

Blessed Trinity Lutheran Church at Rosemont

DAILY MEDITATIONS - NOVEMBER, 2024

November 1, 2024

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth.

Revelation 21:1

Today, many people will commemorate All Saints Day, also known as All Souls Day. It's a day to think of those who have left this life, but who ... many believe ... live on. Many of our ancestors marked All Souls Day by taking food – cakes, breads, favorite dishes – to gravesites, in tribute and remembrance. Some people still do that. Today, I will think of my deceased parents, grandparents, and friends. At these times, my thoughts also turn to beaches, to shorelines. Let me explain. Shorelines are fascinating, and they can be deeply symbolic. At the place where the sea washes onto the sand, two very different worlds meet. Along the shoreline, clams nestle into the sand, small fish dart by, and in the shallow waters where people stand ... knee deep, looking out at the waves ... schools of wrasse, butterflyfish, and needlefish swim nearby. Tidepools, formed near rocks on the shoreline, hold an amazing sampling of sea life: snails, crabs, sea urchins, anemone, shrimps, and more. A few yards out from the shoreline, the world of the ocean awaits, a world few people ever enter. In the other direction from the shoreline, toward land, a world familiar to us unfolds: people sitting on blankets or beach chairs, kids digging in the sand, tall grasses growing in sand dunes. Beyond the beach, hotels rise up, streets and highways mark the landscape, cars and buses carry people to places near and far. The hotels have shops, restaurants, swimming pools, and entertainment. All of this is familiar to us, but the crabs scuttling along the shoreline, and the fish swimming near the water's edge – within inches of people who've come from those beach chairs, hotels, and cars – know nothing about this world of humans, even though they can see the people. Sea creatures could never conceive of a world of Hiltons and Hondas, television and traffic jams, art exhibits and airplanes. No creature living in the sea could begin to understand the complex world of human life that comes right up to the edge of the ocean. No human being, not even those who explore the sea, can understand all of its mysteries and miracles, its living creatures, and its ecosystems. Within a span of 20 feet or so, two very different worlds – which touch each other along the shoreline – exist in ways incomprehensible to each other. I believe it may be so with our earthly life and our next life— two very different worlds intersecting along a spiritual shoreline, where one life ends and another begins. Tomorrow: what happens along that narrow strip, that shoreline, where we go from one world – one life – to the next?

November 2, 2024

He made everything beautiful in its time. Also He put eternity into their hearts... Ecclesiastes 3:11

Several years ago, a friend of mine asked me to keep watch with her, at her husband's bedside, as ... for days ... he hovered between this life and the next. I'd known her husband for many years, and he, too, was a friend. Hospice staff had told his wife that he was "between two worlds, leaving one and approaching another, parting from one reality and encountering a new one." My shoreline thoughts came to me again, as I sat near the man's bedside, occasionally holding his hand and speaking to him, although he seemed only semi-conscious. As his lips sometimes moved silently, and his eyes fluttered, I could almost picture his spirit, traveling along a shoreline of the soul, gradually leaving one world for another. He was leaving – reluctantly? with relief? with joy? – the human world he'd known for more than 70 years. Was he glimpsing, as he approached it, a world of spirit and soul-centeredness? What was he seeing or experiencing, even now, while he was still with us? Was he getting glimpses of a place that holy people and holy writings have described, for millennia, as a place of light, of love, of an undeniable God-presence? Did he, even now, see long-deceased loved ones beckoning to him, waiting for him, welcoming him? There is no way to know, of course. But once again, my shoreline musings caused me to wonder if, in the immeasurable expanses of eternity, and in the infinite complexity of creation, there might be intersections – touchings – of one life with another. The Bible speaks of angels, and many people believe that angelic beings have touched their lives, have brought them guidance, comfort, or rescue. Others *know* – beyond any doubt or argument – that, at times, deceased loved ones are with them; more intersections of one life with another, more shorelines. Many believe that multiple earthly lives are possible.

For the people of Jesus's time, and centuries before, the idea of reincarnation – of returning to earthly existence to live another life – was accepted, was commonplace, until the 6th century, when Emperor Justinian and Pope Vigilius, at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, for their own power and political purposes, declared reincarnation to be a heresy. Again, my thoughts return to the shoreline. If a fish, gliding through shallow waters so close to us, can have no concept of Taylor Swift, Twinkies, Thailand, or anything else in our world, it is likely that we, as we move through our days and lives, have no idea of what lies beyond the veil separating this life from the next. Perhaps the life – the world – that we enter after our earthly existence ends will be just as new, wondrous, and unimaginable to us as our human world would be to an octopus, an eel, or a dolphin that briefly washes up onto a shore in Fiji or Florida. Death, separation from those we love and from what we know, can be frightening. But if we can visualize a shoreline, a place of meeting and touching, a place where two worlds exist side by side, we can find peace in the vastness and wholeness of God's design. Tomorrow: "Your God is too small."

November 3, 2024

For now we see in a glass dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.

1 Corinthians 13:12

Christian writer Catherine Marshall was married to the Rev. Dr. Peter Marshall, a renowned pastor and Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, who died suddenly of a heart attack at age 46. Mrs. Marshall had a very vivid dream of her husband shortly after he died. The dream "had the unmistakable air of reality about it", she wrote. In the dream, her husband was working in a garden, planting roses, something he enjoyed doing in his earthly life. Mrs. Marshall knew, instinctively, that he'd been given a task that was peaceful and pleasant, so that he would have time to adjust to his sudden death and the new life in which he found himself. That concept not only made sense to her; it brought her comfort. Perhaps we, too, have had dreams or 'senses' about loved ones who've passed. It would seem that, given the extraordinary diversity among human beings and their lives, feelings, experiences, and relationships – to God, self, and others – the next life cannot be a one-size-fits-all experience. Our human ideas of what follows death are wildly diverse. Some think that nothing but obliteration awaits. Others suggest a series of flashbacks ... life reviews ... with atonements, repentance, and forgiveness. Some seem to think that we're whisked upward, in a kind of celestial elevator, then confronted with a stern, old-man God who has recorded every one of our sins and failings in a ledger and is ready to issue a verdict. Other people envision an encounter with a Godly Presence that is pure light, pure love, and which welcomes us and embraces us with a grace that can't be described on this side of heaven. English theologian C. S. Lewis wrote the book *Your God is Too Small*, in which he describes the many ways in which we, with our human limitations, limit our ideas about God, making God's love, power, presence, and glory so much less than they really are. A mere century or so ago, most people thought that the universe was what they could see of it— the sun, the moon, the stars, a few planets seen through telescopes. Now, we know that countless universes unfold beyond this one, beyond our ability to number or measure; so many that scientists have said that creation may, indeed, be endless. Our old concept of the universe was also 'too small'. What is the relationship of that vast expanse to the eternity in which we think our lives will continue to unfold? Answers are beyond our grasp, but in thinking about the endless possibilities, in an infinite creation, designed by an intentional Force of Love and Creation (God), we become both humble and hopeful, grateful to be linked to a Creator who could never be small, joyful to be alive ... now and forever ... even if, on our side of life's shoreline, we really can't know what lies beyond.

November 4, 2024

Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Luke 6:38

We often think of this verse in terms of money. But God does not think only of wealth. If we give generously, we may still have only modest income, but be blessed with good health. We may still live pay to pay, but have a loving family. We may be able to buy only necessities, but we have peace in our hearts. We may not have a big savings account, but we enjoy our work and know the satisfactions of serving and helping others. "Good measure ... running over" can mean peace of mind and joy in our hearts. We can be rich in many ways that are not financial, and we can be poor in ways that have nothing to do with money. God rejoices in our generosity and giving, and God gives to and blesses us in return. "Thank you, Father, for everything ... always."

November 5, 2024

David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts.” 1 Samuel 17:45

Whenever we feel overwhelmed, outnumbered, or too weak to fight, we should read 1 Samuel, 17th chapter. It is the story of the boy David’s defeat of the Philistine warrior, Goliath. Goliath actually laughed at David. He was insulted that a boy should be sent to fight him, a fearsome, huge man. In addition to his enormous size and strength, Goliath had a sword, a spear, and a javelin. David had a slingshot and a few stones. But he had something else— unquestioning faith that God was with him, and that God’s truth would prevail. And so, it was. The underdog boy killed the invincible man. Do we confront comparable challenges today? Of course, we do. The boss who wants you to do something unethical. The co-worker who wants to take your job. The teacher who judges and grades unfairly. The person who has told lies about you. The one who unjustly accuses you. The person who says ‘have sex with me or else’. There are Goliaths everywhere. But if we set our hearts and minds in a truthful, God-centered direction, we can be sure that God is with us, to strengthen and deliver us, to give us the final victory. That victory may or may not look like the one we expected, and it may take a while to come through, but God will deliver us, in God’s time and way. We come in the name of the Lord.

November 6, 2024

My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth. 1 John 3:18

I didn’t know her well, but one day, after a meeting, we got to talking. She was pretty— long, blonde hair; a rosy, velvet complexion; and sparkly blue eyes. She was also, to say it gently, very oddly shaped. A normal appearance above her waist gave way to her being extraordinarily heavy-set below the waist. I didn’t know if it was genetics, a medical condition, or being overweight, but I knew it was none of my business. During our conversation, she mentioned her weight. She said that, a few years before, she’d lost 60 pounds, “but no one noticed. No one saw a difference. No one even knew I was trying. That hurt more than being overweight.” I never forgot her words. ‘Noticing’, like support and encouragement, matters. I recalled another woman who said that her marriage seemed to die for lack of noticing— never any thanks or mention of the wonderful meals she prepared, the celebrations she arranged for holiday and family occasions, and the way she cared for and encouraged others, with no thanks or response in return ... no noticing. Most of us are surrounded by people who are trying ... trying so hard ... personally, professionally, or in other ways. If we simply notice, it will mean so much to them, perhaps more than we can know. *“Noticing Lord, open my eyes to those who are striving or struggling in some way, and those who are giving of themselves, perhaps for me. Open my heart to reach out to them, and give me the words to encourage, strengthen, sustain, and thank them, in your name.”*

November 7, 2024

The Lord bless you and keep you. Numbers 6:24

What beautiful words in this verse, what a beautiful thought; so beautiful that it feels like a prayer as well as a blessing. Perhaps it is. Perhaps this is something we can say and should say when we greet each other in church, or anywhere else. When we say good-bye. When we think of someone. Perhaps we can write these words in our Christmas cards or email greetings. However we use them, we should remember and savor them, and feel them in our own hearts, as a blessing to us, today and always. “The Lord bless you and keep you.”

November 8, 2024

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Ephesians 2:19

A well-meaning person once advised me to “always keep an extra \$25,000 in your checking account, in case your car dies and you have to get a new one.” I thanked her for her advice. I didn’t tell her that I didn’t, then, earn that amount in a year. Having an extra \$25,000 was as unreal to me as having an extra \$25 million. She meant well. She simply didn’t understand how different my life was from hers. That can be true for all of us.

We can understand that people lead lives very different from ours, but we can't really know those lives. We have great empathy for those who are homeless, but we don't know what it is to have nowhere to sleep safely, no clean bathroom nearby, no privacy, no shelter. Our hearts break for those fleeing violence or disaster in their countries, but we don't know the agony of walking miles in the heat or cold, carrying a child, hoping that somehow, somewhere, you'll find food, water, a place to simply sit down and stay for a while. Even if we can't know the reality of other people's lives and worlds, we can pray for them, help them, and always, *always*, respect them as God's children – just as precious in God's sight as we are – and as fellow travelers on life's journey, no matter how different the paths on that journey may be. It is a respect that God requires of us.

November 9, 2024

Male and female God created them, and he blessed them and named them “humankind.” Genesis 5:2

Human beings are natural name-givers. We especially name or nick-name things we love, including pets, boats, even cars. My cars have all had names, starting with my first one, the QE II (it was a Custom Chrysler Newport that seemed half-a-block long). But, sometimes we're just as casual with people's names. God seems to take names more seriously than we do. He named Jacob 'Israel'. He spoke the names of John and Jesus to their parents. Saul became Paul, and his life and mission were changed forever. God tells us that God's name is not to be spoken irreverently. It is a holy name. Psychologists know that people can be affected by the names they're given, or the names they're called. Some parents give children names they don't even like, just to please a relative, and the name evokes resentment forever. Some, trying to be trendy, give their children names like Pineapple or Cobra, never thinking of what it means for the child to carry that name. Billionaire Elon Musk named one of his children X AE A-Xii (pronounced Ex-ash). A few parents even turn their child's name into a joke – Midnight Mistake – and think they're being funny. God sees things differently. God knows that a name can be a blessing, a glory, a calling, a destiny. Names should always be given in love, and with reverent thought for what they will mean for the child, not for parents' vanity, relatives' demands, or social media attention. But whatever the names our families give us, we also have a name that God gives to us: Mine. “You are mine,” God says. “Mine.” God's. Child of God. Each of us has that name. Thanks be to God.

November 10, 2024

Give us this day our daily bread ...

Matthew 6:11

It was many years ago. My heart was pounding and I was a mass of nerves and stress. A difficult relationship had gotten worse, and I couldn't think past my pain. I sat in the den of my apartment and prayed, “Please, Lord, let him call. For me, now, this call is daily bread. Please give me this day my daily bread.” About 30 minutes later, the phone rang. It was him. “Daily bread” is usually thought of as food, as sustenance, and such food matters. But sometimes, what we need most is rescue or relief, a kind word, a hug, hope ... or a phone call. In time, I knew I didn't want that chaotic relationship, and I forgot about the man who called. What I've never forgotten is that God understands all the things that “daily bread” can be. Whatever you need most, may our gracious God give you your “daily bread”, today and always.

November 11, 2024

....Neither shall they learn war anymore.

Isaiah 2:4

When he campaigned for the presidency in 1960, John F. Kennedy was young, 43 years old, but he wasn't naïve. He was a senator from Massachusetts, he had been a congressional representative, and he had served in World War II, rescuing his fellow sailors when their PT boat was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer. After he'd been president for a year or so, he said that, once he actually sat in the oval office and felt the weight of presidential responsibility, he realized that ‘the number one job of the president is to keep this nation out of war.’ His comment reminded me of what my father often said: “America has been blessed to have never had a conflict like World War I or World War II on our own land. Except for the Civil War, the U.S. has not experienced the kind of war that so many nations have, the kind in which so many U.S. soldiers have fought.” Today, on Veterans Day, we can do two things: thank and honor those who have served and fought for this nation, for its allies, and for freedom, and we can pray that the day will come when all nations will be ‘kept out of war’.

November 12, 2024

Those who counsel peace have joy.

Proverbs 12:20

In letters sent to advice columnists in the newspapers, people often refer to those – even family members – who create strife. Such people are judgmental, highly critical, unforgiving, and intent on dividing, separating, and isolating others. Unlike those to whom today's verse refers, these strife-creators aren't interested in peace and harmony. Their satisfaction comes from generating bad feelings and hurt. It is such a shame ... and such a sin. Today's verse tells us that those who seek and cultivate peace know joy. God bless them. Based on the letters sent to the advice columnists, those who create stress and dissension may find temporary, fiendish delight in doing so, but they don't find peace ... or real fulfillment. They eventually become enmeshed in the very chaos they helped to create. The lesson is as clear as it is timeless: counsel and create peace ... and you will find joy.

November 13, 2019

Believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.

James 2:1

Speaking of creating strife.... The woman, then in her fifties, was known for three things: her baking skills, her gossiping, and her undisguised favoritism toward one grandchild. The woman had six grandchildren, aged two to six at the time, but she favored and showed affection to only one. She was not unkind to the others; she simply didn't pay attention to them. At a family event, she was even foolish enough to say, to her other grandchildren, "Granny only loves Katie." Not even her children's distress at her behavior, or their warnings, could stop her blatant favoritism. In time, the effects of that favoritism played out. Katie developed a sense of superiority and entitlement that alienated her from her siblings, cousins, and other family and friends. The other grandchildren developed a coolness, a disinterest, toward their grandmother. They enjoyed and engaged with other family members, who paid attention to them, but they stayed clear of Granny. Sadly, she didn't seem to notice. Katie was her whole world. Twenty-some years later, the other grandchildren had no contact at all with their grandmother, and Katie only stopped by to borrow money – which she never seemed to repay – or to present a list of things she wanted Granny to buy for her. Perhaps the grandmother began to see the light on the day Katie came by and asked, "How much will I inherit when you die?" If only Granny, a devout church-goer, had read and understood today's verse. So many lives might have been so different, including her own.

November 14, 2024

...He made us as accepted in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:6

I'm in awe of my friend Sheila's discipline in faithfully doing her therapy exercises at home. I'm lucky if I do one exercise, once a week. Of course, I beat myself up mentally for being such a sloth, such a failure. In the middle of a recent rant of self-criticism, God seemed to stop me cold. God reminded me that, each morning, I read eight devotional guides and spend time with God. Each month, I write 30 or 31 Meditations. "Stop the self-criticism," God seemed to say. "You have discipline. You just use it in different ways. You aren't perfect. You aren't meant to be perfect, and I love you." It was what I needed to hear. Maybe you need to hear it as well: You aren't perfect. You aren't meant to be perfect, and God loves you. Now enjoy your day.

November 15, 2024

The fear of others lays a snare, but one who trusts in the Lord is serene.

Proverbs 29:25

How deeply insightful today's verse is ... and how accurate, psychologically. If we made a list of people or things of which we are or could be afraid, we'd be writing for a long time. We might be afraid of bosses or others who make life difficult in the workplace. Afraid of people who make us feel insecure or insignificant. Afraid of bullies and vicious people. Afraid of those who lurk in the dark and plot evil deeds. Afraid of illness and calamity. Afraid, afraid, afraid. Fear is a natural feeling for human beings. It can help us, warn us, prepare us; but it can also be a snare, a trap, that holds us in worry and despair. But if we trust in the Lord, our fears can be dealt with, can be put in their proper place, even used to teach us, strengthen us, and guide us forward. In God's protection and presence, we are not only "serene", we can be free; free, even from fear.

November 16, 2024

Though the fig tree does not blossom and there is no fruit on the vines, though the product of the olive fails and the fields yield no food, though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there are no cattle in the stalls, yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; he will make my feet like deers' feet and he will make me walk upon my high hills. Habakkuk 3:17-19

Today's verses are more than a reflection of an ancient prophet's trust in God. They are an affirmation, a prayer; one I have spoken often, just as it is written. You don't have to lack cattle in stalls or flocks in the fold to understand and speak these words. You don't have to have vineyards or fields that are not producing. I spoke these words when I lost a job and didn't know how I would pay the rent. I spoke them when I ended a relationship I knew wasn't right for me, even though continuing it would have been easy and advantageous. I spoke them when my father faced cruel cancers at ages when he should have been perfectly healthy. I spoke them in times of fear and anxiety, when the darkness seemed bottomless. These words tell God – and thus, we tell ourselves – that we trust God, no matter what. No matter what. Even when “the fig tree does not blossom.” When a dark time comes, read these words, say these words, pray these words. God will understand. So will you.

November 17, 2024

Surely men of low degree are a vapor, men of high degree are a lie; if they are weighed on the scales, they are altogether lighter than vapor. Psalm 62:9

I often see two contrasting sights: first, scores of self-storage sites, acre upon acre; and second, shopping carts near shelters and food pantries, where the homeless go for a meal or a place to sleep. The contrast, and the irony, are obvious. Some folks have so many things that they can't fit all their possessions inside a house or apartment. Other people only have a shopping cart in which to store the few possessions they own. Yes, some storage units are rented when people move or are in transition. Not all storage spaces reflect wealth. Nevertheless, if we want a visual image of the contrasts in people's lives, shopping carts and self-storage units will do nicely. Jesus said that the poor will always be among us. That's part of the reality of being human. It is equally natural that – through inventiveness, creativity, diligence, or superior skills – some people, in any time or any nation, will generate income and resources that make them rich, indeed. Perhaps there is an inevitability to both of these states— rich and poor. But as we consider the image of storage sites and shopping carts, we should at least agree on this: human beings, whatever their situations in life, are worthy of respect. Rich, poor, or in the middle, we are all God's children— called to God's purposes, loved by God, sought by God, saved by God, both the billionaire and the bag lady. Absolutely equal in God's eyes. It's hard to picture a homeless person, living out of a shopping cart, standing on equal footing with someone who has undreamed-of wealth, power, and possessions. But there is one place where they share such equal footing: before God. We would do well to remember that truth when we look at both the rich and the poor in our communities, our country, and our world.

November 18, 2024

I will both lie down in peace and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8

Yesterday's reference to self-storage units fits in with today's verse, though not in the usual way. In the Bible, and in our lives, peace is one of the BIG words. But peace can be a small thing, too; a gentle, quiet blessing that comes softly when we need it, when we seek it. One day, when I went to the small storage unit I rented when I moved, I saw the door raised on a garage-sized unit nearby. There, at the entrance, sitting on a folding chair, was a husky guy, in his 40s or 50s, in a T-shirt, jeans, and baseball cap. Next to him was a cooler of beer, a tray of sandwiches, and a bag of chips. In front of him, on a small table, was a TV. The guy looked as happy as can be, sitting there at his storage unit, smiling and peaceful, as if he was at the beach. He gave me a smile and a wave and said, “Good day, lass!” Seeing the surprised look on my face, he explained: “It's the wife, you know. Fine woman, but sometimes a man just has to get away. Better for her, too. She packs my sandwiches.” I burst out laughing. My admiration for him soared. Rather than stay home and bicker, or – worse – silently submit to escalating tension or pointless arguing, he had created a little haven for himself; a place of peace where he could relax, be free from anger and quarreling; where he could think pleasant thoughts, enjoy his beer and sandwiches, and watch the ball game. Not the usual sight at a storage facility, and not the usual way to handle conflict.

But, all things considered, not bad. Not bad at all. He did what we are all encouraged to do: he sought peace. Perhaps, when he went home, he and “the wife” were actually happy to see each other. (I’m always an optimist.) Good for him. Good for all of us when we walk away from unproductive anger, when we seek peace, if only for a few hours, if only in a storage unit. More than we realize, we’re responsible for nurturing our own happiness, making our own adventures, and finding our own peace. We have a tendency to place those responsibilities on others ... begging them or blaming them ... but ultimately, the responsibilities are ours. Peace. It can be as simple as refusing to engage with toxic people; cancelling or rescheduling something to better suit our needs, not someone else’s; or discontinuing activities toward which we’ve become resentful rather than inspired. Peace. We can choose it more often than we know; even in a storage shed.

November 19, 2024

Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Ruth 1:16

The story of Ruth is heartwarming. Naomi, a widow, lost her two adult sons as well as her husband. With her now-widowed daughters-in-law, she began to go from Moab to her homeland of Judah. One of her daughters-in-law returned to her own family, but the other, Ruth, chose to remain with Naomi, saying the words in today’s verse. Life can change as much for us as it did for Ruth and Naomi. Most of us grow up in our birth families. Some of us are adopted, some are brought up by family or friends. Parents divorce, remarry, and bring step-parents into our lives. We acquire new siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents. Other marriages and family changes make life more complicated. But often, in the midst of all this change, we do what Ruth did: we form an attachment that’s born in the heart, and we make the commitment that “your people will be my people”. Human beings are hard-wired for connections and relationships. In today’s world, families can become nets of not-simple connections. Loving friends often become the families we choose for ourselves. But when hearts connect, something loving and even holy happens, regardless of how unusual the family tree becomes. When we link our hearts to others, and when we, like Ruth, make the commitment to share life with others, we can be blessed as Ruth was. She found new love and security with Boaz. She found a life she never would have known had she not chosen to bond with Naomi. Commitment and love are seldom easy. They often require courage, and they don’t come with guarantees. But they are always worth our attempts to create such bonds. And often, like Ruth, we find new love, new families, new blessings.

November 20, 2024

For everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. Ecclesiastes 3:1

Two years ago, cataract surgery and house repairs ‘stole my summer’. This year, drenching rain, scorching heat, back pain, therapy sessions, and replacing a roof stole another summer. I didn’t make it to a pool until the end of summer, and I never even uncovered my deck furniture, a tough job for a bad back. It was enough to try to keep up with daily demands. Suddenly, it was September. It wasn’t the summer I wanted, but it was the summer I got, and, as God reminded me, I made it through. Now, as I start my annual countdown to the first day when the days grow longer, and to the first day of spring, I smile. As of today, only 30 days until the days grow longer, only 130 days until the first day of spring. God provides.

November 21, 2024

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children.... Psalm 103:17

God works in our lives in many ways, sometimes in ways we don’t expect. God uses troubles, even distress, to teach us what we need to know. It isn’t that God causes misery for us, but he uses the changing circumstances of our lives – including the inevitable times of trial and pain – for good. God opens doors to opportunity; brings people into our lives; takes others out; and transforms darkness into light. As today’s verse reminds us, God’s love and grace even extend to our ultimate fear— death; the prospect of disappearing into nothingness or descending to ‘the pit’. In God, we know that light and life await us: God’s light, God’s life, God’s salvation, our reconciliation. As God guides our lives, he redeems our souls. Our lives shall “see the light.”

November 22, 2024

I know the plans I have for you ... to give you a future with hope.

Jeremiah 29:11

A friend was talking about the choices he made, the ones he didn't make, and how he wondered about them. We all have that pattern. We make choices. We go in one direction and not others, and sometimes, we wonder. It's natural to look back, to think about paths not taken. In World War II, my dad had the chance to attend Officers Training Corps; to make the Army Air Corps (the Air Force) his career. He didn't take that path. Perhaps, at times, he wondered. When I was ready for college, family problems prevented my attending Stanford University. I was heartbroken. I went to college, but wondered, at times, how life might be if I'd gone to Stanford. After graduation, my plan to do graduate study at the London School of Economics was also derailed by family troubles. That summer, I was unexpectedly ... and amazingly ... offered an administrative position in the office of the Secretary of the Navy in the Pentagon. That was an awesome opportunity, but our family situation eliminated that option as well. In that case, it was my mother who, years later, would occasionally say, "I wonder how different your life might be if you'd taken that job in Washington...." We can't take every road that lies before us. We can't choose every option life offers. We make choices, or life's circumstances dictate our directions. And yes, we sometimes wonder. But one blessing God gives us is the assurance that God has been, is, and will be with us in all of life, whatever paths we choose. Today's verse tells us that God has plans for us. Romans 8:28 says that God can bring good out of all things. Even if we make a wrong turn or a wrong choice, God can guide us into the right path. Even if we're prevented from pursuing our chosen aims, God can bring good out of "all things". All things. No exceptions. *All things*. And we don't have to wonder about that.

November 23, 2024

All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.

Exodus 24:7

Most of us don't like the word 'obedient'. We've had too many bosses in our lives, we don't like the feeling of being controlled, and we don't want to feel as if we're being trained, like poodles. Obedience to God should feel different, but Obedience was probably just as difficult for the Israelites as it is for most of us. First, most of us don't have a list, in our minds or hearts, of what God wants us to do. We don't know how to obey. Second, we're busy with our lives. And third, sometimes we just don't want to do what God seems to be asking of us. God got the attention – and eventually the obedience – of the Israelites through plagues, enslavement, exile, escape, rescue, and restoration. He often gets our attention in diverse ways. We can feel estranged and exiled, fearful and alone. We know hunger and thirst, and may know poverty and loss. Like the Israelites, we discover, finally, that in obedience to God's basic mandates, we find our peace and our purpose. It helps to know what God expects, and those requirements are clear: to love, to forgive, to have compassion, to show kindness, and to trust and thank God in all circumstances. When we accept these God-given commands, when we place them deep in our hearts, we find that we have the wisdom to be obedient ... and the willingness.

November 24, 2024

The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be fulfilled.

Proverbs 19:21

There is a well-known Hebrew saying: 'Man plans, God laughs!' That's an amusing – and, perhaps, accurate – version of today's verse. How do we know if what we want for our lives is what God wants? If our plans are God's plans? Our hopes, God's hopes? It can be especially confusing when we seek to do God's will, when we follow what we think are our callings, and we run into obstacles, dead ends, or outright failure. But think about it. We don't know many people for whom every door opened easily, every path was straight, every effort was successful, and every decision clear-cut. That would be rare, indeed. Most of us, even if we are moving along God's path for us, have times of doubt or discouragement; days when we're unsure or scared, even times when we feel lost and far from God. God has promised us many things, but God never promised us lives free from stress, trouble, or challenges. What God tells us is that he will be with us in all our days and moments, all our decisions and choices. Our best response to God's promises is to believe and trust them, especially when the path isn't clear. The words from former Catholic priest Tom Stella, in his book, *CPR for the Soul*, can help us: "Whatever is happening, should be happening. What's in the way *is* the way." God is in all of it. All of it.

November 25, 2024

But while the son was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.

Luke 15:20

With the possible exception of the good son – the one who dutifully stayed with his father and worked for him – everyone in this story feels joy when the prodigal son returns and is embraced by his father. The power of love and forgiveness radiates through this parable. The sight of his father’s open arms dissolves any doubts the son has that he won’t be forgiven or welcomed home. The father’s love and compassion fill his son’s heart, and ours as well. We have all hesitated and been afraid at times, wondering if we’re forgiven or if we’re still loved. And, like the father, we have all missed someone, regretted a broken relationship, feared that someone was lost to us forever. What a blessing reconciliation is! I can even imagine that the son who didn’t leave home – the good son who resented his father’s welcome of the prodigal – eventually learned the lesson of forgiveness. As his father told him, nothing had changed in his love for that son; he still had all that his father could give him. But now that love was extended, increased, enlarged. There is a mathematical secret to love. When there are many people in our hearts, our love is not divided, it is multiplied. The more people we love, the more love we have. Jesus knew that. Perhaps, eventually, the good son did, too.

November 26, 2024

Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

John 14:27

The works of British poet A. E. Housman (1859 - 1936) are deceptively simple. He writes about cherry trees, young love, athletes dying young, and lads going off to war. But in the pleasant cadence of his words, there is the blunt force of reality. In one poem, he writes about a young man, jailed for a minor crime, who will face the hangman’s noose in the morning; a morning “when he will hear the stroke of eight, but not the stroke of nine.” Those words cut into us, because we know that, for each of us, the time will come – decades from now or days from now – when we will not be in our usual seat in church; when our chair at the table will be empty; when we won’t be there to answer the phone; when we “will hear the stroke of eight, but not the stroke of nine.” We seldom allow ourselves to admit to that reality. It’s too alarming for most of us. But if we live consciously, gratefully, and trustingly in God and with God, the reality of the inevitable, of our leaving this life for the next, will be less fear-provoking, less distressing, and we will rest, even now, in the thought that all is well, and all will always be well, in God’s love.

November 27, 2024

Be my strong refuge, to which I may resort continually; you have given the commandment to save me.

Psalms 71:3

In retrospect, it probably wasn’t the smartest thing I ever did. The guy at the compost center was trying repeatedly to start his car. The engine just sputtered. He was obviously in a fix. This was before everyone had cell phones. He waved at me and asked if I could take him to a garage to get help. It was a split-second decision. I silently asked, “God?” God seemed to signal ‘yes’, so I said “Sure”. We were in a heavily trafficked area, near many stores and offices, with stop lights on every corner. (Yes, I know ... if he had had a gun, none of that would have mattered.) He asked if he could bring his dog; he didn’t want to leave her in his car. I said, “Okay”. When he said “her”, I pictured a small, fluffy dog. Then I saw her— about 70 lbs. of muscled, black pit bull. I love all critters, from snakes to sting rays, but there are a few that terrify me: alligators, crocodiles, barracudas, centipedes, bears, and pit bulls. The dog bounded into my back seat, filling the whole space. She thrust her head, which seemed to be the size of a football helmet, between the two front seats and began to lick my face and neck as if I was a popsicle. I swear, she made a sound like joyful purring. She put her huge paw on my shoulder. I think she’d have hugged me if she could. Her name was Shirley. I drove the man to a nearby garage that had a tow truck and mechanics on duty. He got out of my car and thanked me profusely. Shirley wanted to stay in my car and keep riding. Of course, we should always be cautious and wise, especially when strangers are involved. But sometimes, our fears are groundless. Perhaps, as in all of life, the best thing we can do is to simply ask God about our situation and trust his guidance ... and the fact that God is always with us. Always.

November 28, 2024

In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God concerning you.

1 Thess. 5:18

Thanksgiving— a holiday when we usually focus on turkey, stuffing (filling), candied yams, pumpkin pie... you get the idea. Food, family, and football tend to dominate the day. In the hustle and bustle, we can lose sight of a very powerful aspect of Thanksgiving: it can be a day when we actually do a re-set of our lives; when how we view our lives ... and how we point them toward the future ... can change for the better. That's a powerful, transforming possibility, and it's rooted in the heart of the holiday: thanks. Being thankful often comes naturally to us, as it should. As children, we're taught to say "Thank you", and, for most of us, it's a lifelong response when someone says or does something kind. But deep gratitude, a profound feeling of thankfulness for our lives – the good and the bad – is something else. For that, we need time to think, remember, and feel. We need to look at the long journey of our lives, to see both the joys and the sorrows ... from the perspective of today ... and be grateful for all of it, all of life, even the painful parts. When we can truly be thankful for all that life has been, when we can see that God has been with us and blessed us in all of life, we will be able to open our arms and our hearts to the future, with faith, with trust, with joy ... and with gratitude for the blessings yet to come. *"Thank you, Lord, for everything. Thank you."*

November 29, 2024

I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is ever with me.

Psalm 38:17

In a conversation among several acquaintances, one individual revealed the very personal fact that he had grown up with an alcoholic father. He made the comment in a factual, dispassionate way, but he acknowledged that – with his father's erratic behavior, and with his parents fighting constantly – life with such a parent was always chaotic and sometimes frightening. A few minutes later, another person in the small group quietly said, "I know what you mean. I grew up the same way. There was never any peace. You just didn't know what was going to happen from day to day or hour to hour. It was like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I wouldn't have said anything about this, except that you mentioned your father, and I understand." Secret sorrows. If we would simply understand that so many people around us have secret sorrows, we might pause before making comments or assumptions, we might be less judgmental, and we might even be a little kinder to everyone, whether we know their personal stories or not. *"Lord, teach me to make allowances – to realize there is so much I don't know about others – and to understand that we each have a life story; sometimes, one with secret sorrows."*

November 30, 2024

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, and David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness.

Hebrews 11:32-34

Today's reading sounds like a promotion for a best-seller – and it is! The Bible is filled with adventure, terror, excitement, suspense, betrayal, and bravery ... along with wisdom, comfort, reassurance, love, enlightenment, and inspiration. It is even stunningly forthright about sexual matters. It can be hard to wade through the 'begats' and legalisms of some books of the Bible, but there is so much else to capture our attention. Unfortunately, most peoples' only acquaintance with the Bible is through scripture readings that they hear in worship on Sunday. They couldn't find the book of Micah without a map, and they're likely to think Numbers is about math. In the coming weeks, as we celebrate the season of Christ's birth, and in the coming year, let's give ourselves the gift of time spent reading this remarkable book. There are many versions to suit our needs and preferences; many guides to help us understand what is written there. Our pastors or other church friends can help us to choose a Bible that is helpful for us. We can browse or read deeply; search out specific passages or choose some at random. (One idea is to begin by asking, "Lord, what do you want to show me?") What matters is that, if we have not yet done so, we become acquainted with this remarkable book that is part history and part legend, part Word and part witness, part fact and part fiction, part myth and part miracle. It should also be part of our lives.