



LENTEN

Devotions

first  congregational

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

timeless worship + modern faith

Devotions for Lent 2023

These devotions are a gift to you. Feel free to use them however is best for you. They can be used as personal devotions, family devotions, or group devotions. There are seven devotions in this booklet. One for each of the six weeks of Lent, and one for Easter. But they do not need to be used that way. They don't even need to be used in the order they appear in the book. Use them in the way that works best for you.

Each devotion has a poem written by a member of First Congregational Church's Poetry Group, a scripture reading, a brief reflection, a song suggestion, and a prayer.

We hope these devotions will be a blessing for you on your Lenten journey.

Journeys

A solitary path
can be just the thing to
clear your head and
ground your feet.

In all weathers,
the place and space
between start and end
hold unknown promise.

--Diane Bateman

Scripture Reading:

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. -Mark 1:9-14

Reflection:

Following his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness where his faith was tested and his call to serve God was strengthened during a forty-day period. The season of Lent is based on that story of Jesus in the wilderness. Lent is a period of forty days, plus six Sundays, inviting us to examine our faith, explore our hopes, and ponder our connection to God. As Lent begins, you are invited to undertake a Lenten journey, seeking the path that will draw you closer to God. Take time this season to reflect on where God calls you to be.

Further Reading: Matthew 3:13-4:11; Luke 4:1-13

Matthew and Luke both record specific temptations that Jesus faced. Like Jesus, we might be tempted by food, power, or the challenge to “prove it.” Consider the temptations that you meet and how you respond to the things that tempt you away from the path of faith.

Song: *Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley*

Prayer:

God of all our journeys, we sometimes anticipate travel with great expectation but other times we approach it with fear. One step after another can lead to great reward and surprise unforeseen. Each step leads us farther from our comfort zone. Be with us in our Lenten journeys as we discover the courage to embrace the future that lies ahead knowing that your love is in every place and every person we meet. May we discover new life in the journey and trust you with the destination for we travel with you. Amen.

Renewal

Traffic moves the morning
slowly through the torn up street.

The faint moon hangs
behind a black tree in the pale sky.

Beyond my rearview mirror
litter wraps round sodden weeds.

Light rises, a dull shining
on the mud of backhoe's toil.

Restless, I pull a piece of birch wood
from the glove box, hold it, a totem,

as I watch and wait. I smooth
its silver cover with my thumb

and whisper thanks for giving me
these minutes of reflection, grace

when I might have sought to curse
and bustle, blaming others in my haste.

Then I see tiny purple crocus spires
pushing through forgotten soil

and ask, where's the hand that warmed
the glove that lies beside this street?

And here's the hand that holds
our hand, that helps us to believe.

--Linda Conroy

Scripture Reading:

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. . . With a mighty hand and outstretched arm; His love endures forever. Psalm 136:1, 12

Reflection:

Delays in traffic, the wait in a doctor's office, or the time spent on hold can feel like such a waste of our precious time—time that is so full of things to do. Lent offers the invitation to slow down and look around, to see the world around us and to recognize the presence of the sacred in the everyday. When we take time to observe the beauty around us, to see the examples of loving kindness shared in our everyday lives, and to consider the gifts of our lives, we can acknowledge the power beyond ourselves. In those moments, we recognize the presence of God in our lives.

Further Reading: Psalm 136:1-26

The enduring nature of God's steadfast love is a theme throughout the psalms. Psalm 136 describes the way the Hebrew people saw God's love manifested in their lives. Read this psalm and consider how you see God's steadfast love in your life.

Song: *For the Fruit of All Creation***Prayer:**

Ah Dear God. We find ourselves in a war-torn world filled with suffering victims. Disaster – natural and human caused – lurks around every corner. Smoke filled skies and polluted waters are the price of profits. We mourn not only the human victims but also grieve the passing of glaciers, rivers, forests, beds of coral, and wilderness. We teeter on the edge of despair. Help us to see beyond our fear to the promise of hope. Remind us that you have not forgotten your people. Inspire us to become the change that we seek. Amen.

Footsteps

Walking next to you, I hear the rhythm of our feet,
Our legs are different lengths, and the patterns never meet.
The footsteps never falter, though the speed of each may
change,
The pattern is familiar, though it never will repeat.

Our love is expressed in our walking, as hand in hand we
stroll,
Always ours and always different, a wonder to behold.
To think that we can set a mode that never is the same,
Yet which shows our growing love, solid as life takes its toll.

And when, as we must, we say goodbye, we will be walking
still,
Through sorrow and loss the steps will go on as our lives we
fulfill.
Our pattern will continue and our love will go on growing,
Beyond the time our souls shall merge on the far side of the
hill.

- Jim Hollander

Scripture Reading:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit . . .

If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

I Corinthians 12:12, 26-27

Reflection:

Within the Christian tradition, there is an understanding that faith is not only an individual matter but also involves the beloved community—people who believe in each other and in something together. In our Lenten journey, we seek to discern our individual calls to love and serve God, but we must also consider the call to walk with one another. It might be a challenge to walk with a child whose legs are short or with an elder whose steps have slowed. It is one thing to say that all are welcome in our church, and another thing to learn how to walk with others. Doing so, we learn not just to tolerate differences, but to embrace them, knowing that each one's gifts contribute to the Body of Christ.

Further Reading: I Corinthians: 12:4-30; Romans 12:4-8

The letters to the early churches at Corinth and Rome describe the Church as the "Body of Christ." Read these descriptions and consider what part of the body you might be called to be.

Song: *We Will Walk Together*

Prayer:

Too often, O God, we have sought community and found fellowship. Polite small talk is no substitute for genuine connection. We talk of pulling ourselves up with our own bootstraps but deep down we know that we cannot go it alone. Give us courage to risk opening ourselves to the others you have given us. Give us compassion to hear the stories they share. Lead us into deeper relationships, that our community may reflect the family to which you call us in Jesus. Amen.

Good Neighbors

We grow up hearing, “Treat your neighbors like you would like to be treated.”

Good neighbors bring us ‘just picked’ cherries, newly cut Dahlias, they watch our cats when we are out of town and take in our mail—drop hot soup on the doorstep.

But what of the deer who pass through our yard, the neighborhood cat meowing for a scratch and snack, the pine siskins visiting on the back porch, the spider and bee who drop in to offer their well wishes.

What of the moon and stars who are there every night, and the sun and sky every day. All good neighbors—all worthy of kindness.

--John Green

Scripture Reading:

O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all: the earth is full of your creatures. Yonder is the sea, great and wide, creeping things innumerable are there, living things both small and great. --Psalm 104:24

Reflection: “Creation Justice” is a major emphasis at First Congregational Church of Bellingham. Members of the church organized a Climate Revival for 2022. Groups of people studied issues of climate justice. Our children got in on the act through the summer’s Creation Care Camp. We have been focusing on climate action and what we can do to help the earth. As we are challenged to be “good neighbors” to the earth and its creatures, we are also invited to enjoy the earth and the renewal it offers. We are invited to love the created world as we love our neighbors.

Further Reading: *Speak with the Earth and It Will Teach You* by Daniel Cooperrider; *Right Now! Real Kids Speaking Up for Change* by Miranda Paul. This 2023 All Church Read and the companion volume for children provide additional opportunities to consider our sacred relationships with others and with the earth.

Song: *For the Beauty of the Earth*

Prayer:

Creation God we know that we are all relatives on this earth. The powerful and complex webs of ecology you created connect us with the tiniest microbes and the most distant stars. Help us to expand our thinking about family and community to include our animal and plant neighbors. Expand our imaginations that we might listen to the teachings of this planet with all its life-giving resources. May the awe we feel at ocean's edge or mountain top inspire us to deepening connections with all our relatives. Amen.

Everything is Holy

I close my eyes
and breathe in
and out

listening

rain drips randomly
my clock has a steady beat
the refrigerator hums

and fire pops softly
a chickadee pecks at the screen
and flies away

I breathe in
and out
listening

grounded once again
in all that's holy

now.

--Amelia Bacon

Scripture Reading:

Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. – Matthew 6:26-29

Reflection: The Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” Take time to ponder the holiness in your daily life. How do you feel grounded in all that’s holy each day? How does the power of love flow through your life?

Further Reading: The Serenity Prayer

Abraham Joshua Heschel and Reinhold Niebuhr were good friends, often taking long walks up and down Riverside Drive in New York City. Niebuhr may be best known to the world as the author of “The Serenity Prayer,” but for us in the United Church of Christ, he is known as “one of us,” a pastor in one of the predecessor denominations of the UCC. Heschel was an orthodox rabbi and professor of Jewish Mysticism. Read the Serenity Prayer and consider what it has in common with the well-known quote of Heschel written above. What does it mean to recognize life as holy? How do we live with serenity?

Song: *Dear God, Embracing Humankind*

The words to this hymn come from a poem by John Greenleaf Whittier. The third verse speaks of “the silence of eternity, interpreted by love.”

Prayer:

Spirit God, the air that we breathe is the wind in the trees. You flow through our bodies as surely as you blow across the open waters. The water we drink is the water of creation. Our baptism is one with the melting glacier and flowing river. Open our eyes and our hearts to the sacredness of our surroundings that we might recognize the holy that surrounds us. May each splash of water on our faces remind us of baptism and each breath we take remind us of your ever-loving presence in life. Amen.

My Soul

I will hold you within
until you too hope
for the unconditional
comfort of one.

I don't know your name
or if you ever had one.
I wonder about you
watch for recognition,
long for communion.
Your silence brings doubt
and fear to my heart.

Discipline challenges me,
faith presents itself as a
servant to uncertainty.
Prayer? More silence.

Love, maybe love.
Yes, I've heard about love.

--Randy Flowers

Scripture Reading: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. - John 15: 9-12

Reflection: In John’s gospel, several chapters are devoted to “The Farewell Discourse” of Jesus. This section seems long, repetitive and rambling. But imagine the setting. Jesus has just finished his final meal with his disciples. For three years, they have lived closely together. He has been their teacher—mentor, guide, friend. He knows he won’t be there to help in the next life phase. He wants to instill in them the things they will need to know. “Love one another,” Jesus says to them. Holy Week is a time when the message Jesus left with his disciples also becomes the message flowing through the ages to us: LOVE.

Further Reading: John 15-John 17

Take time to read portions of chapters 14-17 in the Gospel of John. Read these chapters like a love letter—difficult to outline, but earnestly conveyed. Chapter 17 is a prayer, asking God to protect the disciples. John 17:21 is the foundation of the motto of the United Church of Christ, “that they may all be one.” Try reading this chapter aloud.

Song: *They’ll Know We are Christians by our Love*

Prayer:

God whom we know as love, to be created in your image is to have love at our core. Deep within us there is a part of your holiness that gives us the capacity to love without condition or reason. It is so powerful that at times we are frightened. It is so real that we cannot deny it. Open our hearts, minds, and spirits to your love, O God. Make of us servants of your love in the service of the creation that you love. We may not understand love, but we can feel love. And that, gracious God is enough. Amen.

Lost and Found

What if we lost our expectation that our life would work out as it was carefully organized?

If we, so to speak, planned for the best, but understood that God may have an entirely different plan?

If we approached an unexpected event not as doomsday, but as a potentially positive and life-changing opportunity?

Then, getting lost on a road trip might lead to finding an even better destination.

Leaving a relationship might enable a more fulfilling one to happen.

Losing a loved one could make us more self-reliant and independent,

And a health crisis could show us the underlying support system we never knew was there.

All of these events happen to nearly everyone, and looking at them on the bright side, as a new adventure,

Could make the inevitable twists and turns of life less devastating.

A challenge isn't always a bad thing.

- Carletta Vanderbilt

Scripture Reading: Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb, and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there,

but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

--John 20:11-16

Reflection:

Like Mary, we might not recognize resurrection when it happens. At first glance, Mary did not recognize the resurrected Jesus. Resurrection might not look like we expect it to. Where is new life springing forth? Resurrection might be the unexpected surprise of new opportunity arising when and where we least expect it. The gift of new life might be a second chance at happiness or a reprieve from an illness, but it might also be the opportunity that arises from one stage of life coming to an end. That's the message of Easter: a message of hope. For our God is a living God and we are an Easter people!

Further Reading: Luke 24:13-35

Read Luke's story of Jesus walking with his disciples along the road to Emmaus. They walk together for seven miles without them recognizing him. Only when they break bread together do they recognize the risen Christ. Think about times when you have failed to recognize new life emerging.

Song: *In the Bud There is a Flower*

Prayer:

God of the risen Christ, we know that your answer to our prayers often isn't the thing for which we have prayed. We demand an end to pain when what we need is meaning within pain. We cry

Thank You

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