

Lent 2021
Steadfast Love

A Devotional Booklet

"All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness" ~Psalm 25:10a
First Baptist Church in Beverly, MA



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February 17, 2021 marks the beginning of a new season in the church year. We find ourselves in a season called Lent. Lent is a time for us to remember the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness, fasting, praying, and spiritually preparing Himself for His earthly ministry. During Lent it is the custom of many followers of Jesus Christ to remember Jesus’ sojourn in the wilderness by entering our own kind of wilderness. Many Christians use this season to let go of the many distractions that prevent us from drawing closer to God. Letting go is an urgent spiritual practice.

Yet, this Lent, we find ourselves already in a kind of wilderness. For the past eleven months, many of us have practiced physical distancing to prevent the spread of COVID-19. When we have ventured out, we have done so cautiously, often wearing face coverings.

Many in-person celebrations have been put on hold. Babies have been born with only the parents physically present for the birth. We have experienced graduations via video stream. We have celebrated retirements by driving by and honking. We have surrounded newlyweds with our love via phone call and text message. In a sense, life has haltingly gone on.

But, for so many of our beloved neighbors, life has not gone on. We have sat in each other’s hospital rooms via Facetime. We have held each other close via Zoom. Our standard rituals of mourning are not happening in the same way. In our grief we feel so isolated.

This devotional is a gift to you from you. As we mourn delayed celebrations, missed milestones, and the loss of so many of our neighbors, we also feel the presence of the God who has not and will never leave us. We walk the road in the wilderness that God has placed before us because we serve a God who is faithful and whose love abounds. The submissions in this devotional are from members and friends of this church family. As you experience these words and images, may you believe that God is with you, always. The following devotionals are undated to allow you to interact with them in whatever ways feel sacred to you.

During this season called Lent, reflect on the ways you experience God’s steadfast and abundant love, and continue to send your reflections to the church by emailing phaight@fbcbeverly.org.



Kesli Kruzel, 2014

Kesli is the granddaughter of Jeanne Fonda. She is currently a junior at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina.

I say I can't complain and yet I do. I am sheltered, have food to eat and good health so far. I am blessed, but my heart hurts for those not so blessed. My heart longs for those who have passed on. I am lonely without them.

I don't know the world these days and where does one go from here? Grief cannot overtake one's life. Let the memories bring a smile instead of sadness.

The season of Lent approaches and we remember what it means. There was sadness and so much more as we witnessed Jesus' pain, but followed with great Joy and new hope.

Are we experiencing a bit like that now? We have been witnessing hatred and cruelty, enduring a medical emergency but reaching up for hope that a more caring world will prevail soon.

Yes, we must believe that to be so, AND let humor help us along.

Lucy says – “sooner or later Charlie Brown, there is one thing you need to learn.

You reap what you sow – you get out of life exactly what you put into it!

No more-no less.”

Snoopy says, “I'd like to see a little more margin for error.”

Marty Lincoln



January 2021 just seems like December 32-62, 2020-not that much of a change. We are hitting the pandemic wall, not getting that second wind that we thought the new year would bring. The First Baptist Church family continues to lose beloved members, the vaccination system scrambles to invent and reinvent itself in a swirl of missteps, and we still miss hugs and the physical company of other people, even as occasional fears prick at our brains that we have become accustomed to hunkering down, keeping our faces covered and our emotions to ourselves.

But then came Bell Choir rehearsal. We started rehearsing an old familiar song, "Pass It On," but then soon moved on to an Easter piece, "Crown Him with Many Crowns." After a few times through, when it started to really sound like a song, something within me stirred--a thing with feathers, perhaps-- a feeling of Hope. Easter music has that power to wrest hope from tired and despairing souls. It is the music of triumph, of a victory of the highest order. There is an Easter promise to us all that God is here for us, that, with God, all things are possible. This is not a promise that all will be well by April 4th, but it is a promise that light will vanquish this darkness; the darkness will not overcome it. Lent may usher in the day of greatest despair, but it will be followed by Easter. God will bring us through this--not unchanged, for sure, but back into the light.

Pam Constantine

The Church, as a Place of the Heart

Since March of 2020, we have been on a difficult journey, individually and as a church. We've had to adjust in countless ways to a pandemic that has left, as of this writing, over 430,000 of our neighbors dead and required profound changes to how we live.

As a congregation we've evolved in how we worship and how we remain connected to one another. We've lived into the truth that a church is not defined by a physical space, but it is a place of the heart, where we stay connected via prayer, cards, phone calls, social distanced walks and via virtual worship and programming. It hasn't been perfect, it has been a harder adjustment for some but throughout, we've continued to persist in finding ways to be and share the love of God to one another. And, our community of faith has expanded as we've added people to our weekly worship who had been limited by health issues or by distance.

In 1 John 4: 7-12, the writer says, 'No one has ever seen God, yet, when we love one another, God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us.' Surely God's love has been alive and well in our gathered life as a community of faith throughout the difficult days of 2020 and guides our path forward into 2021.

In Romans 8, the Apostle Paul reminds us 'that nothing can separate us, from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord.' This is true. This is not theoretical. We've lived it and we continue to live into this promise. God's love was, is and always will be.

I am very hopeful, that come this Summer, we will be able to return to some level of being together, in person. That the worst of the pandemic will be behind us. As we look to this happier time, we do so as a changed people. We will carry with us new and effective ways of being the church via virtual ministry and programming. Realizing that the community of First Baptist is not defined by an address, but is, a place of the heart, where we hold each other close and where Jesus is to be found.

Kent Harrop

The challenges of the past year as we have spent time separated from our former lives have been both individualistic and universal. Here are some challenges I have experienced. Maybe you recognize some of them as yours too.

- The self/socially imposed, and science approved quarantining to protect us by lowering the risk
- The risk management of choosing which risks we take. Do we see family after receiving negative COVID test results; shop in a store or pick up at curbside; visit friends in person at a distance, or only by phone, Zoom (thank God for that) and long text threads?
- The decisions about the best choices to make became so stressful and exhausting.
- My anger over the mismanagement of the pandemic gave me too many hours of despair.
- A loss of purpose.
- My sadness over losing precious time— precious time— with family, especially my daughters and grandchildren, and friends.
- And most recently, the loss of a dear friend.

Can you picture a mama cat picking up her kitten by the scruff of the neck to redirect it or carry it to a safe place? So often when I feel worried, disquieted, or saddened, a new experience presents itself, an act of kindness is shown, a joyful connection comes by phone or FaceTime, a new idea, a broader understanding, or a thing of beauty will pop into view and I will recognize that the hand of God is effectively picking me up by the scruff of the neck and plopping me down in front of joy. I suspect God is saying, “Here, Elly. Look. Right in front of you. So much beauty, so many good things have been provided for you and all my children. Do you see?”

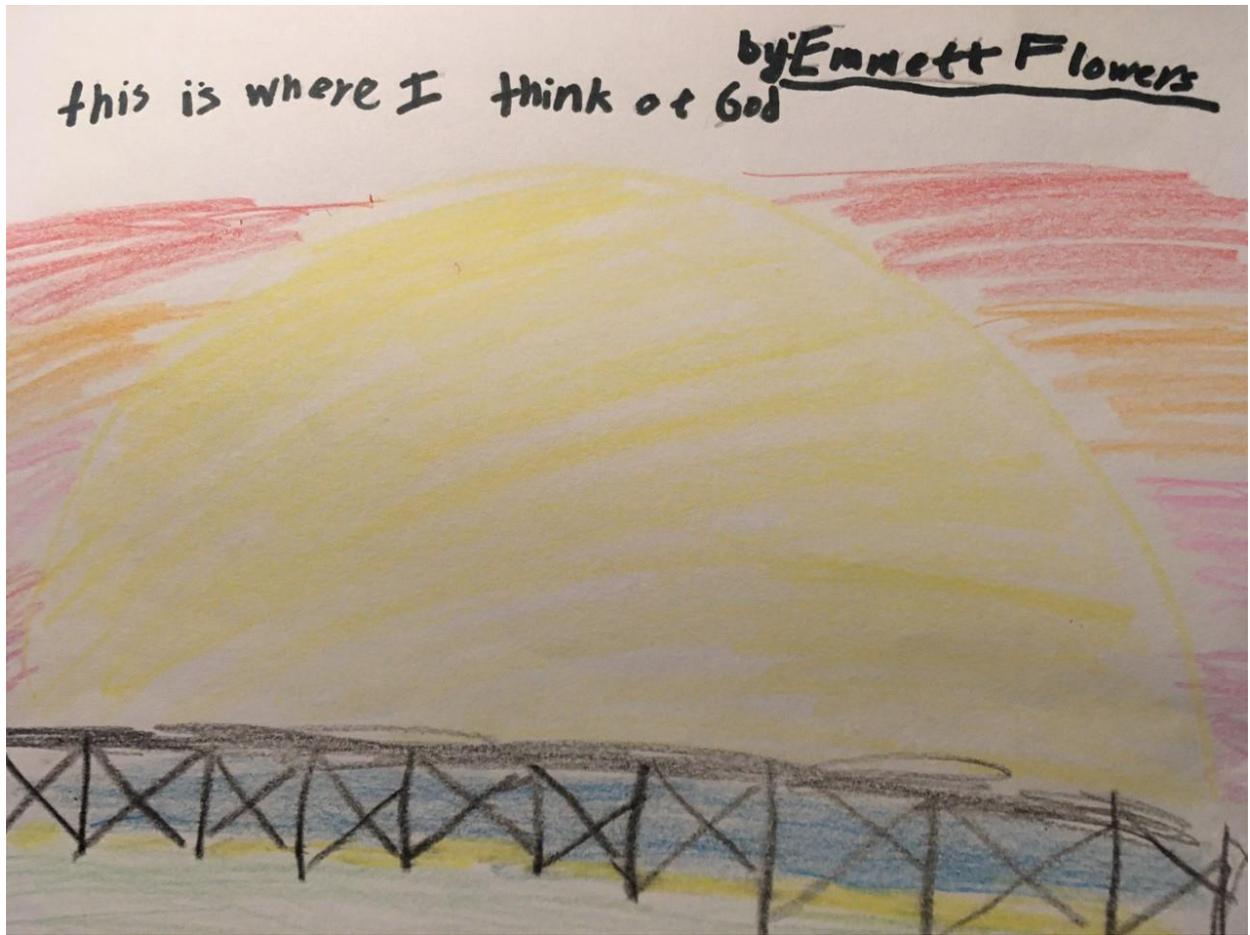
And I see. And I thank God for the intervention!

God is with us always, Hope is always here. Thanks be to God.

“The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He restores my soul.”

Psalm 23:1-3

Elly Flowers



Emmett Flowers, 2021

I think I have cried more during COVID than any other time in my life.

It started with working at home and missing my clients and coworkers something fierce. Due to multiple risk factors, I was not allowed to be at work for the one or two days a week we could attend. In the last month I was allowed into work one day a week. Coworkers had already packed up much of the belongings in my cube: 32 plus years of stuff! There was some sweetness, some grace revealed as I received a wonderful kudos board and a retirement sign that was signed by all my coworkers. Both hang in my kitchen to remind me that others love me and value the work that I have done.

I had wanted to have an intimate lunch with my coworkers where I could try to give voice to what they meant to me. Afterward I had envisioned a reception with homemade desserts where people from the many agencies I worked with could come and say goodbye. Instead, there was a roast of sorts which lead me to tears. There was a Zoom party with my office mates where I was able to tell many coworkers what they meant to me. Because I could not see everyone in person I send homemade cards in an effort to share what I felt. In August on a sunny day that wasn't too hot many of us were able to gather at Salem Willows for a time of hanging out and celebrating. It was yet another slice of grace in a time of sorrow and goodbyes.

I live alone and it has been hard to experience such isolation. I crave human contact but for now have to settle for some Zoom calls and trips to the grocery store. I have not lost anyone that I know personally to COVID. I still have a warm safe home where I live with adequate food and heat. I even have found a place to swim as I await a new pool at my old gym.

Yet the tears have still fallen. Sometimes they come up when a long-ago trauma starts to tug at my heart, trauma that I thought was all processed via therapy and prayer. I think the events of this past year, especially what happened at the Capitol stirred up the past trauma as the nation was reminded that things are out of control.

I have found strength, friendship, and light in the Thursday am zoom meetings run by the Rev. Julie Flowers. It has been a blessing to get to know many of the women in my church better. Yes, there are tears at times but there is laughter. In the midst of this weekly gathering I find strength to make it through the days when I feel like I can't do this one more minute.

That is God's grace, a gift in this time of darkness.

Sue Kingston

Dear God,

We have been living for nearly a year in a new and challenging reality. We have been stretched, and pulled, and pushed, and challenged. We have been made uncomfortable. God, we feel that we have wandered for too long in the wilderness. We ask why. We do not have answers. We try not to become buried too deeply beneath our grief.

We have experienced incomprehensible losses. Through it all, life has gone on. Through it all, You have changed us. Through it all, You are making us new. We cannot go backward. You are leading us forward into a new reality. Even as we mourn our losses, we see you in each blade of grass, in each flower, in each smile of a friend, in each sunrise. We balance our profound sorrow with our immeasurable joy. We are challenged, we are transformed, we are loved. Even while we remain in this wilderness, we join together with a great cloud of witnesses. We have seen a great light.

WITH HOPE,
Jaimie

A Gift

I slump in a chair in the lengthening shadows.

You rummage in the toy basket:

A lamb with no stuffing

A firehose dragon with straggly threads

Just the squeaker of a shredded duck.

You choose a purple platypus

And, after a shake, offer me the slightly damp gift

Of light and love.



“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” -Isaiah 1:16-17

As I consider the last year, I am struck by the amount of enmity there is in our country. After January 6, the members of our government have been going to work in fear for their lives and wellbeing and have had to receive security guards to protect them. The political election of 2020 seemed to make the members of one party see the members of the other party as enemies not as people, fellow Americans with a different point of view. Members of families, churches, and other social groups became so separated from each other that they could no longer communicate with each other.

Members of Congress became dysfunctional and unable to think for themselves because they were so strongly allegiant to their parties that they were totally unwilling to see situations objectively, to follow the opinions of scientists and other professionals, to compromise and work together on solutions to our country's serious problems like the pandemic.

Racial tensions in our country, which are not new, flared up. People no longer saw each other as fellow Americans and members of the same community but as enemies to be opposed.

These opinions are completely un-Christian as I understand the teachings of our church, but they were held by people who had seemed like good people in my past dealings with them. The extremist elements in our society which had been there for many years took over our country. Hatred, enmity, and bigotry need to be confronted and routed out. We as Americans need to take a stand against them.

The concerns of Jesus for the sick, the poor and the weak need to be re-affirmed to make America great again. America needs to re-join the international agreements which had helped us to work together with other nations on climate change, ending nuclear weapons and helping our world to work together on defeating the pandemic around the globe.

As a Christian I think we need to change these destructive points of view of seeing people who disagree with us as the enemies but see them as our neighbors and try to work together to make this a better country and a better world. We need to follow the example of Jesus who focused on the less fortunate as people who need our help, not our criticism. Our country cannot be a strong positive force in the world for good unless we stop looking for our differences and seeing each other as enemies and start looking at what we can do to come together to work on the large problems which divide us.

Nancy Winter



John Thomson, 2020



When I think about the sweet times during the past year, I most think about the different ways I have connected with creation and our natural world. Whether hiking a trail in a nearby park, enjoying the beauty of my favorite lake, or walking the beach as the sun glitters across the waves (depicted in K'nex above), I have been grateful for the time and the opportunity to connect with creation and I plan to continue to keep that connection strong in the months ahead.

Bob Stoneham with thanks to Rev. Jaimie for the encouragement to create with my building toys

Holy Saturday – Buried

As I sit here thinking about Lent, and how it feels during the pandemic, Holy Saturday takes on new nuances for me. Holy Saturday. Jesus is buried. Despair descended into the disciples' bones. Mary stood outside the tomb -- crying. A lot remained unknown. The future was uncertain.

Unknown is the headline of daily life. As a teacher, I constantly have questions that I don't know how, or even if, will be answered. How many students am I going to see today? Who is quarantined and who will actually be in class? When will I see some of my students again? What are they actually going to learn? What will next week look like -- not to mention the rest of the academic year? Plans that I have for the rest of the year are -- just like Jesus was on that Holy Saturday -- buried.

Perhaps what is arising out of this pandemic is the need to change perspective. What if we considered every day as a Holy Saturday event? What if we considered what we do every day as somehow being buried? How is being buried a possibly positive position to take? As I look out my window, there are seemingly dead and dormant -- but also living -- things right outside. The roots of the trees are buried -- but alive in a way I can't see from my exterior perspective. There is a whole mycelial network of fungi moving within the earth -- even under the snow.

In his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, Robert Sardello examines a possible perspective for Jesus' burial. What we do with soul-spirit is buried. The things that we do are done simply, not intended to be a success, not with concern for future results, not to make anything better. They are simply done -- done with soul and done with spirit. With all elaborate fantasies buried, a larger perspective emerges. We drop any kind of naive optimism but our work in the world remains unabated. In fact, "a relationship with the world as Word is more vital and retains a transcendent sheen."

With those words buried within, I wrote the following chant:

“Buried” [here](#) By Bryan Vosseler (to the tune of “Secret Dwelling” by Darlene Franz)

What that we do ...buried
Concern for a future ...buried
Be the Word, in the world
Vitality... transcendent sheen...

Bryan Vosseler

On Being Reminded of Our Place in the Family of Things

This has been a year in which, at times, the sweetness of life – never mind the sweetness of God – may have felt harder to find than usual. When I reflect back, thinking about Lent 2020 and the ways in which we remarked to one another about how it was “the Lentiest Lent we ever had Lented” – the feeling of wandering in the wilderness and of giving up so much – I recall, too, how we longingly said “Maybe by Easter it will be better.”

We meant Easter 2020, of course.

Yet here we are, in the Lenten season of 2021, in this time of reflection and prayerful preparation for Easter 2021, and we are still in that COVID wilderness.

It’s been a longer wander and a longer journey than we expected, and we have learned a lot, and we have lost a lot, and, perhaps in unexpected ways, we have gained a lot, too, such as new ways of being the Church and new ways of building community and new ways of showing loving care and kindness and keeping connections and sharing love across distance; and we may be weary, indeed. I know I have felt that weariness, my friends. I have felt the loneliness and the isolation of this time. I have felt the fatigue of it all, right along with you.

In the midst of it, however, I also continue to hear God’s calling, the infusion of God’s love and God’s care and God’s voice, reaching right down, deep into my wilderness solitude and right into yours, too, if we are watchful, reminding us that, no matter what and no matter who we are we are deeply and profoundly *loved*. No matter what and no matter who we are we are deeply and profoundly *connected* to the Spirit of God and to the universe, to the family of things. No matter what and no matter who we are, we are deeply and profoundly *important* to God and to those with whom we share this journey, which is to say, with all the creatures and all the living things of God’s good creation. When I remember that, I find it awakens within me a little Easter moment – a little bursting forth of my soul from the tomb of despair that these days can bring, a little resurrection of the joy and the hope that, as Julian of Norwich prayed, “All shall be well, and shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

When I feel that light, that joy, that hope sparked by the enduring sweetness of God’s love and by the enduring promise that I belong – that *we belong* – to one another and to God, it calls to mind, for me, the poem “The Wild Geese,” which I share with you now, in the hope that, as we move through this Lenten time together, moving toward the hope of the joy that will await us at the empty tomb, you will find hope, too, in the reminder that no matter what and no matter who we are, we are deeply and profoundly loved, and forever connected to God and to one another – even across distance and through zoom screens – in the family of things.

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.*

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile, the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place in the family of things.*
-Mary Oliver

Julie Flowers

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this printed version of our Lenten devotional!

Where and how are you experiencing God's steadfast love despite the challenges of these days? Let us know! Draw a picture, build something, photograph your favorite place, write a poem, sing a song, or do whatever creative thing God places on your heart to do. Feel free to share your reflections with us by emailing them to phaight@fbcbeverly.org. We will add to this devotional each week by updating it on the website. You will find it in the link called Lenten Resources under the Spiritual Practice Tab.

Blessings to you on your journey, and may you always know God's steadfast love.



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