look back now and see that I wasn’t right.

Sometimes we think of ourselves more highly than others. When we hear about somebody going to jail, getting caught for lying, or anything else that is “evil” in God’s eyes, we might think, “I would never do anything like that and I would never go to jail. I must just be better than them.”

This is a risky road and an easy trap to fall into. Romans 12:1-5 says that we are all equal and not judged by our good works. God loves us all the same and He needs each and every one of us for His plan. When I was younger I was only looking at the small picture, locked in my own thoughts and anger. But God can see the big picture and how everything works out. He sees how we are all needed and how He is going to use all of us.

The body of Christ includes everyone—not depending on your works or what you’ve done. If we repent and read, we can see this is true—we are so connected to God. He loves us and cares for us and urges us to talk to Him. He wants us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. This means to give up seeking what we want from life and instead ask God and see what He wants for our lives. He loves us and only wants what’s best.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why do you think how we think about the world and others is such an important part of abiding in Christ?*
- *What helps you transform your mind to be more in tune with God’s view of things and people?*



READ COLOSSIANS 2:6-12

I have raised four boys. Their idea of a great gift was one that they could take apart in order to find out how it worked. Sometimes, they wouldn't put the toy back together. I would stand back and wonder why they would do such a thing, why they acted the way they did. Fortunately for us, God's Word is complete, giving us the "what's," and "how's" and "why's" and all we need.

In today's passage, Paul tells us to *"continue to live in Him"* (v. 6). The important word here is "continue," as an old Christian song says, "day by day." We are to become *"rooted"* in Christ, not just to believe in the fact of who He is (v. 7). Paul doesn't leave us with the command to continue to live in Him, as if to say, "because I said so." In this passage, he gives us "why's."

The first reason is to have such complete knowledge of the teachings and identity of Christ that we do not mix them with *"hollow and deceptive philosophies"* (v. 8). *The Message* calls these philosophies "high sounding nonsense," and they are still present and active in the world, especially in our country of free speech, even in universities. Other beliefs that people hold true are done so only because they have been believed for so long and are really nothing more than *"human tradition"* (v. 8).

Another, more profound, reason for continuing to live with Christ is that *"in Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form"* (v. 9). WOW! He is God in the flesh! Although in human form, He can subdue evil (He is "over every power and authority") and He can change us into His image by helping us *"put off our sinful nature"* by being *"buried (submerged) in baptism"* and *"raised through faith"* (v. 11, 12). Best of all, He does this out of love because God first loved Him (John 15:9). Why wouldn't a person want to abide in Christ day by day especially because *"He first loved us"* (1 John 4:19)?

FOR REFLECTION:

- Are you more of a "how" person or a "why" person?
- Can you think of passages in God's Word that tell us "how" we can continue in Christ?

Belonging Together

READ JOHN 17:20-26

At a wedding reception, the invitation from the bride and groom ensures that you belong there. If the guests got into a fight, it would be shocking!

Someday all Christians will be with Jesus, rejoicing together at the “wedding supper of the Lamb” (John 17:24, Revelation 19:9). Jesus prayed that, until then, all believers would “be one” to show the world He was sent from God. Regrettably, the Church often exhibits strife instead: name calling, power struggles, church splits.

Some church battles are necessary. At the Jerusalem council, Paul confronted Peter to establish that we are “not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 2:16). Sadly, Christians are also prone to fight over lesser things. Paul urged believers not to pass judgment about “disputable matters” such as food and holy days. Instead, they were to act in love because the other party was “someone for whom Christ died” (Romans 14).

What glue can unite Christians despite our tendency to quarrel? In John 17:20-26, “one” appears four times, along with references to God’s love and the concept of “in” (the Father in the Son, Christ in believers, etc.). Together these words describe a life-giving connection between us and Jesus and His Father as we pursue God’s purposes—like the connection between vine and branches or head and body. This unity is supernatural; “Its cement is the love of God bestowed on men,” Dr. Everett Harrison writes.⁴

When church doctrines vary, we can still show God’s love. In the 1640s, Dissenters at England’s Westminster Assembly noted that we sinners have a limited grasp of truth; even conscientious Christians can arrive at differing conclusions. In 1627, Rupertus Meldenius wrote this famous church motto: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity (love).”⁵

We can also join forces to serve God. When I worked for a Christian publisher, my job included interviewing everyday folks and writing their stories. I felt an instant bond with these strangers as we teamed up to proclaim what Jesus had done for them. At the International Community Center, I sense a similar unity as volunteers from many churches minister to refugees. Within God’s love, we belong together.

FOR REFLECTION:

- When have you felt “one” with believers from a different church or tradition?
- If you’ve had strife with another Christian group, how could healing be pursued?
- How might God’s good gifts be hidden by struggles?

Deep Roots

READ EPHESIANS 3:14-19

FRIDAY, MARCH 1

When I was little, growing up in our house, one thing I distinctly remember were the trees in the back of our yard. There was a whole line of evergreens separating our yard from our backyard neighbors' house. They were huge and formed a fence between us and them. I remember asking my parents if we could cut them down so we would get to play with our neighbors' kids in the back (they were about the same age as us). They said that we couldn't because they were so big, and it would cost a lot of money to take down that many trees.

Because these trees were so big, we were sure their roots had grown deep into the ground, making them into a strong wall behind our house. But one spring a few years ago, a windstorm came through and knocked down two of the trees! It was hard for me to imagine that a tree that big, with roots so deep, could get knocked down because of some wind. But my dad pointed out that the trees that fell were in the corner, where our yard met our neighbors' yard and another family's yard. That corner was the lowest spot for three yards and lots of water would pool up. It basically became a little pond every spring or after a big rainstorm. (Seriously—one time there was a family of ducks living there!) The water had eroded the soil the roots were supposed to be firmly growing in, so while it looked like they had deep roots, there really wasn't much holding those two trees to the ground.

Ephesians 3:17 tells us to remain rooted in Christ's love. By being rooted in Christ we can get nutrients which we need to grow and build up strength in our faith. But how can we know we're really rooted in Christ and not some shallow version of faith? These verses say we can know our roots are firmly planted in Christ when we bear fruit and are able to share with other people the good news to get them rooted in faith too. Ultimately, it says when we're rooted in Christ it will lead us to thankfulness.

Looking back, my family can say we noticed dead branches on those trees before they fell, but we didn't recognize them as the sign of the decay in its roots. I know when I am really rooting my life in Jesus and His Word I will be thankful to God over even the smallest things. When that's missing I need to refocus on what He wants me to think about.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What evidence (fruit) is there in your life that you are truly rooted in Christ?*
- *How does that fruit impact those around you for God?*

Practice: Prayer Walking

WHAT IS PRAYER WALKING?

Put simply, prayer walking is talking with God while you walk and walking while you talk with God.

HOW TO PRACTICE PRAYER WALKING:

There are many ways to practice prayer walking. For this year's Lenten practice, I would like to suggest a pattern used by one of my favorite authors, Adjith Fernando. During the height of the civil war in Sri Lanka (Fernando's homeland), he found he was overwhelmed with all of the death and destruction around him. He began taking long walks with God each day. He would leave his home and walk in one direction, pouring out his heart to the Lord: his fear, anger, and anxiety. At some point, usually after about an hour, he would feel a slight shift in his spirit, a slight lightening of his load; then he would turn around and head back home. On the walk back he would intercede for his family, friends, and nation.

This Lent, why don't we try a similar pattern? As we head out on our prayer walk, we can start by simply talking with Jesus and pouring out our hearts before Him. This can include gratitude and praise, confession and repentance, and sharing all of our emotions with Him—the positive and the negative. It can be a time when we wrestle with Him in our spirits and ask Him why He's allowing a certain situation, or a time when we ask for guidance and direction.

Mid-way through our walk, we can shift from this time of personal prayer to intercession. We can pray for the community we are walking through, for our city, nation and world. We can pray blessings and the promises of God over the people and situations God puts on our hearts. We can be open to the Spirit to have eyes to see and ears to hear what He desires to do in these areas.

Some practical tips:

- *Pray before setting out, offer the walk to God and ask for His guidance in how to pray.*
- *Keep your spirit open to hear what God may say to you on your walk.*
- *Pray with your eyes open. :)*
- *If you have the chance to talk with someone while on your walk, take this as a divine appointment. Ask God how you can bless this person.*
- *End your walk with a closing prayer, thanking God for this time with Him and leaving everything in His hands. Practice. Review your text daily at first. Once you are ready, share it with a friend or relative who can read along and note corrections.*

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Caring for your Plant

ABIDING

Prayer walks remind us that the simple action of resting and being with the Lord leads to our own personal growth. Not everything with our spiritual walk is big and dramatic, just as not everything with plants is a grand milestone. Our plant needs us to tend to its simple needs just as it needs us to tend to its big needs.

This week, check on your plant. Observe it. Has it changed since you received it? Are the leaves looking full? Is there new growth? Does it look status quo from last week? How much water has it utilized from its soil? Noticing these little details may seem mundane, but work to turn it into a practice and a reflection. What little details did you notice around you during your prayer walk? Maybe you have new neighbors, maybe you saw a family out playing in the snow, maybe an elderly neighbor could use help with some yard work. These quiet moments of noticing God's natural world and His people around us allow us to grow in love and the ability to provide personal care and nurture, whether for our plant or our neighbors. If the top inch or so of your plant's soil is dry, give it some water.

The Nourished Life

READ PSALM 1:2 & JOHN 15:3-7

There is that time between planting a garden and harvesting it that feels like it stretches on and on. During this time the plants are gathering nutrients from the soil, the sunlight, and the air so it can reproduce in whatever way it does. This time is essential to the plant's life.

Growth is something that takes time and input, it takes patience and consistency, it takes work from gardener and plant alike. A plant must take in the water the gardener provides, the gardener must ensure the soil has the nutrients required, and this must happen for the entire season. Being nourished as a plant takes time, patience, and consistency.

The Psalmist knew this, and in his opening statements in the first chapter of the Psalms we hear the phrase, *"Blessed is the one . . . who meditates on his law day and night"* (vs. 1:1a, 2b). As we read later in the same chapter we see this blessed one being compared to the tree firmly rooted next to the life-giving river. Nourished, well-fed, and well-watered—unlike the dried out chaff who do not know the life-giving water that is God's Word.

As we begin this week of Lent, the call for us is to be nourished. We are the plants, Jesus reminds us, *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you"* (John 15:7a). The source of our nourishment is God's Word. Written for us in millennia past and spoken into our hearts today.

We must not just sit back and let the water of God's Word fall on us, we must take it in. We can not simply just notice its existence, rather we must do the work of absorbing it and being nourished by it. This requires time, patience, and consistency. Time reading, knowing, and loving God's Word. Patience as we let those holy words feed us and root us deeply. And consistency as we regularly come back to drink in the Word of God. All of these actions lead us to be nourished—filled up with everything we need to grow.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Each Sunday we include discussion questions on the sermon insert that can be used for deeper reflection and/or small group discussions. Take time to read through those questions today. You can find a digital version online at eastbrook.org/TreeandVine.*

He is With You

READ JOSHUA 1:7-9

These verses are some of my favorites in the Bible. I used to carry Joshua 1:9 on a notecard in my backpack to peek at during the school day. I have since lost this notecard but pull this verse from memory regularly for the promise it brings. It serves as the simplest reminder of what God asks of us and what He promises. I can be strong and courageous. God is with me.

I remember being at my first overnight camp and writing and rewriting this verse in my journal from my bunk as I struggled with homesickness. *Be courageous, God is with me*, I am reminded.

As I grew older and mourned the loss of a dear family member taken far too soon, I looked to these verses for comfort. *Be strong, God is with me*.

During the hard dark nights of the newborn phase with my babies I remembered, *do not be discouraged, God is with me*.

In the daily unknowns and busy-ness of work and raising kids, I recall, *do not be afraid, God is with me*.

My circumstances change but God's promise remains the same. *Be strong and courageous. He is with you*.

God says these words to Joshua when he is appointed as Israel's new leader after Moses' death. I can only imagine Joshua's state of mind, looking at the tasks laid out before him without the presence of his trusted mentor and friend, Moses. He was probably not feeling very strong and courageous. God instructs Joshua to remain focused on His commands and to meditate on His Word and then urges Joshua to be strong and courageous. In fact, it's so important, God repeats it twice within these three verses. *Be strong and courageous; God is with us!*

The courage and strength God commands is rooted in the faithful promise of His presence. Remain close to God and remember He remains close to you. Especially in moments when you may not feel His presence—*do not be afraid! Have courage! He is with you wherever you go*.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where in your life do you need the strength and courage God's Word can provide?*
- *How might meditating on the Word of God bring you courage and strength?*

Abiding in His Word

READ PSALM 119:9-16

When I was going to college at UW-Stevens Point, my roommate and I committed to memorize Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible! It took several months, but we worked at it, one stanza at a time. This second stanza, verses 9-16, had a profound effect on my faith, and is still the section I remember best. It highlights the importance of abiding in God's Word.

It opens with the question, *"How can a young person keep their way pure?"* The Psalmist doesn't offer a quick TikTok answer, instead, he points to a path, characterized by several actions: *"By living a life according to Your word"* (v. 9). In the verses that follow we see the verbs seek, hide, praise, recount, rejoice, meditate, and delight. These words tell us in practical ways how we receive nourishment from God's Word and how to practice abiding in it.

The Psalmist echoes this intimacy: *"I have hidden your word in my heart"* (v. 11). This isn't about memorizing verses like trophies, perhaps the early motivation for my roommate and me, it's about letting them become our compass, our whispered counsel in moments of temptation. It's about seeking God with all our hearts, a fervent, relentless pursuit that fuels our desire to align our steps with His ways.

But abiding isn't about a bump-free life. The psalmist also seeks to *"meditate on your precepts"* and *"fix my eyes on your ways"* (v. 15). These are verbs of intention, a commitment to dwell in the Word even when it's challenging. It's about facing our shortcomings with honesty and seeking to align our lives with the light it casts.

Finally, the passage ends with a promise: *"I will not forget your word"* (v. 16). This is not a boastful vow, but a humble prayer, a recognition of our tendency to wander. It's an ongoing conversation, a daily commitment to let the Word abide in us, transforming us, one whispered verse at a time.

This passage challenges us today to open our hearts to the Scripture. Let God's words take root, let them nourish your soul, and guide your steps. Remember, abiding isn't just about knowledge; it's about seeking, learning, and delighting in the Word that lights our way. This is how we keep our paths pure, not through fleeting resolutions, but through a love affair with the One who whispers guidance and fills our hearts with true riches.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How can you be intentional about meditating and memorizing God's Word?*
- *What do you think is the best result that comes from being immersed in the Word of God?*

Nourishment from God

READ PROVERBS 2:1-8

I love words. I love to read them. I love to learn them in English and other languages. I love to teach them to my English as a Second Language students. So when I looked at these verses, I automatically focused on the specific words used. Verse 6 says, *"For the Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."*

I wondered what God through Solomon was saying here. Aren't these words the same, or at least very similar? Why did He mention each separately? I then looked up the meaning of each word.

- Wisdom—knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment, as to action.
- Knowledge—acquaintance with facts, truths or principles as from study or investigation
- Understanding—mental process of a person who comprehends; personal interpretation

These words complement each other as a process, and we need all three to truly live a godly life. It starts with knowledge: having the facts about God at the surface level. From those facts, we need understanding; we need to meditate on what the words really mean. And from that knowledge and understanding, we will gain wisdom and know how to act.

When I think about this week's theme, a nourished life, I think about how we can eat a lot of food, but if it's not the right kind of food, we won't have the nutrients we need to physically sustain us to live well. In a world where unhealthy food is so prevalent, we need to make an effort to seek out nourishing, sustaining food.

In this same way, we have to seek out our nourishment from God and really digest His Word. We need to do more than surface level reading. Verses 2 & 3 tell us we need to *"turn our ear"* to wisdom and *"cry out for"* and *"apply our heart"* to understanding. This is a very active relationship with the text. We need to spend time in it and in prayer, letting the words abide in us. And God promises that He will give us not only knowledge, but also a deeper understanding of his Word and the wisdom to put it into practice in our lives.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Are you getting enough of God's Word to nourish you or is your spiritual strength undernourished?*
- *What helps you go from merely reading (knowledge) and understanding God's Word to experiencing the wisdom it can provide?*

An Invitation to Peace

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:8-9

I approach worry with the same dedication an Olympic athlete trains for their sport. I train daily and continually. I lie awake at night thinking of new issues to worry about; I wake early to worry from a new perspective to ensure I've been thorough.

All this training. It's exhausting, really.

But Philippians 4:8-9 challenges us to do the opposite. What Paul is challenging us with in these verses is both countercultural and revolutionary: he's inviting us to develop a healthy and flourishing thought life.

First, some context: Paul is in prison and imminent death was a real possibility. He'd already survived multiple beatings, an attempted stoning, a shipwreck. Although this wasn't the first time Paul faced death, he wasn't sure what the outcome would be. He writes this letter to people he loved, knowing these may be his final words to them.

In verse 8, the phrase “*think about*” is from the Greek word *logizomai*, which expresses the idea of meditating, dwelling on, or pondering with prolonged scrutiny. Said another way, verse 8 instructs us to protect and govern what will shape our thought life and verse 9 has to do with our actions. Paul is not teaching us to “think positive thoughts” with the blind hope everything will magically work out—it's far more profound and beautiful than that: *Paul is giving us a roadmap to bring about the greatest flourishing of our minds*. He's showing us how to ground our minds in truth by dwelling on things that are beautiful and true, noble and pure. Dwell in that place. Set up your tent there. Plant trees and gardens there. Raise your family there. And by choosing to dwell there, we are tending to the garden of our own minds and participating in the nourishment of our own souls.

Lean in because here's the most beautiful part of Paul's letter: it's an invitation. If we think about such things and put them into practice, *the God of peace* will be with us. Not just peace, but God himself.

And there's one less thing to worry about.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Since, Paul tells us to “think about” true, noble and pure things, how will you begin to make that a daily practice?*
- *How do you think your life would be different if you did dwell on those things every day?*

Spiritual Sustenance

READ 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17

While I secretly wish I was a master gardener, and am fairly knowledgeable about the plants growing outside our house, I confess our indoor plants are a greater challenge. We have coffee plants, a fiddle-leaf fig, a rubber tree, snake plants, peace lilies, a monstera, countless succulents, and many more only my daughter knows the names of. The challenge is that these plants should, by natural order, probably be growing in a tropical environment somewhere. Is there too much water or not enough water? Is the pot too big or too small? Is there too much light or not enough light? Given the magical ratios of light, water, nutrition, drainage, and temperature, the plants can be beautiful.

Having plants abide in my Wisconsin house (which is not designed to be their home) requires frequent attention. The plants can't get what they need on their own so my family tends to them and finds joy in successfully navigating the challenges; nurturing the plants to not only survive but thrive. Just ask my husband about the 'coffee empire' he will someday have! Wink.

Just like the plants in my house, my true home is not this mortal coil. Like the plants, which produce cleaner air, lovely textured leaves, and flowers, I am to produce the good fruit of patience, kindness, goodness, etc. Just as the plant requires an entity outside itself to stay alive, I require spiritual sustenance outside my own strength. If I moved my indoor plants outside and expected them to survive, they would quickly die. If I try to live without the Word of Life, I would quickly die.

I cannot with any measure of success be expected to live and thrive and bear fruit without the Word, the True Vine, the Living Water. When I am dry, that is where I am watered. When life is dark, that is where I find the Light. When I am weak, that is where I find strength. When I feel constrained, that is where I find freedom. When life is overwhelming, that is where I find peace.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *In what ways have you sometimes felt that you were trying to feed yourself with things that don't lead to the type of growth or strength God intended? What was the result?*

Practice: *Lectio Divina*

WHAT IS LECTIO DIVINA?

Lectio divina means “divine reading” or “sacred reading.” With *lectio divina*, we bring our whole self to God as we slowly read through a passage of Scripture four times, allowing the text to come alive for us in new ways.

HOW TO PRACTICE LECTIO DIVINA:

Read through John 6:1-15 four times. Each time, consider a different aspect of the passage. Trust that God will graciously speak to you through this passage as you listen to His Word.

1. **Lectio (Read)**—As you read this passage the first time, listen for a particular word or phrase that speaks to you. Trust that the Holy Spirit will illuminate this passage and will bring a word or phrase to your mind. Hold that word or phrase in your mind. Don't force anything, but wait patiently for God's guidance.
2. **Meditatio (Reflect)**—As you read this passage for the second time, ask God to show you more about the word or phrase that caught your attention the first time through. Savor that word or phrase with all of your senses, and enter into this passage with your whole self. Where are you in the story? What are you seeing? Smelling? Tasting? Feeling? Experiencing? This time through, listen for what images, feelings, and memories are stirring in your soul and welcome them in as you experience this passage in a real way.
3. **Oratio (Prayer)**—As you read the text a third time, listen for an invitation from God rising up from your experience of prayerful reading thus far. In light of the word or phrase that stood out to you and what it evoked for you in memory, image, or feeling, what is the invitation that God has for you? This invitation may be a summons toward a new awareness or action.
4. **Contemplatio (Contemplation)**—Read the passage one more time. As you read, rest in the presence of God and allow yourself simply to be. You may want to reposition your body so that your hands are facing upwards, as a physical sign that you are open to hearing from God in this final reading.

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Caring for your Plant

NOURISHING

How wonderful is the spiritual nourishment we receive from the Word of God! The living Word addresses our needs for wisdom, peace, encouragement, growth, refining, and solace.

We are going to focus on addressing our plant's needs this week. Plants need light and water, but also nutrients! There are many options for fertilizing your plant. You can use a commercial fertilizer, such as Miracle-Gro or Dyna-Grow, available in most lawn and garden sections or at a garden store such as Stein's. You also can use items from around your home to nourish your plant. Mix a teaspoon of dried coffee grounds into the soil; grind up used, dried eggshells into a powder and work a teaspoon in; mix 1/8 of a teaspoon of Epsom salts into a half of a cup of water when you water your plant this week. If you have a fish aquarium, you can use that water for your plant as well! Choose just one method and be conscious of not overdoing either the fertilizer or the amount of water your plant receives; too many nutrients can lead to plant burning. Take a moment to reflect on the wisdom of God's creation, that He created ecosystems where dried plant material provides the nourishment that living plants need.

The Pruned Life

READ JOHN 15:2 & PSALM 1:4

"He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. . . . If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (John 15:2, 6)

On one edge of our yard, we have two forsythia bushes that delight the eyes in spring. Forsythia have long, bending branches that flame forth with bright yellow blooms at spring's peak. They are a welcome sign of new life as winter fades. But I have figured out that forsythia bushes can get out of control, growing at such a pace that they thicken into a chaotic and dense micro-forest hindering the bloom's beauty. Pruning is the key. But that pruning is best done earlier than I usually think it should be, shortly after the flowering in mid-spring. Because next year's flowers bloom on the previous year's growth, the brilliance of the bush is determined by timely and accurate pruning.

Our life with God is somewhat like that. We are made by God for a beautiful and brilliant life, but various things that can hinder such goodness from emerging. Pruning is required to keep us from becoming a chaotic, dense mess. We need God's gracious hand to highlight areas that should be cut back for greater fruitfulness. Sometimes that means God names sin we need to repent of so that God can bring fruitfulness in us. At times God calls us to let go of certain relationships and activities keeping us from obedience. Sometimes God invites us to do fewer good things so we can pursue God's greatest calling in a focused way. There are many ways God's pruning is necessary in our lives.

But this is important to keep in mind: God's pruning is always for our good. On the one hand, it prevents destructive forces from grabbing ahold of our lives (see Psalm 1:4 and John 15:6). On the other hand, God's pruning enables the good life, the full life with God, to emerge in us so we live abundantly and our lives can nourish others. Let us consider what God may want to prune in us during this season of Lent.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Each Sunday we include discussion questions on the sermon insert that can be used for deeper reflection and/or small group discussions. Take time to read through those questions today. You can find a digital version online at eastbrook.org/TreeandVine.*

the Master Gardener

READ HEBREWS 12:4-11

A few years ago, I moved across the street from my sister, Andrea. It's been so much fun! Last summer we decided to join forces and plant a garden together using her garden beds and my lawn for maximum growth and sunlight. We prepped, we planned, and we set out to plant an epic garden: kale, spinach, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers and more!

I was most excited about the sunflower bed I wanted to plant in one corner of the yard. I have spent the past few summers among sunflower fields in Spain and I fell in love with these giant beauties. We already had some sunflower seeds in a packet, and so I got to work. I knew that they needed to be planted 6 inches apart because they use each other's presence to grow vertically. I must have planted at least 24 sunflowers in a neat little grid! We were so proud of ourselves, and it felt like we were making our late grandma Nancy, a master gardener, proud as well.

Well, imagine our surprise a month or so later when something not quite resembling sunflowers started to grow in the corner. Instead of growing vertical, this supposed sunflower patch was curling and vining, growing horizontal, eventually taking over my poor neighbor's yard. A month later and it was clear: these were squash, not sunflowers. And squash seeds should not be planted 6 inches apart! It was a mess. We did everything right for sunflowers, but not for squash. Master gardeners we are not.

Today's passage is about how God loves His children and because of this, disciplines them. Perhaps another way to say this is that the Lord is pruning us, like a master gardener tends to her plants. The master gardener knows the difference between what a sunflower needs and what a squash needs. She knows that sometimes she needs to prune back a flourishing plant to make room for something better and more beautiful to grow. And sometimes, she knows she needs to cut off the dead, dying, and bloated bits because they will hurt the plant's integrity if they remain connected. The plant doesn't know why it's being pruned but trusts the gardener to know what's best.

It makes me wonder if we trust God to know what's best during those seasons of pruning and discipline? We can. He loves us: His beloved children.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What is something you have been nurturing in your life that you need to prune or trim back so that God's will can truly grow in you?*

Loving Correction

READ REVELATION 3:19-22

Rebuke and discipline often make us feel uneasy. Perhaps we picture a scene of being yelled at or unfairly criticized. Maybe we remember a time where we made a bad or short-sighted decision that was brought for judgment. Human-to-human discipline definitely has the potential to be handled poorly or to be initiated for the wrong reasons. Godly rebuke or discipline, though, is a loving correction and not a final judgment. It is not unfair. It is intended to help us on our journey before we get to the finish line.

In this passage, we see that God is interested in improving our lives while they are still being lived out in the day-to-day. When we see that God is involved enough to discipline us, and that His correction is intended for our good, we have a reason to trust it. Imagine serving a God who simply allows the natural consequences and final judgments of life to occur without any interventions. We would have constant uncertainty and anticipate chaos, brokenness, and disillusionment to be one bad decision away. Isn't it comforting, then, to know that our God is there for the sake of loving correction? He does not abandon us to our own choices, and He does not wait until the end to point out our flaws and say, "if only."

I do not need to discern every detail of a predetermined path to secure some better life, or constantly worry about making wrong decisions. The beauty of the interpersonal dynamic with God is that He is right here. He is ready with a "knock at the door." Let's accept the invitation of God to step into our world and dine with us. It is this display of His initiative, His readiness to step into our lives, and our freedom to engage with Him that makes a life of free will something to be grateful for rather than to be feared. His loving discipline provides a way for us to cast aside fear, guilt and insecurity, and live in joy and freedom knowing that He is here.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What would it look like for you today to open the door and take God up on His invitation to dine with Him?*
- *Consider the joyful experience of laying down your uncertainties for the day.*

Father Knows Best

READ PROVERBS 3:11-12

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 13

My son just turned 8 this year. I see so much potential in him and there are many times when his young spirit shines and makes me excited for the man he will become. Yet, he doesn't always act righteously, his words and tone aren't always respectful, and his desires aren't always considerate of those around him.

As his father, I have this innate desire for him to have a selfless attitude, thoughtfulness, meekness, gentleness, and initiative for helping others. I want him to experience the abundant life walking with Christ in step with the Spirit. It's quite clear to me that he needs someone to parent him or that he will be lost to chaos, see no need to turn from his sin, and eventually see his life disintegrate and those around him hurt. However, despite my own clairvoyance, it's up to him to receive any correction or rebuke I give him. No matter how often I make him do pushups for disrespecting his mother, it won't matter unless he softens his heart and allows his character to be pruned.

Today's proverb tells us not to despise the Lord's rebuke, correction, or chastisement. I want to encourage us to take this one step further; we should beg for the Lord's rebuke. We should crave His correction!

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me,

and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23-24 ESV)

The reason is that He alone can see us for who we are as a loving father sees his own child's life stretched before him or her. He sees our unwillingness to admit when our anger takes shape and hurts those we love the most. He wants to mold us so that when shame or anxiety overwhelm us, we turn to Him instead of downward spirals of coping mechanisms that destroy. He sees the potential in us more than we can ever see it ourselves.

Today, Lord, we hear your voice. We turn from our hard-heartedness and completely surrender to you, finding freedom.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Why do you think we often hold onto subtle ways of the flesh when our Father sees our life stretched before us and knows walking in the Spirit would be better for us?*
- *How can you show love or respect to someone today based on Jesus's love for us?*

God of the Mountain

READ JOB 5:17-18

The word "Almighty" in this passage from Job, is translated from the Hebrew word, *Shaddai*. While this word is most commonly translated as "God Almighty," another possible meaning is "God of the Mountain." I love this imagery of God's mountain-top view of the world, our lives, and what is needed.

There has been some painful pruning in my life over the last year, especially in regards to my relationship with my parents. I've spent the last 32 years striving to make things grow in our relationship and have come to realize that the growth of new things, such as trust, kindness, safety, and mutual respect, are not mine alone to bear. . . much less to fabricate. Surrendering to His wise hands as they've unraveled my expectations, chipped away at my fear-based instincts, and uncovered my prideful attempts at fixing relationships, has felt incredibly painful at times. And yet, the resulting peace has been indescribable. His pruning sometimes feels like wounding, but I'm beginning to see the necessity (and even the beauty) of it in small, yet profound ways.

Hosea 6:1 is one of my favorite verses, and reminds me of today's passage in Job. The context of Hosea's story feels unimaginably painful, much like the story of Job. But what a reassurance it is that we serve a God who is able to relate to our weaknesses, temptations, and hurts (Hebrews 4:14-16). Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer says,

"...accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will..."⁶

How often I forget that Jesus' "God of the Mountain" view, while choosing the confines of a human body, continues to be the ultimate picture of surrender. May we trust His will, His perfect perspective, His mountain-top view, and the pruning and healing that He lovingly provides. We can trust His story.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What would it look like to accept our hardships as a pathway to peace?*
- *What is something you might be holding onto that you can trust God to make it right?*

Discipline and Provision

READ DEUTERONOMY 8:1-5

FRIDAY, MARCH 15

One of the great blessings that I am aware of, but don't thank God often enough for, is that I have never lacked for the necessities of life. The water I drink is clean. My house is always warm and dry. My refrigerator and cabinets are stocked full of food. God has provided for me.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they were going from the plentiful country, which the Nile watered for all their food, to a desert. A land of nothing. After 40 years of wandering, Moses gives this long sermon (Deuteronomy). He explains to them what took place the last four decades. God provided. He gave them bread nobody had ever seen before. Their footwear lasted. They had no blisters.

As Moses reminds the Israelites of God's provision, he talks about testing, humiliation, teaching. God supplying all the Israelites' needs was a long test for them. We know from the account of the desert wandering, that the Israelites often showed ingratitude and rebellion despite God's miraculous care.

God's provision can be a test for us as well. When I am praying daily, how often do I thank God for the joy of being alive, the good night's rest I received the night before, my gracious and caring wife, my two wonderful children?

We often think that God's pruning only occurs through periods of suffering. Whether this is a loss of a friend, family member, employment, financial security, relationship strife, God certainly uses these to prune away more of our selfishness and pride.

But He also may prune us when we have what we need. If I show ingratitude and displeasure with all the good He has given me, should that also not be pruned?

Verse 5 shows us His motivation. He is disciplining us as a good father disciplines his children. Not out of sheer pleasure of punishment, but to help them grow into what He wants to see in them.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Read Matthew Chapter 4. Then read Deuteronomy 8:1-5 again. What similarities do you see between the Israelites and Jesus? What differences do you see?*

Practice: Surrender

WHAT IS SURRENDER?

A picture of surrender can be a person with arms outstretched, palms facing upwards. Or a person with their hands straight up over their heads and even waving a white flag. Surrender is often looked at negatively. For example, those who surrender in war are often imprisoned and sometimes even killed. In an argument or debate, we may surrender because the other person has more power or more persuasive reasoning, not because we want to.

How do we think of surrender in the context of our faith and of Lent? Surrender often means to give up or to give in. So, we can think of fasting as surrender. During Lent, we often give up things that are pleasurable for the sake of journeying to the Cross. Whether it's food, movies, or reading fiction, this kind of sacrifice may signify surrender. However, we can sacrifice without surrender. If our hearts are not surrendered, of what use is giving up anything? No matter the outward trappings or appearance, God who sees the heart knows if we are truly surrendered or not. And it is His opinion that matters. We can grow in our willingness to surrender. Sometimes we have to act first and our hearts will follow.

Giving in or surrendering our will to God's is not just a Lenten-thing. Our lives should be in a constant state of surrender. Jesus is our example. He said, *"Not my will but yours be done."* Confession can also be seen as surrender. When we confess, we agree with God that what He says is wrong is in fact wrong. We submit our thoughts and reasoning to His. We intentionally allow Him to be the One with the final say in our lives. This is not easy, but it is essential. However, unlike in war, surrender to God always results in good. There may be death—death to our fleshly and worldly desires and ways—but in actual fact, life is the end result.

HOW TO PRACTICE SURRENDER:

Quiet yourself before the Lord and ponder these questions:

- *What does surrender mean to you? Do you wish to surrender to God? If so, tell Him.*
- *How tightly are you holding on to your "right" to live your life the way you want? Are you willing to explore surrender to your Creator? If so, tell Him. What can you release as a tangible expression of your decision? Don't wait until you feel 100% surrender. Move in the direction of the light. God will help you. Draw life from Him.*
- *Is there someone who can help you in this journey of surrender? Contact him/her today. Spur each other on to love and good deeds.*

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Caring for your Plant

PRUNING

Pruning often brings uncomfortable, painful imagery and almost a sense of guilt. Yet we know the Lord prunes us out of love, in order that we might bear more fruit. Pruning isn't only for dead and dying parts, but also for living parts. Sometimes healthy branches aren't what is best for the plant to bear fruit, such as removing an apple tree's suckers or water sprouts. And sometimes, pruning live branches allow us to grow more plants!

Once again, observe your plant. If it has yellow or brown leaves, trim them and remove the dead pieces from the soil, otherwise they can introduce bacteria. If you have a vining or stemmed plant and it is looking healthy (particularly if it is putting out new growth), you can prune the top of the plant to propagate it. Cut a length of stem with at least three leaves, remove the lowest leaf from the stem, and place the stem and node (where the leaf was attached) in a glass of water or in moist potting soil. Be sure to keep that section under water or the soil moist, place it in a well-lit area, and watch it over the next few weeks for new growth! Check your "mother" plant; if the top inch or so of the soil is dry, give it some water.

The Fruitful Life

READ PSALM 1:3 & JOHN 15:1-8, 16-17

*"That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers." (Psalm 1:3)*

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing... You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you." (John 15:5, 16)

Growing up, we had a series of grapevines in our backyard as a sort of barrier in place of a fence next to our neighbor's yard. As a kid playing in the backyard with friends, we would invariably make our way over to the grapevines to see if they were ripe and worth eating. When the fruit was not quite ripe, there were few things that would make you pucker (and maybe spit it out) more than sour grapes. But when the grape were ripe, there was nothing that could stop you in your tracks on a hot day more than pulling a delicious handful of grapes off the vine to eat.

Just like the vines were made to bear fruit, Jesus tells us that our lives were made to be fruitful for God. What is that fruit? Well, it's the humble, selfless love Jesus both models and describes as the commandment that He leaves with the disciples (John 15:16-17). That sort of love expresses itself in practical ways the Apostle Paul describes as the fruit of the Spirit in one of his letters: *"love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"* (Galatians 5:13-26).

Like a grapevine bears fruit because the sap of the vine is flowing into each branch and stem, so do our lives bear fruit when the life of God is flowing into each aspect of our lives. As we enter the theme of this week on the fruitful life, may God open our eyes to see ways in which we might more fully give ourselves to God's ways that God's fruit might come forth in and from our lives.

FOR REFLECTION:

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Word and Worth

READ COLOSSIANS 1:9-12

Paul begins his letter to the church in Colossae by emphasizing the power of prayer; prayer not just of gratitude for the ways that he has seen God working, but also prayer for the knowledge of God to become ever more prevalent in the minds of the people of the church. Paul has seen and heard of the fruit displayed by these brothers and sisters in Colossae and desires to see that fruit continue to grow, but that first has to come from a place of recognition of what God is speaking to them and the wisdom and understanding that He is continually teaching them: *"We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives"* (v. 9b). This fruitfulness that the Colossians display comes from their dependence on God and their open ears to hear all of what God has to teach them. Paul prays that their desire for more of God wouldn't stop when faced with hardship, but that yearning for God would increase more and more and enrich their lives with the wisdom and knowledge that only God can provide.

From that point of leaning into God's Word, God lavishes worth upon us. This worth is not based upon the views of others, our good virtues and deeds, or any other worldly thing that brings us affirmation. Rather, this worth is built upon God's pleasure of us choosing to seek Him out and deeply desiring to grow in Him. This worth doesn't give us the fleeting sense of acclaim that we feel when we do something good. Instead, it allows us to continue in the path of growth, equipping us with the strength, power, endurance, and patience that empowers us to bear wholesome fruit for His glory over our own.

Finally, out of this place of finding our worth in who God is and using that worth to bear fruit in our everyday lives, let us continue to turn back to God with joy and gratitude for endlessly filling us up with more of Him.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you think it is easier or harder to continue to earnestly seek God when you begin to see the fruit of the Spirit showing up in your life? Why?*
- *How do you think that is connected with how we find our worth and the kind of fruit we bear?*

The Fruit of the Spirit

READ GALATIANS 5:22-25

This passage shows us what our lives would look like when we let the Holy Spirit lead us. I have heard of the fruit of the Spirit many times, at home and in Sunday School. I learned a song about it, too. My dad often tells me that as Christians, we must be doers of God's Word, not just hearers. Since we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (v. 24), our everyday life should showcase that. I want all the fruit of the Spirit to show in my life, and I am learning I can't just wish for the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit grows as I let God's Spirit guide my decisions.

The fruit of the Spirit shows in our actions. When an argument is going on, and I de-escalate it, I show peace. If someone wrongs me, I can choose self-control despite the feeling of retaliating. I show faithfulness when I keep my promise by playing a game with my brother. It takes work to stay in step with the Spirit. The desires that "died" seem to fight, trying to control us. God is the only way to live in line with the Holy Spirit truly. We can ask Him to help us listen to the Holy Spirit because we want to look like Him, our Heavenly Dad. And He will allow us because He is faithful. A daily devotion like studying Scriptures and praying helps me keep in step with the Spirit. Daily yielding to God and His Word helps set our minds in the right direction, and His fruit can show in our lives.

FOR REFLECTION:

- Which attribute (love, joy, peace, etc.) of the fruit of the Spirit is hardest for you to recognize in yourself? Why?
- What can you do to see that aspect grow more a part of who you are?

Deeply Rooted

READ PSALM 92:12-15

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20

This Psalm 92 tree has been planted intentionally in the house of God, roots going down deep for life. It is growing steadily and is strong. It is deep green as it flourishes in the sun, fed by the soil and water. It is among the other trees planted in the house of God. The fruit that it bears does not diminish as it ages, and it is always full of sap—full of nutrients that run through the tree to keep it fed. As it abides in the house of God, this environment enables it to continue to produce fruit into old age.

I love the picture that as God nourishes us through the foundation of His soil, His light shining on us and His water always refreshing, we grow in our strength in Him and we continue to be full of the sap that brings life to our souls so that we are fruitful. There is a direct link between our roots abiding in the Lord and the fruit that is subsequently produced.

Something that I realize more with time is that fruitfulness is not flashy. It is not a huge life decision that we make and that everyone sees. But it is the fruit that is evident in the tiniest of interactions we have with our family, best friends, and committed community. It could be an apology, or a calmness that allows for rest in the people around us, or a growing love for those God has placed in our lives.

So I wonder how we will continue to be nourished so that we can be fruitful into old age. Like the tree, stay by God, grounded in His house, certain of our position with Him, close to the other trees that are also rooted with Him. Keep looking at Him like the tree looks at the sun for life; basking in who He is as our source of life. If we are always with Him, then increasingly bring our thoughts and ideas to Him, and ask Him what He has to say in each new moment. And look towards the future where we will certainly be able to declare that He was always faithful.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Reflect on your life with God, thinking about yourself like a tree that is slowly growing stronger with time in the house of God. How has your fruitfulness changed over time? As life may get harder, how do you see God providing you with what you need to yield fruit?*

Children of the Light

READ EPHESIANS 5:8-11

"That's Mr. Smith's daughter" says the elderly neighbor pointing at me, a child walking down the street in my neighborhood. This also happened at family reunions. "That's Bessie's daughter. She's the youngest" says a distant relative whom I didn't know. How did they know who I was? As a child, I wondered how people connected me with my parents.

Herbert and Bessie Smith were my parents and leaders in our community on the South Side of Chicago. They were officers in the neighborhood block club and met with the Alderman often to discuss the needs of the community. They would hold block club meetings in our basement. Relatives and neighbors knew that they could always reach out to my parents if they needed help. My parents were a team. They taught my siblings and I, through words and actions, the importance of loving our family, helping our neighbors, being generous, and standing up for what was right. Many of my values and beliefs that I hold today came from my parents. These are things that make me a Smith.

The Scripture for today says that anyone who has accepted Christ as their Savior is a child of the light (Romans 5:8; John 3:16-18; Romans 10:9). Before the decision to follow Christ, we were all children of darkness. The author encourages us to live as children of the light. To me, this means to live as a child of God, living as if you are part of God's family. My behavior should reflect what I learned from my Father in heaven. But for what purpose? Matthew 5:16 states "...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." When our actions glorify God, this may provide an opportunity to share with others the reason for our hope and faith (1 Peter 3:15-16).

My parents passed away years ago and I miss them. Today, when some distant relative says, "You must be Herbert and Bessie's child", I fondly say yes. I am part of the Smith family. I pray that I represent them well.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How is your life different now that you are a child of the light?*
- *What does it mean to you to be part of God's family? How is that identity obvious to others?*

When We Pray

READ PHILIPPIANS 1:9-11

I love Paul's prayer for the believers in Philippi. He starts praying from Philippians 1:3. Isn't it awesome to have someone who genuinely cares for us, praying that God's life is formed in us? I have a prayer partner who has been praying with me and for me for a couple of years now. We meet virtually weekly to share life challenges and our desires for God to live in and through us. She prays over me and reminds me of God's promises and character, and I do the same for her. I am blessed to have someone like her in my life. Praying for each other is vital because the struggle is real.

If you have ever been scared that you don't have what it takes to be fruitful, you are right because we don't have what it takes. Our humanity always gets in the way of letting the life and light of Christ shine through. Even though we are dead to sin, Satan, God's arch enemy, won't relent. Satan keeps hitting us with life challenges, tempting us with desires, and seizing every moment he can to stop us from living free and fruitful lives.

While we, the believers, have some responsibility in living fruitful lives, thankfully, the heavyweight is done by God. He has the seed, works on our hearts (if we let Him), makes it grow, brings out the fruit, and prunes the garden. So, what is our role then? Like the hymn, we trust and obey Jesus. We choose and fix our eyes on Him always. We can only successfully do that through God's help. Our walk with God from start to finish is truly by the help of God.

God knows we need Him; He isn't asking us to do life alone. Therefore, He calls us to abide in Him. You and I can continue to pray for each other to desire God above all other ambitions; then, we can overflow in love like Paul prayed for the church in Philippi.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Do you have someone who regularly prays for you? Who do you pray for regularly? Pray today for those you know and love to bear the fruit of the Spirit in their lives more fully!*

Practice: Service

WHAT IS SERVICE?

Service is action that flows from a heart of love, from and for God.

HOW TO PRACTICE SERVICE?

...casting all your cares [all your anxieties, all your worries, and all your concerns, once and for all] on Him, for He cares about you [with deepest affection, and watches over you very carefully]. (1 Peter 5:7, AMP)

Service begins with our heart posture. We will start by renewing our dependence on the Lord. At the Milwaukee Art Museum, there is a painting called *The Wood Gatherer*. This painting is a visual reminder to me of how the Lord bears our burdens while we live in freedom.

Let's pray a breath prayer as we give our burdens to the Lord. We start by simply slowing down, breathing in while praying, "*I cast my cares on the Lord,*" and breathing out while praying, "*for He cares for me.*" Repeat this five times, slowly. As you pray, imagine piling your burdens in the Lord's basket, being free to live lightly, joyfully. Stay in this time for as long as you need.

Next, ask the Lord to help you live in this freedom throughout the day—in every area of your life. Ask Him to show you if there is any way you could bless others in your home or neighborhood. See what comes to mind, and do it! It could even be doing something that you already have to do, but with a different posture. Washing dishes for your family? Do it as worship and thanks unto the Lord. Picking up trash in your neighborhood? Again, praise the Lord that you can bless your neighbors in that way. Spending time interceding for others? That is also an act of service.

Following Jesus' prompting to care for others gives glory to the Father and shows that we are His disciples (John 15:8). We receive life from Jesus and pour out to those around us. And He gets the glory!

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Caring for your Plant

BEARING FRUIT

Our plant's determination to grow—a house plant's version of bearing fruit—reminds us of how God created us for fruitfulness. Our heart posture is the beginning of fruitfulness that can be expressed in many ways, through service, praise, intercession for others, and thanksgiving.

How has your plant "bore fruit" in the past few weeks? Have you seen new leaves? Does your propagation have little baby roots? If your plant is dropping lots of leaves, looking soft or droopy, it may need a change of care. Is it in the brightest, but still warm, area of your house? How much water are you giving it? Overwatering is a common plant care mistake, leading to a plant with sad, mushy leaves. Just as our fruitfulness stems from a strong foundation in the Lord, our plant's fruitfulness stems from the health of its roots. After you check the roots, poke some holes in the soil with a chopstick or handle of a spoon or fork. This brings oxygen to the roots and ensures the soil doesn't get compacted. If the top inch or so of your plant's soil is dry, give it some water. Reflect on the parallels between caring for your spiritual life in order to bear fruit and how you care and nurture your plant in order to help it bear fruit.

The Tree and the Vine

READ PSALM 1 & JOHN 15:1-17

Holy Week begins with what I think is the most uncommercialized holiday in the whole year: Palm Sunday. Nobody buys gifts for each other, there is no bunny, no jolly man traveling around the earth on a sleigh with reindeer, no special food (that I know about, anyway). People don't buy Palm Sunday greeting cards. Ladies and girls don't buy new dresses like they do for Easter. The only music associated with Palm Sunday is sacred, and there isn't even much of that.

For all these reasons and more, I love Palm Sunday! I remember as a young girl having a sense of anticipation on Palm Sunday about the week ahead, knowing there would be sadness and then happiness in the retelling of the Jesus story. I remember when our own daughters were young, watching them process with a group of other Eastbrook children at Riverside University High School with their palms—one with her single blade perfectly straight, the other waving it around like a light saber. I could tell they had the same kind of anticipation.

Palm branches were symbolic of victory in Jesus' day, and the people waving them to welcome our Savior as He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey were making a statement about what they wanted Jesus to do for them, the kind of king they hoped He would be. They shouted "Hosanna!", which means "Save us!", although they did not understand the manner in which He would do so. They had a lot to learn, but I think we do too.

As we continue immersing ourselves in Psalm 1 and John 15 this week, take some time to think about how Jesus is the true "*righteous man*" being described in Psalm 1. Reflect on what we read in John 15 about remaining in Jesus, the true vine, in light of what Jesus went through on his journey to the Cross.

And when you come to church this Palm Sunday, wave your palm branch with joy! Jesus truly is the victorious King of Glory!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Each Sunday we include discussion questions on the sermon insert that can be used for deeper reflection and/or small group discussions. Take time to read through those questions today. You can find a digital version online at eastbrook.org/TreeandVine.*

Because He Said So

READ JOHN 14:6-14

MONDAY, MARCH 25

Many years ago, I remember my mother and father trying to explain things to me but my stubbornness would cause me to question everything they said. They would finally get so frustrated that the conversation would end with the explanation “because I said so.”

Jesus was up against a similar problem. Some of His friends and followers didn’t get it. He said *“I am the way (to the kingdom) the truth (about all things of value) and the life (of eternity.) No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him.”* This is the plain and simple truth.

But like the children of today, the children of the Jesus’ day needed more info. Philip wanted to clarify the simplest of thoughts by asking for Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus had to explain, again, His mission on earth and what was expected of us as a result.

This week, before we face the sadness of the Passion, we are seeing that Jesus did not leave us without reassuring us that we would be taken care of. He promises us happiness, security and eternal life by following Him and doing deeds as He would have. Still, we want things to be explained and cleared up; itemized and categorized. We forget that sometimes simple words say the most complicated things.

Jesus and the Father were one. And why should we believe it?

Because He said so.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *How hard is it for you to believe the promises and statements of Jesus, such as the ones He makes here in John 14? What will you do to increase your confidence in all He has said?*

Our Source of Strength

READ JEREMIAH 17:5-10

Jeremiah ascended to the status of my favorite prophet when I was a kid. His words—strong in the face of a disobedient culture—resonated with me even back then. When he spoke our text for today, Jeremiah was in the midst of a politically turbulent time. One massive empire was still visible in the rear view as the next empire rose before him. When I peer across the landscape of current media and compare Jeremiah's time to present day, I see similar themes.

In Jeremiah's day the people had turned to idols and sought comfort in temporal things instead of eternal rewards. Today we are surrounded by a culture that idolizes fame and wealth, thrives on instant gratification, and seeks to establish its own version of truth. In rejecting the love of God, we have forsaken our true strength. *"This is what the Lord says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh'"* (v. 5).

Jeremiah's message is that we don't have the strength in our flesh to overcome our own weaknesses: temptation, disobedience, uncertainty, or heartbreak. It is only through the Messiah, our Saviour, that we have the strength to be content through all things (Phillipians 4:13).

I want to encourage you with two ways not to rely on your own strength (I know it's easier said than done!). First, find confidence in trusting the LORD, our God and King. Believe that HE made you for greater things and remember to give yourself grace—you've made it this far. Second, iron sharpens iron, so be part of HIS community. Saints: we should not face the world or wrestle our weakness alone. Our willpower alone is not enough. Peter knew what to watch for but his willpower was not enough, so he denied Jesus three times (Matthew 22:54-62).

Between the crucifixion and Pentecost, the disciples stayed together for the safety found in numbers. The community that was gathered in the upper room when the day of Pentecost came (Acts 2) received a special gifting of the Holy Spirit and Peter switched from denying to proclaiming Christ to all nations.

As you've let go of things during Lent, making space to let God work, be a branch that stays connected. Find support in the community of Christ.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Who are you connected with that helps you stay 'rooted' in God's Word? If you can't think of anyone, start praying today for God to bring them into your life!*

The Spiritual Body

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:42-45

The spiritual body is not something we talk about much in U.S. society. Yet, this passage reminds us that each of us has a spiritual body which resides in our physical body until our spiritual bodies are raised.

As media, television and public discourse bombard us with unhealthy ideas and practices more and more, I've found myself reflecting on some of the simple lessons learned in my childhood that still guide my actions and decisions today. Even as an adult, I appreciate and repeat the words to this childhood song:

*Oh be careful little eyes what you see.
Oh be careful little eyes what you see.
For the Father up above is looking down in love,
so be careful little eyes what you see.*

The next verse is "Oh be careful little ears what you hear..." Over the years, I've sung this song to myself and to my children as a reminder that we want to protect our minds and spirits from ungodly ways and allow Godly things to penetrate and feed our spirits. The message to my children is that part of maturing is protecting our spirits. As conscientious adults, we choose to turn off videos or TV programs that cross our boundaries or discern to not read the latest craze in adult fiction books from time to time.

Instead, to feed our spirit, we focus on Christ as our unmanipulated, pure, spirit feeder. He's our life-giving Spirit. Unlike all other humans, Jesus does not disappoint. He is light, pure love, and truly righteous. Once we've experienced this goodness, nothing compares; we crave more; we crave purity; we crave healthy living. Our contentment is palpable, and our lives are fruitful.

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Where do I run for a spiritual uplift? If not currently to our triune God, what steps do I need to take to refocus on connection with His life-giving Spirit?*
- *What are you rooted in? Are you rooted in the presence of the Holy Spirit? Jesus's words? The Father's teachings? How can you stay connected for a bountiful life?*

Bread of Life

READ JOHN 6:32-40

Have you ever been driving happily along on the highway, singing to a song on the radio and all of sudden, "Screech!" the traffic around the corner is at a dead stop and you have to jam on your breaks to avoid ending up in the back seat of the car in front of you? That's kind of what I feel when I read John 6:32-59, a sudden stop.

The first half chapter 6 shows Jesus gaining popularity with the people. The crowds were excited and began to think of the days of Moses, when manna from heaven was provided everyday for the nation of Israel. They were ready to make Him king!

But the next day, when they went looking for their free breakfast, Jesus was gone! After some strategic searching, the crowd finds Him and seems ready for their next meal (vs. 30-31, 34).

Jesus at first tries to gently steer them back on track (vs. 26-27), but when it becomes obvious their motives are not to seek God but have full bellies, He slams the brakes to redirect them to what He really came to do.

Jesus tries to explain that it is not physical bread that the world needs, but spiritual bread. Jesus three times identifies Himself as that spiritual bread (John 6:35, 48, 51). He emphasizes faith (a spiritual action) as the key to salvation: *"My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life"* (v. 40).

It doesn't seem as though they understood His message because many left Him grumbling, even His disciples seem confused by what He was saying.

Today is Maundy Thursday, when we remember Jesus celebrating what we often call "The Last Supper" with His disciples. At one point during the meal, *"Jesus took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is My body'"* (Matthew 26:26). I wonder if during that moment any of His disciples remembered Jesus' earlier discourse on being the bread of life? I wonder if they finally understood the full meaning of His words when He passed the broken loaf around for them to take from? Do we?

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What does it mean to you for Jesus to be your 'Bread of Life'?*
- *What things/relationships/ideas have you tried to replace the life Jesus offers? What was the result?*

A Good Friday

READ ROMANS 8:9-11

I remember, as a child, being perplexed by the name “Good Friday.” What’s so good about killing Jesus? How can humiliation, mocking, wrongful accusations, and a painful public death be good? It doesn’t make sense in the physical world. It seems like weakness and defeat.

But in the spiritual realm, it is good news! Jesus came to earth for this very purpose. Jesus, being fully God, came to earth, fully human, to obey God the Father. This was God’s plan. Only the One who was without sin could pay the penalty for all of our sins, once and for all. The Old Testament covenant involving animal sacrifices, which had to be made year after year, was replaced with a new covenant. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice. He didn’t just cover over our sins. He takes them away and makes us clean and right with God!

Jesus’ physical death brings us spiritual life. His death unites us to Him—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit of God lives in those who believe in Him.

How amazing is verse 11!? The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is living inside of us! The Spirit gives life to our mortal bodies! Spiritual life. Our strength doesn’t come from our own will or stubbornness. But we do have access to more power than we can imagine through the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said, *“In this life there will be trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). When the weight of the world gets you down, remember we belong to Christ. What may not make sense to our flesh, has order and purpose in the spiritual realm. We have the victory over the spiritual realm. Our life and our peace come from being rooted in Christ (v. 6). Apart from Him we can do nothing. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are His children (v. 14) and co-heirs with Christ (v. 17).

Holy Spirit, keep me rooted in you. Thank you, Jesus for dying for me! It is a Good Friday indeed!

FOR REFLECTION:

- *What has Jesus saved you from, not just for eternity but in the here and now of your everyday life? How is that Good News to you?*
- *What difference does it make to you that the Spirit of God (the same Spirit raised Jesus from the dead!) lives in you!*

Practice: Examen

WHAT IS THE EXAMEN?

This week, we are practicing a spiritual discipline that dates back centuries, something that our brothers and sisters have engaged with over the years in order to reflect on where they've seen God's presence over a period of time. This practice is called a Prayer of Examen.

The Examen is usually a daily practice of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern His direction for us. For the sake of this devotional, we are going to practice a Lenten Examen, where we will prayerfully reflect on the past 6 weeks in order to see where God has been at work in each of our lives during Lent, and to discern what He is calling us to this Easter season.

So, settle into a comfortable position. If you process through writing or drawing, grab a pen/pencil and paper. Take a few deep breaths, and allow yourself a few minutes to put aside distractions. This could be silencing your phone, gathering all of those stray thoughts or worries about the day, or perhaps other people in your household. Whatever it takes, place yourself physically and mentally where you can truly focus on God.

HOW TO PRACTICE THE EXAMEN:

Now, let's walk through our Examen. Reflect on these questions in light of the past six weeks of Lent:

- *In this Lenten season, what has been happening to you personally?*
- *In this Lenten season, where have you experienced the greatest sense of shalom (peace, contentment, wholeness, redemption, beauty, etc.)?*
- *Call to mind two or three things that you are grateful for. Write them down and thank God for them.*
- *Where have you experienced the most desolation (preoccupation, depression, anxiety, etc.)?*
- *In this Lenten season, where have you most experienced the presence of God? Where did you notice Him? In what people, places, and events did you encounter God?*
- *Take your time and just "notice."*
- *How has your image of God changed, matured, or been challenged over the past six weeks?*
- *Name the three most important spiritual take-a-ways from the Lent 2024 that you never want to forget.*

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Caring for your Plant

WHAT'S NEXT?

Look back at this Lenten season and the journey you have taken with your plant. How did you find that plant care connected to your devotionals? Were you able to use those quiet moments of watering and pruning to reflect on the lessons you are learning? Did tending to such a small piece of creation help you see the connections between us and God's great natural world? What did you learn about yourself during this time, and what did plant care teach you about caring for creation?

Through your reflections, spend some time wondering—what is next for your plant? Is your propagation ready to give to a friend? Maybe you'd like to bless someone with the mother plant. Does it need a bigger pot? Perhaps you've been inspired to start a garden or care for creation through a park clean-up or the Milwaukee Riverkeeper cleanup in April! As you were entrusted with caring for this plant, so are we entrusted with caring for God's creation. How can we tend to that "garden" in a way that reflects how God tends to us? Whatever the next step is for you and your plant, I pray that your time spent doing plant care has been blessed with reflection and growth. And don't forget, if the top inch or so of your plant's soil is dry, give it some water.

A New Ordinary

READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-22

"Why don't you go for a short hike over there while I shoot some B-roll. It's a pretty good view."

I was in the middle of a visit to our dear field workers in the Holy Land and sometimes on these visits, we simply tag along with whatever they have going on that day. In this case, it was driving into northern Israel and getting some B-roll footage to finish out a video project.

So, I take their suggestion and walk further down the path. For some reason, this path was pretty popular with tour groups, and I wound my way between them on my hike. I then got to the top of the hill, perched on a cliff overlooking the Sea of Galilee. There's a little display naming the hill. "Hold on a second," I thought. I opened my phone and Googled the name.

I couldn't believe it.

I was standing on the spot where Bible scholars believe Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection and gave them the Great Commission. I was standing on what should have felt like sacred ground. But, it felt so ordinary.

Living in light of the resurrection can feel the same way so often. The sun rises, the days pass, and the routines set in. The earth still seems to turn at the same pace, the mundane parts of life still need doing.

Yet, at the same time, everything has changed. Right? Right?!

This is what Paul was addressing in today's passage. Initially the news of the resurrection can be so incredibly life-changing for those who hear it and believe. It is such an incredible truth as well as hope. But as time goes on, what felt so extraordinary can become to feel ordinary and lead us to have mixed feelings about it, or whether it even happened.

But yet, the resurrection of Jesus marks a new ordinary. A new reality. A new hope.

As you start today, reflect on what impact Jesus' resurrection has had on your life. How has that changed over the years? What is its impact today?

FOR REFLECTION:

- *Spend time today in awe and reflection of Jesus' resurrection. Reflect on the questions above in light of this new reality and hope.*



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