

A Future with Hope

*A Devotional Guide for
General Conference Delegates*

Selected from *Upper Room Disciplines*

Prepared for
THE GENERAL CONFERENCE
WORSHIP COMMITTEE
and
THE COUNCIL OF BISHOPS



A FUTURE WITH HOPE
A Devotional Guide for General Conference Delegates
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Pitching Our Tents in the Land of Hope

Leading a gathering of bishops in a discussion of leadership issues facing the United Methodist Church, Dr. Gil Rendle called our attention to Peter's first sermon. Pentecost has come. Dr. Rendle read Peter's quote of King David recorded in Acts 2:

"I saw God before me for all time.

Nothing can shake me; he's right by my side.

I'm glad from the inside out, ecstatic;

I've pitched my tent in the land of hope" (The MESSAGE).

In preparing for General Conference over these next months, the people of the United Methodist Church will hear many voices. Some will point toward the new life and growth emerging across the church. Others will emphasize loss and division. Some people will see turmoil; others will see the ferment of new life.

Like Peter, you have been called into leadership of the people of the United Methodist Church. In the midst of your preparations, the Council of Bishops invites you to join us in pitching your tent "in the land of hope."

Such a hope is intentional, active, and grounded in a deep connection to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Wesley's General Rules describe how such hope-filled people live. In *Three Simple Rules*, Bishop Rueben Job says it this way: Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.

This devotional book has been designed to help you see God before you for all time and to pitch your tent in the land of hope. Please know that the Council of Bishops has already been praying with you and for you and will continue to wrap the General Conference in a mantle of prayer and hope throughout these days of preparation.

God bless you.

—JANICE RIGGLE HUIE
President, Council of Bishops

A Prayer of Beginning

God of the journey,
who calls us to travel with faith,
who reminds us we are dust
yet breathes into us the breath of life,
hear my prayer.

Bearer of the Sun,
draw me into your heart of fire,
that I may have light to uncover
the unremembered stories
and strength to endure their telling.

Creator of the world,
awaken me to the blessedness of earth,
that I may honor those who once dwelled
along these paths that I now travel.

Spirit who hovered
over the face of the deep,
lead me to your life-giving waters,
that I may give my tears to the depths
and find refreshment and delight.

Helper who breathes life
into each new generation,
surround me with the winds of your spirit,
and may I hear with tenderness
the stories that they bear.

—JAN L. RICHARDSON

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www.janrichardson.com

Rooted and Grounded in Love

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 12 • Read Luke 13:10-17

The woman came into the synagogue late—after Jesus had started teaching, hoping to slip into the crowd unnoticed. Maybe she feared the criticism of the crowd or the unforgiving eyes of the synagogue leaders. Being bent over for eighteen years, she was the target of people’s judgment; they believed she was possessed by a spirit that had crippled her all these years. Certainly her physical deformity was the consequence of her unforgivable sin. Unable to see straight forward, she probably made her way into the area reserved for women, slaves, and children in the back of the synagogue, trying not to bump into anyone.

But Jesus spotted her. In fact he did more than notice her. He interrupted his teaching and called her to come forward. According to rabbinical law, it was disreputable for a man to speak in public to any woman, let alone a woman with a disability. Jesus not only called her, but he invited her to come forward to the place reserved for men. Imagine the shock in the crowd, in the woman herself, and in the synagogue leaders!

The woman walked slowly forward. People moved aside—not in avoidance but in amazement. Jesus spoke to her convincingly, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then he laid hands on her, and she stood up straight. For the first time in eighteen years, someone recognized her as a valuable human being who deserved attention and dignity.

Like the woman, we have value in God’s eyes. God wants to heal us from any restrictions that have caused us to be bent over. Give your ailment to God, receive healing today, and begin praising God with your life.

God of wholeness, help me receive your gift of healing. In turn, enable me to extend my hand and touch those who need my attention today. Amen.

—SOOMEE KIM, Claremont, California

At a conference for people involved in prison ministry, an unknown grey-haired priest told the story of a chaplain at San Quentin prison.

Among the inmates in this chaplain's charge was a longtimer known for his cunning. Using his street smarts, the convict always conned the chaplain out of special visits, extra phone time, and many other activities considered luxuries in the stark prison environment. Since the difficulty of the con is part of the game, the convict eventually grew exasperated at the stupidity of the chaplain and upbraided him for being such a pushover.

The chaplain replied that in life one must choose whether to be a sucker or a cynic; for him, being a sucker was preferable. Having told the story, the priest quietly sat down. Only when he was goaded to admit to being the chaplain in the story did the priest reveal that in reality he had been the convict. After a lifetime in prison, he finally was released and was now—in his elder years—studying for the priesthood.

Cynics, whether robbing a convenience store for their next cocaine fix or sponsoring legislation that provides more bombs and less bread, live out of fear. Fear breeds cynicism, and cynicism feeds fear. There is no room for vulnerability and trust for those given over to the rule of fear.

Love, on the other hand, allows one the luxury of being a sucker, a fool, a disciple. How silly and foolish, what profound suckers Peter and the other disciples must have seemed to the powerful and cynical Sanhedrin. Yet their foolish acts laid the groundwork for the kingdom that offers us forgiveness and love even on this day.

O God, you call us to demonstrate love in all the arenas of our life. When we have to choose between loving sucker or fearful cynic, give us faith to choose love, to gladly be a fool for Jesus Christ. Amen.

—JEFF BLUM, Nashville, Tennessee

A fellow who lived in the rural part of Middle Tennessee where my mother grew up responded in this fashion when people asked him what kind of Christian he was: “Well, I reckon I’m the regular kind. I cuss when I get mad and pray when I get scared.” This kind of assessment of human virtue might lead one to cry out, as the psalmist did, saying in effect, “Who are we mortals that you pay any attention to us?”

Who are we, after all, here at the beginning of the twenty-first century, two thousand years after the life of Jesus? We are certainly more technologically advanced than ever before, but is the world a more peaceful and loving place for having experienced two millennia of Christian witness and influence? Most people would say that it is not. Sadly, many of the conflicts around the world today involve Christians fighting other people or allowing other religious traditions to encourage fighting among ourselves.

Has the cussing or the praying of everyday Christians had more impact? We have received blessing, but have we been a blessing to all nations?

Psalm 8 makes the radical assertion that God creates humans as little less than their maker. Apparently the image that God holds of us is far greater than the image we have of ourselves. Now at this time, when we stand at the beginning of a new century and millennium, let us pray that we will grow into the image that God holds of us.

Creating God, you made me in your image. Now help me grow into the person you have created me to be. Amen.

—MICHAEL WILLIAMS, Hendersonville, Tennessee

SATURDAY, MARCH 15 • Read Matthew 3:16-17

When I was old enough to date, my father would often say in a cautious tone of voice as I left the house, “Remember who you are.” When I left home for college, my dad said as a word of guidance, “Remember who you are.” And from his hospital bed a few days before he died, he gave me his final blessing, “Remember who you are.” Remembering who I am in relation to my family of origin means that I know I am supremely loved and valued. It means that my parents and their parents before them gave life, a family story, and a sense of belonging out of which to live toward the future.

It is sometimes hard to remember who we are in a world of peer pressure, advertising bombardment, and unlimited options. We sometimes bow to the pressure to be someone we are not and never can be or someone we don’t need to be. We need help to live into who God enables and invites us to be.

Just as family heritage can remind us of who we are, our baptism tells us in the most profound sense. Baptism gives us our true name as sons and daughters of God. And in the family of God’s belonging we know we are loved and valued. The Gospel account of Jesus’ baptism depicts the true meaning of baptism: “When Jesus had been baptized . . . a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”” Baptism for Jesus and for us is a sign of God’s unmerited and steadfast love. In this love we are free to grow and become all that God envisions us to be.

It will take me the rest of my life to understand the fullness of remembering who I am. I trust that God’s sanctifying grace will finish this new creation. Even though we can never deserve God’s claim and pleasure, we can trust that we are sons and daughters of God and try to be faithful and responsible for God’s gift of life and call to be a part of God’s family and work.

Renew in me, O God, my memory of who and whose I am that I may live as one in your image. Amen.

—JOHN H. COLLETT, Nashville, Tennessee

In the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, a captain leads seven men on a fool's mission to bring back a soldier from the front lines. Private Ryan's three brothers have been killed in the war, and an order has come down the chain of command to go and get the last brother so that his mother will be saved the heartbreak of losing all her sons. The captain, reflecting on the dangers, observes, "This Ryan better be worth it. He better go home and cure a disease or invent a longer-lasting lightbulb or something."

The good news of the gospel is that each of us, as a child of God, is "worth it"—even if we never cure a disease or invent a longer-lasting lightbulb. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus responds to those who grumble because he eats with sinners. He tells the story of a shepherd who has lost a sheep and who leaves the ninety-nine to search for the one.

It's easy to think of the lost only as those in dire trouble or those who do not know God, but a part of every person is "lost." God sees the smallest lost parts within each of us and seeks to return us to wholeness.

We humans sometimes pride ourselves on seeing the big picture. God, however, deals in the little pictures: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the tax collector, the sinner, the lowliest army private, you, and me. When we are found, God joins our smallness to the infinite and incomprehensible big picture of God's perfect love that connects and heals all. We give thanks to a God who seeks out the one among the many and whose transforming love makes each of us "worth it."

God of the lost, help us remember that you love and seek after each one of us as we are. May we remember that through your grace and love we are all "worth it." Amen.

—REBEKAH MILES and LEN DELONY (wife and husband)
Fort Worth, Texas

MONDAY, MARCH 17 • Read Ephesians 1:15-23

As I handed him a release form to sign giving me permission to use video footage of him, a young man in a Job Corps training center suddenly looked crestfallen. He said, “Sir, I can’t sign this.” I was concerned since he was one of the principal demonstrators of a skill highlighted in the video. After some careful probing he said, “I don’t have a home address.”

Tagged with the label “homeless” at some point in his life, this young man had learned that it meant “excluded,” and he was excluding himself now. I assured him that his address at the center was good enough for me, and his face brightened. He rejoined the teasing banter that floated through the room about his becoming a celebrity.

The world has many ways to exclude us: race, gender, age, class, physical condition, and many others. But the writer of the epistle reminds us that in Christ we find out who we are and what we live for. The love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ is inclusive, and we never need feel that we are left outside of that love, for it is never withdrawn.

The epistle writer says that we experience this love above every power, dominion, and name; and, it’s not only in this age but also in the age to come. We are claimed now and forever by a loving God who does not ask for our home address but says, “Come home to me.”

O God of the excluded, we thank you for your inclusive love that claims us and holds us within your reach now and forever. Amen.

—LARRY HOLLON, Nashville, Tennessee

The theological heart of the Reformation can be stated in three words: *the Divine initiative*. Yet this insight is the one that Protestants keep losing, needing additional reformations. Part of the reason for loss of insight is the church's tendency to emphasize giving and doing, rather than instructing people in how to receive. This is why *grace* is such an indispensable word for Christianity, meaning God's graciousness. God lavishes us with so much, not because we deserve it by what we do or are but because of who God is and promises to be.

How we read the Ten Commandments offers an excellent example of how we misread the good news—as something we are required to do rather than the declaration of what God is doing for us. When I was a boy, my minister always preached “Do this!” or “Do that!” Often I wanted to shout back, “Why?” He may have communicated the “what,” but he failed to give me the “because.”

The Ten Commandments do not begin with “Thou shalt,” which is the beginning of the “whats.” We must begin with verse two, which is the “why.” “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” Only those of us who have been freed by Christ can understand why the “whats” should even be done. But when we fall in love with God who first loved us, the “thou shalt” are transformed into “thou mayest.”

God, I do better with the “what” if you keep reminding me of the “why.” Amen.

—W. PAUL JONES, Pittsburg, Missouri

Holy Listening

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19 • Read Luke 1:67-79

This canticle is one of three such songs Luke records. The singer is John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, who has been mute since the day the angel Gabriel first told him his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a child. The old couple had been waiting a long time for that news. To tell the truth, they had almost given up on ever hearing it, which may explain Zechariah's surprise when the word finally comes.

It is the most important day of Zechariah's life to date. When he and the other priests report for duty at the Temple in Jerusalem, they cast lots to determine their roles. Zechariah wins the prize. He alone will enter the sanctuary to burn incense on the altar while the people pray outside. No priest may serve in this position twice in his lifetime; some priests never get to burn incense on the altar at all.

Inside the sanctuary, Zechariah gets the scare of his life when an angel appears to him. What does Zechariah expect? Maybe with his strong focus on the task at hand he forgets whose living room he is in. At any rate he asks one question too many, and Gabriel puts a gag order on him for nine months. Is the gag order a penalty? Or is it a gift from God—a quiet time during which praise grows inside him at the same rate a baby grows inside his wife?

Eight days after the child's birth, Zechariah's tongue is loosed. The first words out of his mouth center not on his own good fortune but on the blessedness of God.

What place does silence have in your life? See what you can discover about the connection between your silence and God's speech.

—BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR, Clarkesville, Georgia

It could hardly have been any more unnoticed, the birth of that boy. Mary and Joseph had walked down to Bethlehem from Nazareth probably grumbling the entire way, the way we do about being inconvenienced by government edicts. Joseph had to go register in his home district, and that registration no doubt meant taxes. And when they got to Bethlehem, there was no room in any inn.

And the boy was born that night.

The stories that we tell now about that night are glorious with a lighted sky and choruses of angels proclaiming a new thing: God has come among us. And who was in attendance after the birth? A few shepherds. For the most part, rough young men with dung on their sandals, but men who nonetheless were in touch with the natural world: They knew the stars by name, and they knew when a wind came up in the west and whether or not there was a storm brewing. They were unsophisticated, but they knew there was music in the air and there was an unusual brightness and that something of cosmic importance was happening.

If they had a song to sing that night, it would have been something like Psalm 148: “Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!”

It was the kind of night when everything in and on the earth praised God—“fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command . . . Kings of earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together!” But most people were in their homes, in their comfortable homes, sorting out the busyness of their lives; and they missed it. When it happened, they missed it.

Help us to stay alert to your voice, God; we know that you still speak, and we want to hear. Amen.

—RUSSELL MONTFORT, Charlotte, North Carolina

FRIDAY, MARCH 21 • Read Exodus 3:1-6

In this famous story of calling, Moses is confronted by the mysterious presence of God revealed through a bush that burns but is not consumed. Moses does not know why God would choose revelation through a burning bush; he only knows that he somehow finds himself in the presence of the God worshiped by his ancestors, and he is compelled to respond.

At this point, neither Moses nor the reader knows what God will require. But if God continues to behave in the same manner as in Genesis, God's requirement is sure to be as exciting and terrifying as Abraham's journeying to a strange land or Joseph's being taken into slavery and ending up second in command to Pharaoh.

Today God continues to call us in ways as mysterious and terrifying as a bush that is not consumed by fire. Like Moses, we do not know why God has chosen to take an interest in us, yet we acknowledge that the call is authentic. We know that the God revealed to us is the same God who was revealed to our ancestors—those persons who have handed down the faith, generation after generation, to us. Like our ancestors, we feel compelled to respond.

We who worship the God who was revealed to Moses do not choose to respond to God's call because we believe in our usefulness to God. We respond because when we stand in the presence of God, everything else that promises to bring salvation—money, success, prestige, things—pales in comparison to the presence of the One who speaks out of the burning bush.

Reflect upon times when God has been revealed to you in mysterious ways.

—STEVE CHRISTOPHER, Ashland City, Tennessee

Questions fill the disciples of Jesus. After traveling with him, listening to him, watching him heal the sick and embrace outcasts, they feel devastated by his death and the apparent triumph of human power. Then they begin to encounter Christ in resurrection power. Two of them have met him on the road; twice the gathered disciples have experienced his presence as they met behind closed doors; and for forty days following the crucifixion they have come to an awareness that his word lives on. Now they want to know if he is about to restore the kingdom to Israel, and perhaps receiving no answer disappoints them. Instead of an answer, Jesus tells them to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit and then to go out as witnesses throughout the world.

All too often our questions seem to go unanswered while we wait for God to act. Many psalms express a human longing for answers: “How long, O LORD?” (13:1) “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (22:1) We find it hard to be in the place of not knowing and to accept with patience the waiting time that precedes a new phase on our faith journey. At the beginning of a thirty-day retreat, my spiritual director handed me a piece of advice offered by Teilhard de Chardin: “Trust in the slow work of God.” I needed that advice as the retreat time unfolded and my initial enthusiasm began to wane. I have needed it often since: every time my demand for answers meets the invitation to be present trustfully in the waiting, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me. Believing in the gift of Spirit power to come fills the waiting time with hope.

God of grace, bless my waiting as I live with questions that slowly unfold into your time of empowerment and calling forth. Amen.

—ELIZABETH CANHAM, Black Mountain, North Carolina

SUNDAY, MARCH 23 • Read 2 Kings 5:5b-14

Naaman proceeds to Samaria with a letter of introduction from the king of Aram, lots of money, and extra clothes—obviously prepared to impress with his position, rank, and prestige. He comes with official credentials and lots of money to spread around if needed. He's prepared to do anything for a cure.

Naaman finally reaches Elisha's house. Through a third-party messenger, Elisha directs Naaman to "go and wash in the Jordan seven times." Elisha promises that such a washing will result in a cure. Naaman is angry, livid.

Naaman's outrage comes on two counts. One, Elisha does not address Naaman personally. No doubt Naaman is offended, having come a great distance. Given his prestige he surely expects to be treated with more deference. Two, he finds the nonsensical simplicity of the "prescription" insulting.

How often in our lives have we missed a great blessing because it came disguised? We stand ready to entertain the big and the complex as a means to our healing and salvation, and God confounds us with babies and baptism. Naaman indeed is willing to do anything to be cured except take a simple bath in the Jordan River.

Perhaps this story's message to us is not to box God in, not predetermine how God will act. When we box God in through our preconceived notions of how God will act, then God's actions seem ridiculous. We want to bolt in the opposite direction. God welcomes our acknowledgment of our need and rejoices that we seek God's help. God does not need our expertise in determining how to help us. When help comes, receive it as a gift. The only appropriate response to a gift and its giver is "thank you."

Gracious God, make me open to receive what you offer so I don't miss your blessings. Amen.

—BISHOP GREGORY V. PALMER, Des Moines, Iowa

Shelves of books have been written in hopes of figuring out what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. Did he mean a present-day reality? a future event? Is the kingdom the church itself or a quality attainable within the very souls of believers?

In this passage from Mark, Jesus speaks plainly and from the heart. He states what is central to his message: God's reign, the rule of God, the kingdom of God has come near.

Whatever else it is, Jesus implies the kingdom is available if we get our priorities straight. The kingdom of God is not an airy metaphor but a personal and political possibility right now. That's good news. It's also hard to face.

In church life, the kingdom of God usually stands for a distant future scenario, an abstraction, a mere phrase. It's easier to be distracted by a hundred other disputes and controversies than to get down to kingdom business. When I clear away the clutter and actually read the Gospels, I realize the kingdom of God is persistent and unavoidable. Jesus refers to it some fifty times in the New Testament.

How do I find this kingdom? Jesus says it's a matter of faithful preparation: repentance and obedience. It's also a matter of opening my eyes. The kingdom is vast enough to stretch across present and future. Every day offers a new shoreline of the kingdom, a place to plant a foot, practice goodness, glimpse the divine potential. The ground rules of this kingdom are not of this world—lose your life to save it, the last shall be first, love your enemies. We're invited to leave the old assumptions behind like unneeded baggage at the border, cross to the new frontier, and take up citizenship.

These words in Mark arrive across twenty-one centuries—fresh, mysterious, urgent.

What are the marks of the kingdom of God? How do I recognize them?

—RAY WADDLE, Bethel, Connecticut

TUESDAY, MARCH 25 • Read John 12:1-8

Mary keeps breaking the rules. First, she defies conventional expectations and sits at Jesus' feet as a disciple while Martha complains about Mary's neglect of kitchen duties. In the last intense days before the Passover, Mary again experiences criticism as she takes her costly perfume and pours it extravagantly over Jesus' feet, using her hair as a towel in an act of deep devotion. This time Judas Iscariot voices the criticism. Although the text tells us that the motives behind his question are not sincere, nonetheless the question has some force. Clearly the followers of Jesus knew of his commitment to the poor. He announced it at the beginning of his public ministry. He demonstrated his concern for the poor in his teachings, his actions, and his own way of living. So Judas Iscariot verbally attacks Mary about giving the cost of the perfume to the poor, assuming that he knows Jesus' priorities. But his assumption is wrong in two ways: He undervalues Mary's action, and he values money over Jesus.

Jesus comes strongly to Mary's defense. He sees the love and the depth of meaning in her action perhaps even more than she fully understands herself. The perfume belongs to Mary; it is hers to give. She chooses to give it to Jesus because she believes that he is worthy of it. Jesus affirms her gift, while at the same time reinforcing the ongoing obligation to the poor.

Mary sensed and responded to a unique moment in human history. Jesus will not be among them for much longer. She acts with sacrifice and devotion, which Jesus receives with gratitude. Different times require different responses. Mary understands that there is a time to give to the poor and a time to be with Jesus. May God help us discern the times.

Spend some time pondering this story and what each of the people in the fragrance-filled room was thinking and feeling. How would you have responded to Mary's act? What would Jesus say to you?

—ROBERTA HESTENES, Tustin, California

Filled with the Fullness of God

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26 • Read Ephesians 1:3-10

God's plan is "for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth."

While growing up in Havana, Cuba, I walked across a cemetery one evening. For the first time I noticed a theme in many of the monuments covering the tombs: a broken obelisk—the top missing—with a heavy cloth draped over it. These monuments referred to lives that had ended abruptly, leaving promises unfulfilled and survivors with the mystery of what might have been.

I was in a particularly meditative mood that evening, and as I looked at those monuments and read the inscriptions under them, it occurred to me that those obelisks represent much of our lives. There are so many things left unfinished! Unfinished are many of last year's resolutions. Unfinished are many projects we undertook, many relationships we entered, many efforts that for a while seemed important but now have been forgotten.

Yet this text tells us that God's eternal and mysterious plan is somehow to bring all things to completion in Jesus Christ, to gather them all up in him. (A more literal translation would be "to make Christ the head or completion of all things.")

In Christ there are no unfinished obelisks; no meaningless, uncompleted loose ends. We do not quite understand how this will be, but we trust. And we know that in him all that is unfulfilled will find fulfillment, all in our lives that is incomplete will find completion! And in this knowledge we rejoice.

I thank you, God, that you have given me a glimpse of your eternal purpose to bring together all things in Christ, so that in him all things—even my incomplete life—find completion. Let it be so! Amen.

—JUSTO L. GONZÁLEZ, Decatur, Georgia

THURSDAY, MARCH 27 • Read Romans 8:14-17

Paul never refers to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But then, he seldom mentions anything described in the Gospels or Acts. But he does describe, in his characteristically intense way, what happens when the spirit of God becomes incarnate in believers.

To our surprise, we discover that Jesus makes us God's "children." Weren't we already? Are we not, by virtue of being created by God, already children by inheritance? Are we not all of one substance with the universe? Do we not "belong" here, and isn't everything "of God" and of one reality in God? So why do we discover ourselves to be orphans, alienated from the universe and one another, estranged from the One who created us for relationship? What have we done to create this chasm that yawns at our feet?

Orphans. We are homeless runaways, easing the pain of separation and the anger of rebellion with chemicals and addictions and unfulfilling relationships with others who are separated from us by the same bottomless abysses.

And because we cannot bridge these gulfs, because we cannot even give an account of who we are, God has thrown across a span: Jesus, in whom all the abysses collapse into relatedness, in whom alienation collapses into love, in whom our rebellion collapses into camaraderie, in whom our meaninglessness collapses into joy, purpose, and vocation.

Adopted. Not by choosing God but by being sought out and chosen by God. Unable to believe our good fortune, we need the Spirit to coach us to cry, "Daddy!" To our surprise, we become heirs, inheritors, of one substance with the universe, belonging to everything and everyone, related—provided, of course, that we bear the cost of becoming reconcilers and abyss-crossers ourselves.

All praise to you, O God, for Jesus Christ who bridges troubled waters so that your love may reach us. Amen.

—WALTER WINK, New York, New York

We often voice the question, “How did Mary know that this was an angel—and an angel of God?” As Christians we know that the one who offers us salvation is the fulfillment of the angel’s promise. Mary has every reason to doubt, yet something in the gentleness, the caring reassurance of the angel suggests something good and true. The angel’s words to Mary quiet her fear and affirm her specialness before God. The angel offers sensitive and clear responses to her questions, saying in effect, “The Holy Spirit will make this miracle happen in ways as gentle and complete as a shadow.”

No, we are not Mary, but we are potential bearers of God’s grace to the world. We all have had moments of visitation in our lives (whether we have said yes or no) that lead to an urge to give to some purpose, to volunteer service in some effort, to visit with a person who is sick or in need, to speak a word of prayer or hope to someone. In that moment perhaps we had a sense of being overshadowed by the Spirit of God with surety and caring, a sense of purpose that went beyond our own reasoning and confidence.

Like Mary, when we say yes to the visitation of God’s invitation to us, we become recipients of God’s grace. The results are often far beyond what we know or can imagine.

Perhaps the most needed gift in our world today is Christians open to the visitation of God in their everyday life, Christians with faith enough to say yes to the gentle lure of God, the overwhelming shadowing of divine grace that enables us to be God’s servants in a world desperately in need of grace.

Use me today, O God, to be a bearer of your love, your peace, your hope to someone. Amen.

—NATHAN D. BAXTER, Lancaster, Pennsylvania

SATURDAY, MARCH 29 • Read 1 Corinthians 1:4-9

The time before General Conference is a time of expectancy—of faithful waiting. It is the time of making our hearts ready to receive the power and presence of Jesus.

Just as we can never plumb the ocean's mighty depths but can at least wade into the surf and feel its texture, taste its salt, and know its cleansing vigor, so I like to think of Jesus as the "shoreline" of God, where I can touch the edge of the eternal. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God comes in a way we can relate to. The God whose face we long to see comes with a human face in Jesus.

In this passage, Paul talks of waiting "expectantly for our Lord Jesus Christ to reveal himself" (NEB). Jesus comes in different ways: He has come already in his Bethlehem birth; he reveals himself to us in the Holy Spirit, his invisible presence; and he will come in glory when it is time to close human history. We need to be open to what each of these ways of knowing Jesus tells us.

But there is another kind of waiting. In Romans 8:19, Paul says, "The created universe waits with eager expectation *for God's [children] to be revealed*" (NEB, italics added). Is it possible that this tired, old world, so long alienated from God, is yearning for something new—a new kind of humanity, liberated from the things that chain our souls?

Paul reminds the Corinthians that God has called them to share in Jesus' life. The best proof of Jesus' coming will be the life of Jesus lived out in *our* lives.

Let your face, O Christ, be seen in mine, your love be known in my loving, your peace in the peace I share. Amen.

—PETER J. STOREY, Cape Town, South Africa

John the Baptist is the adventurer, stalking through the wilderness of his time on the trail of the messiah. He's the original hell-fire-and-brimstone preacher, but he also offers hope to the community he rakes over the coals. A willingness to hope is a willingness to enter the wilderness. Hope is not a domesticated state of mind. It seems to camp out in odd places, crops up at the worst possible times. Just as we resign ourselves to the minimum wages of life with no benefits, hope whispers that we shouldn't settle for despair's bottom line. Hope thrives in the barren places of our lives.

When hope comes out of the wilderness, it turns what we take for granted upside down, making us restless and setting our teeth on edge. It wakes us up, stirs our imaginations, and energizes our wide-awake dreams. It affects everyone: soldiers and farmers, sailors, tailors, cooks, collectors, and cabinet makers. It's contagious because hope-filled humans refuse to recognize boundaries.

Take the people who gather down by the riverside. They're at the bottom of the empire's food chain. They're controlled by a very efficient occupation army. Their religious leaders have either been co-opted or killed. They've been conquered too many times to count; yet they refuse to believe that they've been abandoned by the Holy One, maker of heaven and earth. Surrounded by sophisticated systems of civil religion where Caesar is both God and Caesar, they pray for Immanuel, God with us: a fervent prayer for apparently godforsaken people who are starving for some sense of purpose, thirsting for some meaning for their pain. Somewhere in the waters of repentance and the voice from the wilderness, hope's deep roots take hold in their hearts. Down by the riverside God's wilderness wheat begins to spring up, wild and green.

Holy One, calm my heart with hope and trouble my prayers with love. Amen.

—HEATHER MURRAY ELKINS, Madison, New Jersey

MONDAY, MARCH 31 • Read 1 Kings 2:10-12

At 4 A.M. in the dead of winter I rolled out of a warm bed, drove to a deserted hay field, and lay down in the back of my truck. My seeming madness soon received its reward: a night of spectacular meteor showers. A shooting star streaked across the sky: first red, then gold, then blue, then red. Then there was nothing but a glowing orange trail where that light had just pierced the sky.

So it was when David—the man after God’s own heart—fell to earth. His life was a blaze of glory. First he blazed with naiveté and bravado, a shepherd boy who dared to slay giants. Then came an unblinking moral light as he refused to lift his hand against God’s anointed. The light shifted to bloodred as he burned with adultery, then deception, then murder—yet God’s light continued to shine through him.

Finally this star fell—still and cold—back to the earth. As Israel watched, David’s son Solomon prepared to choose his path. What sort of light would he shower on those around him? How long would his arc light the sky?

Someone will watch your light today and behold the colors with which you burn. Even after you are gone, the paths you choose in life will be marked in their minds. Native American elders say our choices affect seven generations: ourselves, three generations to come, and the three generations that have gone before us. Our choices reach across time and space to affect more lives than we will ever know.

Your life will glow with something today. What will it be?

—LARRY G. JENT, Madison Heights, Virginia

You will notice something about this story of Joseph that you see in other Bible stories. *It is all very specific.*

Fairy tales begin with, “Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a king . . .” Bible stories begin with, “There was a father named Jacob who had some sons, one of whom was named Joseph.” Fairy tales can happen to anybody, any place, any time. Bible stories happen in specific, real places like Canaan or Egypt.

Something in us wishes it all were not so specific and concrete. We prefer to drink religion in the form of clear, distilled nectar from which the gross particularities of history or geography have been removed. We thrill to the enunciation of universal, timeless truth. We rally around high-sounding generalities like “humanity,” “justice,” “compassion.” We are put off by the squabbles, trials, and tribulations of Jacob’s famished family members who go down to Egypt looking for food only to meet in that place their brother whom they once hated—a brother who is now their only hope of survival.

The good news amid this story’s particularity and specificity is that the Bible says this is how God chooses to deal with us. Not on cloud nine or in some generalized idea but here, now, among real people caught in real-life dilemmas in real places like Birmingham, Alabama. *Here.*

And that is good news, because we do not live in fairy-tale kingdoms. We live here, now. And this is where God wants to touch our lives and use us to accomplish God’s plans for the world. *Here.*

Help us to look for you, gracious God, not somewhere else but here. Amen.

—BISHOP WILL WILLIMON, Birmingham, Alabama

Holy Conversation

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 2 • Read 1 Samuel 16:1-13

As Samuel dries his eyes and starts from scratch in looking for a new king for Israel, the outward appearances of Jesse's first seven sons impress him plenty. But God tells Samuel what we often forget: "The LORD looks on the heart." So, attentive Samuel asks for the missing son and in David finds God's irregular choice of a leader.

When we're asked to choose leaders—to evaluate our supervisor or to serve on a church committee or to choose a neighborhood committee chair—we tend to look for someone with good ideas and energy to carry them out. We notice the messages their dress and mannerisms convey. This passage encourages us to overlook people's style and to focus on their substance instead. We look for a character that reveals a heart that listens to God—a heart full of kindness, humility, and serenity.

Passages such as this one also turn our eyes back on ourselves: What does God see when God looks on my heart? Does God see a person whose continual conversation with God is so rich that I frequently surrender difficult people and situations to God? Does God see a heart that mourns for the voiceless? Does God see a heart that cares about advancing justice and showing compassion? In this reflective way, we train our eyes to look on the heart as God does.

O God, I confess that I am stunned by the outward ambience of people and have overlooked those whose heart is strong for you. Teach me to value what you value in me and others—a heart that is devoted to you. Amen.

—JAN JOHNSON, Simi Valley, California

When our sons were quite young, the eternal questions punctuated our eighteen-hour drive to visit a grandparent: “Are we there yet?” “How much longer will it be?” In every journey—even a rapid airline flight—every step and stage follows upon the previous one. In a journey of faith we continue to experience stages of unfamiliar surroundings. Often we receive no immediate answer to our urgent questions: How much farther? How will our needs be provisioned? Are you still with me, God?

The barren appearance of Rephidim, the new Israelite campsite, seems to attest to the lack of a water source. The Israelites begin complaining as soon as they arrive. They demand, in a most quarrelsome and threatening way, that Moses give them water. They too raise questions about the journey: “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?”

So, at this stage of the journey, Moses asks some questions: God, are we in the right place? If we are, how can we live as your people? With the trusty tool of earlier liberation, God leads Moses to strike the rock, releasing the water hidden beneath the barren surface.

As we move by divine leading to new places by faith, our fear of the unfamiliar can be displaced by our trust in God’s provisions: cleansing, living water and grace sufficient for today’s stage of the journey.

God, dissolve my homesickness, release me from slavery to the familiar, guide me by your grace. Amen.

—DIANE LUTON BLUM, Nashville, Tennessee

FRIDAY, APRIL 4 • Read Luke 9:32-36

Luke gives a more detailed picture than either Matthew or Mark of the human reaction to Jesus' transfiguration. Luke alone points out that Peter doesn't really know what he is saying when he asks if he and his companions may build three dwellings on the mountain, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus.

It's a natural reaction, isn't it? In the days of the Exodus, when the Jews traveled through the wilderness, they carried with them a crude building known as the tabernacle. It contained the ark of the covenant, the tablets of the Law, and the holy presence of God.

Jesus and the disciples are in a wilderness setting, and the disciples find themselves overwhelmed by the holiness of their experience. Peter can't help but think that it would be fitting to build dwellings to house the great figures gathered there.

We probably would have responded the same way. Human beings tend to want to solidify spiritual experiences by building things around them, by erecting monuments to them, by establishing something that says for all time to come, "A very important event happened here."

But Jesus knows that we don't hold on to spiritual experiences that way. We may memorialize them, but they evaporate, fade into other experiences, become forgotten. The importance of such an experience comes through its serving as an impetus to our spiritual living. We begin to live in such a spiritual manner that we continue to have new spiritual experiences all the time.

Dear God, help me not to fasten upon the few special experiences I have had but to live so devoutly and sensitively that there will be many of them. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

—JOHN KILLINGER, Warrenton, Virginia

The king's exercise of virtue yields righteousness that seeks one aim: peace. "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea." In God's peace, power and vulnerability lie together. This peace does not ignore conflict or difference; rather, in this peace the vulnerability in power and the power of vulnerability become companions. Neither threatens the other; instead, the friendship of power and vulnerability transforms expected hostilities into deep, deep peace. When we read these ancient words, we can feel it: This peace is what God means for our lives.

When we translate this passage from ancient to contemporary human images, however, our feelings may change. Can we really imagine antagonists who lie down together? The grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan and the African American baby; the CEO of the multinational fruit company and the farmworker; the Palestinian and the Jew; the Japanese and the Korean; the Tutsi and the Hutu; the urban, suburban, and rural children of our countries sitting beside one another in the same school. Even desiring this peace threatens us. To seek this peace we would need to give up the hostility and self-righteousness that defines us. Is disciplining ourselves to the messianic king not a call to seek the peace that he holds out before us, to work actively for this peace even when it means giving up our fears? Of whom are we most afraid?

Spirit of the Lord, disciple us in the ways that lead to your holy mountain. We pray now for our enemies, whom we name in our hearts. We pray for ourselves, that we may transform our hostilities and fears into an openness to your possibilities. Where there seems to be no way, help us find the way to your holy mountain. Amen.

—PAMELA D. COUTURE, Kansas City, Missouri

SUNDAY, APRIL 6 • Read Philippians 4:1-3

Belonging in God's kingdom requires that we get along with others who belong there as well. Paul urges Euodia and Syntyche to "be of the same mind in the Lord." Paul doesn't disclose the nature of their dispute but encourages them to seek sacred mutuality in their common relationship with Christ.

It is difficult to work through differences over things that matter deeply to us. Disagreements over values hinge upon matters we believe to be true, right, and important. Disparities in taste involve our sense of individuality. Diversities of experience affect us at the points where life is most familiar. Divisions born of injury are hard to heal because they create imbalances of power and feelings of victimization. We resist compromise on such differences because we fear the loss of our essential selves.

Christ calls us to self-denial, however. Does this mean we must renounce all that is distinctive about us? I think not. Among other things, self-denial means identifying ourselves *with Christ* rather than with the lesser attributes by which we are otherwise known. The Lord allows us to claim our differences so long as we don't allow our differences to claim us.

Being of the same mind in the Lord means having the mind of Christ "who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:6-7). Being God didn't prevent Christ from taking the form of a slave. In fact, Christ's self-sacrifice was fundamental to his divine nature. By a radical act of submission, Christ became one with us and reconciled us to God. From the fullness of his grace, we receive our true identity and the power to submit ourselves to one another in love.

O Christ, beyond all else that defines me, I belong to you. May I be so at peace with you that I can be at peace with others. Amen.

—ROBBINS SIMS, Montgomery, Alabama

People in my country (the United States of America) worry about many things. Exile is not one of them. Bounded east and west by vast oceans, protected by history's mightiest military, we fear terrorism; but we don't fear mass uprooting. This anguished psalm of one spent by dislocation or depressed by coming home to ruins does not seem to concern us.

If we reduce ourselves to beings motivated only by economics and security, the psalm does not touch us. But having made us in God's image, God bids us love as Christ loves. The world is full of exiles, from Asian girls kidnapped for prostitution to entire ethnic groups blown about in developing countries with no government that welcomes them. God bids us suffer and pray with them. We cannot walk away from this psalm.

We do not claim to know how exiles feel. Mary, the humble maiden carrying God's son in occupied territory, knew a bit more about those feelings. Mother Teresa often said that along with the material poverty of a significant minority in America, she observed a more pervasive poverty of connection and mutual commitment. She saw loneliness everywhere: people exiled in their suburban neighborhoods, even in their marriage beds.

We cannot walk away from this psalm. We cannot celebrate the birth of Mary's son without it. His suffering love is at least as old as the first life form struggling to survive. But his palpable suffering-with-us is at least as old as Christmas. His suffering love nourishes us and shelters us in our poverty. His suffering love calls us to share our suffering love as our greatest gift.

Lord, through the suffering love of Jesus, we receive meaning and hope. Through our own suffering love, give good gifts to your children. In Jesus' name. Amen.

—J. MARSHALL JENKINS, Rome, Georgia

TUESDAY, APRIL 8 • Read Ephesians 3:14-21

I completed my first theological studies in Zimbabwe in 1994 and returned to my home country of Malawi to await a formal ministry assignment. The United Methodist Church had just started in Malawi, and there were few established churches. I was assigned to an area to build a church. From 1994 through 2004 with the help of God, thirteen local churches were developed in the Bethel circuit; these now form two pastoral charges.

One thing I have learned through these years is the power of prayer during difficult times. The committed sisters and brothers whom God raised up for this mission set their hearts and minds on the importance of prayer for leaders. Just as the writer of Ephesians prayed for the leaders of the church in Ephesus, the leaders of the Bethel circuit prayed for me and for new leaders of the Bethel circuit. The charge has grown both qualitatively and quantitatively through the power of prayer.

The writer of Ephesians reminds us that leaders must develop the spiritual discipline of prayer. Sometimes we wonder in awe at the large number of people in the early church who risked their lives to become Christians. Christianity in the twenty-first century is challenged again to weather the winds of change with a discipline of prayer. We must be careful to remember that head knowledge and our own resources are not as powerful as prayer and a close connection with God.

As Christians we must not be distracted by endless criticism of our leaders, but rather we must pray for leaders in the church and in the world. Just twenty minutes of prayer per day can make a big difference to the world. Start today. Reschedule your busy calendar and include a time of prayer for your church leaders, political leaders, and other leaders. Make a difference in the world through prayer.

Lord Jesus, help us realize the difference it makes when we pray for our leaders in this world. Amen.

—BLESSINGS MAGOMERO, Lilongwe, Malawi

Holy Conferencing

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 9 • Read John 15:5-8

Paul spoke of the church as a human body with Christ as the head. John saw the church through Jesus' eyes as a vine with branches and God as the gardener. Both metaphors reflect thought; both use images of living, growing organisms.

Perhaps modern church members have a harder time accepting the vine image—not just because we have moved off the farm and don't see the cycle of grafting, watering, feeding, pruning, and harvesting anymore. Our culture so values individualism and independence that it becomes problematic to think of ourselves as intertwining branches, barely distinguishable from one another and totally dependent on the vine. Most of us don't like the notion that we can't take care of ourselves. We're happy to bear fruit, but don't expect us to give credit to the vine, and we'd prefer that the gardener not interfere. We like to pull our own weight, and we don't want to feel obligated to anyone.

Maya Angelou reminds us that “nobody can make it out here alone.” Alone, no branch bears fruit. Being and doing unite in the vine and branches; if we abide in Jesus, we will bear fruit. The Gospel invites us to wholeness and growth by inviting us to live always in Christ's presence. Wholeness resides in the community of love that starts with Jesus' abiding in God and embracing us into that abiding love. Thus we embody God's love of the world.

The church, according to Samuel Stone's hymn “The Church's One Foundation,” is made up of “elect from every nation, yet one o'er all the earth; / her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth.” The last stanza joyfully affirms that the church “on earth hath union with God the Three in One.” To God be the glory.

God, bring us to your household as heirs not strangers, that we may be one people in your love. Amen.

—M. DOUGLAS MEEKS, Nashville, Tennessee

THURSDAY, APRIL 10 • Read John 13:1-17, 31b-35

Just a few days ago, he had sat at another table and received Mary's gift as she poured the precious perfume on his feet. Now it is Jesus' turn to give as he gathers at the table with his companions for their final meal. And so, basin in hand, he begins to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel he has wrapped around himself. Water splashes over the sides of the bowl as he moves from friend to friend, kneeling before each one.

Water has connected Jesus and the disciples since the beginning of their journey together. By the shores of the lake of Genesaret, Jesus had first met and called Simon Peter, James, and John. On a stormy lake the disciples had become terrified until Jesus calmed the waves. Another time they had watched as Jesus walked toward them on the water. They had listened with some perplexity as Jesus spoke of his life-giving water. And they had watched tears roll down Jesus' face as he wept over Jerusalem and again as he stood at the tomb of his beloved friend Lazarus.

This last meal is a meal of memory. Jesus gives them not only the gift of bread and wine by which to remember him but also the gift of water. In the washing bowl they see the reflections of all they have shared together. Yet Jesus impresses upon them that their shared journey does not end with this gift of washing. Rather, they are to continue to wash one another's feet, even as he has washed theirs. Water will continue to connect them and all who walk in the path of Christ, offering grace and comfort.

Even as I receive your gifts, O God, may I pass them on to others. Even as I know your touch, Divine Companion, may I extend your embrace. Amen.

—JAN L. RICHARDSON, Maitland, Florida

When I was learning to drive, my father offered some advice that has served me well. “Don’t focus on the street just in front of the car,” he said. “Look farther down the road, and see the bigger view.” In today’s scripture the apostle Paul suggests that the Christians in Rome extend the focus of their spiritual eyes to see the bigger picture.

The members of the church in Rome comprised a diverse and contentious group. People bickered about opinions, holy days, and diet. An inhospitable and judgmental climate prevailed. Paul likens them to insensitive guests at a banquet who criticize their host’s servants. He suggests that they lift their eyes above and beyond their disagreements to realize that those differences are individual ways of honoring the same Lord and serving the same God. Instead of battling with one another, they can unite in thanks to God.

Paul could be writing to us. We also struggle with accepting diversity within the church. We too are quick to judge and slow to understand, accept, and appreciate one another. Our spiritual tunnel vision can corrode our spirits, blunt our witness, and undermine our mission. We would do well to heed the apostle’s advice to take a bigger view—to be aware that even though we may not think or act alike, we all seek to worship and serve the same God through the same Jesus Christ.

God of all people, as I relate to others both inside and outside my particular faith community, help me focus on the commonalities we share through you—not on our differences. In Christ’s name I pray. Amen.

—ARVIN LUCHS, Portland, Oregon

SATURDAY, APRIL 12 • Read Romans 13:8-10

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” This new commandment makes me, a native South African, wonder how apartheid ever came about. South Africans are God-fearing folks, yet we allowed the absolute antithesis of this commandment to become the law of the land. How can we love one another and reside in this segregated country?

Love crosses seas, moves over national borders, and is blind to the hue of another person. Why is it so hard for sophisticated, educated people to grasp the truth and understand the simplicity of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves?

In a world that has become increasingly violent—where is love for our neighbor? After two thousand years what have we understood about loving our neighbor as ourselves?

As the scripture says, “The commandments . . . are summed up in this word: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following options for the meaning of the word *commandment*: “command, order, bid.” Soldiers follow the orders (command) of their superior officers to the letter. Let us follow this order this day to the letter. Let us love one another as we love ourselves.

Today we must, with urgency, begin affecting the lives of those around us where we are. We must love one another unconditionally and without thought of “what’s in it for me.” If we follow the orders of the Lord, all obstacles to love will fall away. Today let us try to love all those whom God places in our path. We will do this with the empowering strength of the Holy Spirit.

And tomorrow?

Lord, help me. Empower me to love as you have commanded. I cannot do so without your help. Give me the grace this day to be open enough to love my neighbor as I love myself. Give me an understanding of your love for me, so that I may affect the situation of those you give me to love. Amen.

—ROLAND RINK, Gauteng, South Africa

Abraham and Sarah have trusted God long and often in the many decisions of their lives. They have moved from the land in which Terah settled, dealt generously with Lot, and followed God's instructions regarding worship. Abraham has also heard the word of the Lord: He will be the father of a great nation. Since Sarah does not conceive, Abraham makes various arrangements to ensure the promise's fulfillment.

In today's text, Abraham extends lavish hospitality to three men who give no account of themselves at all. They appear to have neither baggage nor retinue, but Abraham treats them with great courtesy all the same. In so doing, Abraham extends the hospitality practices of this nomadic people. He also opens himself to hear God's word spoken by these visitors. By taking the servant role (in this passage he refers to himself as such, and in the next section he actually serves them), Abraham accords his visitors the sort of respect that allows him to hear their later confirmation of God's promise to Abraham.

The text alternates between "three persons" and the use of the singular ("Lord") in reference to the visitors. At some point in the conversation, Abraham appears to recognize this event as a divine visitation. Perhaps we too might experience insights into the divine will if we learn to respect one another and listen deeply enough.

Think of times in your life when listening to a stranger (or perhaps a person living in the margins) allowed you to hear God's promise.

—HARRIETT JANE OLSON, New York, New York

MONDAY, APRIL 14 • Read Matthew 18:15-20

This passage offers a dimension of the power of living in community. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” When the community of Christ prays together, God shows up with power to restore, to make whole, and to mend broken relationships.

Those who exercise with a partner are more likely to continue the discipline than those who exercise alone. In covenant discipleship groups, the “buddy system” sustains us in mutual accountability. Even in nature we see the power of two. Zebras often stand in pairs, head to tail, tail to head, using their tails to swat flies off the other and act as eyes in the back. Enemies coming from either direction are quickly seen. We commonly say and believe that “there’s safety in numbers.”

But this text involves more than merely human support and communal power. The community is the context of the continuing realization of the risen Christ. (See Matthew 1:23; 18:20; 28:19-20.) Matthew’s Gospel holds a clear vision of Christ with us and among us to the end of the age.

We are communal beings, from the microchurches in ancient Rome to our growing awareness of ecological relationship with all things. As Christians we do not live as lone rangers. Baptized into the Christian community, we acknowledge that solitary piety contradicts biblical understandings of Christian living. Our vocation is to work out our salvation, inward and personal/outward and social, as members (in the organic sense more than organizational) of the body of Christ. In every context, grace draws us up into the love and life of the Trinity. We are invited again and again to know God through the power of community.

When have you experienced God’s presence through the power of community? What were the short-term and long-term effects of life in community? How will you strengthen the sense and experience of community for yourself and others?

—MARY O. BENEDICT, Waialua, Hawaii

Today's reading sets forth God's goal statement for the faith community: that believers take their place in God's new family as children of God. "How-to" steps accompany the goal statement. Being children of God or adopted into the family of God is both the point of departure and the destination. Most of us find it comparatively easy to accept that we are God's children. The hardest part, however, is to accept one another as brothers and sisters, siblings in the large family of God. God directs us to our oldest sibling, our elder brother, Jesus the Christ, who leads us into this new life assuring us that it is possible, since it is he who has broken down the walls of separation on the cross.

Under Christ's leadership we are to live as children of God. The way we treat those we love—and those we don't like—measures the effect of God's grace upon us. Adopted as children of God, we find ourselves reoriented. We see things, people, and circumstances in a new and different light.

Often God's goal remains an unrealizable ideal because of the prejudices and injustices of one group against another. Mahatma Gandhi, the foremost leader in the freedom struggle of India, called the most discriminated-against people of India *Harijans*, "God's children." Caste and racial prejudices in India have assigned them the lowest place in society. This group of people chose another name for themselves: *Dalits*, the "broken" people. Neither Gandhi's endearing term *Harijan* nor the church's claim to be one in Christ have attracted the broken people of the land because of long years of discrimination.

God's goal for believers remains an enlarged new humanity where barriers of race, culture, class, and other distinctions are broken down. This new human family is God-designed, sealed by Christ's death, and delivered daily by the guarantee of the Holy Spirit.

Christ, our eldest brother, make us one in your broken body on the cross. Amen.

—GLORY E. DHARMARAJ, New York, New York

A Future with Hope

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 16 • Read James 5:7-12

Seed-sowing is for the hopeful and sometimes the arrogant. The arrogant do not always stay until germination. They are captivated by the novelty of beginning something new and intimidated by the loss of status that failure might bring. They are quick to interpret the success or failure of other seed-sowers and are masters of the “you should have. . . .” Still, it is in the plan of God that even the arrogant sow.

It is the hopeful who plant their lives with the seed—living not for the breaking of new ground but for the emergence and maturity of the fruit. Having carefully selected the seed, they pull the weeds, give all the water their arms can carry, and wait. At times, the wait is long. The certainty of the moment in which they held the seed is obscured. They wait and work. They work and pray.

Deep within the faith-seed is the promise of God, pregnant with life. Whether sown by the hopeful or the arrogant, it lives. Its germination is both guaranteed and determined by God’s plan. There is no risk and therefore no need to argue.

In the face of utmost certainty there is no speculation. We time the planting, expecting the fruit at harvest time. But the seed is God’s. It often grows what we did not choose. Its germination is longer than we thought. But it grows. It is not often what we thought we had planted. It is always what we need.

**Seedmaker,
teach me that all which comes from you
is certain.
Remind me
that I am the product of someone else’s sowing,
and how long I have taken to grow. Amen.**

—RAY BUCKLEY, Anchorage, Alaska

At the time of this psalm's writing, God's servants are passing through times of sorrow and sadness. They wish the situation could be different or that a way of escape existed. Even today many people wish that life could be different, that there might be a way to escape the major calamities of the day: HIV/AIDS, unemployment, poverty, hunger, war . . . the list is endless.

Yet the psalmist expresses hope and trust in God. In God's hands he feels safe, secure, and protected. God cares for him in the same way that a hen watches over her chicks. The hen's wings protect like an umbrella. Her protection begins at their birth and continues by creating an atmosphere of strength and assurance. Under her outstretched wings, the chicks can live in freedom and with confidence.

We need to settle under the knowledge and assurance that at all times God reigns—at all times God is in control and, therefore, we can completely trust God. This is what the psalmist portrays in verse 4: “and under his wings you will find refuge.” If we trust in God, we can look away from daily fear and anxiety to the God who is trustworthy. The people, settings, and situations that cause fear and anxiety may and will continue to be part of daily existence, but God's promise of love, care, and protection far outweigh these trials. We affirm our confidence in God by our continued expression of trust, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1), as we face the future with the knowledge and confidence that God is in control.

Lord, teach us to hold on to the truth so that our trust in you may be an everyday pillar of hope and assurance. Amen.

—IKE (ISAAC) MATSHIDISHO MOLOABI, Johannesburg, South Africa

FRIDAY, APRIL 18 • Read Isaiah 40:3-11

Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low,
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed.

The future tenses in Isaiah 40:4 seem to be imperatives; if these conditions are met, then the glorious and blessing-filled consequences promised in verse 5 will happen. We can prepare the way for “the glory of the LORD” to come.

Lifting valleys and lowering high places symbolize the acts of the sovereign Savior promised in Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). So sure is Mary of God’s promises that she states them as accomplished facts. The Lord who will come into the world through her “has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52).

What appears in the Magnificat as promises of God’s action appears in Isaiah as human responsibilities. The lowly people in captivity are to be lifted up; the mighty on their thrones are to be brought low. If they do that, then the glory—the awesome and rich presence—of the Lord will come in conspicuous ways.

Preparing a way for the Lord’s coming also includes straightening out the circuitous routes we impose on people to achieve the same gains we have obtained and leveling the playing field where we live out our lives. If we promote equity in these weightier matters of justice, then all people shall see the glory of the Lord together.

Gracious God who works for justice, renew our resolve to bring down the obstructions, straighten out the crooked paths, and level the rough roads people must travel to obtain dignity and the necessities of life, so that your glorious presence will become conspicuous for all. Amen.

—ROY I. SANO, Washington, D.C.

The valley of dry bones portrays well the self-awareness of the exiled community in Babylonia and also of the scattered Hebrew community in Palestine. Valley of dry bones, death, death, death. The prophet enters into that somber mood, living in solidarity with the human reality of historical defeat. He does not rejoice in the fulfillment of his warnings and predictions of judgment. His central vision is the living God who calls him to prophesy to these bones, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.”

The resources of God are brought to bear on a closed historical situation. The opening toward a different reality does not depend on human resources but on God’s powerful handling of history to open new possibilities: “I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.” The good news to these people who perceive themselves as scattered and powerless is this: God is still alive, opening the future. The miracle of faith resides in its ability to risk. Faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

We recall the sad times of slavery in America and the power of spiritual songs to keep faith and hope alive; we think of the Orthodox Christians in former socialist countries singing “Christ is risen, is risen indeed” as the only simple and powerful answer to ideological propaganda. Or we see children singing God’s praises in refugee camps in the heart of Africa. God’s message is clear and historical: “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.”

O Servant Lord, who participated in profound human despair on the cross, help me look beyond my closed reality to the power of resurrection, to the new heaven that is coming. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

—EMILIO CASTRO, Montevideo, Uruguay

SUNDAY, APRIL 20 • Read John 4:5-15

Jesus' journey led through foreign territory. Given the fierce hatred between generations of Jews and Samaritans, this stage of Jesus' journey sounds like God's leading rather than a human preference. Jesus travels across religious taboo and social segregation and rests at a well. Thirsty, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman with the means to draw water for them both. He dares to draw her into the shared task of satisfying his need for water. The noonday sun is hot. She questions and hesitates but relents in the face of their common necessity.

Jesus invites the woman to move beyond the surface of this water's meaning and depths. He already has led them both across the boundaries of their people's enforced separation. Jesus offers her life, the eternal life that the well water only begins to signify. Look beneath the surface, he urges her and us. Look beyond the edge of this encounter with life's wellsprings. Look across the boundaries of race, sex, religion, culture, geography, economics, and social barriers.

Dare today to look for water that is more than water; dare to live beyond the bondage of material gains and losses; dare to move out from the superficial exchange of consumer transactions. What a daring conversation Jesus and the woman enter on that day's travel stop. Allow him to meet you in this moment. What will he push you to accept? What will he challenge you to share?

Dare to move today in the presence of Jesus' love: from the surface of your life to the heart of God's concern, from water in a bucket to living water offered for all.

Place a vessel of water before you. Touch the water; remember all it means in your life—cleansing, renewal, refreshment, life, and death. Look beyond it to the living water of life in Jesus Christ.

—DIANE LUTON BLUM, Nashville, Tennessee

Light kindles, blazes, shines, sets afire, illumines. What a vivid image of hope: a fire blazing in the dark. A ray of promise invades the gloomy citadel. Anticipation washes over the covenant people with the flood of the prophet's imagery. God's people will reap an abundance of joy again. Hope will be held in the hands like gathered grain. Isaiah's audience knows full well that all of life hangs on the harvest. A drought, a disaster, erases the future. Harvest is joy because harvest is future, the satisfaction of knowing that provisions necessary for tomorrow are being gathered in the hand.

The prophet ladles more assurance into a thirsty hope. Assyria's yoke on the people's shoulders breaks. Remember Gideon. Gideon with one God and three hundred men attacked the camp of the stronger Midianites. Gideon's band marched with trumpets and swords, clay jars and torches, trust and obedience. Israel celebrated the spoils of victory. Remember? Isaiah calls forth a sacred and cherished memory. God whose name was Deliverer then is God whose name is Deliverer now. The yoke breaks. Prepare for the return of joy.

We are a shined-on people. Around us, undetected in the dark, sprout the seedlings of all we will need to live on tomorrow. We see them in the firelight of God's presence. Hope has been growing all along. God has been with us in this dim place. What has lain so heavily upon our shoulders lightens. Listening to God's name, Deliverer, we smile the Amen in the dark.

I permit my heart to sing, O God, despite all evidence to the contrary, all the debris of darkness still around me. I feel the warmth of your fire burning, and joy gathers at the edges of your shining. Praise you. Amen.

—RON MILLS, Front Royal, Virginia

TUESDAY, APRIL 22 • Read Matthew 13:31-32

We have in today's parable a nest in the shade during a long, hot season. But to whom is the shade due? Presumably, the mustard seed was planted for the purpose of reaping its harvest later on, mustard being a cash crop with various medicinal and dietary uses. But Jesus' parable does not lead us to that end; the sower is removed from the story early on and never returns.

Instead, we are led to the conclusion that birds of the air become the beneficiaries of the full-grown mustard shrub. Right away we realize that any birds nesting in such a tree are freeloaders, never having lifted a feather to earn their place in its branches. Did they purchase the land? Did they prepare the soil? Did they plant the seed? Did they cultivate the young shrub to full growth? At best, they were a mere irritation of droppings and chatter along the way. But to them belongs the mustard shrub!

Ezekiel 17 offers a beautiful apocalyptic vision of the nation of Israel becoming a towering tree—great, strong, and noble. But in Matthew we get a dowdy, frumpy mustard shrub. And it is given over entirely to birds who are only in it for the shelter and the shade. Unmeriting, undeserving, uncredentialed, the birds are just there to receive. In this parable, the kingdom of heaven is such a reality: a mustard shrub enjoyed by those who can never earn it, never pay for it, never create it themselves—who can only delight in it.

Loving God, open my heart to receive from you what I cannot earn from you—your gracious rule in my life. And open my heart to accept others I may have thought unworthy, who benefit from that very same grace. Amen.

—PAUL ESCAMILLA, Dallas, Texas