

FINDING FREEDOM

The World Turned Upside Down

2024 LENT DEVOTIONAL



Feeding hope. Changing lives.

Devotional Scripture

Welcome! You're invited to join us on this 40-day journey through Lent. This is a season where we prepare our hearts and minds to accept the significance of Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the grave at Easter. Through practices like fasting, prayer, and meditation on the Word, we intentionally open our eyes to the reality of our need to rely on God for his perfect grace, love, and hope.

This year, we are using the incredible story in Acts 16 as a lens to see God's upending work in our world. Each day will hold a unique reflection and prayer written by a trusted friend and leader in our community. Before we embark on this journey, we invite you to read the narrative for yourself. If you're able, read it slowly, two or three times. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal which character you most relate and empathize with, or who you find yourself most challenged by.

We pray that this will be a transformative season for you to embrace the restorative power of Christ in our lives, communities, and world. May the truth of Christ's holy sufficient work at Easter gracefully wash over you. Be blessed.

*For His glory and our joy,
UGM's Church Relations Team*

"From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent

earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left."

ACTS 16:11-40, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (unless otherwise noted, all scripture referenced in NIV).

Introduction

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

by Mark Buchanan

"These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."
Acts 17:6 (NKJV)

These who have turned the world upside down.

That's how some men from Thessalonica described Paul and Silas. Revolutionaries. Insurrectionists. Big-time trouble-makers.

The Wild Ones.

The Bible tells us not a single thing about the Apostle Paul's physical appearance, though it hints in several places that he suffered bodily afflictions: bad eyesight, maybe wounds that never healed, or some unidentified thorn in his side. Tradition tells us more. It has him as a short bald man with a crooked walk and a reedy voice.

Not a specimen of physical intimidation.

He's no Samson wielding a donkey's jawbone, not even a Joshua with a band of wall-wrecking horn players. This is a small man (what His name literally means) with a shambling gait, a pipping voice, and a skull bone shining like metal in the sun. He preaches sermons so long, some might say boring, that teenagers fall asleep and fall out of windows.

Yet he's got a sizable town shaking in its boots.

What reputation precedes him? What rumors about him, Silas, and maybe a few others, have reached these men of Thessalonica, and so alarm them?

They must know about Philippi.

Philippi was the last city Paul and his team spent any significant time in. Paul and Silas, and a few others, turned it upside down. More accurately, the gospel they preached, and loved, and lived, and suffered for – it turned that city upside down.

And now they, and their gospel, have come here too.

In this year's UGM Lent devotional, we start in ancient Philippi, and watch the gospel turn it upside down. The gospel touches on every aspect of that city's life – its social, political, judicial, economic life. But, always, always, it upends, in

the best way imaginable, the personal lives of men and women there - a wealthy businesswoman, a trafficked girl, a huddle of hardened prisoners and a scowling hulk of a prison guard.

Each and all, their lives are turned upside down.

When Paul and Silas limp their way out of Philippi several days (or maybe weeks - it's hard to get a clear idea of how long they were there) after arriving, nothing in it is or ever will be quite the same.

What started there continues here. Over the forty days of Lent, we will explore these events in Philippi. I hope two things: one, we feel history brush up against us, feel its heat and pulse, its wild and beautiful and dangerous aliveness. I hope Philippi feels, not far-away and long-ago, but here and now: very close, very present, very recent.

And I hope the gospel that turned their world upside down turns our world upside down, ever and again: socially, politically, judicially, economically.

And especially, personally.

And I guess I hope a third thing: we go and do likewise.

Let us begin.

SCENE ONE - LYDIA: THE BEST OF THESE

Paul had not intended to go to Philippi. He was heading in the opposite direction, eastward, to Bithynia in Turkey. But this happened:

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 16:9-10 (NIV)

That's a trip of almost 800 km in the opposite direction. Paul's given, it seems, no further details: just a man in a vision begging. Everything else Paul and his team will have to figure out. So off they go, toward Philippi, "a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia" (v.12).

On that Sabbath, as they seek a place to pray, they meet a group of women. Paul seizes the opportunity and preaches the gospel.

One woman opens her heart. Her name is Lydia, a "dealer in purple cloth" (v.14).

This means wealth. Lydia is a woman of substantial means. She owns a house in Philippi, and maybe also in Thyatira. Money flowed in and through Philippi, and savvy businesswomen like Lydia could reap big profits there.

Yet something for her seems to be missing. Wealth can add many things to life, but not meaning. The poverty of the rich is often this: they don't know what

to do with it.

Lydia, according to the story, is the only woman who opens her heart to the gospel that day. I wonder how much her wealth - the disappointment of it - prepared her for this moment. She had all she wanted, except this: no real purpose.

At any rate, her first impulse after coming to faith is to share her wealth: here's my house, she says, please use it. As though she's discovered, in one dazzling revelation, a purpose for all that money and stuff. The gospel's turned her world upside down.

It's worth noticing that in a letter to the Corinthians, Paul holds up the churches in Macedonia - among them, this one in Philippi - as models of lavish generosity:

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

(2 Cor. 8:1-4)

He goes further, and suggests that such generosity is a reflection of Jesus himself, who, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Though rich, yet for your sake became poor. I wonder if Paul is also giving a summary of Lydia's life after her conversion.

SCENE TWO - A SLAVE GIRL: THE LEAST OF THESE

Paul and his team go back to the place of prayer. It must seem to them fertile soil. A thin place.

This time, a slave girl with an unclean spirit meets them, and then follows them, days on end, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (Acts 16:17).

The girl, or rather, the spirit that has hold of her, tells people their future. She, or it, is apparently very good at this: she makes big profits for her pimps. You want to know which stocks to invest in, or guy to marry, or seeds to plant next spring? Pay the pimps, and the girl will tell you. It must work, more or less, because people keep coming and keep paying.

And she *is* perceptive. She knows exactly, precisely who Paul and Silas are. She uses startling theological language, language she couldn't have come

up with on her own. And she's not a shade off, not a note flat. These are indeed servants of the Most High God, and they are telling people the way to be saved.

Which is a fantastic infomercial. Imagine it: the city's own cultic celebrity following you around broadcasting your heavenly *bona fides* and distilling your core message to a succulent sound byte. People are willing to pay hard cash for spiritual insight from this girl, and now she's avidly promoting, free of charge, for several days running, the gospel and its messengers.

Paul should be thrilled.

He's not. The NIV tells us he was annoyed, indeed, *so annoyed*. That's a questionable translation; the original word means something closer to devastated. He's undone. Emotionally exhausted.

So he casts the demon out of her. This enslaved, abused, exploited, traumatized, forgotten, forsaken little girl is now free. Rid of the demon. Rid, it seems, of the men who trafficked her.

Her world turned upside down.

Several things happen next. Her pimps can't make any more money off of her, so they start a riot. The riot leads to the intervention of the city magistrates. That leads to the arrest, beating, imprisonment, and shackling of Paul and Silas, all without trial.

Her freedom comes at the price of theirs.

Though rich, he became poor for your sake...

We don't know what happens to her. Does she survive, recover, flourish? Does she work through her years and layers of trauma? Does anyone see her, welcome her, refuse to exploit her? Does anyone love her?

Where she can go, and be safe?

It's possible that Luke (who wrote Acts) or Paul (Luke's main source) never knew what happened to her (though I'm going to suggest a possibility in Scene Five).

But maybe that's the point. Girls like her are everywhere, in every city, and most towns, of the world. She's in Vancouver, Prince George, Regina, Moosejaw, Oshawa, Montreal, Moncton.

Everywhere.

Maybe the question becomes ours: "Where can she go, and be safe?"

SCENE THREE - THE PRISONERS: THE FURTHEST OF THESE

Paul and Silas disrupt the economics of exploitation - what Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis calls a Depraved Economy: profit made off the lifeblood of the poor and the vulnerable. For this, Paul and Silas pay a grim price. Rome boasted that they were the most just society on earth, founded on law and order. But law and order, then and now, often serves financial interests.

Thus,

...the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Acts 16:22-24

Paul and Silas came to Philippi at the desperate bidding of a man in a vision. They came to help, and they do: a rich woman, a slave girl. For such kindness, they are mercilessly punished.

This is how they respond:

"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God" (v.25).

We'll take a closer look at these two men in Scene Five, and ask, *What kind of men sing under such circumstance?*

Here, I want to note their audience: "And the other prisoners were listening to them" (v.25).

I doubt these prisoners have ever witnessed anything like it. These two men have committed no crime except radical kindness, and the courage to rescue a girl everyone else has either used or ignored. For this, they're brutalized. Yet instead of howling in protest, they sing.

Of course the other prisoners were listening. It's a rare day you hear the sound of real freedom.

At that exact moment, as if on cue, an earthquake strikes. It's of such magnitude "that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose" (v.25)

Yet not one prisoner tries to escape. Not one.

"We're all here," Paul tells the suicidal prison guard.

Suddenly all those prisoners, every one of them, have no better place to be. They're under a kind of spell. A Godspell. A gospel.

Their worlds too have been turned upside down.

SCENE FOUR - THE PRISON GUARD: THE HARDEST OF THESE

The prison guard is the biggest surprise in this story. He goes from hardened warden to astonished convert in a blink: one moment he's a man ruthlessly doing his brutal duty, the next a man joyfully saying "yes" to the gospel and washing the wounds of the men he's held as prisoners.

The guard fell asleep sometime through the evening, while Paul and Silas sang and the other prisoners listened. Maybe the singing soothed him into sleep.

Maybe he hasn't slept well in a long time. But the earthquake rocks him awake. And he wakes to a terrible realization: all the doors are wide open, all the chains are loosed, and all the prisoners are gone. No matter how this happened, Rome will make it his fault. The one noble thing to do is pull out his short sword and run it through his own heart.

But a voice from the dark cries out: "Do not harm yourself! We are all here!"

It's Paul, who's still there, right alongside Silas

But we? *All?* We're all here?

No one has left the building.

I have a hunch about why Paul and Silas stayed. In Acts 12, an angel personally escorts Peter out of Herod's prison, past the guards, through the locked gates, all the way to freedom. Luke tells us what happened to the guards on duty that night:

In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Acts 12:18-19

My hunch is that the early believers were heartsick about this, and made a pact that if anyone, under any circumstances, supernatural or otherwise, ever again had a chance at a jailbreak, not to take it. They would follow the example of Jesus, who could have summoned twelve legions of angels to rescue him but chose instead the way of suffering.

So it's easy to explain why Paul and Silas didn't make good their escape.

But we? *We're* all here?

Even the worst criminal in that jail - he's still there?

These men, as I said in Scene Four, have fallen under a Godspell, and it's produced a miracle of kindness.

And so that guard rushes forward, falls to his knees, and asks - *though I think the truer word might be begs* - he begs Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Some commentators think he's asking how he can get out of his current predicament. But that makes no sense of his plea, no sense of the story. Better to infer that sometime during the week, the jailer heard the slave girl announce, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." And now he wants in.

"How do I get whatever it is you two have?" he's asking. Please, please, turn my world upside down!"

Paul answers, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved."

So simple a child can instantly grasp, so deep a scholar can't plumb the depths of it in a lifetime.

The jailer and all his household believe and are saved. Then he washes Paul and Silas's wounds - as true a picture of repentance as there is. Then he and his household are baptised. And then they break bread together.

Saved.

I said a better word to describe the jailer's request to Paul and Silas is he *begged*. Luke describes him this way: he "fell trembling before Paul and Silas." That's a posture of begging.

Remember how this whole venture in Philippi began? Paul wanted to go in the opposite direction, but saw, in a vision, a man in Macedonia *begging* for help.

Maybe the man was imaginary.

Or maybe not. In fact, I think the whole time Paul was in Philippi he was looking for *that man*.

And I think he found him in the jailer.

One piece of evidence that this might be so is a strange detail late in the story. Paul only pulls rank as a Roman citizen after he's met the jailer. He lets himself - and Silas - be beaten, jailed without trial, shackled. Only at the end, only after the jailer and his household have come to faith, only then does Paul mention to the magistrates who ordered his beating and imprisonment that he's a Roman citizen. To beat and imprison a citizen without due process is a major violation of Roman law, and the magistrates fly into panicked apology and desperate backpedaling.

Paul could have avoided all his suffering if he'd just told them sooner, but he didn't. It is as if he refused to interrupt his mission in Philippi until he'd met the man in his vision and turned his world upside down.

SCENE FIVE - PAUL AND SILAS: THOSE WHO TURN THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

What kind of people live this way? What kind of men and women change their plans on a mere prompting from the Holy Spirit, speak the gospel to anyone with ears, set captives free, sing in their chains, care deeply about even the one who put them in those chains?

What kind of people turn the world upside down?

It's those whose world Jesus has already turned upside down.

We know very little about Silas, and most of it comes from this story in Acts 16. But we know quite a bit about Paul, both before he met Christ, how he met Christ, and - especially - after he met Christ. Maybe the best summary of Paul's life is that Jesus so thoroughly turned his world upside down that forever after he knew no other way to live except to go and do likewise. Paul turned from

narrow, angry, violent dogmatist to generous, loving, suffering evangelist. And he never looked back.

This story is beautiful. But it's also troubling. Jesus has turned my life upside down. No question. But have I looked back, turned back, gone back to ordinary living?

And you?

The only real vocation for those whose world Jesus has turned upside down is to go and do likewise.

The events narrated in Acts 16 happened during Paul's second missionary journey. It was his first visit to Philippi. He established a church there. He wrote maybe his most affectionate letter to them, about ten years later. As I noted earlier, he mentions, again with great affection, the churches in Macedonia in his second letter to the Corinthians.

A few years after the church in Philippi started, Paul's visited them a second time (Acts 20). Most scholars believe he visited them at least one more time again.

I like to imagine that scene. It would have been at least ten years later. I picture Paul walking into the church, surprised at how it's grown. Then surprised by a huge burly man rushing toward him, nearly crushing him in a bear hug.

"Do we know each other?" Paul says.

"Yes! Well, no, not exactly. But years ago I heard you singing..."

Then Paul sees Lydia. She's aged. She doesn't dress in elegant, expensive clothing anymore. No more purple cloth for her. She just kept giving everything away, to make room in her home for former slave girls she redeemed with her dwindling wealth. She sees Paul. They embrace, but she's distracted. Her eyes are on a beautiful young woman on the worship team, singing like a nightingale.

"Do I know her?" Paul asks.

"Oh, Paul. Of course you know her. You set her free, in the name of Jesus..."

And then the pastor walks up to preach. And of course, Paul knows him. He saw him first in a vision.

That man now preaches the gospel, the gospel he once begged Paul to bring to Philippi, the gospel he once begged Paul to share with him personally.

That gospel turned his world upside down.

And ever after, he's gone and done likewise.

And I think I know how that man starts his sermon:

"We're all here."

Day 1 / Wednesday, February 14

I grew up in a church tradition where the Lenten season was not one commonly practiced, or even spoken about. Some events in the church calendar were briefly mentioned, though held at a distance. Others were simply notifications that would occasionally pop up on my calendar, only to be completely ignored by me until next year when it would emerge once again.

It can be challenging to engage with certain liturgical traditions, especially those that beckon us into a season of abstaining from things we love. But herein lies the invitation of Lent: to continually place God at the center of our lives. One way we practice this is by becoming more aware of the numerous preoccupations that distract us from relying on Him and responding to His work in and through us.

I find it unnervingly easy to become excessively attached to the people, places, jobs, material possessions, technologies, and approval of others in my life. While good in themselves, these attachments can easily become what 4th century theologian Saint Augustine calls 'disordered loves' when they push God out of the way and become central to how we perceive ourselves and our worth. Here abounds feelings of fear, jealousy, perfectionism, self-doubt and resentment that blind us to the inner freedom found in Christ's resurrection and abundant love for us. The practice for us is to continually sacrifice and reorder our desires to acknowledge God's position as king.

The Acts 16 narrative presents a cast of characters, each with their own disordered attachments that prevent them from seeing the truest liberty offered by the Gospel of Jesus. Some have their eyes opened and are set free; others learn how to use their attachments for the glory of God and the love of those around them. Though some are less aware of the freedom offered to them and we are left wondering of the resolution to their stories.

As with the people in this story, each of us experiences the Gospel in a unique way. May these next few weeks bring you freedom as you let God's liberating grace gently work on you as you become more aware of the disordered attachments in your life - and of the radical, victorious work of Christ in our world.

O Spirit of God, we ask You to help orient all our actions by Your inspirations, carry them on by Your gracious assistance, that every prayer and work of ours may always begin from You and through You be happily ended. - (traditional Jesuit prayer)



PAUL THIESSEN is a Church Relations Advisor at UGM. He attends and serves at The Way Church in Vancouver.

Day 2 / Thursday, February 15

In Acts 16, we find Paul and Silas visiting Phillippi. During their time in the city, they encountered many unexpected people and events. Three distinct crowds watched these two disciples.

The first crowd watched Paul and Silas when they were falsely arrested. They supported the merchants who enticed the Magistrate to put them in prison. This crowd stayed in their secular, comfortable world, impervious to the disciples' prayers and miracles.

The second crowd were fellow prisoners who watched from within the prison walls. They experienced God unlocking all their chains and doors. They watched fellow inmates, Paul and Silas, witness to the power and mercy of God. We do not know what their personal response was to what they saw, so we can only hope an experience like this - then and now - encourages individuals to start a journey of faith.

The third crowd were the general bystanders that watched the scene as they walked around the city. Some hardly noticed, and others were permanently changed. A slave girl was healed and believed, and could say to this crowd, "*Here are the servants of the most high God.*" A prison guard was saved from taking his life. His belief in God was so radical that his family also came to faith. A wealthy society woman, Lydia, also found a faith that inspired her to take the liberated prisoners into her home to be with fellow believers.

As we walk through the season of Lent in our own city, let us consider which crowd represents us. Do we close our eyes to the truth and possibly condemn the innocent? Do we see God at work around us and yet not make the choice to follow him? Or do we join the community of people from every background of economics, power, and life experience that embrace the person of Jesus?

Lord, as we journey through Lent, we will experience both desolation and signs of wonder. Help us respond to Your love and grace when we see it. In the name of the Trinity. Amen.



THOMAS COOPER is the Founder and President of the City in Focus Foundation since 1988.

Day 3 / Friday, February 16

At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized...He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household. (Acts 16:33-34)

It's a shocking scene to imagine. A darkened first-century prison, air as thick with dirt as it is with despair. Hearts are hard as the bars that divide. But something is different here tonight. Songs of praise pierce through. Hope rises. Then, an earthquake; louder than the song. As walls shake and iron bars break, chains are falling in more ways than one. Miracles are made in the most unlikely places. God's kindness never fails.

It's a funny thing about grace... It always does unexpected things. Grace turns our messes into our mission. Hurt into healing. Despair into dancing. Darkness to light. The prison guard was likely chosen for this assignment based on his brute character and a resume chalk-full of intimidation. But God had a different assignment in mind (as He does for each of us). A meeting was being orchestrated for this moment, where at his lowest, full of fear and shame, about to take his own life - hope had its perfect chance to break through. "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" Isn't this what we all need to hear?

Isolation is a dangerous thing. When we feel alone is when the lies speak the loudest and our burdens feel impossible. But we have a remedy, and His name is Jesus. He not only comes for each of us, He comes to mend us together. We see this in the prison guard. His first action after his gospel-encounter was to tend to the wounds of the prisoners. He was not only spared from inflicting wounds on himself, but as mercy washed over and grace went to work, he found himself on the ground, washing others' wounds.

Mercy is not an individual assignment. As God's grace pours out to us, we are changed so that mercy flows back out. Mercy is not just a gift, it's a calling ... and there is someone who needs what you have. Whose wounds can you tend to today?

Father God, we praise You for Your mercy that never fails. We ask You to cleanse us and fill us, so that we can be on mission for You. Let us see others how You see them and help us to bring Your grace to unexpected places.



CHERYL MCMANUS is the Associate Executive Director at CityReach Care Society in Vancouver.



Day 4 / Saturday, February 17

In the heart of the book of Acts, we find Paul and Silas, two individuals who defy societal norms. Imprisoned for unsettling the status quo, they found solace in hymns and prayers, embodying a freedom that transcended their physical confines. Their story captures the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's kingdom—a tension familiar to many of us.

For the past 14 years, I have lived in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a choice that resonates deeply with the story of Paul and Silas. I left a managerial role at Scotiabank and a comfortable home in South Granville to serve in a nonprofit music school for underprivileged children. Eight years later, I found myself back in the corporate world, now in I.T. Each day, I walk from my community house—my 'chosen family'—past homeless shelters to a gleaming office tower. Along the way, I engage with and pray for the marginalized individuals I encounter—many of them longing for miracles. This dissonance, this tension, is a lived experience for many of us.

Lent serves as a poignant reminder that we are all caught between two realities. We yearn for the full realization of God's kingdom, even as we navigate the complexities of the world as it is. This 'not fitting in' is not a bug but a feature of a life lived in Christ. So, as we journey through Lent, let us embrace our peculiarity, our Christ-like grace, and our call to move from faith to action. May God inspire us with new pathways to escape the status quo, pathways we could not imagine on our own, and grant us the courage to venture into them. For in doing so, we find the freedom that Paul and Silas sang about—a freedom that opens our prison doors and can turn the world upside down.

Lord, in this season of Lent, help us to embrace the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be. Empower us to live as peculiar people, defying expectations and the status quo, loving with abandon just as Paul and Silas did.



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Day 5 / Monday, February 19

"...and Creator opened her heart" (Acts 16:14, First Nations Version).

Passages like Acts 16:10-15 are often cited as a call towards evangelism; the action of telling others about Jesus. This is what occurred with Lydia upon hearing the Apostle Paul preach. While this interpretation is tradition, when I recently re-read the passage, I felt pulled in a slightly different direction. Namely, the evangelization of my own heart.

I vividly recall the moment I first became a Christian. Being raised in a Christian home with wonderful God-Fearing parents, faith in Jesus was simply part of my every day. That said, at a very young age, I read a comic book about the life of Johnny Cash, and in my own simple, childish way, was moved by his transformation. My mom sat with me as I read the comic book and after asked me if I, like Johnny Cash, wanted Jesus in my heart. I said 'yes,' and she guided me as I accepted Christ.

The moment - nearly 45 years later - remains implanted in my memory bank. It was real, authentic, and meaningful.

Yet, I have found that it was not the only moment that this needed to happen. Having the Creator open my heart to Jesus has not been a one-off event; it's proven to be an ongoing occurrence.

Consistently, I find myself asking if my heart is open to the Creator. Am I inviting His presence into my life? Am I listening to the Spirit? Am I living a life that is pleasing to God?

Part of what I so love about Lent is the focus on spiritual health. While I should be concerned about this each day, Lent serves as an important annual check-up for me. The Easter season compels us to ask, 'is my heart open to God?'

That first moment with me, mom, Johnny, and God was powerful. But each day I need to keep my heart open to the Creator; I need to evangelize myself. I hope that this time of Lent will help each of us to (continue to) have open hearts to Jesus.

Dear Creator, as we engage in this time of reflection and celebration, I ask that You open our hearts. May we all know and feel the presence of Jesus in our lives, as we receive the grace and life You have promised for each of us. Amen.



DEAN KURPJUWEIT is the President of UGM.



Day 6 / Tuesday, February 20

Once, when I was 26 years old, I was being interviewed to be a youth pastor. I had only been married for a few months and I really needed a good full-time job. The interview took place at a White Spot restaurant with several pastors from the church, and I felt the interview was going fairly well when all of a sudden Pastor Rob asked me a question that would change my life: "Matthew, are you currently struggling with pornography?" I thought to myself: *Classic church interview question! Leading off with legalism!* At that moment I felt immediately awkward and I felt so small. Sitting there in the White Spot booth I said: "yes - I have an addiction." The reality was that I had been living with a decade long addiction to pornography that needed dramatic healing.

Like the Philippian jailer in Acts 16, when the lights were turned on, the reality of my situation was exposed, and I felt such shame. But, like the Philippian jailer, God used that moment of public shame to shine the light of salvation into the depth of my heart.

The following year became a huge year of healing as God set me free from the addiction, the shame, and the guilt through an incredible community that helped me learn to walk in freedom. Now, 18 years later, I can deeply breathe the fresh air of freedom. I am so thankful for the cross and resurrection of Jesus, I am so thankful for the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and I am so thankful for the church that walks with the wounded on their way to freedom. By God's grace I am tasting the freedom of being a new creation. *The old has gone, the new is here!* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Father God, as the light of Your love exposes the sin within me, keep me from shame. The enemy wants to shame me, but You long to heal me with Your love. Remind me that I am Your adopted child, I am a new creation, and by Your grace create a new heart in me today.



MATTHEW PRICE is the Lead Pastor at North Langley Community Church. He is married to Tanya and has three children: Lucy, Ella, and Micah.



Day 7 / Wednesday, February 21

In the story of Acts 16, three major themes stand out to me; hospitality, obedience, and baptism. Paul and Silas went out to share the gospel, in an act of *obedience* after hearing from God.

As they went out, they met Lydia and the jailer. In their interactions, we see the fruit of Paul and Silas' *obedience* to God.

Lydia was a successful businesswoman who accepted the message Paul shared with her. Following her acceptance, her whole household was *baptized*, then was *hospitable*, inviting Paul and Silas into their home. It can be easy to find identity in status, wealth and influence, both in Lydia's time as well as today. But, as her life showed us, we find true freedom and purpose when we choose to find our identity in Christ.

The jailer was tough and watched the prisoners closely, until he realized the earthquake was powerful and the prisoners had the chance to escape. Moved by the surprise that Paul and Silas chose not to escape, the jailer humbled himself and asked the prisoners how he could be saved. The jailer accepted the message, was immediately baptized, and was hospitable by bringing Paul and Silas into his home. God moved in both scenarios by going before Paul and Silas to open hearts.

It is important to open our hearts and eyes and see how God is moving and to be obedient to what He is asking of us. We never know what fruit will come from obedience, whether we see it in our lifetime or not. We never know how God is moving before us, such as in the stories of Lydia and the jailer.

I ask, Lord, that You open our eyes to see, and our ears hear, how You are moving. Help us be hospitable, to open our homes, to share meals, to take time to talk and pray with one another, and to be obedient in every season. Thank You for Your love, grace, and kindness.



SHANNON DALZELL works for the Raphael Family Support Centre in Langley, B.C. She is a proud wife, dog mom, and loves Jesus.

Day 8 / Thursday, February 22

Lydia is not often associated with Lent. Hers is not a story centered around death, repentance, fasting, or the frailty of the human condition. Scripture does not say much about her at all! We know she was from Thyatira and worshipped God. We also know that she was a woman of status who sold fine cloth, and she opened her home to Paul and his companions during their ministry in Philippi. Her home even became a gathering place for the Philippian church.

While details about Lydia's life are scarce, both her generosity and hospitality are palpable in this short biblical account. More and more, I am realizing that Lydia's posture offers a very relevant lesson to us on this Lenten journey. Generosity and hospitality are indeed crucial dimensions of the Easter story!

The God of the Universe exchanged the riches of heaven, its unfathomable majesty and glory, to enter a world obscured by sin and death. There, He submitted Himself to every limitation of being human - all the way to a death. Why? *So you and I could enter into His presence as His sons and daughters, and have eternal life.*

God extended lavish generosity by offering Himself so we could gain salvation and freedom everlasting. God extended radical hospitality by welcoming us, sinners, into His presence and His family. Jesus invites us to accept these free gifts of grace. He also invites us to partner with Him in the ministry of generosity and hospitality. Lydia embodies this. In her, we find a believer that willingly sacrificed her affluence, power, time, and possessions for the furtherance of God's Kingdom.

In a world of individualism and seclusion, of selfishness and tight-fisted accumulation, the acts of opening our homes and giving generously are revolutionary. They align us with the cross, where Christ made room for us, and gave His life (and full self!) to make a way of salvation for you, and for me.

Lord, as we anticipate the celebration of death's defeat at Easter, bring us face to face with our utter dependence on You. Open our eyes to the generosity and hospitality displayed at the cross. Like Lydia, may we follow the way of Jesus in sacrificially giving and opening our homes.



JESSICA THIESSEN is a Development Officer at Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada, a ministry facilitating the translation of God's Word globally.

Day 9 / Friday, February 23

When I was a kid, I really enjoyed annoying my older sister. One of the things I often did when she was on the phone with her friends was walk around behind her and repeat everything she was saying. Certainly, it was annoying.

This memory comes to mind when I read this story about the girl with this spirit in her that predicted the future. Someone going around constantly speaking things out loud in an annoying way.

I wonder what her life was like. Was she so controlled by this spirit that she had no power over what she was doing? Traumatized, impoverished, marginalized, and underprivileged. Her master used her for financial gain and that's all she was worth to him. She was exploited and this just may be all she knew in life. How did it come to this? Was there any hope or any way out?

She then had an encounter that maybe she never expected. This "Most High God" had greater power than the spirit that indwelt her. Did she know this about Him? Or did she just think he was one of the many gods that her culture believed in?

The change in her was immediate. The passage tells us, the spirit left her "at that moment." Freedom! Not only freedom from the spirits but maybe even freedom from her master since she now served no financial purpose to him. What is next for her as she moves from bondage to freedom?

As we approach the cross of Jesus during Lent and we declare that He is the "Most High God" what type of freedom do we expect? How are we in bondage? Will our freedom be immediate? And, what's next for us?

Lord, I come to You with hope, doubts, fear and expectancy. You are The Most High God. Show me Your power over what keeps me in bondage. (Spend time listening to how God may be speaking to you)



KEN PIERCE is the Pastor at Emmanuel Christian Community in Richmond, BC.





Day 10 | Saturday, February 24

*"...Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."
(Acts 16:27-28)*

The invitation of Christ is toward the truest freedom available to man. A few beats prior to this moment, the jailer witnessed his two newest prisoners, Paul and Silas, in chains, "praying and singing Psalms to God" (Acts 16:25). I can just picture them now, eroding with song, every note emerging from their lips like a dove in the wind.

The jailer, witnessing this, would have reasoned to himself: "Something is different about these two prisoners. They are in chains, why do they sing? Don't only free men sing?" When given the opportunity to run free after the earthquake shook them free of their chains, Paul and Silas stayed. "Why did they stay?" I picture the jailer wondering.

These men had been met with the perspective-altering grace of God and now their take on "freedom" has been forever re-oriented. They didn't run because they were cradled by the true freedom that they found in Christ, rather than in their earthly circumstance. Circumstance no longer defines their freedom, the cross does. *They are now **truly** free.* The freedom we find in Christ ultimately restructures our paradigms in a way that causes us to see the world, our circumstances, and our identities through the lens of this newfound freedom. We now see our condition and identity rightly.

Our circumstances no longer define our freedom.
Our self-perceptions no longer define our freedom.
The way we are treated no longer defines our freedom.
The cross does.

Because we were extended Jesus' freedom, as afforded through the cross, we meet life's most unfavourable circumstances with a lightness and levity that is foreign to the natural bend of our sinful natures. Even in the most horrid of situations, we realize hope, rest, and relief as our newfound freedom becomes the nucleus from which we view reality.

The grace of God changes us when Christ's freedom becomes ours, and the jailer witnessed this firsthand. He didn't want to remain a witness. However, He wanted it for himself, ultimately exclaiming: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" A question that would forever alter his life.

Father, help us to be people whose hearts and imaginations are baptized by Your freedom. Help us to realize our identity as free people, mirroring Your Son who through the most radical act of freedom, surrendered his life on the cross - His life given, not taken - so we can find freedom in Him. Through the power of Your Spirit, help our hearts and minds be oriented by You in a way that redefines the way we see our circumstances.

Change us, Lord, from the inside, out.



DANIEL SMITH is a Pastor at The Way Church in Vancouver.

Day 11 / Monday, February 26

Growing up in a small town farming family, I never considered myself among the wealthy and privileged. But as I've journeyed into a wider perspective of the world, I've come to realize that the system within which I live works *for* people like me. Of course there have been challenges, but as a woman of European descent, the system has definitely worked in my favour as I've pursued my education, obtained work, and navigated my way through life. As a woman living in the first century, I'm sure Lydia also faced her own challenges, but as a business woman - a dealer of fine cloth - she too experienced a level of privilege that many in her society did not.

From this place of material success and privilege, it can be easy to think we've got it all figured out. Our outer worlds align nicely with society's expectations. Privilege and societal affirmation often make it harder for us to see the new ways that God may want to form us - invitations into deeper intimacy with God and the created world.

As I reflect on Lydia's experience with Paul and Silas, I wonder what it was that allowed her to be receptive to something new from God. There must have been an openness to her, likely a posture that required consistent cultivation in her daily life. Whatever it was, it allowed Lydia, a woman of privilege, to humbly respond to God's invitation via Paul and Silas and welcome them to share in her wealth by opening up her home.

In what new way might God want to cultivate a new openness in you during this Lenten season and beyond?

Creator, it can be so tempting to fall prey to the lie that privilege equates to having it all figured out. Whether we experience privilege or not, we pray that You would help us to find new ways to cultivate openness to You this Lenten season.



LAURA SOLBERG is the Executive Director of Kentro Christian Network, a network of over 70 Canadian organizations working from a Jesus-centred perspective.



Day 12 / Tuesday, February 27

What were the prisoners thinking?

The prisoners experienced the joy of the men they could hear singing. Paul and Silas had been beaten and locked away in the most secure of spaces in the jail and could be heard praising God. They then experienced a miracle: the prison was shaken, doors opened, and chains fell away...but they didn't go. Though God had a plan in this experience for each person, the emphasis in the story is on how he drew the jailer and his whole family into salvation.

But what about the prisoners? This is an experience they never would forget. I find myself relating to the prisoners.

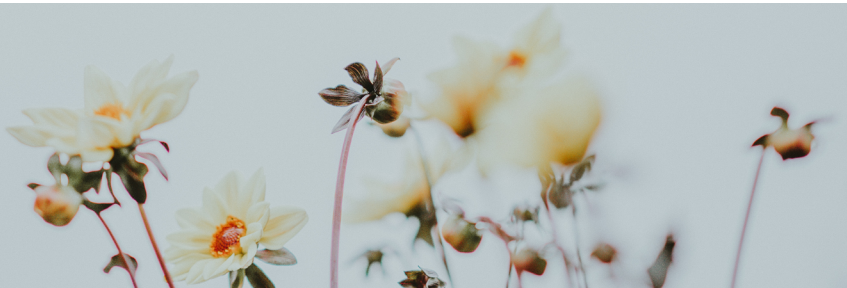
When I met Jesus, he powerfully set me free, more so than I knew at that moment. It took time for me to realize that I was actually free, that I could come out of my cell. I hadn't been locked up physically (not for long, anyway), but I had spent so long in my rebellious ways and on the wrong side of the law that I thought of myself as a bad kid. I realized I still felt this way after years of being unchained from my old identity.

We grow up in the Lord, we mature, and this is good and appropriate. It takes time, but He gives us stories like this and statements of power and truth to consider. As Jesus himself said in John 8:38, "so if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Jesus, thank You for the simplicity and mystery of salvation – that I could ask for a new life and a new way, and You made it possible for me. Thank You for helping me with the things I know I'm trying to work through as well as the things I'm not aware of that You are going to show me. Let there be depth and joy in the intimacy of those insights. Thank You that I am safe with You on this journey. Keep breaking chains and walking me into Your plan for me.



JASON ROBERTS is the Executive Director of Wagner Hills Farm Society in Langley.



Day 13 / Wednesday, February 28

Moving to Vancouver this past year and working at UGM has been eye-opening for me. Just outside our building on East Hastings I see people experiencing poverty, homelessness, and addiction with a plethora of barriers to restoration. While we witness many breakthroughs, our community also experiences constant setbacks, loss, and heartaches. Amidst this, I have asked God, 'Where are You in our neighbourhood?'

The slave girl in Acts 16 might have shared some of our community's experiences. She was exploited by domineering masters who used her spiritual captivity for their profit. She suffered from spiritual oppression. The author doesn't even mention her name. She was instead identified by her vocation - an exploited slave. Facing social and spiritual bondage, forgotten and disregarded by society, how would someone like her ever be free?

Following the path of Jesus, Paul and Silas enter the story of the slave girl at the most opportune time. It is puzzling that the disciples did not intervene for several days, but Paul eventually cast the demon out of the woman - liberating her from her exploitative masters. We don't learn what happened to this girl afterwards, but I imagine that like Mary Magdalene, she was set free from deep social and spiritual bondage and brought to new life in Jesus.

African American Pastor James Cone says, "God's salvation is a liberating event in the lives of all who are struggling for survival and dignity in a world bent on denying their humanity." More than a spiritual platitude, the Gospel is a tangible reality that enters our neighbourhoods, towns, and cities. This Lent, I want to be reminded, again and again, to see the liberation and hope of Jesus. When I come face to face with those that are experiencing a life like the woman in this story, or UGM's neighbours in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, I must also remember to share that liberation and hope.

"You who shepherd the lost and comfort the afflicted. Guide our hands to touch the untouchable. Our ears to listen to the hopeless. Our eyes to see the misery of others. Our hearts to feel the pain of prisoners. Empower us to take risks to be channels of healing and mercy. So that this world may be a better place. Amen." Taken from Liturgies from Below, page 102.



TIM GABUNA is a Supervisor of Volunteer Resources at UGM.



Day 14 / Thursday, February 29

It is a joy and privilege to work alongside teens in the city. I am a Youth Pastor in East Vancouver, but my parish reaches beyond my congregation. I give leadership to a youth community in partnership with four neighbourhood churches, each representing a different denomination united in a vision to journey alongside teens as they learn to follow Jesus. I also volunteer with a learning program that partners with public schools to support vulnerable youth through education, clinical counselling and outdoor experiences.

Whether students grew up in the context of church or not, they all have a knack to expose lazy storytelling. With adults, I often use quotes and ideas from other authors, but with adolescents my storytelling must align with how they see me live, work, and play, as they wrestle with their own questions of identity, purpose, and belonging. Teens remind me that growth and transformation are inseparable from what it means to be human - physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Lydia, who I'd like to think was the president of the Thyatira quilting club, heard a compelling story from a transformed man, Paul. We are told that "the Lord opened up Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's message." God invites Paul to tell the full story of his freedom, and he opens curious hearts like Lydia's. This opening of the heart happened to me as a teenager, and now my vocation is sharing that story with students.

Can you remember when God first opened your heart to His story? I challenge you to take time to connect with a teen, or someone younger in their faith journey, sometime in this season of Lent, and listen to his or her questions. Share your story of transformation without glossing over the hard parts or mistakes. Growth is part of the human story.

Jesus, open my heart to hear Your story from others and be transformed, and open my heart to tell Your story to others in fullness. Amen.



MITCH CLAASSEN is the Pastor of Youth and Community at Reality Church Vancouver.

Day 15 / Friday, March 1

More and more often I hear from individuals involved in ministry words like 'exhausted', 'burned-out', and 'disillusioned.' I have used them myself more than I care to admit. I have worked in the criminal justice system and have visited people in jail; working as a prison guard seems dreadful to me.

I can't even imagine being Paul and Silas' jailer, someone ordered to guard prisoners, to harm them or to cause more pain while risking one's own life in the process. That guard must have been seriously exhausted, spiritually depleted and physically broken.

How did he come to terms with the punishment he was inflicting on others? Did he debate if his actions were justified or just plain sinful? This man was at a breaking point. The miraculous scene of opened doors and unlocked stocks after a violent earthquake was clearly the final stroke to that jailer's long spiritual battle. He needed to reconcile with his own soul, with humanity and with God.

Even while helping others, we can experience spiritual exhaustion. Like the jailer, we face the darkness and ugliness of social injustice, feel the oppression of systems and are appalled by death. We are brought to our knees time and time again.

However, it is in this very dry place where we can find mercy and grace. It is here where we are given the opportunity to reconcile with our own weaknesses and experience God's power. This is the place where human meets divine.

Today I pray that the Lent season allows us to experience the healing that only Jesus can bring to our wounds. I ask that we can be stretched out in so many ways that we hunger and thirst for God as a matter of life or death.

*Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.*

Let Your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. (Psalm 130: 1-2)



JENNY MARIN is the Pastor of Anchor of Hope, a Salvation Army Church in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

Day 16 / Saturday, March 2

If I had a chance to talk to Paul, Silas, the other prisoners referenced in Acts 16, and to UGM's vulnerable program participants and neighbors today, I might say to them,

"Your circumstances, the customs of others, and oppressive systems have taught you - through their indifference and through their rancour, that you deserve your lot in life. It might feel like this narrative is true, and all the advocates are silenced. Life has taught you that hope, freedom, and liberation are out of reach, and all that is left is an insidious, costly hustle for survival and self-gratification. Do you find yourself in a prison of your own making? Do you feel like you are left ruminating in your own chaos? Yet can you hear the sounds of drumbeats and songs - from a faraway distance coming closer to your cage? Do you feel your breathing intensified? Are songs leaving your mouth?"

I read the Acts 16 passage in the Indigenous Translation of the New Testament (FNV, IVP, 2021), and verse 28 especially caught my attention:

"But Small Man (Paul) shouted out to him "Do not harm yourself, we are all here!"

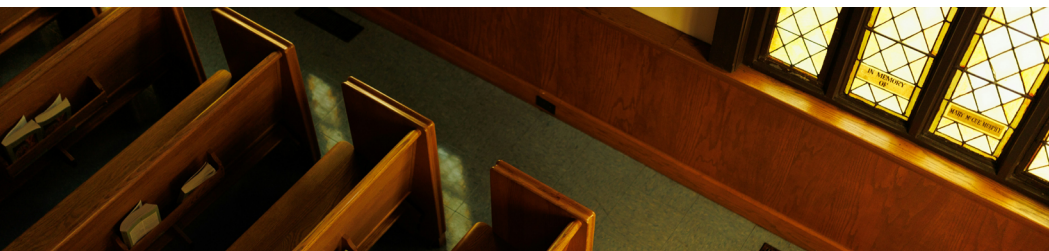
I might also say to the prisoners,

"You stayed in your circumstance because you realize you are now *FREE*. But liberation will only come when *ALL* are *FREE*. Oppressive chains will lose their weight. There will be an indescribable moment where your soul opens for the sake of others. You will find yourself lost in the radiant worship of the Creator as far and high as the eagles soar."

Prince of Peace and Sower of the Earth, we pray for those lost in the chasm of negativity and nothingness whose songs are full of violence and fear. May they be filled with the renewing purpose of hearing Your voice and following Your footsteps. Our eyes can be so consumed with shadows that we run from the light. So, in the deepest prison of our own thoughts, we pray for the beating drums of hope where evil no longer has sway - as it shrieks and runs from the songs of Your beloved. Run evil run. Amen. SO BE IT.



CANDICE HARPER is the Director of Outreach & Intake at UGM. She has been walking with the community of the DTES for 18 years.



Day 17 / Monday, March 4

My awakening to the harsh realities of life occurred on a maternity bed, a mere three days after giving birth in the midst of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Weak and vulnerable, I pondered the uncertain future for my newborn son and myself. After two weeks of fear, hunger, and desperation, the Red Cross graciously evacuated us.

We spent the next 20 years in Kenya, first as refugees. Eventually I had the opportunity to lead a shelter for other refugee women. Many shared narratives of bondage—physical, emotional, and spiritual. The shadows of sexual assault originating from security guards, policemen, and even fellow refugees loomed large, intensified by cultural shame and fear of judgment. Those who courageously reported incidents often found themselves without help, as corrupt authorities shielded the perpetrators.

In contrast, the narrative of Jesus, who endured rejection and persecution, becomes a beacon of hope. His sacrifice offers freedom to those who trust and follow Him. Jesus is not merely present in our trials; He surrounds, supports, and walks beside us, assuring us that no suffering is too great for Christ to share.

The experiences of my fellow Rwandans, the refugee women in that Kenyan shelter, and the slave girl in Acts 16 remind us that life's journey, woven with threads of pain and redemption, can reflect the enduring love of Christ. Illuminating the path to healing and freedom is Jesus, our refuge. As we enter the Lenten season, may we look for opportunity to encourage those who have weathered similar storms.

Dear Heavenly Father, grant us grace to learn from our suffering. Help us to be free from the bitterness of the past and resentment. Heal our physical, emotional, and spiritual pain. Knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because Your love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (taken from Roman 5:3-5)



REV. CLEMENTINE UWIZIYE is a Recovery Care Worker at UGM.



Day 18 / Tuesday, March 5

Early in my recovery, I believed that my problem was physical addiction. I was eager to be free of it so that I could continue living life as I wanted. My earliest attempts at long term recovery failed, in large part because even though I was sober, I was still primarily focused on my own wants, demands, and expectations. I naturally sought out the best advantage for myself in any given situation, though not always overtly. I acted kindly and generously, not understanding that I was often being manipulative and concerned only with my own interests.

It was only after doing sincere, hard work on myself that I learned that my addiction was simply a symptom of my true prison, which was an obsession with self and all the nefarious ways that could manifest in my life. Jesus calls me to die to myself daily, to walk towards him with each decision that I make, and to focus on the needs of others. Paul demonstrated this freedom from his self-interests when he called out to the jailor, concerned more with the jailor's wellbeing than his own physical freedom.

In my own life, I recognize that trying to force the world into accommodating my wants and expectations just keeps me locked in the prison of self. Instead, pivoting to acknowledge and serve the needs of others is an action that I can take daily to shift my focus away from myself. This is the path to freedom.

Father God, as You have freed me from the prison of self that I may better serve You, please help me to acknowledge, focus on, and serve others. Amen.



SEAN WALLS is a Shelter Support Worker Intern at UGM.



Day 19 / Wednesday, March 6

In 2017, I was part of a collective effort between a local church in Vancouver and a few International NGO's advocating for justice in a variety of initiatives in the country of Cambodia. One evening I was asked to participate with a local Cambodian NGO (unnamed to protect their work). I was the only male in this group of four as we entered the Beer Garden, one of a few strategically targeted venues of exploitation. The entrance had about 40 women and girls dressed to solicit attention from potential exploiters. They looked up at me as a potential client and I immediately felt very uncomfortable. I was astounded as our leader engaged with these two girls that came to sit with us, and by speaking with them, he subverted their work to meet their pimp's quotas, and instead began the process of redeeming their identities and freeing them from their bondage to the exploiters.

It's a long, concerted process but one that is sustainable and transformational - now impacting thousands of Cambodian women and girls. Earlier, I had visited their headquarters and was fighting back tears from how so many of these 'slave girls' have now shed their false, imposed identities and re-discovered who they truly are. All because one person said 'yes' over a decade ago to a call to do something about it. A call to advocate for these Cambodian women and girls who have been exploited for simply being, in this case, poor and born a female.

I have used this memory as a reminder, a taskmaster to advocate always in every situation I'm found in. What is your role in emancipating another image-bearer of God? Perhaps it looks like a purchasing decision? Walking alongside someone in your life? Confronting an exploiter head on? Who has played a role in your emancipation and what is your role in paying it forward? Life and freedom are found with a simple, initial... YES.

God, may the injustice of others cause us to always respond, always love, always persevere. May our own life lessons give us the boldness and wisdom to play a part in redeeming the exploited and helping to reclaim the true identities of those who have had them covered, manipulated, or stolen. Come Lord Jesus, we pray.



ROB MCKINLEY is the National Director of Mobilization at SIM Canada.



Day 20 / Thursday, March 7

Does praising and worshipping God come naturally to you? When things are going well, it is easy to do. In Acts 16:22, we read that Paul and Silas were stripped of their clothes, ruthlessly beaten, and thrown into a dark, cold jail cell. Even in despair, they found solace in their faith, lifting their voices in prayer and song, drawing the attention of the other prisoners. When I read about Paul and Silas, their story resonates deeply within me. In a challenging situation, I learned to worship God unconditionally.

Before becoming a pastor, I taught English as a Second Language for 18 years. The agency I was employed at created a toxic work environment and would conduct surprise evaluations which they used to justify firing me. My wife and I faced immense stress, but we clung to Jesus' teachings in Matthew 5:11, which tells us to bless those who hurt and persecute us. Similar to Paul and Silas, I made a radical choice to worship God. God reminded me that praise is always a choice, regardless of our circumstances. Despite a toxic work environment, my devotion to worship inspired someone I knew to explore Christianity and become a follower of Jesus. Our example can inspire others to look to Christ during difficult times. Yours could too.

Despite their pain, fatigue, and fear, Paul and Silas were determined to glorify God, trusting that He was in control. In times of suffering, do you seek solace in God or avoid Him? Despite our circumstances, we have the choice to praise God, even if it goes against our natural inclinations. My response to suffering became a tool to lead someone to Christ.

God, it's tough to worship You amidst our pain. Forgive us when we desire to run away. You are in control and we are not alone in our suffering. You are our source of comfort, even in times of suffering. We ask for these in Jesus' name, Amen.



REV. BILL CHAN is the English Youth and Children Pastor at Pacific Grace MB. He is married to Winnie and they have a son named Kairos.





Day 21 / Friday, March 8

I wonder what was going on in the hearts of Paul and Silas as they were stripped, beaten, severely flogged, and ultimately thrown into jail. Did they experience any doubt about the calling God had given them? Did they wonder if they had made a mistake? Were they feeling abandoned by God?

We don't know. I can only imagine their full experience that remains a mystery to us readers. I do know what it means to struggle to have faith. To wonder if God has abandoned me. To question the journey that I'm on.

In our highly individualized culture, I can come to believe that it's up to me to find my way back to God. However, I have learned that in moments like these, my community plays a crucial role. I need others to remind me of who I am, who God is and to what I am called. When I have nothing in me to sing out a song of praise on a Sunday morning, I need others to sing on my behalf. When my relationship with God feels tenuous and distant, witnessing the joy of new life through a friend's baptism reminds me of my own convictions. Sharing the eucharist with others connects me to my chosen church family and all those who have gone before me, reminding me that I'm not alone but we are all one body in Christ.

Perhaps Paul and Silas did that for each other. As they sang and prayed out the truth of who God is, they were reminded of God's faithfulness and presence. Not only did it minister to their fellow prisoners, I would wager that they needed to hear these reminders as they nursed their wounds and clung to a trust that God would grant them freedom.

When I am lost inside my mind
Sing me the hope I cannot find.
When my despair has left me blind,
Sing me the tune I've left behind

Creator God, when I don't have the words, when I feel lost and faithless, send me Your people who can show me Your love, who will believe on my behalf, and who will have faith when I cannot. Thank You for Your Church.



REGULA WINZELER works for Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries and lives in community in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

*This reflection was inspired by the song "[Sing Over Me](#)" by The Porter's Gate Sanctuary Songs, an album of songs about mental health and faith. (sanctuarymentalhealth.org/sanctuary-songs)

Day 22 / Saturday, March 9

I arrived in Vancouver as a stowaway from Angola in my early 20's, not knowing anyone. I met some good people and experienced many good things, including winning some boxing championships and acting in the *Heart of the City Festival*, which celebrates the different cultures in Vancouver. I also had some hard losses, which led me to UGM as a program participant. Now, I work with UGM, helping to care for people who have a story like mine.

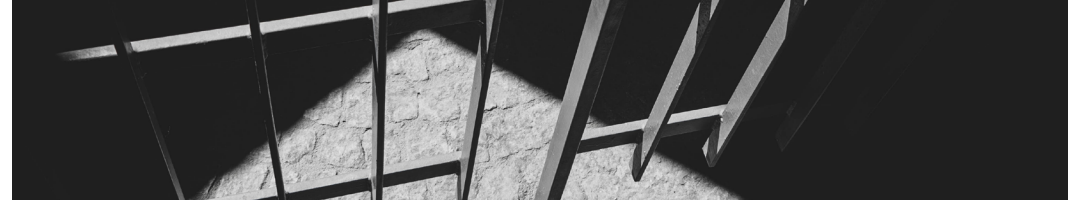
One of the most important lessons I have learned is to be aware of my blind spots. I have to pay attention to how the things I do impact my life, and I have to be humble enough to let others teach me about how my actions impact them. One small example of this is learning how important it is to show up on time, or even a few minutes early, for classes and groups. I like to run and listen to music. I sometimes let those kinds of things distract me, so I lose track of time and miss the start of group sessions. It took me a long time to learn how this hurt both myself and the others I was meeting with.

During Lent, and all my life, I am working on my blind spots. I am learning to be thankful for the people who help me see them and help me act in ways that make me stronger every day.

God, thank You for helping me see the good things in my life.



ANTONIO DOS SANTOS is a Shelter Support Worker Intern at UGM. He shared his story with us in English, although he is also fluent in Portuguese, Spanish, Swahili, and Kimbundu, his tribal language.



Day 23 / Monday, March 11

What do we do when God turns the world upside down?

I'm fascinated by the jailor in this story. It's safe to assume he was someone firmly committed to the Roman cause, his heels dug deep in the way things were. How could you be otherwise in a position like his? The fact that his first impulse was to take his own life when he found the jail cells thrown open suggests that he could not imagine anything other than the violence of the state against those who miss the mark or step out of line. He failed to keep Rome's version of peace and he had no framework for imagining a way of being in the world that isn't rooted in power, and absolute allegiance to the ways and means of empire.

That is, until he encountered the wild alternative of the Gospel in the bodies of these weird, worshiping prisoners. They refused to play the game, indifferent to the empty authority and flimsy structures that maintained Rome's stranglehold. These men had their eyes and hearts fixed on the King who, instead of demanding everything from them, gave everything for them.

Too often, when the Gospel shakes the foundations of our nicely ordered lives, upsetting our expectations and understandings, throwing open new possibilities for the way things truly are—as it invariably does—our first instinct is to fall on our swords for the sake of the status quo. It's easier to die for the world as it is, than live for the world as it will be when God gets the world God wants.

But, the invitation of Lent is to set down our swords, call for the light and see again, or for the first time, the new way King Jesus leads: the way of life that is truly life.

God of holy disruption, shake the foundations of a world mired in violence and injustice—and tremble our lives into a new hope: the way of Jesus, light, life and love for this world. Keep our eyes fixed on the King, who doesn't grasp at power but empties himself, so that Your kingdom may come on earth, in our lives, as it is in heaven. In his name, only Jesus, we pray, amen.



AARON MILLER is the Congregational Minister at University Hill United Church, and the United Church of Canada Campus Minister at UBC Vancouver.



Day 24 / Tuesday, March 12

When I read the Acts 16 text I am drawn to the “places of prayer” almost as if they are another character in the story. Likewise, our *places of prayer* today are not centers of cultural and societal power. What would happen if we made a few more trips to and from these intangible places? What would happen if we actually looked and expected the activity of God on our way to and from them? And what could happen if we gathered some followers of Jesus to pray regularly in a neighbourhood?

A few years ago, while pastoring with Cityview Church in Vancouver, I moved our weekly prayer meeting out of the building and onto the sidewalks. We sent small groups out for prayer walks in the neighbourhood. Once in my group, the three of us paid attention to what was in the yards and homes we passed. We asked God to bless parents with wisdom, to open hearts to Jesus as Lord, to bless the gardeners with the same diligence for their souls as they had for their gardens, for the poor to have decent living spaces, and for Jesus to be known by the nations living in our neighbourhood.

On our way back to the church, I noticed a man standing in the middle of the sidewalk. As we approached, he did not turn aside or make room for us. Instead, he waited for us. When we were right in front of him, he asked,

“Where are you going?” “We are going to the church building.”

“Where have you been?” “We have been praying for the neighbours.”

“Would you come in my house? My wife wants to know how to meet God.”

We were stunned. This had never happened to us before. We followed him into his house. We spoke with his wife about Jesus and a few months later she declared her allegiance to Jesus through testimony and baptism.

That day we were going and coming from our place of prayer in our neighbourhood – prayerfully. We rejoiced for days afterward because God had prepared us all for a divine encounter. We rejoiced because the Lord added to His family of believers.

God, we need a few more places of prayer. Help us see that You call us to be mobile prayer units. Help us create places of prayer everywhere.



CRAIG O'BRIEN is the Pastor and Chaplain at Origin Church on the UBC campus.



Day 25 / Wednesday, March 13

Purple cloth. Beautiful, extravagant, expensive. This is what Lydia supplied to the people of ancient Phillippi; or, rather, to the few that were privileged enough to afford the shocking price tag. But for those that had the means, it was worth it. A visible sign to everyone that they were part of the upper echelons of society. And in this sense, Lydia herself had a place in that exclusive club. She was a woman with some independent wealth, and with that tends to come influence and access to opportunities that would otherwise be off limits.

And yet, in another sense, Lydia was still outside the inner circle. She was a “God-fearer,” a gentile believer in the God of Israel. But as a woman, she could not go into a synagogue or learn about her faith as a man would have been able to.

And then along came Paul, down to the river where Lydia and other women like her gathered to pray. Paul taught her, just as he would have a Jewish man in the synagogue, and just as Jesus had taught his disciples: men and women, rich and poor, tax collectors and fishermen. In the footsteps of his Lord, Paul was spreading this gospel revolution where “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In Christ, Lydia was neither important because she was wealthy, nor unimportant because she was a woman. She was simply Lydia – loved, seen, forgiven and given a new life in Christ. Filled with gratitude for all that Jesus had given her, she lived a life marked by generosity, using her wealth to take care of the budding church in Phillippi and spreading this revolutionary gospel throughout the world.

Lord Jesus, You demolish every barrier, hierarchy and scale that we could ever erect to determine the value of another human being. You love each one of us so completely and offer us dignity and inclusion without cost. Help us to respond by demonstrating the same kind of extravagant generosity and welcome as You have shown us. Amen.



KATIE TWITCHETT serves on the Ministry Team at Seedling Church in Abbotsford.

Day 26 / Thursday, March 14

Sometimes it takes a lot for God to get my attention. My dependence on spheres of influence, sources of income, and social status can easily distract me from His purposes.

The Philippian jailer was quietly confident in his task of keeping Paul and Silas locked down awaiting their day in court. He threw them into the inner prison and set their feet in the stocks. It took an earthquake to really get his attention. The foundations of his confidence were shaken as the prison doors flew open and the chains fell off. It was enough for him to contemplate suicide.

But God's purpose was not to destroy but to bring the jailer humbly to his knees. Even kneeling before Paul and Silas, his immediate question was how he could be saved from this disastrous predicament.

God had greater plans.

The jailer and his family believed in the Lord Jesus, were baptized, and joined the growing band of "God's holy people in Christ at Philippi." From that moment, it was the unshakeable Kingdom of God and God's power to save and transform that became his guide.

Some time ago, my wife and I were church planting and had little regular income. The funds for our daily necessities were running out. We had \$1,000 in the bank while costs for that month were more than \$2,500. To say that I was fearful and distracted was an understatement. As we prayed my wife felt sure God was telling us to give away the \$1,000 we had. What a faith tester! We gave a cheque for \$1,000 to a local church and did not mention our situation. The next morning someone left \$1,000 in cash in an envelope at our door. For that month and beyond all our expenses were covered - often in amazing ways.

God is faithful - even in our personal earthquake moments! His purpose is always to strengthen our faith.

Heavenly father, thank You that You are always faithful to fulfil all Your promises to us. Help us to see even the earthquake moments in our lives as opportunities to trust You and draw closer to You in Christ. In Jesus name, Amen.



DAVID INNES is the Executive Director of Vancouver Urban Ministries and an avid football lover.



Day 27 / Friday, March 15

The Acts 16 narrative is a gripping reminder that no matter who we are or what we have done, when we come into contact with the Living God and true faith in action, it does indeed turn our world upside down.

At UGM, we walk alongside many on the margins of society. Through a wide range of circumstances, often filled with abandonment, trauma, and a lack of persistent love, women and men find themselves struggling with poverty, homelessness, and addiction. Unfortunately, many of our economic systems and societal norms multiply their challenges. They are, like the prisoners in this story, as Mark Buchanan calls them, "*The Furthest of These*". These individuals struggle heroically, yet often journey alone. Our God is one who casts no one aside.

There are many others in our Western, materialist, individualist society who are also far from God. They are our neighbours, colleagues at work and school, and those on the bus. They are on the margins of belief, with seemingly no interest in God. They are just as alone and lost in terms of faith; the furthest of these.

Our God calls out to them as well.

As we journey through Lent and remember our Lord's sacrifice for us, let us pause to remember those on the margins of wellness and on the margins of faith. Let us recommit ourselves to our God-given ministry of healing and reconciliation, to bring restoration of body and mind, and indeed salvation to souls.

Loving God, we remember Your incredible passion for the lost, in all forms. We pray that You would bring healing to all each one made in Your image, and to those lost in self centeredness. Start with us, Lord. Give us compassion and wisdom to care for the furthest of these.



DAN RUSSELL is the Vice President of Mission Initiatives at UGM.

Day 28 / Saturday, March 16

As a fourteen-year-old, I witnessed the frenzy of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver. I joined a drumline that was performing on street corners and busy plazas. There was a sea of waving flags down Burrard Street, banners sprawling down the sides of high rises. To this day, I have yet to see Vancouver stirred like it was during the Games.

Paul and Silas, as we read throughout Acts 16 and 17, are gaining quite the reputation as a duo. In Philippi, these two were accused of "*throwing our city into an uproar*" by starting a house church and freeing a female slave from a nefarious spirit. Imprisoned for their troublesome ways, they prayed and sang until the foundations of the prison were shaken and their chains fell to the floor. At this point, the Philippian government knew no answer but to request them to leave the city.

It makes complete sense that when Paul and Silas arrive in Thessalonica, they are met with trembling murmurs and fearmongering.

Paul and Silas weren't being penalized for bad behavior. These were men with a fervent faith, a passion for justice, and a knack for sending demons running and chains shattered in their wake. They were only following the example of their master – the one who subverted the world through a powerful and potent love.

Lent is a call to anticipation and reflection leading to Christ's death and resurrection: catalytic moments that spun into motion a movement that would turn the world upside down.

As followers of Jesus, we belong to a long line of faithful "world turners." May we be people who, through God's loving empowerment, turn the world, and our city, right-side up by first turning it upside down.

Father, help me to be a faithful example of Your character. Help me serve as a redemptive presence in my neighborhood and city. Help me see the kind of opportunities to bring freedom that Paul and Silas were able to see. Thank You for Your love, kindness, and care. Amen.



RHYS FOWLER is a Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Coquitlam. Rhys and his wife, Larrissa, live in Port Moody where he enjoys suffering along with his favorite sports teams, reading a good novel, and learning to follow Jesus with the time that he's been given.

Day 29 / Monday, March 18

When I read about the prisoners in Acts 16, I am reminded of my own experience of captivity, imprisoned by childhood traumas and a life of violence and hurt which ultimately led to addiction, criminal activity, and homelessness. For me, this life felt like a prison cell - hopeless with no escape.

But just like the prisoners observed Paul and Silas as they worshipped and prayed, I too found myself seeing another way. I saw freedom in the examples of people I encountered who had found both faith and sobriety before me.

In this story, the prisoners show faith by remaining in their cells. But for me, faith was trusting God to lead me out of my captivity. Faith was realizing that the prison doors were always open and through prayer, teachings, and support, I was able to step out of my prison cell!

In the passage, there was an earthquake which caused the prisoners' shackles to come loose. This was a clear sign from God that He was present. My personal earthquake came in the form of a profound spiritual awakening as I did a 12 Step Bootcamp, where I encountered the Lord and felt as though someone was pouring warm water over me, washing away my hardheartedness, and giving me a brand-new soft heart!

Even today, twelve years as a believer, I still need the Lord's help daily when I find myself slipping back into captivity. Where in your life do you find yourself imprisoned and in shackles? Is there a prison cell you need to be freed from?

Heavenly Father, as we reflect on this passage, we are reminded of Your presence and the strength that You give us in our daily lives. Thank You that we do not need to stay enchained by past or hurts or struggles. Thank You that Your love has already thrown open the gates!



STEVE FIKE is the Manager of Maintenance & Custodial Services at UGM and an alumnus of UGM's Alcohol & Drug Recovery Program.



Day 30 / Tuesday, March 19

During Lent, we give up something that has a hold on us to rid ourselves of the negative impacts of that behaviour or consumable. There are some parallels in this practice to dieting when we cut out certain foods or extra calories.

Restrictions or fasts can certainly have benefits, but they are not always possible. When we are significantly under-nourished (physically or spiritually), as are many of the brave men and women who enter UGM's programs, or as the slave girl in Acts 16 might have been, further restricting anything can feel impossible. Over-restricting usually leads to greater deficiency, and then, in a state of exhaustion, it is common to binge on something that makes us feel worse - ultra-processed food or other tools for numbing.

More and more research is showing that dieting triggers unwanted side-effects. Rather than make us healthier, dieting is a *life thief* that drains our energy to make good choices. Psychologically, it is easier to think about *adding* something to our daily routine, rather than *cutting out* or *resisting* particular foods or activities.

If your resilience feels low today, can you find something to add instead of another fast, as good as that may be? Try a glass of water and a snack (with some protein) during that mid-afternoon slump instead of another cup of coffee or sweet treat. Write down a few things you are grateful for as a simple, but perspective-shifting spiritual practice. When our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits are well nourished, shallow pleasures have less appeal.

God, show us the way, and then help us see the next step.



KAREN GIESBRECHT is the Dietitian & Food Security Coordinator at UGM.



Day 31 / Wednesday, March 20

"These men are servants of the Most High God!" shouts the enslaved fortune-teller for days on end. As theologian Willie James Jennings puts it, we might be tempted to see her relentless proclamation as an affirmation of the Good News. It is not. It is a masquerade of the gospel, a series of confused words from an addict trying to fit the truth of Jesus into a framework of polytheistic spiritisms.

Who should we hold responsible for the slave girl's condition? The owners who are shareholders of her profits? The clients who purchased her labour without consideration of her well-being? A paganist 1st century religion that birthed practices ripe for exploitation, or a city that comfortably holds these systems in play? It turns out that multiple entities can hold one person in bondage. WE hold the slave girl captive.

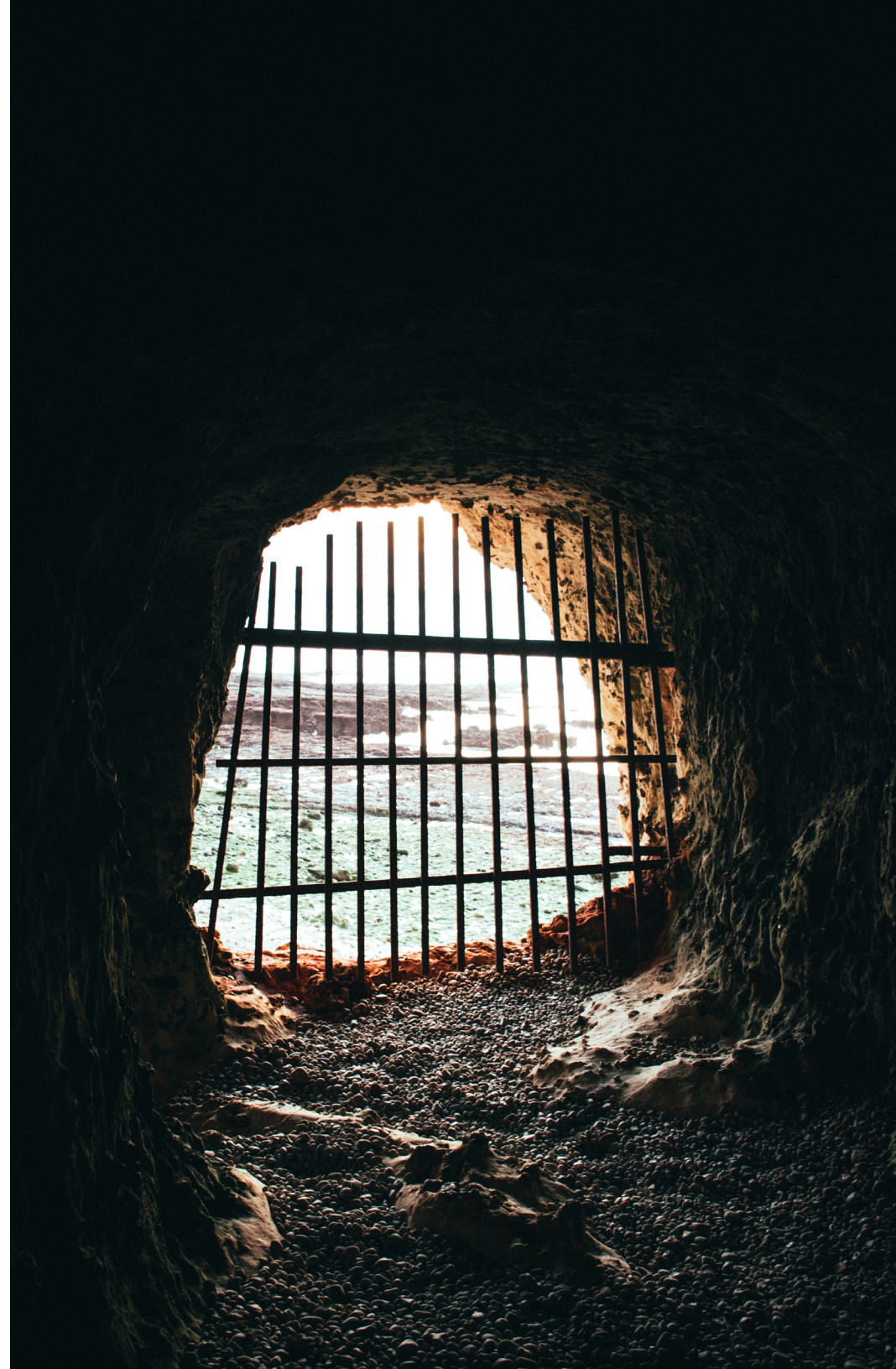
Her lack of agency is sandwiched in contrast to both Lydia's and the jailor's journey of spiritual self-determination. Lydia freely exercises her desire to follow Jesus. The jailor utters one of Christendom's most cherished questions, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" As for the slave girl, we get no such consent, no outward expression of inward conversion. Even Paul's actions towards her are rooted in irritation.

Her agency is complicated. We can only speculate what will happen to her in the days to come: will her angry owners oppress her further? Will the Body of Christ adopt her? Only God knows. And yet, if we look to the author of Luke-Acts, we know that the spirit of love and mercy reigns throughout these stories. We may not hear directly from her, and yet her unleashing should inspire our own pull towards true freedom, found only in Christ.

May You show me the Way of freedom, as given to us by Jesus Christ. May I have the courage to always walk in this Way. In the name of the Father who is for us, the Son who is with us, and the Spirit who unites us in the freeing, never-ending dance of love. Amen.



JENNA SMITH is the Head of Outreach and Engagement at Christian Direction in Montréal. She directs the Rapha Project, a study on domestic violence and the church in Québec. She lives in Montréal with her husband Nicolas and their dog Wilma.



Day 32 / Thursday, March 21

It is in the dark nights, in the depths of the prison pits, that our faith becomes real.

My grandmother is a remarkable woman. As long as I can remember, she has been telling me that she does not plan on being around in 5 years because she is so excited to be with her Lord. She is also longing to see her daughter again. I never met my aunt; she died when she was 19, years before I was born.

My grandmother grew up in Holland and emigrated to Canada after the end of the second World War, where her family was caught hiding Jews in their house during the Nazi occupation. I grew up listening to many stories from my grandmother's childhood. They were not primarily about her childhood, of course, that was just part of the setting; they were stories about God's faithfulness playing out in the lives of His people, even through their most difficult experiences. My grandmother--through war and tragedy--in the darkest, most difficult parts of her life chose to sing of God's goodness to her and to insist on his presence and faithfulness. Her faith is so evidently alive and shows itself as she points to God's working in every part of her story.

Acts 16 is the first record we have of Paul being arrested. While perhaps not his darkest moment, it must have been dark nonetheless. He and Silas chose in that time to sing, to proclaim God's goodness and faithfulness despite their circumstances, as did my grandmother - their faith becoming, in that act, not some theoretical acknowledgment, but something more concrete, something real. Such faith becomes a thing to which we can hold, and which could hold us, moving us each to lifelong action.

*Holy Father,
You whose light shines in the dark;
Give us strength in Your Spirit
To sing in the darkness of life.
As we do so may we find our faith
Made real,
Set in the mold of the pits -
Tangible in a new way -
And anchored in Christ,
By whose name we pray.
Amen.*



NATE HUIZINGA is part of the Ministry Team at Seedling Church in Abbotsford.



Day 33 / Friday, March 22

I relate with the prisoners in Acts 16 as I once found myself in a place of captivity. Looking back to my early years, I would say that my emotional health was poor. I had learned to suppress any negative emotions because throughout my childhood, anger had often been met with reprimand, sadness with dismissal, and neediness with shame. Much like the prisoners, even if the jail door was open, I could not easily walk out.

Marriage has been a gift but also a tough teacher around emotional health. Counsellors have also helped to bring clarity, guidance, empathy, and humour as I navigate my close relationships. I still face the need to diffuse my anger and shame, learning to regularly repair relationships instead of escalating conflicts as a defense mechanism against vulnerability. I love food, but humble pie is not my favourite.

The emotional numbness that characterized much of my life is thawing. It was simpler to not feel anything and go through life monotonously. However, the lack of ups and downs is akin to a flat-lined heart monitor. We need the blips to tell us that we are truly living.

In my healing journey, I have used the image of myself as a boy in a heavily fortified castle that protects me against my past emotional neglect, but I no longer return to that castle. Now in my thirties, I am learning to take control of my defenses and allow my adult self to lead through pain, healing, and growth.

I find journaling and being intentional about how I spend my Sabbath to be key anchor points. I cannot find healing without Jesus, and I need the company of my parents, my wife, my son and others who are walking with me. The fullness of life lies in the awe and joy that are all the more beautiful because of all the complexity and cracks.

May the Spirit show us where we are choosing our well-worn imprisonment for its safety, rather than an unfamiliar journey towards freedom. May we have the courage to walk through doors that we thought were bolted shut, and courage to ask for help when needed, so we can experience life to the full.



LESLIE ROSENAU-LAI is a Church Relations Advisor at UGM.

Day 34 / Saturday, March 23

ancouver's Downtown Eastside is a world turned upside down. The culture and public vulnerability are shocking to many. We usually hide our pain and tuck all that is embarrassing out of sight. We fear being truly seen in our sadness and loneliness, without filters or curation.

At the same time, there is a freedom in shedding society's expectations and relinquishing self-consciousness. In that place, mutuality and radical acceptance can flourish. I have seen it in small and big acts of kindness: people jumping in to help others in need; the cries ringing out, "kids on the block!" reminding those nearby to tuck illicit substances out of sight; the tenderness of a stranger pushing a wheelchair across the street, and the smiles (and cigarettes) regularly offered to one another.

The tradition of Lent in the Anglican tradition is centered around three primary concepts: Prayer (justice toward God), Fasting (justice toward self), and Almsgiving/Charity (justice toward neighbours).

Like Lydia, I wonder how often we put in the extra effort to support others with God's love and inclusion? Here at UGM and in other professional roles we can offer a place to rest, a nourishing meal, emotional support, and spiritual care.

What about in our own households, within our own communities and friend

groups? Are we urging those who are on the outside to join us? Are we noticing the person sitting alone at church, or being friendly with others on the bench at the bus stop? Are we inviting that family with the 'difficult' child to join us at the park for a playdate? Do we include an elder in our neighbourhood for a walk or a meal?

Where are we intimately opening ourselves to the invitation to compassion? Almsgiving is a sacrifice of our time and energy, not just our money. What is God calling us to in the context of our personal communities? Are we willing to do it?

"The more we become aware of the human need that surrounds us, the more overwhelmed we can become to the point that we end up doing nothing. The secret of the compassionate life is to focus our care on a few things that we can do something about..." From *Mutual Ministry* by James C. Fenhagen

Lord, be at the beginning and the end

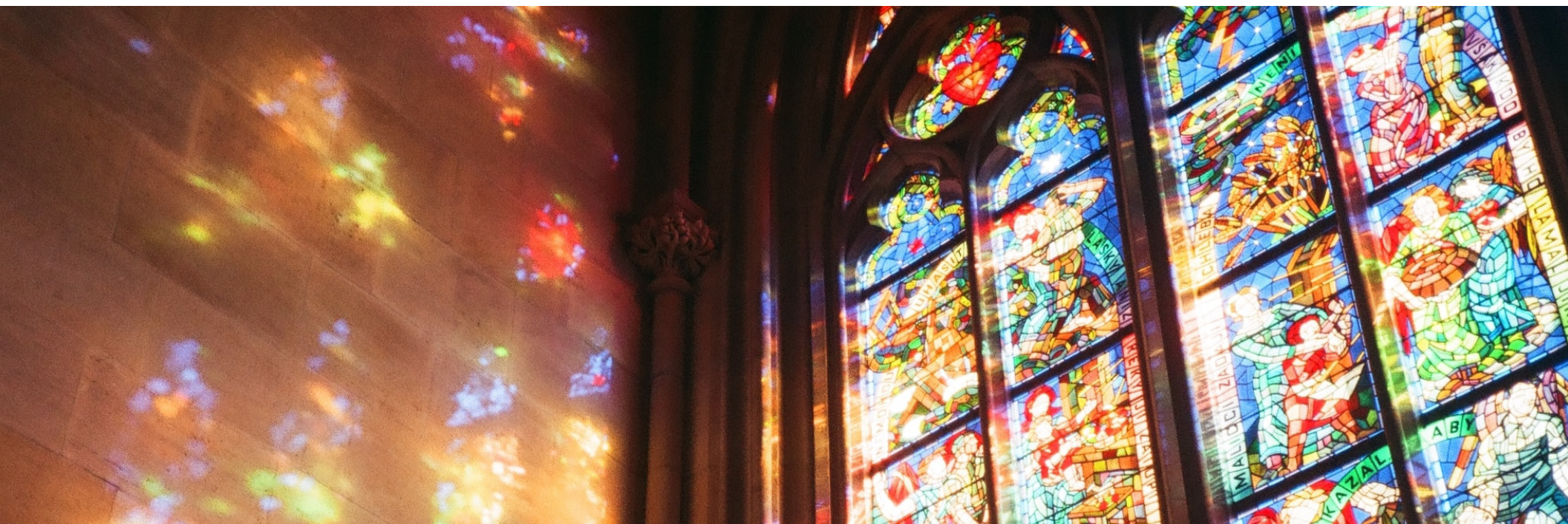
Of all that we do or say.

Prompt our actions with Your grace,

And complete them with Your all-powerful help. [The Divine Office]



TRACY TOBIN is the Activities & Spiritual Care Coordinator at UGM.



Day 35 / Monday, March 25

The passage from Acts 16 gives us insight into confronting death, embracing life, and understanding our purpose. The jailer was likely a retired soldier who had been appointed this position. As a soldier in the Roman army, he was no stranger to life and death situations. He was ready to die when Paul stopped him short, and then as he was trained, ready to respond. He recognized a higher authority when he asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Then, filled with joy, he shared his experience with his whole family, and they were baptized.

The Jailer could say, as the Psalmist did, "I shall not die, but I shall live and recount the deeds of the Lord" (Psalm 118:17, ESV). We denounce death, declare that we have life that is *truly life*, and we discover the purpose that God has for us. The enemy tries to imprison us, but Christ sets us free so that we might declare the deeds of the Lord, as Paul did with the jailer.

Recounting His deeds and celebrating His goodness brings joy to us and glory to God. Sharing the gospel is our grateful response for what Jesus Christ has done through His life, death, and resurrection.

Father God, our creator, we thank You for the life, the death, and the resurrection of Your son Jesus Christ. We thank You for the declaration of hope contained in the Psalms, that we shall not die, but live and recount Your deeds. Father, we ask that You help us understand our purpose and give us courage to share with others the good news of Your saving grace. Help us to declare Your good deeds in the way we live and in how we treat others.



DANIEL SEVERSON is a Front Desk Worker at UGM.

Day 36 / Tuesday, March 26

The spiritual practice of bread baking has helped to remind me that we can find freedom when we stop trying to control everything. God's grace is at work in our lives and in our world and when we are open to the invitation of receiving God's grace, rather than trying to control the process, we are transformed.

I lead an online bread baking circle, where we gather once a month to bake bread in a worshipful manner, paying attention to how the Spirit is present in our lives and communities.

One of our recent bread recipes helped to remind me that I cannot control everything, and I need to trust that the ingredients will do what they were made to do. The recipe for no-knead bread required that we start the dough the night before; mixing flour, yeast, water, and salt and letting it rise overnight. As I was mixing the ingredients together, I realized this was the most work that I would need to do for the entire dough. The next day I only had to fold it once and put it in the oven - there was really nothing more I could do to control the outcome of the bread.

I appreciate the story arch of Lydia, as it bookends the passage in Acts 16. When we first meet her, we learn that she is a gatherer of people and nurtures the community around her. After being transformed by the Spirit, she continues to create a place for others to meet God and be transformed themselves. While creating the space for the Spirit to work amongst the community, Lydia cannot control the process herself. Lydia is a conduit of God's grace.

With the no-knead bread, by noon the next day, I had a beautiful loaf of bread. The dough had been transformed into delicious loaf, without me needing to control each step. I had found a breath of freedom, remembering to give up control and opening myself up to God's transforming grace.

A Breath Prayer:

Inhale: I release my control

Exhale: God's grace transforms me



ANDREA PERRETT is a church planter and works for the Centre for Missional Leadership at St Andrew's Hall in Vancouver. She is also a registered dietitian working in mental health care.



Day 37 / Wednesday, March 27

For many of us in addiction, we feel that we are a slave to the disease; that we've been labeled as undesirable. Traumatic childhood experiences, generational cycles, abusive relationships, and a lack of tools for coping can leave us wondering if we are worthy of something more. Addiction welcomed us with open arms. Little did we realize this place would become a prison worse than any building with bars and concrete beds. Time and time again we would turn to someone or something, praying they would have the power to rescue us from our own despair. Time and time again we would be disappointed in ourselves, wondering why we just can't seem to break free.

Looking back on the first year of recovery, I realize now that addiction wasn't my only prison. The seeds of negativity that I surrounded myself with were poisoning my spirit. Although I was no longer a slave to substances, I was still held captive by my own state of mind. Relying on others and accepting help that was being offered made me feel weak. I was incredibly stubborn and felt it was important to take care of things all on my own. I was not accustomed to feeling gratitude toward the people in my life who were only trying to care. Love and light were such foreign things to me that I closed myself off from them entirely to make my life "easier."

Fast forward to my 4th year in recovery and not only do I no longer shut people out, but I actually welcome help. The realization that I am not alone and never have been opened my eyes to what freedom really feels like. I am worth so much more than the mistakes I made and the people I hurt. I am no longer held captive by my past and imperfections.

Today I have the freedom to choose to be valuable. I can take my experience and share it with others in the hopes that they will find freedom, too. By giving up the restrictions I placed on myself, I have found a way to truly grow and heal. I have found a way to forgive myself.

Heavenly Father, thank You for blessing me with the ability to see my worth. Your unconditional love has given me the strength to free myself from my own prison. Thank You for helping me realize that I am worthy of forgiveness.



KATRINA FLEMING is a Sanctuary Aftercare Intern at UGM. She is a single mom to a beautiful four-year-old boy and is grateful to be giving back as an Intern for UGM Women & Families building.



Day 38 / Thursday, March 28

Like many of us, Lydia had the privilege of having a place in society that afforded her a good life. A steady job, a community, a home; many of us can relate to her in this matter. Where we may be less quick to relate is her keen spirit to receive, and so willingly act upon, God's call for generosity with this privilege of resources.

Even when I think of hosting the people I cherish most, a hesitation in the back of my mind surfaces for a quick moment to dissuade me. The cooking, the cleaning, adjusting my own daily routines to accommodate my guests; it's a lot! We may begin to think of our own plans or just feel so burnt out that we can't see beyond our own situations to move into generosity. But we read that Lydia moves forward with the purest spirit of hospitality, for people she doesn't even know well! She hears where God is calling her to care for His community and offers her home wholeheartedly, persisting, to fulfil her role as an extension of God's love and support.

What limits us from being the most selfless, hospitable versions of ourselves? How do we actively combat the barriers that keep us from this?

With the life building stage that I'm at, I find myself easily falling into the "put on your own oxygen mask before helping others" trap. While ringing true at its purest, if we're not careful we can become preoccupied with taking care of ourselves, often by our own means, and leave little room for God to care for us through the vibrant community that He desires for His children. A community called to be ripe with hospitality that fills the soul and replenishes the spirit.

Where can we make space to be more hospitable, with our money, time, intentions, and the way we carry ourselves throughout our day?

Lord, I pray that You open my heart to hear Your voice as it calls me towards hospitality and connection — to see where I may use my privileges to honour You. I thank You for the community that You intend for me and pray that You help me see beyond myself to serve with the hospitable spirit of Lydia for Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.



MENNA TEGENE is the Assistant to President at UGM.

Day 39 / Friday, March 29

I recently traveled to Florida with my daughter and some friends. While flying from Western Canada to the Eastern United States, it was notable how people often display a vast array of reactions as they navigate airport schedules and customs. Many travellers displayed anxiety, frustration, and a lack of patience.

There are times in every life that are dark. Things do not go the way they should, or unexpected surprises sabotage our plans. The world says that what has happened is not right and we have a right to strike back, evaporating any joy that we or those around us feel.

In contrast, it is amazing how Paul and Silas sang hymns to the Lord after they were beaten and imprisoned. Their response then had a calming effect on everyone around them. It is doubtful that prayers full of anxiety would have had this effect! It seems more likely that these prayers expressed trust in God. Their response even led to the jailer to care for their wounds and set them free the next day.

I wonder how I might have responded in the same circumstances. Would I have been consumed with worry over what was going to happen next? Would I have felt anxiety over whether I would have been killed or left to rot in prison? Or would I have had faith that God was going to care for me and accomplish His will?

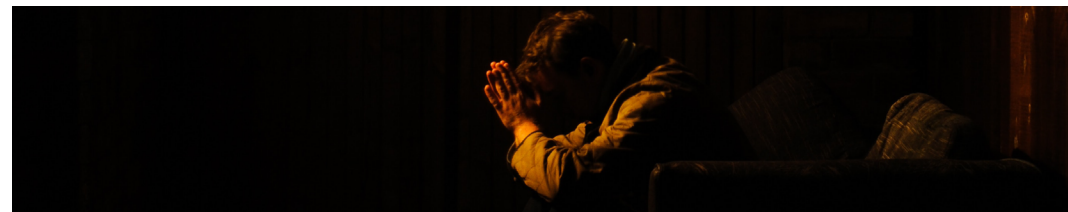
Believers have a reason to rejoice in all situations. God will always be with us, despite how dark our lives feel. Jesus brings light into our lives, and where there is light, there is a reason to worship God.

It may appear as though the whole world is against you. You may feel as though you are in a prison with no chance for release. Look up to God, despite how dark it is. It may be midnight, but God can bring light to your night and release to your chains.

I pray today that we will know God's presence in our lives; that we will seek God in dark times, worshiping instead of complaining. God, bring Your light to this dark world.



BILL WONG is a Senior Advisor of Church Relations at UGM.



Day 40 / Saturday, March 30

We don't know much about her. We don't even know her name. We know that she was a slave girl, that she was possessed by a spirit that could tell the future and we know that her human masters used her to get rich. Even the spirit that possessed her used her, making her follow Paul and Silas around, yelling "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And we know that Paul, in the name of Jesus, drove the spirit out of her.

Something we don't know is what happened to her after Paul drove out the spirit. We don't know if she was so grateful to be free that she came to faith in Jesus. Or perhaps she longed for the way things used to be. We assume that she would have been happy to be free, but often people prefer what they know, rather than the unknown. One of my seminary professors once said that "we prefer the hell we know to the heaven we don't know." Deep down inside, though we know we shouldn't, we sometimes prefer our old way of life before we knew Jesus, because it was familiar, and we knew what to expect. We know it wasn't good for us, but it was comfortable. But Jesus doesn't call us to be comfortable—he calls us to follow him, and often to follow him into the unknown. He calls us to step out in faith, trusting him to be the rock on which we stand. It's not easy, but it is so much better than the hell we know. The question is then: will I step out in faith and trust Jesus and embrace my new life in him, or will I cling desperately to my old life before Christ because it's familiar and comfortable?

Lord Jesus, thank You for Your work on the cross and for the new life You have given. Please help me to embrace my new life with You wholeheartedly and to not long for my old life without You. In Your name I pray. Amen.



REV. SAMUEL LEE is the Manager of Church Relations at UGM.

Taanishi (Hello),

The UGM Church Relations Team and I have been praying for you on your journey through Lent. May your ears be open to hear the guidance of Creator as you travel through the rest of 2024. It is a joy to be together on this good road.

*Maarsii (Thank-you),
Elder Joanne ∞*



ELDER JOANNE ANDERSON is a citizen of Metis Nation, BC. She descended from The Red River Settlement, and now serves and guides Union Gospel Mission as the Matriarch and Elder.





To each contributor we say a resounding THANK YOU for leading us through this beautiful Lenten season together. We are grateful for your honesty and thankful for your involvement.

If you would like to learn more about the work of Union Gospel Mission, access the online version of Lent Devotional, or see if there are opportunities to partner with us, please visit UGM.ca/church-relations or scan the QR code below.



Union Gospel Mission has been feeding hope and changing the lives of men, women, and families for over 80 years. Through its eight locations in Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, UGM offers an intentional continuum of care through outreach, meals, emergency shelter, alcohol and drug recovery, affordable housing, and career development. The heart of UGM is to demonstrate God's abundant love, and provide opportunities for healing, transformation, and integration into healthy communities and toward brighter futures.

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