

*Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church**

DAILY MEDITATIONS - February, 2023

February 1, 2023

And how great are his signs, and how mighty his wonders!

Daniel 4:3a.

As I often write in these Meditations, ‘you can’t make this stuff up.’ My late mother and I occasionally stopped at Ritz Barbeque, an iconic eatery in Allentown, near the Farmers Market. Almost 100 years old, the Ritz had its heyday in the 1940s and ‘50s, when teenagers in ‘jalopies’ converged there for hot dogs, ice cream, and music played on tabletop juke boxes. The place never seemed to change. Its ‘50s atmosphere continued into the 21st century. Mom died almost 11 years ago, and, since her passing, I haven’t been to the Ritz, though I often thought of it. A few weeks ago, after finishing my shopping, I thought again of the Ritz and of Mom. My heart suddenly felt heavy. I decided that, if there was a parking space in front of the Ritz, I’d go in. There was, so I did. Time melted away. Nothing had changed. That ‘50s décor was still there. Even the plastic-sleeved menus were the same, though prices were a tad higher. The cheery waitress who seated me asked if I needed more time to look at the menu. “I used to come here with my Mom,” I told her. “I always got turkey barbeque and she’d get a hot dog or a hamburger.” The waitress touched my hand. “My Mom came here with me, too,” she said, “and she liked hamburgers and hot dogs, too.” We nodded in silent understanding. When the waitress walked away, nostalgia and sadness – the kind of sadness I hadn’t felt in a long while – washed over me. Silently, in my heart, I said, “Oh, Mom, I miss you so much! I wish you were with me, right here, right now.” As I felt hot tears forming in my eyes, I glanced up. There, at a booth across and down from mine, hanging on the hook on the wooden post of the booth, was a black and white nubby wool coat, identical to the winter coat my mother wore in the last years of her life. Identical. But there was no one in that booth, or the one across from it, or the one behind it. The coat was just hanging there, all by itself. Waves of goose bumps covered me. My common sense knew that it wasn’t Mom’s coat; I’d kept that coat in her closet at home. But as I looked at the coat hanging on the hook at the Ritz, I knew – beyond all logic or argument – that the coat on that hook, apparently belonging to no one nearby, was not there by accident. I knew, I believed, then and now, that, through the incomprehensible workings of the universe, and the mysteries of God’s ways, that coat was a tangible symbol of Mom’s ongoing, living presence. In God’s mercy and Mom’s love, I was given a sign, an unmistakable sign, to comfort my heart and reassure my soul. Never doubt. Never doubt. You can’t make this stuff up.

February 2, 2023

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all.

Ecclesiastes 9:11

Sports – participating or watching – can teach us many things. Some of those things actually parallel Biblical lessons. The need for discipline and commitment is one such lesson, as is the need for teamwork and the desire for success. Other lessons are more subtle, such as the lesson to ‘savor the moment.’ Almost every athlete who has made it to the Super Bowl, the Olympics, or the final round of the Master’s Tournament, realizes ‘I may never get to this point again.’ Seize the day. Savor the moment. Be grateful for what is. Another lesson is the importance of grace under pressure, especially the pressure of defeat. Players who throw their helmets to the ground, or who refuse to shake hands with the victors, brand themselves as losers in ways that have nothing to do with the final score. And when we see an exhausted runner shuffling toward the finish line, in the darkening dusk, after all the faster runners have gone home, we realize that victory takes many forms, and ultimately, only we can say whether we’ve won or not.

February 3, 2023

As for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more.

Psalm 71:14

Last month, several things, especially at church, seemed to be going from bad to worse. Each day seemed to bring at least one phone call that began, “I have bad news...” When a friend phoned me, and I told her that it felt as if I was sitting at the wrong end of a garbage chute, she said, “Well, I guess 2023 will be a lousy year.” My mind snapped to attention. I had been so determined that 2023 would not just be a good year, but a great one. My favorite number, for no particular reason, has always been 23. Age 23 was terrific. I was looking forward to 2023, and in that moment, I made up my mind that 2023 would be a good year ... a *great* one. No one, and nothing, would stop this year from being blessed and bountiful. I didn’t realize it at the time, but what I was really doing was trusting God more than circumstance; believing that God’s goodness is greater than man’s evil; praising and thanking God even in terrible situations. In that instant, I flipped my outlook the way I’d flip a light switch, and a new light did go on in my mind and heart; an illuminating light, God’s Light. All days, all years, are in God’s hands. Challenging and even frightening things can be part of any year, but we can’t let them define the year. We’re not helpless victims of chance and circumstance. We can do much to shape the present and the future, to create the life we want to have. God can bring good out of everything, and God is to be thanked, praised, and trusted in everything. Here’s to 2023!

February 4, 2023

My grace is sufficient for you; my power is perfected in weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:9

Years ago, on a business trip to Nevada, I was happily tooling along a highway south of Reno and Carson City, in a red convertible rental car. I was heading to a place called Gardnerville, and there was nothing around me except blue sky, boulders, dust, and sagebrush ... until I saw flashing red lights in my rearview mirror. I knew I was within the speed limit – I am a very careful driver – so I assumed the police car was chasing someone else. After a few more miles, I decided to pull over and just let him pass me. When the police car pulled over behind me, my heart flew into my throat. I felt sick. The state trooper came over to my car, saying, in amused disbelief, “Well ... did we finally decide to stop?!?” “But I didn’t think you were following *me*,” I gasped. “I’ve been obeying the rules and driving within the speed limit.” “Not back in Minden you weren’t,” he replied. Turns out that a small town – what seemed to be all five blocks of it – that I’d driven through, has a lower speed limit than the roads leading into and out of it. I didn’t know that. Blessedly, the trooper understood that I was a visitor to the area and had never driven through Minden before. He also saw how surprised and upset I was. He gave me only a warning, and told me to watch out for speed limit changes in the small towns dotting the desert. Grace. Pure grace. I was so relieved that I wanted to hug him. So-- I had done something wrong after all. I wasn’t as blameless as I thought I was. It’s a lesson I still remember.

February 5, 2023

The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.

Proverbs 13:4

Several years ago, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) reported on a fascinating study. A series of tests was conducted with 262 children, with an average age of 15 months. One group of babies watched an adult do a task easily, within 10 seconds. The second group of babies watched an adult struggle for at least 30 seconds, persist, and accomplish the task. When both groups of babies were then given a task to do – making a music box play by pushing a button that was inactive – babies in the first group pushed the button an average of 12 times, then gave up. Babies in the second group ... who had watched the adult persist ... kept at it, pushing the button an average of 23 times. Additionally, the babies who persisted longest were those who had been engaged by the researchers, with eye contact and use of their names. It was clear: we learn diligence, we mimic persistence, and we respond to encouragement, even from babyhood. Perhaps another lesson, a spiritual one, emerged from the study: it’s not only okay to struggle, it’s good when we let others see us struggle. They learn

– whatever their age – that some things are hard and not everyone succeeds on the first try. Perhaps our openness in struggling is a form of witness, and we never know who’s watching ... and learning.

February 6, 2023

With the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.
Matthew 7:2

This is one of those verses from scripture that is clear, blunt, and correct. When we judge, we will be judged. Perhaps, more accurately, we will set ourselves up for judgment; we will have a judgmental mind-set, and we will wind up judging ourselves. A vicious circle. To the extent that we give, we will receive. That’s also an understandable cause-and-effect. When we give, we give from a sense of abundance and trust in God, whether we have a lot or not. That sense of abundance – or its opposite, a sense of lack – mysteriously sets us up to expect, and get, more of the same. A wise therapist once wrote, “We get what we think about, whether we want it or not.” We get what we focus on; we attract to our lives the forces that dominate our thinking, whether negative or positive. Psychologists today have fascinating ways to explain these mental and emotional truths, but 2,000 years ago Matthew said it so simply: if we judge, we will be judged; the measure we give will be the measure we get. The choice is ours.

February 7, 2023

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Psalm 105:1

If we ever wonder what God expects of us, what we can and should be doing as his creation, his children, this verse sums it up very nicely. We are to thank him, in all circumstances and at all times. We are to ‘call on his name,’ meaning pray to him, talk to him, listen for his words to us. And, we are to make his presence in our lives, and our belief in him, known to others. Each of these actions reinforces the others. When our hearts are grateful and we can count our blessings, conversation with God comes naturally. And when we’re aware of our blessings, we share that good news easily. *“Lord, thank you. Thank you for all of the blessings in my life—past, present, and future. Be with me always. Let your words come to my mind and heart, as my words come to you in prayer. And help me to reflect your presence in my life – your peace and your love – to others. Thank you, Lord. Thank you.”*

February 8, 2023

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she will not be moved. Psalm 46:4-5

Frequently, in the psalms, the writers use the image of a river to convey the flowing abundance of God. In this psalm, the defeat of nations that oppose God is celebrated, the power of God is acknowledged and exalted, and the grace of God – a river with streams carrying blessings to his people – is praised. These are ancient words, probably not easy to understand. They’re not the words we would use to praise God. But the unfamiliarity of these words and phrases makes us think, makes us see images of a flowing river, and helps us to think of God’s blessings in a different way. It’s good to have fresh thoughts and new images to stimulate our minds and hearts. The God who doesn’t change welcomes our new and varied ways to see him and praise him. How many blessings have flowed through your life from the river of God’s love?

February 9, 2023

Lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet.
Hebrews 12:12-13

Sometimes, we just have to push on. We may be tired, we may ache – physically or emotionally – and we may feel the weight of hopelessness. After we’ve made sure that we have given our bodies the nourishment, care, and rest that they need ... and after we have taken the burdens in our hearts to God in prayer ... it may be time to simply get up, get moving, and re-enter life. It can be too easy to stay in our beds or stay in our homes or in the protective shells we build around ourselves. When we hurt, that’s a natural instinct, and God understands that. But two of God’s consistent messages to us are that he is with us, and that he wants to give us “life, and that more abundantly.” Even if we take small steps toward re-entering life, God will take our hands and walk with us. Whatever our fears or afflictions, God can lift them as he lifts us; lifts us to new life and new strength. *“Lord, help me in my weakness. Strengthen me, guide me, and help me to move forward, one step at a time, one day at a time.”*

February 10, 2023

God our Savior desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:3-4

Whether we realize it or not, a great deal of our life is spent in real or perceived competition. In childhood, we want to be chosen in games and chosen to be a friend to others. In high school, we want to be high in class rankings. We want to be accepted at a fine college or get a good job. If we compete in sports, we want to be on the winning team or to beat our competitors. When we work, we want good reviews, promotions, and raises. Today’s verse reminds us that God isn’t holding auditions, and we don’t have to compete to win a place in his kingdom. He wants all of us – every one of us, even the people we don’t like or admire – to know him, to understand the truth of his love, and to come to him in this life and the next. There are no losers in God’s all-encompassing love; no one who is left out, unless he or she wants to remain at a distance from God. Even then, God waits and hopes that we will turn to him. God “desires everyone to be saved.”

February 11, 2023

All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.

Isaiah 40:6-8

The inevitability of death is a very difficult thing for most people to face, especially when we’re young. And it is difficult to face the fact that those we love also have a limited time in this earthly life. Our aversion to the reality of death is natural. Isaiah uses examples from nature – grasses and flowers in a field – to remind us that all living things have their seasons and lifespans. But God’s love and presence, his word and his promises, are eternal, and they do not only apply to us in this life, but also in the life to come. Life itself, in God’s grace and goodness, does not end. It may change form, setting, and substance, but we have his word that it does not end. It is a promise for all the seasons of our lives.

February 12, 2023

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Deuteronomy 10:12

If these words sound familiar, they should. They are a great deal like the words in Micah 6:8, and like many other readings in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. One thing we can say about God’s messages conveyed in the Bible: they aren’t cloaked in mystery. The language may be archaic in some versions of the Bible, and words such as ‘shewed’ may be unfamiliar to us, but when it comes to letting us know what he expects, God is crystal clear. We are to revere, honor, and respect him (“fear him”), to obey him (“walk in his ways”), to love him, and to serve him. God isn’t playing games with us or being difficult to know. God couldn’t be saying it any more clearly. We simply have to live as God asks us to ... for our own peace, joy, and benefit; for our own sense of purpose; as well as for the good of God’s creation, and the fulfillment of his will.

February 13, 2023

I the Lord will speak the word that I speak, and it will be fulfilled.

Ezekiel 12:25

Many years ago, I read an article about an international group of Roman Catholic nuns who have long been seeking changes in what they are allowed to do in their calling. When asked how they could be patient and hopeful in this quest, their spokesperson said simply, "If it is of God, it will come to pass. If it is not, it won't." What serene acceptance! We would have to have a very long view of history to truly understand how God's will works itself out, especially through bloody years of warfare and the reality of humans' cruelty to each other. Perhaps this is one of those statements in which we have to have blind faith, believing – because we know so many other things about a loving, creating God – that in the infinite stretches of time, God's will and word will be fulfilled.

February 14, 2023

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things ... love never fails.

1 Corinthians 13:7-8

I sat on the sofa in my living room, watching TV, and soaking tissue after tissue with tears that flowed endlessly. The TV show was a 20th anniversary special about the movie 'Love Actually', one of my favorite films. I laughed at some of the actors' comments. I was touched by the true-life stories behind some of the scenes in the film. It was at the end of the show, when people all over the world spoke about what the film meant to them, that my tears started. The program host asked the film's writer and its actors "what love actually is?" Their answers, coupled with film clips of toddlers and the elderly, husbands and wives, friends and lovers, pals and partners, sisters and brothers, turned my tears on full force. "Love really is all around," said several. "Love is deeper than we realize." "Love changes you; it really changes you." "Love is, in the end, all that matters. It's everything." I sat there and blubbered. 2022 had been a rough year. Friends and friends' spouses had been seriously ill. Several friends died. The nastiness in politics and the violence in the world seemed inescapable. Conflicts and contentiousness in church and community had caused me heartache and helplessness. But that message – "Love is all that matters. It's everything." – suddenly loomed larger than all of the troubles that had darkened my days. It was so clear: no matter who is in Congress or in City Hall, no matter who serves on councils or committees, in a flicker of time ... in an instant ... they, we, will be gone and forgotten. Even what we've all done, for good or ill, will soon be lost in the mists of the past. But love-- that's what matters, that's what lasts. Love should be our focus and our joy, our mission and our message, today and every day. May we all give and receive love, especially God's love. "Love really is all around."

February 15, 2023

Anna worshipped with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. Luke 2:37-38

There's a lot in this verse that's hard for us to understand. For one thing, the idea that someone would spend all day and all night in worship is almost incomprehensible. It is also a curious thing that Anna would see the baby Jesus and know ... simply know ... that this child was born for great things, for nothing less than the redemption of Israel. But Anna was a devout woman, focused on God. She had been asking for this salvation for many years. The intensity of her focus, and the deep sincerity of her prayers, may have opened her heart to recognize this child when he came. There are some Biblical verses that simply stir wonder within us, without giving us answers. This is one of them. And that's okay.

February 16, 2023

The Lord says, "I will look with favor upon you and make you fruitful and multiply you; and I will maintain my covenant with you."

Leviticus 26:9

For the ancient tribes to whom God spoke in the times of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), it was very important to be “fruitful and multiply.” Having many children meant hands to help with work, strong arms to defend the tribe, and more chance of keeping lands and flocks within the family. To be alone, to have few or no children, was to be very vulnerable. When God promised these three things – to look with favor upon his people, to multiply them, and to maintain his covenant with them – he was making the promises they most needed to hear. He still promises to look with favor upon us and to keep his covenant with us. In ways that are not limited to creating big families, he also promises us abundance and security. *“Thank you, Lord, for promises that are ancient and also current. Thank you for looking upon me with favor, keeping your covenant promises to me, and making me fruitful in ways I can see and in ways I may never understand. Thank you.”*

February 17, 2023

Uphold me according to your promise, that I may live, and let me not be put to shame in my hope.

Psalm 119:116

We all have dark nights of the soul. All of us have times of depression, despair, or doubt, when we don't know how we're hanging on, or even if we want to keep hanging on. The psalmist uses today's verse to tell God how bad it is. He needs to be upheld; his own strength and resources are no longer enough to uphold him. He wants to live, but he knows he can't sustain his own life. He has hoped in God, but has not yet seen the answers to his pleas. He doesn't even know, for sure, if God has heard him. Yet he still hopes, and he prays, and he believes. Surely, this unknown psalmist is a hero of faith; just as we are, when we keep believing, hoping, and asking, even in the dark nights of the soul. *“I hope in you, Lord. Hold me up. Let me live. Bring me out of the dark places. Please.”*

February 18, 2023

Those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Mark 11:9-10

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we can be far removed from what is being said in worship. The liturgy, the readings, and the sermon can sound like so much ‘Yadda, yadda, yadda.’ This is especially true when the focus is on cherubim and seraphim, on Hosannas and coming kingdoms, and we're sitting there wondering how we'll pay for the car repair bill, whether our job will be eliminated, or whether that lump we found is really ‘nothing.’ Yadda, yadda, yadda doesn't speak to our fears or calm our worries at such times. Even the most devout among us have times like that in worship. But God is there – always there, for us – regardless of the specific words being said. Connecting with God in worship can be as simple as saying, “I'm here, Lord. I need you,” at the start of worship, and saying “I trust you. Thank you,” at the end. God can skip over the middle – the words that don't minister to us that day – and he can go right to our hearts, right to our needs, calming our fears, comforting our souls, and bringing us his peace and his presence. *“I'm here, Lord. I need you. I trust you. Thank you.”*

February 19, 2023

Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but a good word cheers it up.

Proverbs 12:25

Doctors now know what our ancestors knew for centuries: stress can take a greater toll on us than physical illness. When we're worried or afraid, nothing else seems right, and ... unlike some medicines and treatments for physical ills ... there are few fixes for anxiety, especially the ongoing or recurring kind of anxiety that can truly ‘weigh down the human heart.’ The good news is that we are more resilient than we think. The God who made us, created us for peace and joy, serenity and gladness. Our bodies and spirits want to be in that natural state of peace and joy, and God is always ready to help us cast off anxiety and return to that natural state. In our anxiety, we should listen for the ‘good word’ in today's reading. It might come in the form of kindness from

someone, a child's smile, or a reminder of blessings. We are meant to give and receive such good words so that there will be less anxiety ... and more peace ... in us and in our world. *"Today, Lord, open my ears to the good words you have for me, and nudge me to offer good words to others."*

February 20, 2023

You are a God who makes things right, giving justice to the defenseless.

Psalm 103:6

The bumper sticker on the car in front of me caught my eye: 'Karma has no time limits.' I smiled. I needed that reminder. I'd recently seen too much terrible behavior, not only in national and international news – starving refugees, bombings of civilians in Ukraine, elimination of women's rights in Iran – but also closer to home, with sickening anti-Semitism polluting public meetings. My capacity for forgiveness was at 'Empty', and my desire to see justice, and even vengeance, was running high. The bumper sticker was a helpful reminder that it is God who balances accounts in the battle between good and evil, and that God's actions are not limited by time. Even people with no religious affiliation or background understand the concept of Karma – the belief that 'what goes around comes around' – and those who deliberately court or create evil will, somehow, be punished. We might never see what happens to the evildoers ... to the haters, liars, and destroyers ... but perhaps it's good that we don't. For the sake of our own peace, it's best if we leave justice – and especially vengeance – in God's hands. And it's all right if we take human comfort in the fact that 'Karma has no time limits.'

February 21, 2023

Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.

James 1:22

At a writers' conference, a young man asked the panel of famous authors how they created "the right atmosphere" in which to write. He said that he had a mountain retreat that offered him seclusion, but he hadn't yet found satisfactory light fixtures, a just-right desk, or a comfortable chair. The panelists smiled. They knew: a real writer can write on the back of a napkin while being jostled in the subway. This young man was either not ready to write, or he wanted to 'be a writer' but didn't want to actually write. In almost everything of importance and value in life – from love, to use of our talents, to faith in God – it isn't enough to 'hear' or 'want to be.' At some point, we have to begin doing: showing our love, using our talents, stepping out in faith. Living in God, and having God live in us, isn't a theoretical exercise. It is a real and wonderful way to live, and it is as centered in doing as it is in believing. *"Help me to be a doer, Lord; to actually live and love as you want me to."*

February 22, 2023

I – my hands – have stretched out the heavens, and all their host I have commanded. Isaiah 45:12

Few things remind us of the creative power and majesty of God as the sky does—that enormous expanse of firmament that can have a surreal glow at sunrise, an impossible electric blue at mid-day, and a thousand colors at sunset. Most of us can look at cloud formations endlessly, and if we do, we can almost feel peace settling over us while awe rises in our souls. The sky in winter is often grey, and the clouds seem to dissolve into it. But there are some days, even in winter, when the sky puts on a show. Soon, for the fun of it, and for the faith-filled awe of it, let's pause to look up into the sky, to watch it for long moments. Let the peace and reverence come. Let the reality of God and his majesty come. It will be time well spent.

February 23, 2023

So then, putting away all falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors. Ephesians 4:25

In the old "I Love Lucy" TV show, Lucy Ricardo and her friend, Ethel Mertz, were always getting into scrapes that frustrated their husbands, Ricky and Fred. In one episode, tired of the women's exaggerations and fibs, the

men challenged them tell nothing but the truth for a whole week. The women issued the same challenge to the men. All four found it impossible to last seven days without telling even a little white lie. I wonder how long I'd make it. I know I often withhold things or tweak the truth so that others' feelings won't be hurt. Today's verse certainly doesn't mean we should tell our neighbors that their drapes are ugly. But it does mean that we should take a hard look at what we say and how we say it. If twisting the truth has become comfortable to us, we're in a danger zone. If we tell outright lies, we're deep in 'I-need-forgiveness' territory. Only we know. And God knows.

February 24, 2023

The kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.

1 Corinthians 4:20

Symbols are important. The cross is a symbol. Wedding rings are symbols. Our actions can be symbolic. Years ago, at a spiritual retreat, an elderly woman told me that her life had been deeply scarred by her mother's cruelty. After her mother died, the woman's unexpressed anger – and her guilt over that anger – continued to keep her from having joy or peace. I counseled her to write a letter to her mother that night, a letter in which she could pour out her feelings, telling her mother everything that had hurt her, as well as describing her anger, guilt, and unfilled need for love. I asked her to meet me at dawn at the entry to the retreat center. The next morning, she was there with a 12-page letter—written on both sides. We walked to a clearing, where I'd dug a shallow hole. I said a prayer for her release from bondage to this terrible history, and told her to place the letter in the hole. I handed her matches and suggested that she symbolically burn away all that had been hurting her. She knelt. She struck a match and put it to the letter. I prayed again, claiming new life and freedom for her-- release for her and her mother. She wept, but they were tears of relief, not regret; peace, not pain. The symbolism of that act, she later told me, changed her life. If doing something symbolic will help you – opening a door to kick the demon of worry out, wearing a mustard-seed pin to bolster your faith, writing a letter you'll then burn in release – do it. Power comes in many forms. One of those forms is symbols and symbolism. Use them whenever you need to.

February 25, 2023

Jesus's parents found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Luke 2:4-6

We have so much to learn in life! Not just basic life-skills – managing money, working diligently, social skills – but also the deeper things, the wondrous things. How many universes are there beyond ours? What makes a star shine? What puts colors a rainbow? What is the “force that through the green shoot drives the flower?” as the poet Dylan Thomas asked. Who is this being called God, and how does God relate to me? There is so much that brings awe-- so much mystery, beauty, and miracle in life; so much that can enrich our minds, hearts, and souls. But too many of us coast along, not thinking too deeply or asking any questions; never really willing to use our intellects as God intended. But if asking questions and learning – willingly and joyfully – was Jesus's path, shouldn't it be ours, too? It is never too late to open our hearts ... or our minds.

February 26, 2023

Christ says, “I have come as a light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.”

John 12:46

The 'Four D-demons' are familiar to us: darkness, doubt, despair, and depression. Almost everyone experiences some kind of despair or lostness at some point in life. In the same way that Christ can enlighten our minds, as in yesterday's reading, he can banish darkness and the other Ds as well. But wait— if God truly loves everyone, why doesn't he just banish all forms of darkness – abracadabra! – with no need for belief in him or Christ or the Spirit? Perhaps it is because our human nature needs to know – to understand – how things happen, how they

work. God, who created us and is in us, knows that about us. If we don't understand that there is a path to healing, we won't believe it can happen. If we don't think there is 'a way' toward the light, we won't be open to light; we won't recognize it or accept it. Light would become just another shade of dark. To believe in Christ is to believe that the impossible is possible; that miracles can happen; that there is a path, even in the dark. When we can believe that, we can begin to see the light, and we will be willing to walk out of the darkness. Perhaps this is why Jesus said "I am the way."

February 27, 2023

God told them, I've never quit loving you and I never will, Expect love, love, and more love.

Jeremiah 31:3 MSG

For many years, as our parishioners walk up to the altar area to receive communion, I've developed the practice of silently saying a brief prayer for people as they pass by me to return to their pews. If I know they have an illness or other problem, that's my prayer focus. Otherwise, I simply pray, "Please bless Linda ... Please bless Bill." But recently, as I watched my fellow parishioners pass by, it simply hit me: how God overwhelmingly loves us, each of us, every single one of us, in our incredible diversity. In our faithfulness and our foolishness, God loves us. In our weaknesses and strengths, God loves us. With our compassion and our hard-heartedness, God loves us. Young or old, confident or struggling, secure or vulnerable, God loves us. Only God truly knows us. Only God sees the insecurity beneath boastful arrogance. Only he sees the fear mixed with faith. Only God knows the height of our hopes and the depth of our sorrows, and in all of this, God loves us. It seemed so obvious, as I watched each person pass by: if God loves you, so must I. I might not like some people; I might disagree with others. I might feel real anger about what some say and do, but I must have the kind of Christian love, for every person, that God has for me, with all of my flaws and failings. I must offer the grace I've been given. All of this would be beyond my feeble humanness, but it isn't beyond God's power. *"Thank you, Lord. Thank you for loving me, and help me to truly feel – and show -- love for others."*

February 28, 2023

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

Deuteronomy 30:19

We're not always comfortable with the idea of choice. Choice equates to responsibility—the responsibility for creating our own lives, for better or worse. Most of us pretty much get the lives we choose, the lives we fashion. Abraham Lincoln said, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be." That's a hard thing to face if we're not happy with ourselves. It's so much easier to blame circumstances or other people for whatever is wrong in our lives. If we think of ourselves as victims, we have someone or something to blame; we don't have to be responsible for our lives. But the truth is inescapable. We have choices to make at every stage and every age in life, and those choices will guide the direction and outcome of our lives. Yes, some people have childhoods that are nightmares, and the effects of that trauma must be faced. Others have spouses who are unloving or abusive; bosses who are managerial monsters. But wise counselors have always told us that it isn't what happens to us that matters most, it's what we do with what happens to us; how we react and how we make our choices. The responsibility of making good, healthy, and positive choices is ours, no one else's. It is a truth to which God holds us, at any age.

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***A new congregation, formed by St. John's Windish Lutheran Church, Light of Christ Lutheran Church, and St. Peter's Lutheran Church, all in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania**

