

2023 LENT DEVOTIONAL

From Desert to Oasis



Feeding hope. Changing lives.

Introduction

From Desert to Oasis - A 40 Day Journey

Through the Lenses of Gratitude

Thank you for joining us on a 40-day journey of Lent, a time of fasting and reflection before Easter in the Christian calendar. The Lenten practice is inspired by the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert. We are mindful that the discipline of Lent is not a substitute for the completed work of the Cross, but rather a tool to help us bring the Light of Christ to a hurting world. The spiritual formation we undergo by abstaining from a food or activity that has a hold on us opens our eyes to the stark reality of our desperate need for grace and healing.

This year, we are calibrating our Lenten focus through the lens of *gratitude*. Thankfulness can strengthen relationships, facilitate a more positive outlook on life, reduce the risk of depression, and relieve stress. A posture of gratitude can truly be life-altering and life-giving.

In Matthew 12, Jesus says that when a defiling spirit (what we might see today as addiction or compulsive, harmful behaviours) leaves a person, there is potential for other spirits more wicked than the first to fill the void, leaving individuals worse off than they were in the first place. This is the law of displacement occurring. When we release something that has a hold on us, something else will fill the empty space. As disciples of Christ, we look for something that draws us closer to Him. **The practice of gratitude helps us focus on what to fill that void with.**

The Gospel story also teaches us that resurrection follows death. All life is birthed from this reality. When we come to the place of realization that death has been conquered through Christ's sacrificial work, old, ingrained patterns die, and we can embrace the mysteries of life that are so often hidden in plain sight. Viewed through this lens, weighty, draining things in life can be buried and replaced with the renewing, restoring hope found in Christ's finished work.

The following pages contain stories of what this looks like in the lives of the UGM team and our community partners. We need each other and

we need Christ on this journey, *for in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).*

Ash Wednesday begins the season of Lent. Isaiah speaks of ashes in chapter 61, verse 3, "...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair". May this Lenten reflection be one of renewal for you, where gratitude supplants vice and where beauty is discovered where ashes once resided.

With Gratitude,
UGM's Church Relations Team



DAY 1 - WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 22ND

(Colossians 2:6-7)

“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”

Whenever I was reminded of ‘him’, my whole inner world would start to boil. His words and behaviours had wounded me deeply. While this would always be true, it was also true that through this experience I had learned some valuable life lessons, like taking heed of the ‘still small voice’ that cautioned me about linking myself to him in the first place. (At the time he had the energy and vision I felt I needed so that gentle warning was inconvenient.) As I learned to let go of my need to retaliate and began to thank God even for him and the lessons learned, peace and clarity returned, as did vision for the coming season. And over time his hurtful words and actions had no power over my life anymore.

Lent is a season synonymous with giving things up, which can be a great start. Perhaps even more important is replacing whatever we give up with something healing and life giving. In a world that overflows with vengeance (as the saying goes ‘hurt people hurt people’), what would happen if we let go of our need for justified revenge and retaliation and fill that space with gratitude? It will never ‘excuse’ the hurtful words or actions of people who wound others, but it helps chart a different way forward for us as an interconnected community. Each of us were deeply loved by Christ when we didn’t deserve it, and because of his example we can help fill the world with loved people who love people.

Lord, we are so grateful for your kindness and mercy. Help us forgive as You forgive us. Help us overflow with gratitude as a way of breaking the cycle of revenge and in so doing, becoming more like you. Amen.



Brian Doerksen

Songwriter

JUNO winning recording artist

Father of 6 including 2 sons with Fragile X Syndrome





DAY 2 - THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 23RD

(Jonah 2:9)

“But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, ‘Salvation belongs to the Lord.’”

In the book of Jonah, we often only talk about how Jonah runs away from God, comes to his senses in the belly of a whale, and finally becomes obedient. But that isn't how the story ends.

Instead of joy at the repentance of the Ninevites, Jonah got angry at God. He did not want God's compassion to be shown to Israel's enemies. He would rather die than know that he helped save so many. So, Jonah goes out to the outskirts and takes shelter, hoping to see the destruction of Nineveh. Instead, God teaches Jonah an important lesson.

God grew a plant to provide shade for Jonah, yet a worm came and quickly destroyed the plant. Jonah showed care for the plant, wishing it would spring up again to shade him. *“But God said, ‘You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. But Nineveh has more than a 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left... Should I not be concerned about that great city?’* (Jonah 4:10-11)

What type of person can't tell their right hand from left? Children.

Jonah showed more compassion for a plant than for 120,000 innocent children.

God, ever compassionate, shows grace to Nineveh despite Jonah's lack. God taught Jonah that His love is not only for the Israelites, but for everyone. The book of Jonah is more than simply a fascinating account of one man's attempt to run away from God, it is ultimately a story of God's love for everyone. Salvation belongs to the Lord indeed.

God, continue to grow in me a heart of generosity and compassion for those different than me.



Albert Chu
Lead Pastor at Tapestry Church
Director of the Centre for Missional Leadership at St. Andrews

DAY 3 - FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 24TH

(Matthew 11:28)

“Come to me you who are weary, and I will give you rest.”

Chelsea came into our recovery program called New Story Community twenty-eight days clean from a six-year heroin addiction. During that time, she mostly lived on the streets. She experienced deep physical, emotional and spiritual pain. She was weary to her bones and soul of watching friend after friend succumb to addiction, weary of just trying to survive another day.

Chelsea was the first participant in New Story Community. For a couple of weeks, she was the only participant. I got a front row seat watching the God who seeks the lost sheep. The God who heals, restores and redeems a life, making it stunningly beautiful.

That's Chelsea.

It was a particularly cold winter and the accommodations we had did not have adequate insulation. The floors were always cold, the windows seemed no barricade to the wind, and the wood stove was ravenous, always needing to be fed. When I apologized for the less-than-ideal conditions, Chelsea never complained. She said, *“Cheryl, every night I crawl into my warm dry bed, I thank God I'm not living on the streets, and I pray for those who are.”*

In countless ways, the women who come into New Story Community are my teachers, particularly in the area of gratitude. I often forget to thank God for my own warm dry bed. And I rarely thank God that I have never, not once, had to sleep on the streets; or thank him that my weariness has never, not once, been from literally just trying to survive through my day.

Creator God, I thank you for the many ways I am not weary, and I pray for those who are: weary from financial instability, weary from physical or mental illness, weary from relational struggles. Please lift our burdens and give us rest. Amen.



Cheryl Buchanan
Director of New Story Community, a supportive recovery program for Indigenous women located on Keats Island, in the unceded territory of the Squamish Nation



DAY 4 – SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25TH

(Philippians 4:5-6)

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Life is complicated. Every day is filled with challenges, questions, opportunities, options, failures, frustrations, wins and losses. Trying to discern God’s fingerprints in all of this can be exhausting (and downright impossible). In today’s passage, Paul lifts us above the fray and provides us with a simple, overarching, liberating life principle that covers every moment of every day of our lives. It’s a life principle that is *broad* enough to cover **“any thing”** and **“every situation”** (v. 6), and *powerful* enough to **“transcend all understanding”** and **“guard our hearts and minds”** (v. 7). It’s a life principle that invokes gratitude no matter our circumstances and unleashes peace in the midst of our circumstances. What is this principle? Simply stated:

Our decisions and our affection, lead to God’s provision and God’s protection.

What are you facing today? No matter how you feel or what you’re experiencing, Paul assures you that this principle holds true. And remember: Paul was wearing chains when he wrote this!

Your decisions and your affection, lead to God’s provision and God’s protection.

Today, *decide* to refuse to be anxious about anything. Today, *decide* to choose to trust God with everything. Today, *decide* to thank God in the midst of all that is swirling around you. And today, do this with the full assurance that God will provide and God will protect, at a level and in a way that is beyond your ability to anticipate or comprehend.

Lord, there is little that I can control in my life. But I can control my decisions. Today I choose to trust you. I bring to You the cares of my heart and the concerns of my life. Thank You that You hear me. Thank You that You love me, and that I can rest in the knowledge that You are working in ways that are beyond my ability to see. I receive Your peace.



Darin Latham
Lead Pastor, Broadway Church in Vancouver

DAY 5 – MONDAY, FEBRUARY 27TH

(Philippians 4:12)

“I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

While his earthly position was as a prisoner of Rome, Paul writes that we are to be content in every situation. In 2 Corinthians 11, he shares that he was beaten, stoned, experienced anxiety and many other life-threatening, unbearable conditions. Did Paul feel pain and torment? Absolutely. But his earthly circumstances did not overshadow what he knew to be true in Christ.

When working in the field in South Asia rescuing people out of forced labor slavery, my team and I faced dangerous and dire situations time and time again. I learned that the only way for peace to reign in those situations (and any situation truly), is full dependence on the one who gives us strength and peace. Though it may be hard to believe, Jesus cares about the difficulties that affect you, your family and your community. He cares about them all – both big and small.

Our contentment need not depend on the conditions of our situations, but on the fact that God is in control. The next verse (Philippians 4:13) sums up the message nicely, *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me”*. When we don’t have the answer, God does. When we can no longer stand in our own strength, he carries us. When the darkness seems all consuming, let Christ’s light shine bright, illuminating the hope that only he can bring.

Father, thank you for the revelation of your word. Please help me to have a grateful heart in every situation. Help me to submit every difficulty to you, trusting that you alone have the answer. Please give me true understanding of how to apply the secret of contentment in my everyday life – especially in service of those in need around me. In Jesus’ name, amen.



Anu George Canjanathoppil
CEO at International Justice Mission Canada





DAY 6 - TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28TH

(2 Corinthians 9:15)

"Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!"

Sometimes you learn something that sticks with you. Something that helps you grow spiritually in a surprising way.

This moment for me was nearly 20 years ago and came from a new friendship. Father Charles was a catholic priest whom I started to get to know through a leadership development program. Charles was the only catholic amongst a group of mostly Evangelicals, with a Reformed pastor or two in the mix. The group of us spent a lot of time seeking to understand more about the Catholic wing of the Christian faith through our friend Charles.

One day, Charles started talking about the difference between what is secular and what is sanctified. In my tradition, the secular is anything not of God (generally speaking, seen as being spiritually neutral at best and quite often as being spiritually negative) while the sanctified was anything that is holy and acceptable to God.

Charles threw all that out for me.

He described it this way: secular is anything that can be used by God while the sanctified is anything that is set apart for God. Here's a simple example; a church sanctuary is set apart for God while a movie theater is secular but can be used for

worship.

What has this got to do with Lent, and more specifically, 2 Corinthians 9:15?

Part of the practice of Lent is to give something up that is good and replace it with something godly. It is this act that helps to remind us of the good that we have in our lives as a result of all that God has done for us. Gratitude is rooted in this.

My encouragement for you today is to look at all the things in your life that are 'secular' and consider how they can be used for God's purposes. When I practice this, it's an incredible reminder of all the gifts that God has given me. It's more than replacing the good with something godly, it is taking the good and making it holy.

Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were incredible gifts on multiple levels. This includes the redemption of all things.

With this in mind: What is secular in your life that you can use for God? What is good in your life that you can make holy?

Holy Spirit, help me to see the things in my life that can be used for God; illuminate to me that which has the potential to be more than merely good and transform it into godliness. Amen.



Dean Kurpjuweit
President at UGM

DAY 7 - WEDNESDAY, MARCH 1ST

(2 Corinthians 9:12)

"This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God."

Some days are tough and then occasionally, we have really tough days. I had a particularly tough day last week. I was already late for my first meeting by the time I left the house, my phone was nowhere to be found, my water bottle leaked everywhere in my backpack, and I tripped on the way to my bus stop, which I later very publicly found out, resulted in a seam ripping in quite an unsavory spot. During my entire commute, I sat miserably, internally wallowing in self-pity. I wanted SO badly to turn back home and crawl back into my bed.

Despite fighting against every fibre of my being, I made it into work. I cheerfully entered our reception area, greeted everyone upon arrival and made my way up the elevator as though all was right as rain. By 7 am that morning, I had already decided the day was ruined and it affected the way I answered my text messages, emails and phone calls. It even provoked me to take my lunch upstairs to eat it in my office alone, with the door closed. It was that same afternoon where I received a note of encouragement from a manager in another department. What did it read? *"I know things have been challenging with everything going on, but I want to thank you for always making people feel seen and heard. The work you do is so important and we feel so blessed to have you here."*

It was a simple card with a few bright words, but God used that little note to bring sharply into focus the enormous value of serving others in His love. Only the other side of eternity will reveal to you and me the immense value our small sacrifices of service have accomplished.

Lord, help me go out today and spend my life for You. Continue to allow me to witness the joy in serving others. Sustain me through all the tough days and help me withstand all the storms if they promote service to You and others.



Stacey Reyes
Director, People & Culture at UGM

DAY 8 - THURSDAY, MARCH 2ND

(2 Corinthians 8:9)

"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich."

In this letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul throws out a straightforward challenge to believers with extra cash and comfort: to share some of their wealth with struggling believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-15).

This was nothing new. The first Christians, the ones who sat at Jesus' feet and received their teaching directly from the Big Boss himself, were so serious about their radical new way of life that they pioneered new communities of believers, who sold their possessions – their actual investment portfolios, holiday homes and townhouses – and then redistributed cold, hard cash to the needy (Acts 2:45). Incredibly, they managed to eradicate economic poverty in their midst through this commitment to overcoming injustice (Acts 4:35). This led to a community of believers filled with gratitude and joy. What an amazing accomplishment!

In Western society we are so used to radical individualism, that we may not even know when our own friends are struggling financially. To ask others for help is seen almost as a moral failing. As a result, we tend to banish those who make us uncomfortable with their brokenness and poverty. The poor hold up a mirror to our most uncomfortable truths, and so we push them to the ragged edges of our communities (so that we won't have to face our own failures and addictions).

This is what we mean when we say someone is "marginalized" – they have been banished to the margins. Yet Jesus offers a different way. A different kind of community - where we take joy in helping our brothers and sisters across the city, and around the world. Jesus left the most exclusive gated community in the universe, gave up everything he was entitled to, and laid down his wealth and power. All in order to reach us. How should we respond then to the invitation to follow in His footsteps?

Lord, let me not be comfortable with an easy faith, one that makes no demands on my wealth. This is not the path You walked, and it's not the path you invite us to walk. Instead, show me today how I might redistribute some of what I have to those who are in need. Give me eyes to see, and a heart that is willing to respond.



Craig Greenfield
Founder of Alongsiders international and Author of Subversive Jesus, and the recently published Subversive Mission



DAY 9 – FRIDAY, MARCH 3RD

(Isaiah 41:10)

“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you.

Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you.

I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.”

One of the most common questions I hear when I invite people from outside the Downtown Eastside to visit me is, “Will I be safe? Do you feel safe raising your family here?” For 12 years, my answer has always been an emphatic YES! This past year has offered me more opportunities than any previous to recognize moments when fear shows up in myself. With building fires up 89% this year and tent cities shifting from fields to streets with no dignified vision for housing, frustration shifts quickly from grief to desperation to rage. How does fear show up in your body? For me, sometimes it’s a tightness in my chest, a quick shift in my gaze toward the ground or my walking pace quickening with my heartbeat.

How do we move through feelings of genuine fear? Isaiah offers the promise of God’s continual presence. Strength, help and courage are available to us at any moment. Practicing generosity and fasting during Lent help us lean into faith and the presence of God when we encounter fear for our well-being. Most often, I can draw a straight line from my fears to my sense of scarcity; the worry that there isn’t enough for us all and I will be left stranded. The practice of gratitude during Lent helps us tap into God’s abundance.

Whenever you notice your body reacting in fear today, ask your loving Creator, “How are you offering me a good gift of your presence at this moment?” The Trinity is continuously creative to provide what I need, even when I fear I won’t be cared for. My DTES neighbours have been my best Lenten teachers reminding me through their stories to be open to God’s provision through any means, not only through my own strategies for self-preservation.

A Breathing Prayer (stay with this as long as you need to!)

Breathe in: Thank you Jesus

Breathe out: Your abundant love surrounds me



Krista-Dawn Kimsey
Director of Learning and Collaboration, Servant Partners



DAY 10 – SATURDAY, MARCH 4TH

(Hebrews 12:28)

“Let Your Kingdom Come!”

I spent a few days in Quebec City at an Airbnb with some friends last fall. We stayed in an almost 200-year-old house in the old city. Our unit had a bolt-on steel ‘balcony’ that doubled as the fire escape. Enjoying coffee and croissants on the ‘balcony’ where we could enjoy the view seemed like a good idea, so we climbed out of the window only to discover that the fire escape balcony shook every time we moved. I’ll admit to faking the need for a ‘bio-break’ as a face-saving way to get back inside the safety of the unit.

The world increasingly feels like that shaky fire escape balcony. It’s like there’s a new tremor every day. And while we’d prefer something safer and more stable, the verses surrounding today’s passage tell us that everything that can be shaken will be shaken so that only the unshakeable things will remain.

In contrast to the instability of the world, the Kingdom of Jesus cannot be shaken. While his Kingdom has not yet fully come, we experience it in our lives as we make room for Him to rule and reign within us. Griffith Thomas noted that the ancient grammar and phrasing indicate, “We are **constantly and perpetually (Greek) receiving a Kingdom that is incapable of being shaken.**”

Lent is the season when we intentionally make room for Christ our King to establish his eternal and unshakeable Kingdom within us. We welcome it with glad and grateful hearts because we transformed through its arrival and blessed because of its presence in our lives.

Let’s pray together.

Heavenly Father, we are taking this time to make room for you to establish your unshakeable Kingdom in our hearts and lives. We welcome your presence, transforming work, and abounding love. Let your Kingdom come and let your will be done in us and through us. Amen.



Tim Schindel
Founder and National Director, Leading Influence



DAY 11 – MONDAY, MARCH 6TH

(Psalm 118:24)

“This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

I don't know about you, but I've often felt like the day had me – like I was powerless to whatever whims the day would throw at me. Day-to-day this mindset brought up so much angst that before the day has even had a chance to be good, I've already become overwhelmed. Without realizing, I'd have weeks of this felt helplessness overcome me. I hated this “*new normal*.” Eventually these thoughts drained me in every way. I was wearing my stress, packing it around, each task or hurdle packed on one unnecessary baggage after another. Even if concerns were seemingly small, they were adding up, leaving me in a constantly exhausted state.

Thankfully, I have enough resilience that when I get to the point when “*enough is enough*,” I move for change. Too uncomfortable with where I am at, convicted enough that God has MORE for me, I sought wisdom outside of myself. My wholesome company would remind me often to ask myself, “*Who created the day in the first place? Where does my help come from?*” So, I committed myself to the scriptures, allowing them to anchor me to some sanity. Like drawing water from the well, I started to take in what the Psalmist penned together in today's verse.

That alone is refreshing to my Spirit. I'm reminded that the Lord is already in the day. He has seen everything from sunrise to sunset long before I even opened my eyes to this new day. Those heavy feelings? I'm not alone in it, God is with me in this day. Worry? There's a place for that. And it's not with me. He says I can give it to Him. I can acknowledge Him and He will direct my steps. When things hit the fan, I can look to Him as He's already in the moment. I can count on Him to guide me. As I drink deeply of these truths, I've sensed my heart believing. Slowly, my dread for the days diminishes as I am convinced that He's my Lion, my Defender, and Protector, walking ahead of me each day to scope out any snares set for me, faithfully leading me from revelation to revelation. To this I exclaim with the Psalmist, “*Let us rejoice (in the day the Lord has made) and be glad in it!*”

Thank you, Lord, that I can steamroll the day with joy and gladness instead of allowing myself to get steamrolled by the lie that I just must fall victim to whatever comes. On this day, I choose to acknowledge You, to look for You like treasure throughout the day, and choose hope for every moment. In Jesus' name, amen.



Jolene Williams

A T̄silhqot'in daughter of the Most High. He opened the doors of Lydia Home to me to search where His heart beats, with His beloved women in recovery.

DAY 12 – TUESDAY, MARCH 7TH

(Psalm 23:6)

“Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

I remember as a child growing up in Winnipeg how after church on Sundays my parents seemed to talk forever with other church members during coffee hour. Even now I recognize that look of discomfort after worship in my own children who are used to being around the church as “*preacher's kids*.” As a child, I sometimes wondered if a never-ending coffee hour was what the psalmist meant by “*dwell in the house of the Lord forever*.”

But the comfort this beloved psalm has given countless generations of believers is remarkable. David's praise song to the Lord reminds us of God's presence, protection, and providential care for those who love the Lord. Our hearts are full of gratitude when we recognize that God's goodness and love accompany us through life – from baptism to life's end (and beyond). Dwelling in the house of the Lord is not being stuck after church in coffee hour, it is celebrating God's constant and faithful presence in our lives at church, in our homes and in the wider world where we journey.

How might we recognize God's goodness and love walking alongside us, as well as with those we encounter today? Where do our lives offer witness and testimony of what it means to be transformed by that grace, goodness and love that Jesus gives us through his body we call the church? Who is waiting today for our grace-filled invitation to “*come and see*” the goodness and love of God present within a local church? Dwelling in the house of the Lord forever is not an endless coffee hour chat, rather it is learning to live our regular, ordinary lives, in the beauty of God's creation offering a cheerful witness as we share and show the gospel. To dwell in the house of the Lord today (and forever) is to demonstrate lives changed by grace, hearts full of gratitude and lips full of praise to the saving power, presence, and purpose of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Father, we come before you today with such deep gratitude for your goodness and love in our lives. Help us to glorify you today by showing the world evidence in our lives of your transforming grace and mercy. In Jesus' name...Amen.



Ross Lockhart

Dean, St. Andrew's Hall, the Presbyterian college on the University of British Columbia campus



DAY 13 - WEDNESDAY, MARCH 8TH

(Proverbs 15:30)

"Light in a messenger's eyes brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones."

The full revelation of all scripture and wisdom is best understood in light of the person of Jesus. When I read this verse, I think of Jesus' profound words when he teaches us to store up treasure in Heaven by valuing and desiring the things of the Kingdom - the things that He loves. He told us that the eye is the lamp of the body and when our eyes are healthy, our whole body is filled with His life-giving light (Mt 6:19-24).

In other words, the love of God, which is revealed in Jesus, is like a corrective lens. We see things rightly when we receive His love (because He loved us first), which enables us to value and adore Him above all else.

Rather than being overwhelmed by our circumstances or the fallen nature of our world, He enables us through His Spirit to see our circumstance in light of His Good News. Jesus is the Good News that gives joy to our heart and health to our bones! As we continue to fix our eyes on Jesus and to grow more deeply in love with Him, His very life seeps into our bones and the depth of our being.

We get to be the messengers that bring good news with the light of Jesus in our eyes! We can ask Him what His Good News looks like in every circumstance, and for wisdom on how to live out of His love and resurrection power so that we bring health to the people around us.

Jesus, You are utterly desirable and beautiful beyond ten thousand others! You came to give sight to the blind. So Lord give us spiritual eyes to see your loving gaze and the radiance of your presence. May the delight of knowing you intimately percolate through our entire being and into our very bones. May we be vessels of your extravagant love, bringing health and life to the people around us.



Jen Baker
Counsellor, Sanctuary at UGM



DAY 14 - THURSDAY, MARCH 9TH

(Col. 3:15)

"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful."

In this season of Lent, we are reminded to give up those things that distract, that lead us away from our Lord. With what shall I replace my self-centred striving?

Among its many other amazing provisions, the good news is that the gospel offers the wonder of peace. In a world of strife, power-mongering, and personal insecurity leading to individual and societal grasping, we are offered something entirely different and life-changing: true peace.

If you are like me, this peace can be fleeting. I can easily be caught up in my own agenda and sometimes frenzied activity, even with noble intentions. Yet this peace is freely available.

It's an interesting thing, this peace of God. It is not something I can fabricate or conjure up. It is indeed a gift, based ultimately on the kindness of God. I receive the peace that calms my heart, as it is indeed divine peace, simply found in loving relationship with him. The peace of Christ. Hallelujah.

And as we rest in this transformative peace, we can be thankful. We no longer need to strive or worry. We are secure in the loving embrace of the Trinity. Gratitude flows from the experience of the peace of Christ that passes all understanding.

Loving God, we praise you for the gift of peace, that reaches down and calms our troubled spirits. May we bear this peace of Christ well, evidenced in grateful hearts, blessing the world around us. Amen.



Dan Russell
Director of Men's Programs and Outreach at UGM



DAY 15 – FRIDAY, MARCH 10TH

(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18)

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I am not a natural when it comes to gratitude. Left to my own devices I can be self-absorbed and tune out the needs and blessings of others. Like all disciplines, gratitude requires practice. In one of Paul’s letters to the early Church he writes our verse for today.

I’ve been invited by members of my community in the Downtown Eastside, time and time again to become a first responder in gratitude – regardless of my circumstances. This is a paradigm shift!

I am grateful for the way the morning sunlight hits my bedroom wall. When I see a tree clothed in cherry blossoms, I thank Creator God. My heart fills with appreciation after an encouraging conversation on the street. These moments of thankfulness can be more numerous than we realize. They exist even amid suffering, disappointment and distraction.

To be thankful in the small things is an act of courageous resistance. With gratitude, you are staking a signpost for yourself and others firmly in the ground. Amidst overwhelming individualism and materialism, this sign orients us towards community. It points to the hope and joy we have in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, thank you for today. Thank you for _____. Please cultivate this practice of gratitude in my heart and in my community. May it be added to the other signs that point people to you.



Jenny Hawkinson

A visual artist, advocate, pastoral outreach worker and learner in the Downtown Eastside



DAY 16 – SATURDAY, MARCH 11TH

(Matthew 5:8)

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

This verse lands in the thick of the greatest sermon ever given, Jesus’ sermon that transcends time, ethnicity, and culture – the **Sermon on the Mount**. But what does He mean by being ‘*pure in heart*’ and how does this relate to Lent and gratitude?

When one of my kids was 8 years old, he decided surprise me with a gift of service. At the time we lived up a long, graveled driveway. I would park my car in front of the garage next to the entrance way. It was summertime and my car would get covered in layers of thick dust from the driveway gravel. As I walked outside one morning, I was greeted with the beaming face of my 8-year-old son, sponge in hand and bucket of soapy water beside him. “*Daddy, I washed your car!*” he announced with the purest of hearts and a joy more radiant than the midday sun or a harvest moon. He then proceeded to show me his handiwork: placing the sponge in the bucket, dropping it on the driveway gravel, stomping the water out, and washing the car in the grittiest of ways – rocks and all. As I watched with a mix of deep love and horror, I noticed the scores and scratches decorating the car like gleaming trophies in the sun. Right then, I knew this would be a defining parenting moment. Choose intent or choose result. Build up or destroy. Serve God – or mammon. Thankfully, I chose the former of each. As I picked him up and hugged him, we laughed and I thanked him for how shiny our car now was (I also used it as a teaching moment for future car washing endeavours where we can achieve shiny without scratchy).

My son saw me with that purity of heart Jesus speaks of; pure intention, joyful anticipation. This was not only teaching moment for me as a parent but more importantly, as a follower of Christ.

The gratitude I experienced that day from his act of kindness reminded me of the ‘*Kingdom*’ things Jesus values and how so often children can recalibrate us towards ‘*pureness of heart*’ which leads us to seeing God’s handiwork.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (Psalm 51:10). Thank you God for these moments of grace that fill our hearts with gratitude and draw us closer to You. Amen.



Rob McKinley

Manager, Church Relations at UGM



DAY 17 - MONDAY, MARCH 13TH

(2 Corinthians 4:16)

“So we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

Hope sometimes wrongly gets tied up into toxic positive narratives which teach us to ignore what might be happening directly in front of our eyes. Toxic positivity says that “it will all work out”, that “everything happens for a reason” and to “look on the bright side.” Hope, on the other hand, takes a deep breath, looks at the pain, grief, and suffering around us and wonders if there might be another way. It understands that heartbreak will happen, but that healing can also come from it. It is not ignorant to discomfort but is open to seasons and the passing of time in which life is created, flourishes, decays and goes back into the ground.

The Story of Christ is that of hope. It is not comfortable, but it is hopeful. In fact, what is presented goes against many of the things that we seek to achieve in our modern lives. We are invited into relationship and community with people that we may not understand. To share when it feels like it is against our own best interest. To pay attention and change course when my comfort causes my neighbours oppression. These are lofty invitations that seem unachievable, and really, they are... if we try to do it ourselves. But our life story is part of the hope of the billions of people that came before us and those that will follow us. People that get curious about what could be and have the audacity to be part of the bigger story of creation. A hope that includes us but does not center around us. A hope that can keep on moving despite us and welcomes us in as participants and cherished neighbours.

As we lean into hope, let us hold in tension the greatness of what we are being invited into and the way that we are but a few words in the story.

God of sacred hope, help us to seek truth and lean into discomfort so that we can see with your eyes the beauty and possibility around us. Teach us to hold the tension of suffering and grief with that of joy and celebration.

Through your creation, walk with us as we expand our understanding of both our beloved and small place in time that you have given us. Amen.



Kari Bergrud
Manager, Program Development, Church Relations & Satellites
at UGM

DAY 18 - TUESDAY, MARCH 14TH

(1 Tim 4:4-5)

“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

In the first words of our passage, Paul references the Bible’s initial chapter, Genesis 1. The most consistent refrain in Genesis 1, proclaimed after each divine speech-act, is a variation of the phrase: “God saw it was good”, mentioned a perfect seven times. Paul picks up on this language in verse 4, inviting all readers into the world of Genesis 1 where creation is a gift from God to be received in an embodied stance of thanksgiving and an invitation into partnership with a God who wants to extend His shalom and goodness through His people.

Not only is Genesis 1 the beginning of God’s story, but it’s also the goal of our cosmos. The Biblical narrative moves from creation to new creation, a garden to a garden city. Currently, we find ourselves somewhere between the two: with the promises of Jesus, the power of the Spirit and the hope of a new creation, but stuck in a world that is “groaning” in anticipation. How do we partner with God in this moment? How do we live out His story? What is “good”?

Our moment, in Paul’s mind, calls for discernment which comes from immersing ourselves in God’s story and prayer in order to recalibrate our understanding of “good” so we can live faithfully as God’s images in this moment, in our neighbourhoods.

For Paul, therefore, thankfulness depends on what story we find ourselves in. In 1 Timothy, he invites readers both ancient and modern alike to critically assess the narratives that sculpt our understanding of what “good” is (the myths of individualism, progress, national pride and the middle-class dream, for example) and exchange them for the perfect “good” of our Creator.

Creator God, thank you for your goodness. Teach us where our stories do not align with yours and form us to be a people of discernment and thanksgiving by the power of your Spirit. Amen.



John Hau
Pastor, Reality Church



DAY 19 - WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15TH

(Psalm 100:4)

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!”

I recently learned the word *freudensfreude*, a German term that describes finding joy in another person’s successes. Even when not directly impacted, some experience genuine gladness in others’ achievements, akin to the praise expressed in Psalm 100.

Just after I learned the term, I met with a friend who personifies *freudensfreude*. I always felt good after spending time with her, and now I could articulate why. She delights in my stories and my projects. I do not know if it is a learned skill, naturally part of some people’s personalities, or even a spiritual gift. This kind of positive empathy is not a reflex for me, especially when my resilience is worn down, but it is something I want to work on, particularly through this season of Lent. We all need the tangible experiences of people finding joy in our lives.

One aspect of spirituality is a growing awareness of being part of something larger than ourselves. Many of us understand that to be God and a Body of Faith. The self is not a good container for meaning, but if we can connect our actions to others and to larger communities, our lives become more meaningful and we can create a lot of good, which the world sure needs. *Freudensfreude* shifts focus from our lives to others. This shift naturally then leads to gratitude and a growing awareness of the richness that those around us bring to life.

God, help me shift focus off myself, and help me cultivate joy in the lives of those around me.



Karen Giesbrecht
Dietitian and Food Security Coordinator at UGM



DAY 20 - THURSDAY, MARCH 16TH

(Luke 12:34)

“Hearts and Treasures.”

The era in which we live in places a very high value on possessions. Essentially, the implicit message is this: the more stuff you have the greater you’re worth. And greater worth has major implications for status, respect, opportunities and, of course, power. Material possessions often open doors for us. Among other things, they allow us to meet other people who have power and prestige and create new opportunities for us.

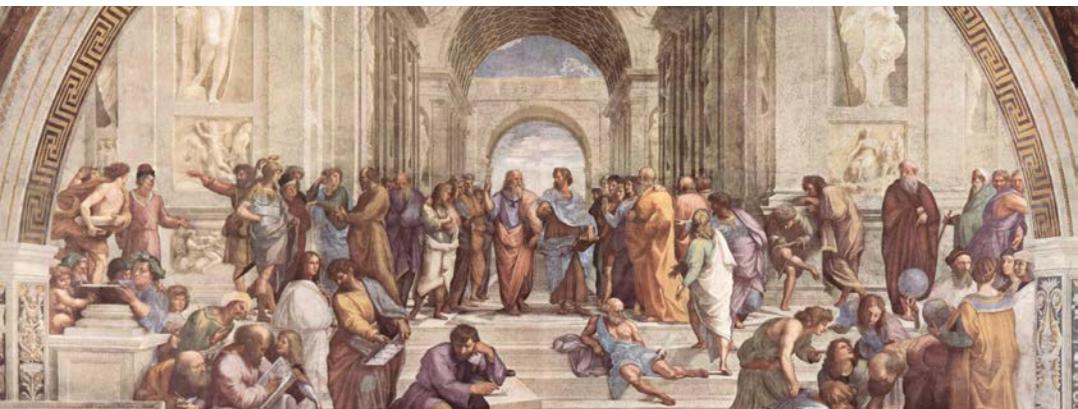
Neurologically, our brain adjusts to the abundance of “good feelings” that new possessions give us – in a sense we “down regulate” our neurological response so that the old treasures no longer do it for us. We move on to bigger and better things. In this process gratitude fades as our eyes are drawn to the next possession or experience. The more we get, the more we want. One might say that material things have the tendency to become an obsession (or might we say an addiction?).

This is not to imply that possessions are inherently evil, any more than a glass of wine is. Not everyone who drinks wine becomes an alcoholic. In this passage, Jesus is pointing out the truth that our heart follows what we treasure. God asks for our hearts, and we can know if He has it by looking at what we treasure.

Lord, thank you for the abundance of good things you have already put in my life. May I remain ever grateful while I enjoy these blessings. May I share these blessings with others, and may I be delivered from the craving for material things and the status that they bring. May my heart never be so focused on the things you provide so as to forget you have provided them.



Dale Wagner
Manager, Men’s Recovery Program at UGM



DAY 21 – FRIDAY, MARCH 17TH

(Psalm 9:1)

“I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.”

Years ago, a friend who is a therapist shared with me a simple way to check in on my mental health using the image of a traffic light. The green represents when I am doing well; staying connected to myself, others, Creator, and the world around me; and giving from a place of abundance. The amber represents the first warning signs concerning my wellbeing. The goal is to heed the amber warning; acknowledging my needs and putting self-care practices and healthy boundaries in place so that my (wholistic) health doesn't continue to deteriorate to the point where my life is best represented by the red light.

After my friend shared this image with me, I took some time to identify what my warning signs were, as well as what brings good fruit and connection into my life. Two helpful practices I identified were gratitude and whole-hearted living. Both of which we find in the opening verse of Psalm 9.

I find that I quickly become exhausted when my heart is divided, when I am pulled in multiple directions and distracted by things that do not reflect my true values. But when I live wholeheartedly, allowing myself to be fully committed to what I hold most dearly – there I find rest and relief. I am also a lot less inclined to compare myself to others, want for more than I need, or buy in to the promises of consumerism when I am intentionally practicing gratitude – taking time each day to acknowledge all that I have been given, finding joy in the smallest of daily gifts, and recognizing that all good things come from above.

In a world that constantly tells us we need more; wholehearted thanksgiving is an antidote to the scarcity fallacy.

Abba Father, when we find our hearts divided and strained, when our eyes are scanning for all we have not yet acquired, led us back to wholehearted thanksgiving.



Holly Warren
Holly, Supervisor of Women's Resource Team, UGM

DAY 22 – SATURDAY, MARCH 18TH

(Thessalonians 5:16-18)

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances.” No problem, right? Sounds easy. When God speaks of joy in trials and rejoicing always, I find that we often take a posture of incredulity. We think, *“doesn't God know what's going on my life? He should probably turn on the news and see what's happening. There's not much worth being thankful for or joyful about right now.”* Many of us get discouraged and disillusioned in our journey of faith when we conceptualize God as an angry, out-of-touch parent creating absurd rules to establish His authority and dominance. Unfortunately, that picture entirely misses the heart of our Good Father.

Today's verse sounds incredibly difficult because it is! It is an impossible task. However, as with any worthy goal, it is one that is aimed at the highest ideal: a love that is reflective not of Hallmark-style romance, but one rooted in God's complete, sacrificial love.

God is not a faraway figure in the sky, indifferent to the realities of your life. The entirety of Christ's life, death and resurrection points to the fact that God loves his creation so dearly that He desires above all else to draw near to us. He desires to draw near to you. And, as in any relationship, the one who loves us desperately wants to be loved in return. This, as the verse says, is *“God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”* His longing is that of someone to their beloved—that we would love Him not only when things are going well, but in all circumstances; that we would speak with Him not only when we feel like it, but even when we do not; and that we would acknowledge His faithfulness and nearness to us at all moments, especially during difficult seasons.

Today, may we practice a biblical, true posture of love: one that gives thanks, rejoices, and embraces the difficult yet beautiful journey of loving our Creator because He first loved us.

“I pursue you, Jesus, so that I may be caught by you. I press in so that I may know your heart. I stay close so that I may be like you. Loving Lord, grant me purity of heart, humility of soul, integrity of life and gratitude for all. Amen.” – Richard Foster



Paul Thiessen
Church Relations Advisor at UGM



DAY 23 – MONDAY, MARCH 20TH

(1 Corinthians 1:4)

“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.”

One of the ways we can practice gratitude is by acknowledging how other people bring goodness to our lives. A smile. A helping hand. A gift. A prayer. A word of encouragement. These kindnesses make us feel noticed and valued, encouraging us to be more human and humane as we connect meaningfully with others.

In this season of Lent, we also have an opportunity to practice gratitude as we remember the most extravagant goodness we could ever experience – God’s gift of grace to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Through this sacrificial act, Jesus defeated death and sin, providing us with free and open access to God, securing our place in God’s kingdom forever.

There’s nothing we’ve done to deserve the grace of God and nothing we can do to lose it. Grace is all God’s work to rescue and redeem us, enabling us to be in right relationship with him and others, bringing repair, renewal, and restoration into our places of guilt, shame, and brokenness. In relationship with Jesus, we are gradually being brought back to life as we learn what it means to be part of God’s kingdom, daily experiencing his amazing grace and goodness.

As we go through this day, let’s acknowledge and express gratitude to the people who bring goodness to our lives. They are an extension of God’s grace, and we can give thanks to God for them. Let’s also look for opportunities to bring goodness to others so they, too, may experience the gifts and benefits that come from the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

God, thank you for your extravagant grace provided to us through Jesus. Jesus, our hearts are filled with gratitude for your sacrifice on our behalf. Thank you. Spirit of God, empower us to bring God’s goodness to the people we encounter today.



Sharon Simmonds
Director of Programs, Arrow Leadership



DAY 24 – TUESDAY, MARCH 21ST

(Acts 24:3)

“In every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.”

For years I tried countless ways to free myself from the addiction I battled. I lived in a constant state of fear, panic, and confusion, surrounded by darkness and inner chaos. I could not see past my own pain and suffering, which was slowly killing me. The only thing on my mind was to numb the pain.

I had failed at being a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend. Knee deep in my addiction, I had no one and nothing left. Anything that ever brought me joy or happiness was lost to me. Reality was painful. Being awake was torture. Nothing mattered.

Loss and pain were comfortable and familiar. After a particularly hard loss, my heart was finally shattered and I was completely broken, unable to move or breath.

It was at this point that I reached utter desperation and cried out to God. I was defeated with absolutely no fight left in me. I was willing to do whatever it took to crawl out of this deep hole I had found myself in. God heard my cry. I started my journey of recovery. I was told to write a list of what I was grateful for. It started small...coffee, sleep, hot water. Day by day, as this list increased and I saw the blessings in my life, that gnawing feeling of emptiness decreased. One day I just noticed it was gone. Completely gone. When I focus on the good things and blessings, I do not feel like something is missing. I feel whole and complete. I experience peace and joy on a regular basis. I see beauty amid the mess. My perspective has gone from being pessimistic to optimistic, from being anxious to hopeful.

God, help me to remain grateful for the little things and let me see You in every situation. Amen.



Leanne O'Brien
Recovery Care Worker at UGM Lydia Home in Mission, BC



DAY 25 - WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22ND

(Hebrews 13:15)

"Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name."

Before coming to UGM I ministered in a relatively obscure denomination called 'The Church of the Nazarene.' The denomination chose the name from the scripture where some disciples wondered about Jesus saying, 'What good could come from Nazareth?' The name reminds us that Jesus chose to be associated with those who were despised and rejected. In a similar fashion Hebrews 13:12 says that Jesus was the high priest who made a sacrifice outside the camp, outside of the temple, outside of the holy city. Jesus, the son of God, left the sanctuary of heaven, and endured the abuse and shame of a humiliating death reserved for criminals. It was through the sacrifice of his own blood that we are sanctified, made whole.

Our verse for today implores us to continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that confess his name. This sacrifice of praise is worship and thanksgiving from our mouth and is also doing good and sharing what we have (Hebrews 13:16). Isaiah 58 reminds us that true fasting that pleases God is sharing food with the hungry, offering shelter and clothing to the poor.

We, who confess Jesus as Lord, show Him love through the following: offering continual praise with the words that come from our lips, doing good, and sharing what we have. Such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Authentic worship involves praising God in the sanctuary on Sunday and also living justly and loving mercy continually in our day to day. Right now, consider: 'What good can I do today? What do I have to share?'

Jesus Christ, thank you for leaving the holy place, the safety and security of heaven, to enter our neighbourhood, our brokenness and our sin, so that we might be made whole. You have blessed us to be a blessing, to do good and to share what we have. May our Lenten fast be authentic, bearing fruit of gratitude, goodness, and generosity.



Geoff DeJager
Supervisor, Chaplaincy, Hastings Chaplaincy & Outreach



DAY 26 - THURSDAY, MARCH 23RD

(Psalm 28:7)

**"The LORD is my strength and shield.
I trust him with all my heart.
He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy.
I burst out in songs of thanksgiving."**

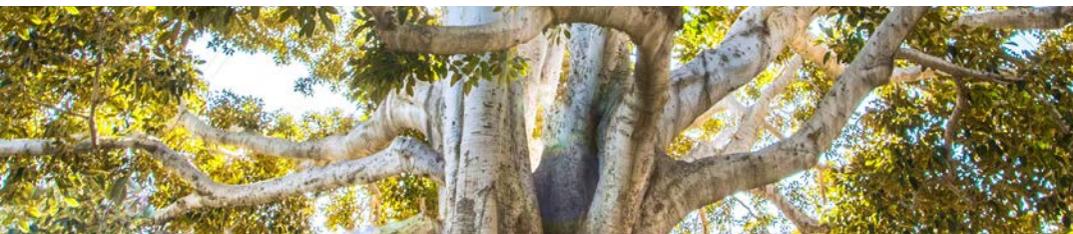
I am notoriously hard on myself. I regularly feel like I'm failing and that I'm not good enough. A read through my past journals confirms that this has long been my reality. Perhaps you struggle with similar thoughts and feelings. Psalm 28:7 offers great encouragement to those of us who battle self-condemnation because YAHWEH is our strength and shield. It is difficult to win this internal fight on our own, but our Creator, the one who knows every bit of us, helps us out. We may not be able to trust ourselves, but we can trust God - and as we do, our hearts are filled with joy! We literally burst out in songs of thanksgiving because he rescues us.

I experienced this in a profound way a few years ago when I went to visit a friend in Alberta. To counter my negative thoughts, I had started journaling five things I was thankful for each day and, even if they were small things, there was no shortage of gratitude. Through that practice God invited me to intentionally choose joy. Since I think hashtags are ridiculous and enjoy using them for fun I started saying "#choosejoy." That statement was contagious! The friend I was visiting loved it and we started saying it for everything. Putting together Muskoka chairs? #choosejoy. Frisbee? #choosejoy. Dancing around the house? #choosejoy. Pizza? #choosejoy. A good conversation? #choosejoy. To this day I still use #choosejoy when the feelings of being a failure and not being good enough show up. When I do, it turns my attention to the goodness of God and reminds me that we can cultivate gratitude and choose to see the good in this world. This Lenten season I invite you to #choosejoy and put your trust in YAHWEH, for God truly is your help.

God, you are our strength and our shield. We can trust in you. Thank you for being our help and for filling our hearts with joy. May we burst out in songs of thanksgiving for all you have done. You are so good to us!



Melissa Van Dyk
Manager, Hastings Chaplaincy & Outreach at UGM



DAY 27 - FRIDAY, MARCH 24TH

(Psalm 23:1-3)

"The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake."

The shepherd's Psalm was David's expression of his experience of what it meant to walk with God. Drawing from his own experience as a shepherd, intentionally guiding the sheep under his care into what is best for them, He reflects on God's own care for himself. One phrase is especially telling: *"He makes me lie down in green pastures."* One of the ways a shepherd cares for his sheep is to ensure that they take the time to stop their foraging for their needs and to just lie down and be still.

Many people during Lent choose to put a pause on one of the activities that is contributing to their over busy schedules. If that becomes your Lenten choice for this year, I want to encourage you to intentionally focus on the Shepherd. Let Him fill the void that you have created in your schedule. Picture yourself as a sheep being led by God to lie down and just be quiet in His presence.

Sometimes circumstances in life, like sickness or loss of employment, force us to *"lie down"* for a period, from our busy pace in life. How much better, to allow the caring shepherd to lead us to a time of intentional, laying down of the busyness of life and simply rest in Him, His work and provision for us spiritually, physically, and emotionally?

Whatever practice of Lent you have chosen for this season, allow the Good Shepherd to fill the void. When we do that, we find, like David that we *"lack nothing,"* that our souls are refreshed, and we are led on the right paths in life.

Dear caring Shepherd of my soul, thank you for the way you graciously lead me through life, guiding and providing for me in every way. Forgive me for the way I run ahead of you and forage for my needs when you are simply calling me to lay down and rest in your presence. May part of my laying things in life aside during this Lenten season be allowing you to fill those voids with a calm rest in your provision and care.



Rich Peachey
Pastor of Operations, Town and Field Church in Langley, BC



DAY 28 - SATURDAY, MARCH 25TH

(Ephesians 5:19-20)

"...speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Gratitude does not come easily to me. Though it is usually a noticeable marker of my spiritual and mental health, so it's something I am learning to cultivate. I have found that my path to gratitude is often through the gift of music.

Music helps me to slow down enough to sit with and feel my emotions. When this eventually leads to the gift of sadness, I can then finally become attuned to my present moments. Dallas Willard encourages us to *"ruthlessly eliminate hurry from your life."* My typical mode of operation is hurrying from task to task and accomplishing as much as I can, until it leads to deep disconnection and dissatisfaction. Music helps me to slow down, listen, and allow space for my pain to be felt. Jesus speaks into that space and reminds me that the feelings of being *"not enough"* or *"not worthy of affection"* are rooted in shame, not Himself. Instead, the quiet voice of the Spirit says in my heart language of Cantonese, *"You are my boy."* This reminder helps me to become present to my life instead of rushing off to the next task, thereby helping me to notice the simple things around me, leading to gratitude and joy.

My next steps would be to have gratitude not only as a marker, but to have it become an instrument towards being present to God's creation, transformation, and love around me.

How might music and other artistic outlets lead you to gratitude and living fully present in this season of Lent?

What words might the Holy Spirit be speaking in your heart language?

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in breaking down the stories that hold us back from spiritual health, continue to help us discover the musical and artistic gifts that allow us to enter into gratitude amid dissatisfaction and disconnection.



Leslie Rosenau-Lai
Church Relations Advisor at UGM

DAY 29 – MONDAY, MARCH 27TH

It is not difficult to find oneself anxious of late. I often find myself fighting an inner battle between wanting new things on the one hand and avoiding my climate-anxiety-induced buyer's remorse on the other. Prices for essentials are on the rise too-somehow routine trips to the local grocery store for milk and bread end with price tags in the double (if not triple) digits. And then there are our other ever-present problems: political and cultural polarization, a housing affordability crisis, an overdose epidemic, and a world filled with wars and rumours of wars. How did we get here?

This question, "How?" plays a central role in the book of Lamentations. In fact, the book's original Hebrew name is *Eicha*, simply meaning "how." This question also functions as a structural device in the book. In Lamentations, the poet poses a series of raw, uninhibited questions to God about his very real problems. You see, his beloved city, Jerusalem, has just been destroyed by the Babylonians. As the poet walks the streets of his once-great city, his eyes are met by nightmarish visions: houses reduced to rubble, adults scavenging through the remains, and children begging for food – any food at all. The situation in the city is dire, and the poet blames God for "letting all His anger loose, holding nothing back" (Lam. 4:11).

A pious modern Christian might find this outburst uncomfortable: "Bring your sorrows to God, but don't blame Him for them!" However, many modern Christians haven't faced much suffering. When you face injustice or when you are overwhelmed with pain, it's hard not to just let your emotions out. And, surprisingly, God seems to be okay with that. He has left an entire book of such complaints against him in the Scriptures. He can handle your unfiltered thoughts and feelings. You just might find that doing so helps. After all, once the poet in Lamentations vented his frustration, he gives us one of the most shocking and beautiful prayers of all time:

(Lam. 3:22-23)

"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."



Saana Walker
Research and Evaluation Specialist at UGM

DAY 30 – TUESDAY, MARCH 28TH

(Colossians 3:17 FNV)

"Let the message of the Chosen One become a deep watering hole inside you. It will then become a refreshing spring as you teach and guide one another with wisdom and understanding. You will sing traditional prayers, sacred chants, and spiritual songs as you dance your prayers before the Great Spirit with glad and Thankful Hearts. Every Step taken, and each work spoken should be done to represent our Honored Chief: Creator Sets Free (Jesus). As you dance your prayers and give thanks through him to our Father, the Creator."

Sometimes I need to be reminded that every little thing that I do matters. No task is too small, insignificant or unimportant. It is easy to forget that all I do with my minutes and moments on this side of heaven is for Him. And when those grumblings of frustration or discouragement come as they tend to do in my human condition, I have a choice. I can complain, freak out, and lose my cool; or choose to thank the Father for this moment I have to honor him. Gratitude is powerful. Jesus showed us how to give thanks so that the Father was glorified. When we give thanks to the Father and express our gratitude, isn't it just like Jesus to turn it back into a blessing for us?

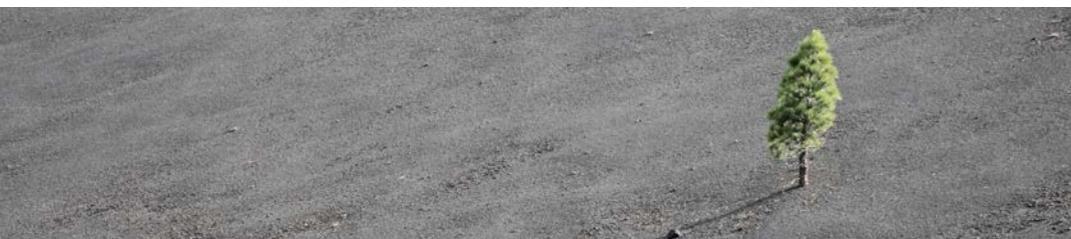
I'm reminded of a First Nations woman I met on the streets of Vancouver who was lost and lonely, in the grip of addiction, sex work, and homelessness. Her anger was coming out in all sorts of ways. I thank God that she had a safe place to let her anger out. "What are you thankful for today?" I asked her. "I'm grateful to be a mom," she said. Eventually she was able to reunite with her daughter who was being cared for by a relative. Years later, she contacted me to say, "I'm thankful you never gave up on me". She is now many years sober, baptized, married to the love of her life and living in the full forgiveness and love of God. It is a real-life story of the "Creator Set's Free," which is another name for Jesus in the First Nations Version Bible.

When I think about my everyday life, I struggle to remember to be thankful as she was. But in the season of Lent, I appreciate the reminder to give thanks to the Father, often and much, no matter the circumstances.

Creator Sets Free, Jesus: thank you for doing just that: setting us free each time we give thanks to the Father. May we experience the deep well of your love this Lent.



Skye Walks
Volunteer Resources Coordinator at UGM



DAY 31 – WEDNESDAY, MARCH 29TH

(Matthew 5:6)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

When was the last time you were *really* hungry or thirsty? Maybe you have all too recently experienced considerable hunger or thirst, perhaps even of the cramp-inducing kind. For me, my current days as an architecture student remind me of my first days in Canada nearly a decade ago: as an MDiv student at Regent College, my wife and I, having just moved from Washington D.C. and without a source of income, struggled to adjust to Canadian prices of gas, milk, meat, and produce. “*It’s always cereal time!*” became such a constant refrain in our apartment, it morphed into a song. Craving a cheap source of calories, I was nearly always hungry.

As perhaps some of us know by experience, when intense hunger and thirst become habitual, our mind, bodies, and spirits can be dramatically affected. Ask the likes of an ultra-marathon runner, a child in a developing nation, and some of our local street friends. Thankfully, the deeper and more uncomfortable our hunger, the greater and more uplifting the satisfaction in being filled, and perhaps – if we have not become hardened by the arduousness of our experience – the greater our gratitude. This is true especially if our circumstances have been transformed by

a regenerative experience that pulls us out of our hunger and situates us in a new reality.

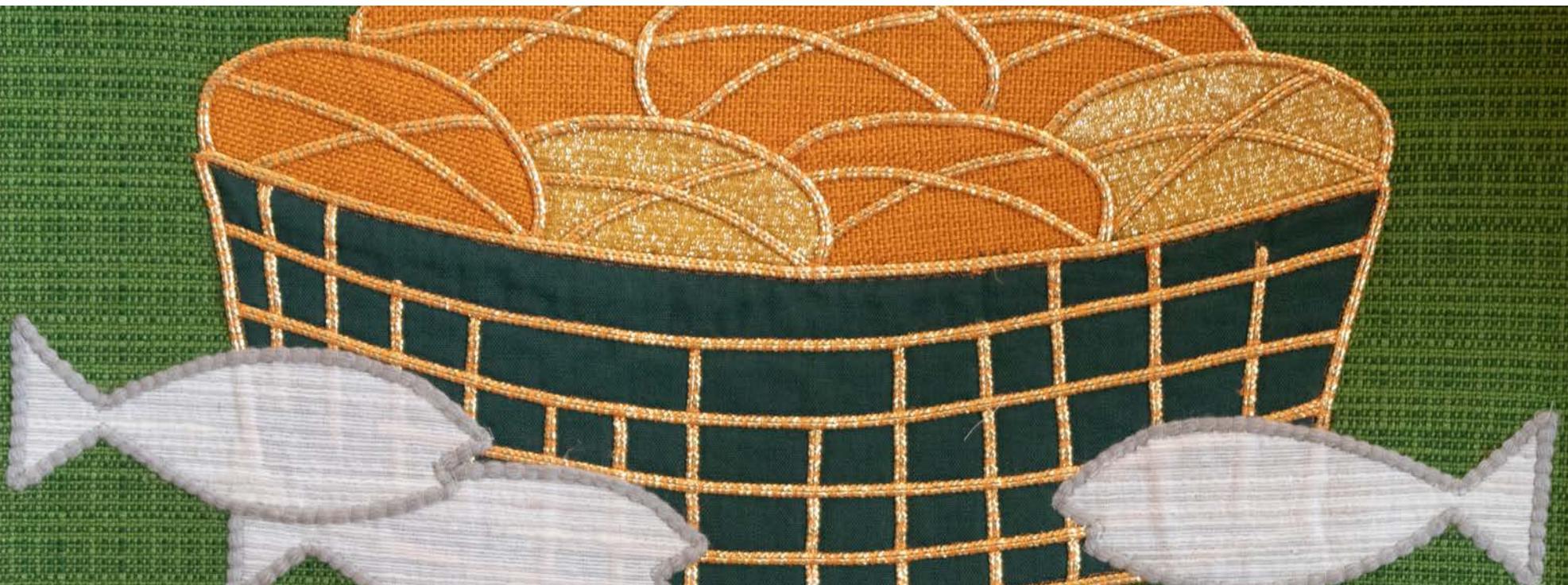
In past Lenten seasons, where I have chosen food from which to fast, the commitment has been demanding, the temptation great, and the struggle real. And yet, with every right culmination of the fast, I could not be more thankful for the celebration that is “*being filled!*” How much, then, shall we be satisfied when it is righteousness (that beautiful Greek word *dikaiosune* – also well-translated as justice, equitableness, uprightness) for which we hunger and thirst! Parched to see the uprightness of the Father manifested in all areas of society; panged to see the justice of the Son extend through our relationships and communities; hungry to see the fairness of the Spirit more fully mark our personal lives, we trust that He and his Church shall fill, and we shall be blessed!

Heavenly Father, help us to be people of your kingdom who are defined by our hunger and thirst for righteousness, justice, and equitableness. Guide us communally to grow more in this area of our lives, in rhythm with this Lenten season...that we may be satisfied, and made grateful, with the great feast of your resurrection supper.



Stuart Campbell

A Regent College graduate, has served on the First Baptist pastoral staff, ministering primarily with small groups. He currently studies architecture at UBC’s SALA.



DAY 32 – THURSDAY, MARCH 30TH

(John 13:34-35, NIV)

“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

Peace and mercy. These words were spoken to a people that had no land. They lived in tents and were vulnerable to the elements and to the hostility of other nations. They are meant to instill comfort in uncertain times. In two beautiful parallel lines, they portray the Creator as a protector. Through the face metaphor of this blessing, we are reminded that peace and mercy are deeply relational and not merely conceptual. We need peace and mercy to be fully alive.

Can you think of a face that makes you feel fully alive when you see it? Perhaps a child, a loved one, a parent or a good friend. Perhaps the someone whom you do not know well yet but makes you feel welcome.

I belong and work for a faith community with a long history in our city. Together with some volunteers, we serve an abundant meal on Tuesdays to marginalized or vulnerable neighbours in downtown. Over the last couple of years (despite all the challenges that the pandemic brought), as we greet each other, engage in conversations, and get to know each other, some of the neighbours’ faces have become familiar and welcoming.

As I give thanks for these welcoming faces, I am reminded of the words of martyred Archbishop Oscar Romero from El Salvador,

Gloria Dei, vivens pauper.

The glory of God is the poor person fully alive.

Christians believe that one day we will see God’s glory face to face (1 Cor 13), but we are invited to live into peace and mercy now. Through Christ (and just like him), we are invited to extend and receive hospitality in the faces of the poor with whom we live in our city.

Creator, be gracious to us. Make your face shine upon us. Give us grace to see your face in our neighbor’s face as we seek your peace.



David Nacho
Director, Street Ministries at First Baptist Church, Vancouver

DAY 33 – FRIDAY, MARCH 31TH

(1 Chronicles 16:34)

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”

Living in Vancouver we often say “thanks” without giving it much thought. Maybe it’s the Canadian in us or we’re simply used to saying it.

In this passage we can tell the author’s encouragement to “Give thanks” is more than simple words or polite manners, giving thanks here is recognizing that God not only does good things, but He is good.

Understand that any situation that we are experiencing has an expiration date, regardless of that date, God’s love will be with us always.

In Matthew 12:43-45 Jesus talks of a defiling spirit leaving a person, but this passage shows us that being cleansed is not the same as being filled. When we get rid of bad habits, behaviors, and addictions, we need to fill this void with good habits; a life of gratitude is key to keeping our new life in place and to face the challenges of this world.

If you look at the past, you might feel unworthy. If you look at the present, you may be filled with worry. But if you live one day at a time, in gratitude, you will cultivate the joy you need to handle everyday situations in life in the knowledge that any situation of this world will never overcome God’s love.

In the past, I would quickly choose what felt good to me, even if my actions were against God. As I went through the Celebrate Recovery Program and took tangible steps back toward my Maker, I started to repent these worldly things that once filled me.

“Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.” – Melody Beattie

God, please let us come to you with an attitude of gratitude for all that you will do, have done, and given to us so we can stay focused on your goodness, care, and love in our daily life, knowing that your love and care will never end. Amen



Maria Peralta
Outreach Worker at UGM





DAY 34 – SATURDAY, APRIL 1ST

(Philippians 4:8)

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”

What “such things” have you experienced this week? This question struck my mind, and I struggle to answer it. With these words, Paul has undoubtedly set a high standard of what we should allow in our minds. To elaborate, the thing we should think about must not only be true but also noble. Plus, not only what is true and noble, but our thoughts are also to be right and pure. Do you see where I’m going with this?

Yet, the context of this chapter is merely Paul sharing how he learned to be content, knowing that “Christ Jesus has made [him] his own” (3:12) and that “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). From this understanding of his identity, Paul learned how to rejoice and give thanks as he received His peace. He repented and replaced his old religiosity with the revelation and practice of the Good News that fulfilled all these standards so that in plenty and hunger, or abundance and need, whatever it was, he could do all things through Christ who gave him strength.

So, let us start practicing rejoicing in the simple gospel and our God. Let us fill our minds with “such things” that inspire thankful worship of God and service to others as we pray on earth as it is in heaven. By practicing these things, you will learn to see what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, and the God of peace will be with you.

Creator, we give thanks and rejoice for you are good. Remind us today of the love on that cross that makes way for our peace and hope. In worshiping you and serving others today, Spirit, help us set our eyes on you and renew our minds to see what’s true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Amen.



Nathanael Siaoman
Ministry Support Worker On Call at UGM
Coastal Eden Downtown Eastside Team Member
UBC’s Psi Chi Member and Psychology Research Assistant

DAY 35 – MONDAY, APRIL 3ND

(2 Thessalonians 1:3)

“We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.”

These last couple years have been a whirlwind of change. Moving, attending school, moving another three times, learning to be a functioning adult standing on my own two feet, and a relationship that did not work out.

All these experiences could very well have rocked my world and left me isolated, alone, and frozen with fear.

In hindsight, I am so grateful for the tears and frustrations my struggles had brought me because they helped me to lean not only on the utmost high King, Christ himself, but also on other believers. The victories and faithful lives of others helped encourage me through the rough patches and warmed my heart with joy.

Now having the experience of seeing others come to faith and learn to walk with Jesus continues to give me strength as I get to share my own walk with them. What it all boils down to is the gratitude I have for being able to live the human experience with my brothers and my sisters in Christ.

God, during this season of lent, may we find strength in our community with other followers and may your light shine through us and light the way for those around us.



Kelly Nobel
Recovery Care Worker at UGM



DAY 36 – TUESDAY, APRIL 4TH

(James 1:17)

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY ON TOP

Life is full. Full of pleasant surprises, unexpected turns, unimaginable pain, and joys too great for words. One thing we do know - the more things change, the more they stay the same. This isn't merely a common, pithy statement. There's teeming truth in it. James 1:17 reminds us that God does not change like the shifting shadows here on earth.

I've had my life rocked by 4 significant times of crisis – major, life-altering, catastrophic times where the end seemed nowhere in sight. One of those times was when I lost my brother suddenly to a plane accident. Mark wasn't just my older brother, he was my closest friend, advocate, and quasi-father figure. I say this as we had lost our father to cancer when we were quite young which forged our bond even more strongly than what it was.

I heard the news when I arrived at work. It was a Tuesday morning and two RCMP officers were waiting for me in the meeting room. I had no idea why they were there. At the time, Mark was an RCMP officer in Alberta. They informed me that the plane he was flying went down due to inclement weather. It was now my job to inform my mother and the rest of the family. Shock. Pain. Unimaginable grief on being the bearer of such news to those I loved. It took me two years to wrestle this out with God – and still, it's never fully 'over.' But through it all, there was a transcendent peace amidst the pain that I still can't explain. During the memorial service in Alberta, the Pastor reminded everyone that it's always 'sunny on top' – relating to Mark's love of flying. I'm struck by this whenever I fly – leaving the torrential downpours of Vancouver and breaking the clouds to see the sun shining gloriously.

My heart overflows with gratitude in this brief scripture in James. No matter what our losses, trials, or griefs may be, nothing is changed in God's perfect and beautiful nature. As a follower of Jesus, I take great comfort in this reality – a shelter not just during the shifting shadows on earth but in the continuum of eternity, where it's always sunny on top.

Gracious God, thank you for the reminders of who you are in both the small and great things that carry us through the storms and rejoice in the beauty of life. May we be ever mindful of your presence and promises as we lift our eyes to you. Amen.



Rob McKinley
Manager, Church Relations at UGM

DAY 37 – WEDNESDAY, APRIL 5TH

(Psalms 95:2 NIV)

“Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.”

Gratitude is a choice. Choose to be grateful, and you'll always find God's beauty and glory manifest in and around you; choose to be ungrateful, and you'll always find things to grumble about.

But let's be practical here; how do we be grateful in the midst of chaos and adversities we face in life? The person who wrote this verse above gives us a hint. This psalm is attributed to David, who was a king who ruled over Israel for forty years and who faced many trials and hardships: persecution, temptation, conflicts in relationships, fear, loss of loved ones – you name it. David had much in common with us, for, although he was anointed as king, he faced seasons of desert like all of us do. But in this psalm, David teaches us that if we are to choose gratitude, we must focus on something greater than this life's struggles, which is Christ's victory over our ultimate and most critical enemy: eternal separation from God. If we take a step back to verse 1, we find the following words: *“Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation”* (Psalms 95:1). David acknowledges here that Jesus is his salvation and he recognizes that Christ has given him the precious gift of salvation. Jesus died on a cross so that everyone who believes in Him might have eternal life by His side (John 3:15).

And this is the secret for choosing gratitude when life is tough and you feel lost and lonely: meditate on Christ's work on the cross. Jesus died and was resurrected on the third day so we could be granted the most beautiful gift: being saved and called His beloved children.

Father God, thank you for saving us and for pouring mercy and grace over us. Thank you, for you see us and care for all our needs. Lord Jesus, please remind us today of your work on the cross, and teach us, Holy Spirit, to be grateful for our salvation.



Mariana Berbel
Early Childhood Educator Plus at UGM



DAY 38 – THURSDAY, APRIL 6TH

(Matthew 5.16)

“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

A young man searches for a homeless friend inside a metro station in Montreal. He walks toward a garbage bin inside the metro that his friend usually sits in front of and panhandles. Upon arrival, he sees a homeless man that looks like his friend, but when he takes a closer look, it is not him. Yet he squats down and asks the homeless man if he knows his friend and where he might be. Unfortunately, he does not know. He thanks the man and goes towards the escalator. Just as he ascends, a woman stops him and says, *“Wait, come back I want to talk to you. I see a light in you.”* The young man halts, turns around and walks down the escalator. She tells him that it is rare to see a person squat, be at the same level as a homeless man, and speak to him. She felt like the young man was being like Jesus. With the previous comments that she made, the young man asked if she was a Christian, because he was. She told him that she was spiritual, and they decided to continue their conversation at a nearby A&W restaurant. The woman opened up, telling him about her unhealthy relationship with her boyfriend. The Christian told the woman that he was part of a morning prayer group and asked if they could pray for the couple. With tears running down her cheeks she gladly accepted. She thanked the young man repeatedly. He replied, *“Thank God.”* The woman agreed and said, *“Yes, thank God and you.”* Suddenly, a verse came to memory in the young man’s mind: *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matt. 5:16 NIV).

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit grant us the sensitivity to befriend those who do not have a place to lay their heads. As you comfort us, may we comfort those in need of it. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for humbling yourself; becoming like us though you were also God. Empower us to shine our light and to glorify you. Amen.



Amos Bohoussou
Emergency Shelter Worker, Hastings Chaplaincy & Outreach at UGM

DAY 39 – FRIDAY, APRIL 15TH

(2 Corinthians 4:15)

“All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

I want to feel that I can be with people and provide support that will make a difference in their lives. I want to reflect the face of Christ to all those I meet but I often feel inadequate to that task. There are many distractions that pull at me and often keep me from hearing what God is asking of me.

In 2 Corinthians God says, *“let light shine out of the darkness”* and he made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ. Jesus was so much braver than I am. He was a rebel who did not follow a prescribed or easy path. He was a risk taker and a flame that sparked light in others. Grace flowed from him into other people. I am grateful for the gift of grace that I feel when I walk with Him and want to feel that grace and share it with those I meet during this time of Lent and always. Often when serving at our community meal I am so busy *“doing”* that I forget to *“be”* with people. Sharing food is needed but sharing compassion and taking time to listen and be present can be even more nourishing. Participating in this kind of sharing makes my heart fill with thankfulness that overflows.

Lord, give me the courage to do more than what is prescribed or expected. Give me strength to be a flame and to bring light to darkness in a way that makes a difference. During this Lenten season and always help me to be brave and look deeply into the hearts of those I serve to see their need and share the grace of God.



Belinda Boyd
Social Justice Ministry Community Meal Coordinator at St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Richmond





DAY 40 – SATURDAY, APRIL 16TH

(2 Corinthians 5:17,19)

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.”

While reflecting on this devotional I kept circling back to myself and how I respond to difficult situations. These situations were so varied and at first didn’t seem to have any constant theme until this scripture came to my heart.

This scripture always seemed so obvious to me as I once was caught up in the throes of addiction in the DTES. Of course, I am a different person now than the one who pushed his shopping cart into the UGM building with the last of his belongings. I am cleaned up, healthier and the chains of addiction have been broken for me. It is now 15 years later and the selfishness of addiction is far in the past but also one that I am constantly reminded of each and every time I share my testimony.

What is different today compared to my fresh new self coming out of UGM a Christian surrendered to the Lord and a new creation?

I now live in Cambodia serving the Lord here in a slum relocation site. My friends and neighbours were violently evicted by the government and their land was stolen from them. I was a witness to this tragedy being onsite and helping people lift their straw huts to fetch some belongings before the bulldozers took another run at their home. In the past I would meet violence with violence, but I believe that this is not the right answer as a Christian. Even in the village many are angry about the poverty they live in and the hopelessness in it never changing. This leads to a lot of alcoholism and violence in families. I have stepped into many a house when these daily occurrences reach another level and I have taken machetes, hammers and even a bicycle from the hands of a person acting violently. I always wondered why I was never hurt in these

situations but, you see, I didn’t step into the situation with a violent heart towards the perpetrator, but with one of peace of the Holy Spirit who cared for my neighbours and the children who were witnessing these acts as their “normal.”

From just a couple of stories above you can see the new creation I am in Christ Jesus. Though, we are always close to letting that “old creation” back into our lives.

Maybe this Lent season we can give up a little more of our “old” self.

*Lord, you are so patient for us all
You wait and listen and see and know our true hearts and desires
You must weep for all the times we walk away from you and the Divine appointments
you have in wait for us
You beckon us with your love
You beckon us with the people you place in our lives
You beckon us with where you plant us
You beckon us to just stop and listen to the Father
Just like the disciples they see and hear but do not always understand right away
Again you wait
You wait like a father with a child watching us take our first steps and fall but you are
always there to catch us
Forgive me, Father, for all the times I do not act with the love you have shown me
Forgive me, Father, for not loving my neighbours as myself
Forgive me, Father, for not loving myself
Help me, Father, recognize the path you have laid out for me
Help me, Father, love the unlovable
Help me, Father, recognize you in the homeless and addicted
Please help me, Father, become more like Jesus*



Kevin Knight
Co-founder Manna4life Cambodia

Union Gospel Mission has been feeding hope and changing the lives of men, women, and children for over 80 years. Through its eight locations in Metro Vancouver and the City of Mission, UGM provides outreach, meals, alcohol and drug recovery, and housing to those struggling with poverty, homelessness, and addiction. The heart of the mission is to demonstrate God's transforming love, ease the burden of the most vulnerable, rebuild the lives of the broken, and offer dignity to those who feel cast aside.

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