

WILDERNESS VOICES

Reflections for Lent
Amid Pandemic



PORT NELSON
United Church

Edited by Ruth McQuirter and Michael Brooks

Foreword

The two major Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas are preceded by seasons of preparation. Advent heralds Christmas, while Lent is the prelude to Easter – traditionally a time of fasting and repentance prior to feasting and celebration.

Both seasons share a dominant image: wilderness. In Advent, the “voice in the wilderness” that is the prophet Isaiah’s first word of hope to people in exile later becomes the proclamation of John the Baptist as he announces the good news of One to come. The Lenten season is patterned on Jesus’ 40 days of temptation in the wilderness, which echoes the account of the wilderness testing of the Israelites in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, scripture interprets scripture, spanning thousands of years.

Wilderness is not a place in which most of us relish spending any length of time. Wilderness evokes images of loneliness, fear, fatigue, and confusion. One who is “bewildered” is one who is perplexed. This describes the reality for countless people as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to disturb so many facets of life. Extended periods of self-isolation, so-called “lock-downs,” and the postponement or cancelation of events and experiences we once took for granted have all contributed to a sense of “wilderness living.”

But even in the wilderness, blessings can be discovered, mined, and shared.

The purpose of this booklet from Port Nelson United Church in Burlington, Ontario, Canada is to share “wilderness voices” amid the pandemic. The writing is as diverse as the contributors. It is hoped that these stories might offer touchpoints for your own experiences of the past year, and fodder for your Lenten journey.

Material for each day between Ash Wednesday and Easter is included and organized in three ways: Stories, Questions for Reflection (Wednesdays), and Sunday Celebration Practices. Even in this penitential season, Sundays remain “little Easters” not included in the 40-day wilderness journey. The suggestions for Sundays invite you to practice and to celebrate discoveries you may have gleaned from the preceding week’s readings in diverse and creative ways. In short, Sunday is the day to have fun!

Many people from the Port Nelson Church family have contributed to the success of this venture. Ruth McQuirter has acted as co-editor since the project’s genesis in June, 2020. Dale Estey, Ann Fleming, Pat Gilmore and Candy Harvey formulated most of the Celebration Practices and Questions for Reflection. Jennifer Bath, our Office Administrator, very capably assembled the booklet. Last but certainly not least, 19 people contributed stories, some of them from places of vulnerability and even pain. We are grateful to these individuals for sharing their gifts of time and talent.

-Michael Brooks

Ash Wednesday, February 17

Spring Cleaning

As the period of self-isolation began in March, 2020 everyone was encouraged to look out for others. Attempting to heed the advice, I called my neighbour. “How are you,” I said. “Oh, I’m just fine,” she replied. “My house has never been cleaner! I’m using the new-found time to sort through boxes in my basement that have piled up for years.” She went on to talk about how tidying up her basement was giving her the sense that she was cleaning up her very life. Some of the items she discovered during her purge were things she hadn’t touched since before her husband died. Sorting through all of those memories provided some closure and healing.

I was thankful that my neighbour was healthy. Even more, I was grateful that she had discovered what we might call a spiritual practice – something in which we engage that helps us experience a sense of the Holy in a deeper, more profound way.

The season of Lent could be described as a time for spiritual spring cleaning. Indeed, the word *Lent* itself means “spring.” At its best, Lent is more than just another shift in the calendar and the donning of new liturgical colours. It provides an opportunity to explore changes God might be bringing about in our lives.

A year after the initial period of “isolation,” are we prepared for another spring cleaning? Will we pray the prayer often used on Ash Wednesday that the Psalmist prayed so long ago: “Have mercy on me. Wash me. Purge me. Restore me. Deliver me.”

-Michael Brooks

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Psalm 51: 10)



Thursday, February 18

Locked Down

My 97-year-old mother lives in a retirement residence and has been completely bed-ridden since cracking her pelvis in December, 2019. For the first part of 2020 I lived with her, providing meals and personal care. Then, on Sunday, March 22nd her residence was locked down. Completely. Abruptly. With very little warning.

Within one hour, the once beautifully furnished hallways and common areas were stripped of chairs, tables and floral arrangements. Doors were locked and fobs de-activated. Yellow caution tape appeared everywhere and signs forbidding entrance were plastered on doors and windows. A letter written in large, bold capital letters from the Home's administration appeared under each door, seemingly yelling at us to "STAY IN OUR SUITES." Signs abounded: "STOP!" "DO NOT open your door!" "DO NOT collect mail!" "DO NOT dispose of garbage!" DO NOT, DO NOT, DO NOT! It was a shock to the system. Freedom, in an instant, was gone.

With no internet in my mom's suite, I snuck out into the hallway at midnight, ducked into a nearby stairwell and sat in a dark corner, hoping to "piggyback" onto the Residence's guest network. The need to connect with my children and close friends far outweighed the potential backlash from being caught. I laid awake that first night, and many nights thereafter, imagining myself walking the 15-km round trip to my own home under the shelter of darkness. Leaving the patio door unlocked during the night made me feel much less like a caged animal. Going for a walk had become a luxury I no longer had.

The following day, more protocol letters were slipped under the door. Rarely prone to jealousy, I found myself envious of prisoners being released from jails in huge numbers. Personal Support Workers were no longer allowed into the building. Caring for my mother on my own was daunting.

While difficult to accept at the time, shutting down hard and fast was the right thing to do. The extreme measures kept residents healthy and avoided the tragedies that occurred in many retirement and long-term care facilities. Even so, those first few days of lockdown were difficult, to say the least.

-Carolyn Petrie

"Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for a little while until the wrath is past." (Isaiah 26: 20)

Friday, February 19

Unexpected Conversations

While it may sound contradictory, the most enjoyable part of the pandemic for me has been telephoning the many clients who are part of our Port Nelson Food Voucher Program. Under normal circumstances, people visit the church every Thursday morning to obtain a grocery card and other essential items. Often it can be busy, so I don't have much time to talk with the participants.

With the onset of the pandemic, the in-person Food Voucher Program was suspended, and we began telephoning the more than 200 clients to arrange for the grocery cards to be mailed to them. Unexpectedly, the pandemic has afforded more time to engage in meaningful conversations with people.

I have discovered that, often, all they really want to do is talk. That is more important than the grocery card. I have learned so much about their lives and situations. It makes me ever so thankful for what I have, and grateful for my home, my family, my friends, my church family, and my health.

-Carolyn Ellison

"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But Jesus answered, 'It is written: One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4: 1-4)



Saturday, February 20

We Are Not Alone

It was late Saturday night as they placed me in the ambulance. I had been unconscious only a few moments earlier and really didn't understand what had happened. All I knew was that I was in pain and I was on the way to the hospital.

As I lay in the Emergency Room, I realized no one could be with me due to COVID-19. The staff came in and out briefly and I was rarely spoken to. The mask placed on my face covered most of my eyes as well as my nose and mouth, so I could barely see. It was a very long night consisting of X-rays, a CAT scan and more X-rays. As I lay alone, I recited my personal mantra over and over. With each breath in, I said to myself, "God within," and with each breath out I said, "God beyond and around." Moment by moment, hour by hour, I waited for all the tests to be done and my wrist to be put in a cast. I knew I was safe – that I was never really alone, and that morning would come.

In the days since my fall, I have appreciated all the support I have had from my family, my friends and the church ministry. God is always with us.

-Diane Handcock

*"Be still, and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."
(Psalm 46: 10-11)*



Sunday, February 21 – The First Sunday in Lent Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

A Sacred Space

Make a sacred space in your home to use each day during Lent. It might contain a cross, a plant, a candle, a particular book or the Bible – whatever speaks to you. Visit the space once each day, possibly when you use this reflection booklet.

An Intentional Walk

Take a walk outside. Pay attention to what you see and hear in a deeper way. When you return, write out or draw what you experienced. Be sure to end your walk with a gesture of gratitude to God.

A Growing Project

Find a glass jar and some soil, and plant seeds or bulbs so you can watch them grow during Lent. Some suggestions of seeds that might work well for this project are: peas, green beans, basil, parsley, sage, lettuce, quinoa, green onions, sunflowers, sweet peas, Nigella, Columbine, California Poppy, Nasturtium, Pansy. In the spring, transplant to a garden or outdoor pot, or give to a friend.

An Intentional Conversation

Call someone that you have not spoken to in a long while.

Monday, February 22

Fear Ends Where Faith Begins

Before COVID hit hard, I had planned to travel to visit my daughter's family in Kelowna, B.C. last summer. At first I was isolating at home. I had my groceries delivered. My communication was by telephone, e-mail and, later, by Zoom which I learned to use during the pandemic. Then, gradually, I started to do a lot of walking every day. I tried not to be fearful about contracting the virus. However, because of my age, it was always on my mind.

The possible trip to Kelowna kept looming. Many people I talked to didn't think it was particularly safe for me to travel.

Then, one morning when I was out for a walk with my other daughter, Stephanie, we met up with a neighbour we hadn't seen for a long time. He was chatting us up and talking about his grandchildren. He said to Stephanie that parents are always there for their kids and would do anything for them. I took that as a sign that I should fly out to Kelowna. I remembered what my favourite coffee mug says: "Fear ends where faith begins."

That became my mantra for the summer. So, last July – amid the pandemic – I flew to Kelowna. Despite the great care taken at the airport and on the plane, including many protocol around distancing, sanitizing and masks, I breathed a sigh of relief after 14 days had passed and I was confident I had not been infected with COVID-19.

It turns out my coffee mug was correct: "Fear ends where faith begins."

-Pat Gilmore

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11: 1)



Tuesday, February 23

Absolute Trust

Part of my time in the wilderness meant hosting our daughter and her family for several months. These young people, with two small children, live above a bar in Toronto in a small apartment. There was no place to take the children without encountering people, so, after strict isolation for two weeks, they came to live with us.

Previously confined, the children thrived with a backyard in which to play and trails to walk. Much as we love them, this took considerable adjustment on everyone's part: new schedules for meals, not much time to rest, keeping one's own council to avoid arguments. It also taught me to let go of little things that bother me and to appreciate the absolute joy of discovery. I sat with the 5-year-old and watched toy construction projects for hours. I read board books with a 17-month-old cuddled into me. Most of all, I experienced the absolute trust of these little ones as they looked to us for food, for fun, for help, for comfort and for love.

Where is God in my life? He/she is everywhere: in nature, in family, in friendship. We do not have to look far to feel God's presence, but we have to look deeply into ourselves to appreciate the gifts we have been given. I am using my time in the wilderness to do this.

-Andrea Battista

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (Proverbs 3: 5-6)

Wednesday, February 24

Questions for Reflection

The biblical story that roots the entire season of Lent is the story of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. This is Jesus' time for spiritual cleansing and renewal. In the early days of this Lenten season, what things in your life are in need of cleansing and renewal?

Carolyn Petrie's reflection captures the difficult experiences of thousands of people living in retirement and long-term care homes amid the pandemic. When facing change in routine support and care for others, in whom do you place your trust?

How has lack of freedom of movement or gathering allowed for deeper and more meaningful conversation with others?

Several of this past week's readings speak of trust, and the relationship between fear and faith. Has fear of exposure to the virus held you back from something vital?

Where is God in this time for you?

What is your greatest fear in life? What might be a remedy for that fear?

Is the opposite of fear, faith?

Diane Handcock and Pat Gilmore both share about their personal "mantras." Do you have a personal life "mantra?" If so, what is it, and why is it your "mantra?"

What have children and grandchildren taught you amid the pandemic?

How has your relationship with neighbours changed?



Thursday, February 25

Narrowing My Vision

It was a spontaneous decision. When I arrived to preach on the first Sunday of “isolation,” I quickly realized that my congregation had shrunk – literally – to three inches in diameter. You see, as a preacher I was taught to be attentive to eye contact while delivering sermons – panning the crowd, avoiding looking exclusively in one direction, occasionally turning and visually including the choir behind me. But what to do now?! Not one person in the pews. No choristers. No children. No stragglers, running in from the parking lot as the introduction to the first hymn is played. Just a three-inch camera lens at the back of an empty, 4,000 square-foot room.

This was my preaching “audience,” and it would turn out to be my audience for the next five months. Everything I had ever learned about the mechanics of homiletics was thrown out the window. That first morning, I decided to try to embrace my new three-inch audience. I abandoned my manuscript. I stuck loosely with my planned scripture text and theme. But I focused on the camera, perhaps even more than it focused on me.

To my great surprise, all these months later, preaching to three inches has helped me discover how to better communicate with 4,000 square feet and 400 live eyeballs. I focus more on the people and less on the notes. It has turned out to be one of the blessings of COVID-19. And sometimes, God sends us surprise blessings.

-Michael Brooks

“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.” (2 Corinthians 9: 8)

Friday, February 26

Newfound Confidence

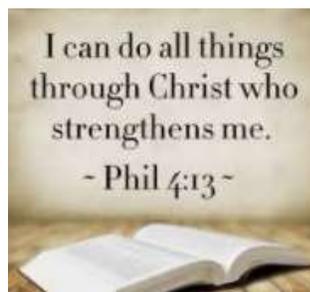
Looking back on my life, I had always thought I would be an artist and that I was only good at making videos. So my journey since high school has been the constant pursuit of projects within that industry. When the pandemic began, slowing down and then ultimately hearing that all film production was being shuttered forced me to look at my options in a new light. So I went back to school and studied mathematics – Grade 11 Functions and Applications to be specific.

When I was in high school, mathematics is a subject I barely passed. It had previously bewildered me and caused me anxiety. However, the pandemic gave me an opportunity to consider something new: What if I had to do something else with my career? What if the arts and my industry didn't bounce back and I needed to find a new way to provide for my family? What if I just needed to focus harder and stop running away from math because I felt I couldn't do it? Did I need to simply throw myself in and see if I would survive? The mathematics course gave me something to focus on, and I ended up achieving a 96 percent grade in summer school – a whole year of class compressed into one month. I'm thrilled that I did it!

Building on this success, I continued my studies, taking Grade 11 University Physics and Grade 11 University Functions. I hope to complete the pre-requisite Grade 12 University math credits – four in total – that will allow me to attend university one day for Engineering or Computer Sciences. All of this has given me newfound confidence in myself. It probably would not have happened without the pandemic.

-Denise Lee

"I can do all things through God who strengthens me." (Philippians 4: 13)



Saturday, February 27

From a Window

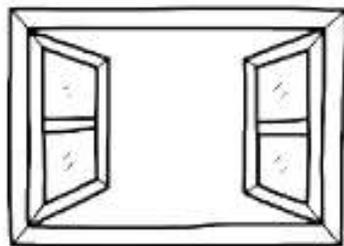
As I look down from the second-floor window, I see construction workers coming and going all day. Despite the quarantine, they are considered essential workers as they build the new house next door. I am only a visitor to this quiet Riverdale neighbourhood, a senior self-isolating with my daughter and her family during the COVID-19 pandemic. People walk by and stop, curious to see what progress has been made on the tall, three-story building. Like many Toronto homes, it is narrow, occupying a lot just 19 feet wide.

For neighbours, their interest goes beyond simple curiosity. Nearly five years ago, a house on this same lot was the scene of a tragedy. Fire broke out in the middle of the night and an elderly woman perished at the scene. Neighbours went house to house in the dark, warning one another as the fire raged. The home next door was so badly damaged by flames and water that it had to be torn down. On that lot now sits the home I am in, occupied by my daughter, her husband, and my year-old granddaughter, born since they moved in.

Now the neighbourhood is coming together once more. Windows bear handmade rainbow signs, part of a world-wide effort by children to spread a message of hope and cheer. Two young girls left a sign they made for my granddaughter to post in her window. One day she will read about this time in her life when she was oblivious to the global crisis around her. For now, she does her part by just being a baby who sees joy in the simplest things, reminding the adults in her life how precious each moment is.

-Ruth McQuirter

“As a green bud in the springtime is a sign of life renewed, so may we be signs of oneness mid earth's peoples, many-hued. As a rainbow lights the heavens when a storm is past and gone, may our lives reflect the radiance of God's new and glorious dawn.” (Ruth Duck, 1983)



Sunday, February 28 – The Second Sunday in Lent Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Preparing a Meal

Prepare a meal or do some baking for someone who is alone or needs help. Deliver it anonymously if you can.

Writing a Note

Write a hand-written note of appreciation to a neighbour and either drop it in their mailbox or mail it.

Labyrinth Walk

Bring a shovel and clean off the labyrinth at Burlington Central Park -- located at the Guelph Line south of Woodward Avenue entrance. Take a walk on the labyrinth. You may wish to say/think a simple sentence mantra while you do this. (For example: "Be still and know that I am God.")

Journaling on Trust and Fear

Journal or write down your thoughts on trust and fear and how they relate to your faith. Some may prefer to draw. How do you picture this in your mind and heart?



Monday, March 1

In Like a Lion

“I love my job!” For many years, I have included that as part of my email signature. Not only do I love my job as Port Nelson’s Developer of Youth Ministry, but I also love my job as a public school administrator. That love has sustained me through the pandemic as much of my time and energy has been invested in helping children and their teachers pivot to online learning, navigating PPE requirements, and supporting many families who are going through really tough times. Even with all the challenges, I have been amazed at the energy and creativity that has emerged. In September, 2020 I was very glad that we were able to return to in-person learning. I had missed the eager energy of the children and the dedication of a fantastic group of teachers and staff.

I was just getting used to being back in school when, in mid-October, the phone rang. My Superintendent of Education had news for me – news that was both exciting and terrifying. Effective November 1, I would be moving to a new school as principal. A promotion! But a promotion amid a pandemic! This would mean getting to know people whose smiles I wouldn’t even be able to see through masks. It would mean waiting many months for others to return to school in-person. It would mean saying “goodbye” to the community I had come to know and love without the opportunity to even exchange handshakes, let alone hugs.

Ironically, the mascot of my new school is a lion. The new school year was certainly coming in like a lion! And, well, lions roar! At least that’s what we hear and, if you’ve visited a zoo or travelled on an African safari, you may have experienced this first-hand. I was being thrown into a new situation quickly, pandemic and all. Was this my 2020 lion’s den? Fortunately, I am growing to love the new children, parents and staff as we all navigate these unusual times. We’re learning how to “roar” together in love!

-Jay Poitras

“Then the king gave the command, and Daniel was brought and thrown into the den of lions. The king said to Daniel, ‘May your God, whom you faithfully serve, deliver you!’ (Daniel 6: 16)

Tuesday, March 2

The Power of Prayer

For us, experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have confirmed the power of prayer. We are seniors. We have a blended family with five children and 10 grandkids. We really miss seeing them. Trying to figure out how to visit in some meaningful way is very challenging.

Chuck's oldest sister lives in Louisville, Kentucky and has battled a rare type of cancer that has hit the lining of her blood vessels in her breast. Fortunately, between 36 daily chemo treatments and 14 radiation treatments and breast removal she has made it through. However, because of COVID, we couldn't see her to offer our help because of travel restrictions.

Amid all of this, we truly believe that, because of the prayers of many, she is with us today and doing as well as can be expected.

We also believe COVID has meant we talk to our neighbours more while out walking. We recognize what is really important in our lives. We appreciate those who work at jobs that society needs in times like this.

-Charles and Diane Faist

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1st Thessalonians 5: 16-18)



Wednesday, March 3

Questions for Reflection

Many of this past week's reflections speak about accepting and embracing new situations, and learning new skills in order to respond to change.

What new skills have you had to learn in the last year?

In general, do you embrace change, or do you resist change? Does it depend on what the change is?

In the last year, how has your focus changed? How has your focus had to change?

Has the fear of change in your life led you to explore new possibilities?

What have been the gifts of new learnings?

What new perspectives have you gained about the world from where you watch or sit?

Have you ever returned to something that you set aside earlier in life?

When "sinking is not an option," what has kept you afloat?

Have you ever been pulled away from something you love toward something you're not sure about?

In their reflection, Charles and Diane Faist speak of the power of prayer in their lives. Does prayer have the same power for you?

What is prayer for you?

Is prayer something you find easy, or difficult?

Do you believe prayer works? If so, how does it work?

Thursday, March 4

A Sense of Place

I joined Port Nelson United Church a few months after moving to Burlington in 2019. I felt so at home after uprooting myself not once but three times before finding a room in a house in which to live. I was beginning to get to know the area.

Then, the pandemic hit. I still did not have my bearings yet. I felt lost. The shut-down of the church was especially difficult.

During my time at home, I found myself going deep within, reflecting on what I wanted my life to look like. I asked myself: "Where is my heart and soul calling me to serve?" I realized, then, that I had lost my sense of place. What I was counting on before all the shut downs was finding my way to church every Sunday, and during the week. I don't drive so I came to know the neighborhood by walking in it. The church building is familiar to me. The Family Room is my "living room" and the library my "quiet place." The sanctuary is the holy centre. When I am there, I know I am grounded in a place that remains – no matter where I go. Even though we were not able to enter the building for many months, knowing it was still there gave me great comfort and a sense of peace. I could imagine myself being there.

Many today say that there is less and less need for a church building. It is the community that makes the church. I agree that the building only comes to life through the hearts of the family. Still, I did not know many folks yet, so for me – a stranger in a new land – the building meant so much. It gave me a sense of place and belonging where I could travel to and from.

When things began to open up again the answers to my questions became clearer. I am called to serve those who are needing support with daily living – those who are living with experiences of poverty, disability and otherness – just as I am – and those who are suffering or alone in various ways. So I am back in the place I call "home" – offering my time and talents along with other dedicated church family.

In spite of and because of the isolation I was able to name and claim my sense of place.

-Beth Hancox

"In my Father's house are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14: 2)

Friday, March 5

The Healing Power of Music

I am relatively new to Port Nelson United Church, but I am not new to the United Church of Canada. I was raised and confirmed at St. Andrew's United Church in Winnipeg, and grew up singing in every choir in the church. Originally United College, I went on to attend the University of Winnipeg and directed the chapel choir during my fourth year of studies. The Theology and English faculties of this fine university nurtured me.

Thankfully, the COVID pandemic has not affected me in any negative, terrible way. Rather, as a musician during the first few weeks in isolation, I used the time to look more deeply into music I had not had time to consider before. I took out the Bach E-Major Partita for Violin and began working through the difficult passages, cleaning up problem areas for my own pleasure. Playing music takes one beyond physical limits while at the same time engaging both body and mind in intense concentration. For me, playing the music of Bach is also a deeply spiritual encounter. The beautiful *Sarabande* and the *Loure* of the French Suite in G-Major touch the deepest parts of me. I am grateful every day for the ability to play my two instruments – violin and piano – and I go to them when I am lonely, frustrated, afraid or confused.

-Andrea Battista

"My lyre is tuned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep." (Job 30: 31)



Saturday, March 6

Now This from Luke

On one of the first Sundays during the lockdown in March, 2020 we were at home watching the live streaming of the Port Nelson Church service on our big television. Our son, Luke, was doing something I wasn't keen on. I scolded him: "Luke!" I said. Coincidentally, this was at the very moment when Rev. Michael Brooks was about to read from the Gospel of Luke during the service, and Michael said, not a second after I did: "Now this from Luke!"

We all turned around and looked at Michael, completely bewildered. "How did Michael see what Luke was doing?" we wondered. The timing was so perfect that we all broke out laughing. Really, we couldn't have timed it better, and it was as if Michael was backing me up in my discipline! Michael even looked up at the camera at that very moment, almost as though he was right here in our living room.

A moment of levity amid the early, difficult days of the pandemic.

-Cindy Powell

"God did for Sarah as God had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age...Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born. Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'" (Genesis 21: 1-2, 5-6)



Sunday, March 7 – The Third Sunday in Lent Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Contemplative Prayer

Try this basic "Here I Am" Contemplative Prayer from *50 Ways to Pray* by Teresa A. Blythe, page 31:

- Resolve to be in prayer for at least 5 minutes
- Do not answer the phone or allow yourself to be distracted
- If you wish, set a timer
- Be seated comfortably
- Begin noticing your own bodily presence – how your body feels in the seat, how your feet feel against the floor
- Relax; notice what you feel inside; now notice the presence of all that is around you; be aware of it; just be present and silent; relax even more
- Now say to yourself, "Here I am in the presence of God"
- Repeat silently to God, "Here I am;" bask in the presence of the Holy One until your time goal has been reached

Listening to Music

Quietly, sit and listen to a favourite piece of music, preferably one without words accompanying it. Afterwards, you may want to journal/write out what you were feeling while listening.

Something New

Try something new that you haven't done before: cooking or baking a new recipe, walking where you've never been before, playing a new instrument or a new piece of music, etc.

Monday, March 8

Affirming Community

It was a minor jolt – literally. Sitting in my office one late afternoon last March, I said to the person on the phone, “Wait a minute! I think something has just hit my window!” I put the phone down and went over to have a look. To both my surprise and delight, there were about 25 children, youth and young adults happily engaged in a pick-up street hockey game in the church parking lot. I stuck my head outside. “Oh, sorry about the ball hitting the window,” a young man said. “No worries,” I replied. “So glad we can provide a place for this.”

I knew better than to try to join in the fun. Truthfully, I’ve never even owned a hockey stick, and I’m always fearful of turning an ankle. But I was grateful nonetheless that our church family could provide such a gift for the neighbourhood. It had been a few weeks since schools were closed due to the pandemic, and children and youth were eager to get outside. With the church building essentially shuttered, there were no cars in the way. Our Port Nelson parking lot is the largest paved surface in Roseland, and on that day, it was providing a beautiful, open space for outdoor fun.

It brought to mind conversations I have shared with people in our church family whose children grew up playing in the parking lot. From road hockey to learning to ride bicycles to driving lessons, sometimes, the church provides community in unexpected ways.

There have been a few more minor jolts since, as tennis balls hit the walls along with the clatter of sticks slapping on pavement. I am no longer startled. On the contrary, my heart sings with joy as we try to live out being an affirming community – even in the midst of pandemic.

-Michael Brooks

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that, some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13: 2)

Tuesday, March 9

Home Bodies

I have always been a home body. Having been “on my own” for a lot of my life, isolation has not affected me as much as it has affected my friends and family. I do miss them, but I keep in touch with them frequently with phone calls. Most of all, I miss their hugs!

My daughters have been wonderful - shopping, calling, front yard visits from 20 feet away, etc., and now back yard picnics keeping our distance and masks on, and enjoying Swiss Chalet take out. I have always been grateful for my home where I have lived for 54 years. I feel I am very fortunate to have it as my husband died 48 years ago and his investment paid off our mortgage. Many people have not been so fortunate.

With the arrival of warmer spring weather, I have been sitting on my patio listening to the church services. The little wrens nesting on the down spout sing loudly when the organ plays the hymns. How enjoyable! Perhaps, in keeping close to home, I am getting a taste of the simple life of the birds of the air, and the creation that is their home.

-Carolyn Ellison

“How lovely are your dwellings, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, even faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young.” (Psalm 84: 1, 3)

How Lovely is Your
Dwelling Place

Psalm 84



Wednesday, March 10

Questions for Reflection

This past week's reflections speak of the importance of place and belonging.

Where do you feel you belong? Are there times in your life when you have felt completely out of place?

What does home look like for you? Where is home?

Does your home feel like a cage or a refuge?

Andrea Battista writes of music as being an escape from cares and concerns. Do you have an "escape?" Do you have an activity in which you can engage that becomes a spiritual encounter?

What has been your experience of online worship services during the pandemic?

Are you open to the possibility of what might seem an intrusion becoming a gift?

Are there funny stories from the last year that you will never forget?



Thursday, March 11

Count Your Many Blessings

Since retirement, I have always been an active person. I have been busy in many volunteer jobs that occupy my time and keep me happily engaged. As was the case for so many, when the pandemic began, that all stopped.

As I became somewhat depressed with the seemingly unfulfilled time, I was reminded that, from time to time, people, activities and the world all need to rest, to slow down, and to recover. Yards and homes, including mine, had never had so much attention to details than they did in the early weeks of the pandemic. Personal health and fitness escalated greatly with more time to walk and engage in activities in our beautiful world, permitting us to slow down and smell the roses, literally. We reconnected by telephone and online with people with whom we had lost touch.

The summer of 2020 was a summer of many emotions, but overall, it was a summer of many blessings. I learned and discovered that, first and foremost, we need to realize just how blessed we are and be thankful that we have and can do so much. When some doors close, others open and, in the end, all things do work together for good when God is honoured. For everything there is a season, and this was the season of pandemic.

We are blessed to be able to recognise and appreciate that we do have so many tools and building blocks moving forward to recovery. In the end, just maybe, things will be better for the experience and what we have learned to value.

-Nikki Brooks

“And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” (2nd Corinthians 9: 8)

Friday, March 12

Straight from the Heart

Throughout the pandemic, I have missed the feeling of safety within the faith community. My son and I have been afraid to go to church because of our ages, and because he is in school, I know that any new germs could be harmful. I also do not want our elderly church members to get exposed to anything that might harm them.

But I have an even greater – perhaps even deeper – fear. I am also fearful because, as an Asian minority, I do not know whether people secretly harbour fear against me because of my background. COVID-19 started in the East. Its first days in China were truly devastating, and that devastation spread quickly around the world.

I know that the Bird Flu, Mad Cow Disease, SARS, Ebola, the Black Plague, Scarlet Fever and many other horrible diseases have originated in various places, tearing through populations across the centuries. Still, I feel that a particular emphasis and hatred towards China and those of Chinese descent has grown. Paranoia, as well as misinformation and anger are some of the emotions and reactions that are online. Without knowing how to stop the virus from hurting others, I feel that it is not the safest time for me to be amongst other people.

-Denise Lee

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3: 28)



Saturday, March 13

My Gratitude List

The best-selling book *Thirty Days of Gratitude* by Julie Boyer – written by a former neighbour of ours – has become a staple for me throughout the pandemic. The book reminded me of the benefits of keeping a journal in which, at the end of every day, I write at least three things for which I am grateful. I have tried to do this since the pandemic began – writing out a list of personal joys.

Looking back on past and present blessing makes the list grow. Originally it was lengthy, but I cut it down so I could read it in just a few minutes. At times when I feel “down,” I pull out the list and I read it with a smile on my face. It always gives me a positive lift and reminds me of those many things I’m grateful for.

Yes, the COVID-19 pandemic has raised our concerns in many areas: health, family, friends, work, and finances. We have become much more aware of rules and caution. But most importantly, it has heightened our Christian faith.

This anonymous poem has become my prayer:

Take my hand in yours, dear Lord, and help me every day
To do the things that you would wish, lest I should go astray.
Show me calm serenity, that only you can bring,
Put out your hand and help me, Lord,
Each day in everything, each day in everything.
Help me know within my heart that you are always near,
And cast away my loneliness, help me when I fear.
Show me calm serenity, that only you can bring,
Put out your hand and help me, Lord,
Each day in everything, each day in everything.

-Sylvia Johnstone

Sunday, March 14 – The Fourth Sunday in Lent Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Gratitude

For one week, at the end of each day, write out one thing that you were most grateful for each day. Also, each day, write out the moment for which you are least grateful. Perhaps when you were least able to give and receive love. What made it so difficult? Be with whatever you feel. Do not try to change or fix it. Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. You may wish to have a friend to share this with during this week.

Breath Dance

Try this "Breath Dance" from *Dance-the Sacred Art: The Joy of Movement as a Spiritual Practice* by Cynthia Winton-Henry, page 22:

- Have some calming music, or nature sounds playing – or just be in a quiet spot
- Sit in a tranquil position that allows arm movements
- Several times, take a deep breath in and let it out with a sigh
- Widen your arms to complement the 'in and out' movement of your breath in any way that feels good to you
- Let your movement and breath quietly or enthusiastically contract and expand in sync
- Let go thinking about the "ins and outs" as your breath and movement interplay
- Let them evolve where they may; sink into the moment
- To end, bring your arms together on your lap and spend a moment in thanks for the breath that gives you life

Images of Christ from other cultures

If you have access to the internet, search out images of Christ. What feelings enter your heart when you view them? Is there some residual reluctance to accept the differences? What might this be telling you? Is this speaking to any sort of racism? How might you change these feelings?

PIE Day

Today is "PIE Day." If you're not familiar with this, "google" it, then think of ways you could become a more inclusive person. Help yourself to a piece of pie or draw one if you have given up dessert for Lent!

Monday, March 15

The Ides of March

The Ides of March has never been a particularly positive day on the calendar. There are traditions of scapegoat beatings and of settling debts dating back centuries. March 15th is notoriously famous as being the day when Julius Caesar was assassinated.

It's ironic, then, that March 15th, 2020 was the first Sunday of "isolation" for many church congregations. While our liberal, progressive leanings outwardly reject any hint of a circumstantially punitive God, I can't help but wonder if, just maybe, even a small part of the Divine chose the Ides as a sort of spiritual debt-settling day. After all, Lent is supposed to be a time of repentance – of being intentional about acknowledging one's shortcomings and seeking to turn in another direction. The grace of God helps tremendously with this.

In the initial weeks of isolation, many people spoke and wrote about how the pandemic was perhaps a sort of societal re-set. We spiritual people might describe it as God's deliberate re-booting of an otherwise overloaded, overworked, stressed-out system. Oh, I know. It's skirting with bad theology. But part of me – even a small part of me – can't help but wonder.

It was the Ides of March, you know.

-Michael Brooks

"In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" (Matthew 3: 1-2)

Tuesday, March 16

Wilderness or Place of Bounty?

As we entered the new world of COVID-19 in March, 2020 I found that an organized pattern eventually established itself for me – a new rhythm, a “new norm.” Our usual busy days changed drastically. My husband and I spent much more time together. How lucky we were to have had this time of generally uninterrupted days at a slower pace than normal.

We are fortunate to have many friends in our curling, golf and church lives. We enjoy all of our time apart from one another outside the home. However, the “togetherness” was a gift beyond measure. Though we don’t dwell on this fact, compared to our grandchildren, we are near the end of our lives. Each day, I look at my husband and thank our God for this gift of love and joy in my life. To have seemingly “extra” time to spend days together – to laugh and reminisce together – was so unexpected.

Some people seem to take the opportunity to delve deeply into life when they know the end is near. This has certainly been the case for us. We both felt the preciousness of the unusual time, and wanted to hold on to it and to each other, not knowing what would really transpire.

As various activities slowly began in small measures, we began to see the “new world” that is emerging. We came to realize that, for us, it was not a time in the wilderness. Rather, it was a place of joy and beauty where the bounteous gifts from God were held out to us for the taking. And for all of this we say: “Thanks be to God!”

-Susan Posgate

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall bloom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” (Isaiah 35: 1-2)

Wednesday, March 17

Questions for Reflection

Many have found and experienced blessings despite the pandemic. Several of this past week's reflections recall some of the blessings in people's lives.

What is a blessing? How does a blessing differ from just another good thing?

What have been some of your specific blessings in the last year?

Despite so many losses, are there times when you have been able to name abundance?

Has forced togetherness – or forced aloneness – blessed you or not?

In her reflection *Straight from the Heart*, Denise Lee shares vulnerability about her fears. Have you ever felt vulnerable because of who you are? Have you ever experienced being in the minority in some way?

In *The Ides of March*, Michael Brooks touches upon a certain theological view that some people in our world hold – that God punishes humanity for certain acts. How do you feel about this particular theology? How can you be in conversation with someone who might believe this?



Thursday, March 18

Meeting at the Cemetery

Making good decisions has not always been easy for me. My late husband was good at helping me with this. He was practical. Many widows have told me that they go to their partners' graves to get advice. So, even though I was skeptical, I thought I would give it a try.

I was facing a dilemma and was seeking guidance. Kneeling down in the grass in front of my husband's gravestone, I laid out my problem and asked him to send me a sign – whatever that might be. After a while, I realized I was doing all of the talking.

Thinking this was probably a futile exercise, I was about to leave the cemetery when I noticed an elderly man getting out of his car. In order for him to have more privacy, I started walking away. He began to approach me and tell me that he had recently lost the love of his life – his wife. He told me how he sat at home and cried all day. Then, he began to tell me the story of their life. As he spoke, he gradually moved closer and closer to me. He took some photographs of his late wife out of his pocket for me to see.

Suddenly, I realized that I was closer to another human being than I had been since the pandemic began. I stifled a scream as I realized what was happening. Here we were – two seniors chatting without masks and not socially distanced. Then I thought to myself: "This is absurd." He was in need of pastoral care, and I would not be able to assist him if I were too afraid to listen to him and to be present with him. I started to walk away, but then noticed he needed help with the vase at his wife's grave. As I was showing him what to do, he said to me: "I'll see you again."

-Pat Gilmore

"For I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25: 35)

Friday, March 19

A Most Meaningful Embrace

Who would've thought we would miss having a haircut as much as we seemed to. It made me wonder if it was our usual appearance which we missed, or were we missing physical contact? Were we missing a kind touch? A handshake? A hug?

From the very beginning of the pandemic, my husband and I have been blessed to have our son, our daughter-in-law and our two grandchildren close by and in our "bubble." This means I receive lots of wonderful hugs and kisses. On the other hand, my daughter is single and lives in California. She celebrated her 40th birthday last September amid the pandemic. Ordinarily, we would have been together. But, like so much else, COVID changed the plans.

But what did happen was quite remarkable. Four of her best friends planned a fabulous, socially distanced party for her. The guests were scheduled to visit in two-hour timeslots outside in a park. After the party, our daughter thanked all of her friends and said she could not have imagined anything better except, perhaps, a hug. When one of her friends heard this, she said, "You want a hug? Here. I have one for you." And with that, they donned their masks and shared a hug.

It was the first hug my daughter had shared with anyone in six months. I can still remember the glow of her happiness the next day when she told us, over FaceTime, about her special birthday hug.

-June Wright

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 5)



Saturday, March 20

Where the Music Comes From

Despite lamenting a number of losses in the early days of the pandemic, I was also given an incredible gift of joy. I have found new family members I didn't know I had. Let me explain.

I was adopted as an infant and was raised by loving parents as an only child. I have always had a mild interest in learning about my birth parents, but it was never all-consuming. My attitude was, "Well, if it happens, it happens." I was quite content with the way things were. I already had some non-identifying information about my birth mother. I knew the last name from my original birth certificate. I knew her first name. I knew that her family lived on a farm in Eastern Ontario. And I knew that my birth mother sang in the church choir. I had always wondered if music was there in my background somewhere.

However, with new DNA technology, my daughter began to search for more. She was curious about her own background. When she asked me if I wanted to know anything she might find, I hesitatingly said, "All right. It would seem odd that you know something I don't."

Well, it happened. During the first week of isolation in March, my daughter told me she may have found my birth mother's family.

As an adoptee, you often wonder – and assume – that you likely have half-siblings. We discovered that, while my birth mother died about five years ago, I actually have a half-sister who is older than me and living in the USA. Learning I have an older sibling was one of the biggest surprises in the story. We also identified three half-brothers in Western Canada. Since last spring, I have been writing to my half-sister and one of the half-brothers regularly. We have shared hour long chats every month or so. None of them knew about me, or that our birth mother even had another child. It was a surprise to them too.

My birth mother's brother had ten children, and one of the first cousins has been my main family contact. Each of his siblings recorded a Happy Birthday greeting for me last fall. I have felt nothing but love and acceptance from them ever since we uncovered this DNA connection.

I have also found some information about my birth father and, although it is not a strong connection yet, I know he had six other children. So, while growing up as an only child, in the last year I have discovered eight half-brothers and two half-sisters!

The main gift from this whole experience is that, even as a "senior citizen," life can still send delightful surprises. I have new people in my life who have embraced me and are looking forward to building relationships with me. They all seem like wonderful people and I welcome the day when we will be able to meet in person.

In all of this, many of the mysteries of my life have been resolved. I now know where the music comes from.

-Jacki Kingston

Sunday, March 21 – The Fifth Sunday in Lent Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Contemplative Colouring

On a sheet of paper, randomly write out the things that are troubling you (worries, concerns, etc.). They may be things beyond your control, or not. Then take a couple of your favourite colours (crayons, pencil crayons) and slowly and contemplatively colour the troubles out one at a time. Give these concerns over to God. They are in God's hands now.

Blessing Exercise

With a partner (or via Zoom or Skype with someone), try this simple blessing exercise: With your hands held slightly above your friend's head (or open palms toward the screen) say, "The Spirit in me greets the Spirit in you. I offer a prayer for your wellbeing. I bless you as a child of God." The receiving friend may prefer to bow their head. Switch places and offer this blessing again.

Drawing Hugs

How do you draw a hug? Think of all the ways you could send someone a hug. What symbols could you use? Send a note to someone with a hug in it.

Painted Rocks

When you are on a walk look for a smooth, flat stone just large enough to fit in your hand. Bring it home and paint colourful, uplifting designs on one side. On the other leave a message of hope. Then gift the rock to a stranger by leaving it in an unexpected place on your next walk.

Palm Leaves

Find a palm leaf/branch on the internet, print it out, and then colour it to use next Sunday.

Monday, March 22

Pandemic Funerals

I estimate that, during 17 years of ministry, I have conducted about 400 funerals. Perhaps experience's greatest lesson is that there's always a first time for everything.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced an unprecedented set of circumstances around end-of-life rituals. For several months, funerals were limited to no more than ten attendees, all of whom had to maintain six feet of physical distancing. In the midst of this, on a pleasant mid-April morning I made my way to Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto to bury one of our flock. With so many people isolating at home, the big, bustling city was unusually quiet, providing generous air time for the spring birds to sing their morning songs. On a typical spring day, Mount Pleasant's picturesque pathways would be filled with walkers, runners and bikers enjoying the bright, yellow forsythia flowers beginning to peak out of their branches. But not on this day.

Instead, I arrived to discover locked gates guarded by a security officer. Satisfying him of my legitimacy, I proceeded to the grave where I met the funeral staff. After a few moments of levity, several more cars arrived. This is when things got, well, really "unusual." From the cars sprung six men, all wearing masks and surgical gloves. They made their way to the funeral coach while the family was forced to remain in their cars. The masked men – hired pall bearers – carried the casket to the grave and then promptly left. Only then was the family permitted to approach, while remaining spread apart. To see the anguish on the faces of two sisters who had not seen one another in weeks and could not even stand close enough together to shake hands, let alone exchange a hug with their grieving mother off on her own in the distance was enough to break your heart. But there we stood to bury father and husband. Distanced. Isolated. Sterile.

Even tried and true words of comfort seemed somewhat more hollow than usual: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." But a time for this? Welcome to the hard reality of COVID-19. As painful as it sometimes is, there's a first time for everything.

-Michael Brooks

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1)

Tuesday, March 23

Perspectives from the Workplace

Back in the early days of the pandemic we closed our fitting rooms in the clothing store where I worked. It was not because of policy, but anxiety. In February and early March 2020, my shifts were cut daily. Mapleview Mall was a ghost town. Then the official announcement came: orders to stay home.

After about a month at home, just enough time to really settle into isolation, my return-to-work email arrived. Apparently, people were still fond of shopping, even in lockdown! So for the next two months I prepared orders for delivery. The days went by fast. I enjoyed it.

Then the day came when we could re-open. The store had to be ready. On top of the normal customer service, there were added concerns. We had to think of store capacity, directional arrows, alcohol wipes, plexiglass guards, sanitizer and in the early days, quarantined clothes. And when we opened, all those delivered orders came back! Bags and boxes full of returns. It took me a long time to feel comfortable with the plexiglass. I wasn't afraid of COVID. I felt more like a caged animal. I missed connecting with people.

That was June. The store and I began to operate on a more "normal" basis for the next few months. My mask was a part of me. I wasn't always behind the "plexi." Even though it felt like I had worn away my fingerprints from the constant use of the alcohol wipes, things were good.

Then the COVID case numbers started to rise. With Toronto, Peel and eventually Hamilton all locked down, things became very strange at the store. Our customers were not the regular clientele. Instead, our neighbours from locked municipalities came shopping. Most came to do returns because "their" stores were closed. Some came unmasked, muttering about breathing your own carbon dioxide and conspiracy theories with sanitizer causing cancer. It was during this time that the store became unfamiliar to me. We were not a place to stay and chat, feel welcomed, and find something. We had become a depot for returns. I felt exhausted.

With Christmas approaching I took time away from the store to cook the veggies for the contribution from Meals of Hope to the Meal Bag Christmas Day Dinner. For the first time in a long while, I was feeling more relaxed.

January 2021, I was back at the store, happily picking customers' orders again. The Christmas break had left me refreshed. I felt good about my job again.

But in late January, I was laid off and joined the thousands of COVID unemployed. I am left with so many feelings, and plenty of time now to process them.

-Nancy McKenzie

"For everything there is a season: A time to seek, and a time to lose." (Ecclesiastes 3: 1, 6)

Wednesday, March 24

Questions for Reflection

Several of this past week's reflections focus on the importance of intimate relationships and of touch.

When did you last risk the touch or hug of a loved one or stranger?

Do you tend to be a "hugger?"

Jacki Kingston describes the discovery of her birth family during the pandemic. Have you ever discovered something unexpectedly that has changed your life?

How would you react if you suddenly learned you had new family members?

Have any of the restrictions on social gatherings broken your heart?

What rituals do you miss the most?



Thursday, March 25

Today's News

News has always been my go-to for comfort. Two morning papers over a cup of tea, podcasts on the way to work, CBC radio, evening news, Twitter feeds, digital subscriptions to American papers, newsletters in my inbox. A way to stay connected, to be informed on a broad range of topics, but also an escape: feel-good stories, advice columns, recipes, puzzles.

Now I see nothing but COVID-19 coverage. I am fixated on the daily 11:15 updates from our Prime Minister as the door to Rideau Cottage opens and he emerges in blue shirt and tie, neatly tailored overcoat. His beard has streaks of grey but the thick, wavy hair is still there. Five years ago, they said he "Just wasn't ready." How do you learn to be ready for a global pandemic?

I am shocked when my iPhone reports my social media use is 6 hours a day. Six hours of one story dissected from every angle. When television, radio, and newspapers are added, do I have time left in the day to work, eat and sleep? My world has broadened in this global pandemic but also shrunk into a single story.

-Ruth McQuirter

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." (Isaiah 61: 1-2)

Friday, March 26

Parades of Hope

Being socially active, I found being confined to our apartment and cut-off from human contact under COVID-19 an isolating and lonely experience.

Then a missive from our City Council called on us to acknowledge the front line workers by applauding them at a fixed time. We emerged onto our balconies at the appointed time. We joined other neighbours in our building in a cacophony of clapping and banging utensils against pots that echoed over downtown Burlington. We waved to each other and it highlighted one of the new buzz phrases: "We are in this together." Suddenly, I didn't feel alone anymore.

On another occasion, we were drawn onto our balcony by a raucous racket heading up Brant Street. To our surprise, we witnessed a parade of ambulances, fire engines and police cruisers all blaring their sirens and honking their horns in a symbol of togetherness. I found myself with a lump in my throat choking back the tears. I was moved and felt embraced and cared for by my city — not forgotten.

As time went on, there were smaller motorcades of groups celebrating special occasions. There was a group of cars decorated with signs and balloons accompanied by honking horns for a resident in our building who was missing an important celebration. On my husband Ken's birthday, one of our own families assembled outside our building with balloons, dropped off gifts and treats in the foyer, and sang happy birthday to him from the sidewalk.

While COVID-19 turned our homes into prisons, cancelled our activities and kept us apart from our family and friends, it managed to draw us together in strange new ways.

When it is all over and done, I am going to celebrate being together at last with my family and friends far more often. If nothing else, the pandemic has made me realize the importance and joy of human contact.

-Penny Heneke

"So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life. The mountains and hills will lead the parade, bursting with song. All the trees of the forest will join the procession, exuberant with applause." (Isaiah 55: 12-13, The Message)

Saturday, March 27

A Mystery Package

It was the last day of March, and the reality was finally beginning to set in. Amid the pandemic, Holy Week services around the world would not take place in person in 2020. Easter without church? The thought was almost inconceivable.

While mostly isolated at home, I made a quick trip to the church to attend to some urgent matters. When I arrived, a large package was sitting on the step. I brought the package into the office. Attached to it was a handwritten note that said “Dear Port Nelson: We hope you might be able to use these on Sunday. Thanks for all you’re doing for our community. Sincerely, neighbours.”

Intrigued, I opened the package to discover dozens of beautiful palm branches. My heart was warmed. We had been struggling to source even a few branches to use during the on-line Palm Sunday service that coming week. Now, presumably, knowing we were offering online services, someone had dropped these branches off because their own church was closed and they otherwise would have gone unused. It felt like an answer to prayer. It’s as though the package had literally fallen down like manna from heaven! It was the right thing at just the right time.

I immediately took the branches into the sanctuary and scattered them up and down the centre aisle of the church. Holy Week instantly became much more meaningful. I experienced a foretaste of what the disciples might have felt on that first Palm Sunday when they threw their cloaks and branches on the road to welcome Jesus. The overall context was one of pain and uncertainty, but they enjoyed just a few minutes of celebration. Hosanna!

-Michael Brooks

“A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.” (Matthew 21: 8)



Palm Sunday, March 28

Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! Even though Lent is a season of reflection and penitence, the Sundays in Lent remain "feast days." We still celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ in our world and in our lives.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Palm Branches

If you're watching the live streamed Palm Sunday service from home, make a point of waiving the palm leaf/branch you decorated last week during the Palm Sunday hymns.

Palm Sunday Story

Read the story of Palm Sunday – perhaps using a children's story Bible – and imagine yourself as part of the events. Who would you be? Who would you not want to be? Journal any discoveries.

Silence

Ready to practice 20 minutes of silence? Find a comfortable spot away from all distractions – no music, no books, no phones. Allow yourself to have the thoughts and feelings you bring with you. Present yourself to God. Acknowledge whatever surfaces within you, but quickly jot it down (it may free the mind, if you wish) and leave it for now. Breathing in and out at your normal pace helps calm yourself into silence. Relax the body. Imagine serenity and the peace of God surrounding you. You may want to focus on an image that tends to encourage quiet, such as a scene from a window overlooking the woods, a picture in the room, a candle or a memory of a sunset/beach/garden. You may wish to record insights, or you may just sit quietly. You might want to save writing anything until after the experience. Silence makes us all pilgrims by moving us into the quiet centre where God is. Silence equips us to speak and to serve.

Mini-Retreat

As Holy Week begins, plan your own mini-retreat of reflection and journaling. Some questions to consider: Where am I now in my life, my spiritual life, my creative life, and my believing life? What are my questions, my doubts and my confusions? How much of all this can I give over to God to cherish or hold dear for me?

Top 10 Post-pandemic Wishes

Look ahead to when pandemic restrictions are lifted. Make a list of 10 things you look forward to doing that today are not feasible. Visualize yourself doing each.

Monday, March 29

Set Me as a Seal

In late March, 2020 it became clear that we would not be able to gather for in-person services for some time to come. Any thoughts that the pandemic would be short-lived were all but dashed, as COVID-19 slowly but steadily swept across continent after continent, nation after nation, city after city.

When this reality began to sink in, the Port Nelson Church staff team thought up ways we could keep the church family connected. Palm Sunday was around the corner – a day when, traditionally, lots of children and youth lead the entire church in a Palm Parade as we sing *“All Glory, Laud and Honour to you, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.”* Could we, in some way, replicate this online?

With a lot of planning and hard work by Sharon, Jay, Kelly, Alex, Denise, Riley and Tina, we came upon with a plan. We emailed a template of a palm branch to every family in the church. People were asked to print the template, decorate it, take a picture of themselves waving it in celebration, and send the picture back to us. We then compiled all the pictures, forming a virtual Palm Parade.

Not only did it turn out to be the perfect ending to our Palm Sunday online service, but it was also the first time in nearly a month that people actually “saw” one another. There was a warm sense of community as dozens of familiar, smiling faces waived paper branches as a visible sign of anticipating better days. Stillman Matheson selected a pre-recorded choir anthem we had on file to accompany the picture show. As I heard our choir sing “many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it,” a tear came to my eye. Nothing – not even a pandemic – could quench the love shared in and through the community of faith.

Anticipating better days, indeed.

-Michael Brooks

“Set me as a seal upon your heart...for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave...many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.” (Song of Solomon 8: 6-7)

Tuesday, March 30

Out Like a Lamb

The month of March is drawing to a close, and so, too, is our Lenten journey. I'm sure you've heard the old proverb about March: "In like a lion, out like a lamb." Its origin is highly debated, but its reality, at least here in Canada, is always a matter of surprise. Sometimes, on March 1, crocuses and even tulips are poking their way through the soil in lamb-like anticipation of rebirth. Other years, we're pummeled with an early spring snow storm as March takes its lion-like leave.

But regardless of the weather, this year, March will go out like a lamb. Why? Because, in the midst of this Holy Week, the prophet foretells how the "suffering servant" takes upon himself the shortcomings of all of us:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. (Isaiah 53: 7-8)

This lamb – helpless, weak, vulnerable – this lamb of God will soon take away the sin of the world. This lamb of God – even more precarious than the rest of the flock of older sheep – this lamb will take upon himself the iniquity of all of us sheep who have gone astray.

It seems so unfair, so unwarranted. It was, frankly, an ugly sight: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isaiah 53: 2) But then, God has a way of acting through suffering. And in this case, God acts through one whose suffering made him so repulsive that people didn't even want to look at him. Oh, it's not that God *causes* suffering. It's that God *identifies with* the life of an innocent sufferer.

Who are the innocent sufferers today with whom God identifies? Who are those who, by perversions of justice, are taken away?

-Michael Brooks

"He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised" (Isaiah 53: 3)

Wednesday, March 31

Questions for Reflection

This past week's reflections move us toward Holy Week and, specifically, the public nature of Jesus' ministry.

Ruth McQuirter touches on the experience of news during the pandemic. How have you managed the intrusion of 24-7 COVID news?

Parades are public activities. Have you ever been a participant in a parade? If so, what did it feel like to have many people watching you? What is unique about a parade versus other public activities?

Have you received any mystery or surprise packages in the last year? What have they been and what did they mean?

Michael Brooks' reflection *Out Like a Lamb* takes us into the passion narrative that is at the heart of Holy Week.

Who are the innocent sufferers today?

Who are those who, by perversions of justice, are taken away?

Why do we continue to look away from the suffering we know is around us? What frightens us about those who are suffering?

What is "sin?" How would you describe "sin" to someone else?

In all the changes of this past year, how has the church community sustained you?

Maundy Thursday, April 1 In the Upper Zoom

“After all these years,” he wrote, “I can finally articulate it. I feel closest to Jesus on Maundy Thursday.”

That was one of the many reflections shared following the 2020 Maundy Thursday service held on Zoom. In a typical year, about 40 people gather on the Thursday from four area churches who share Holy Week services. But in 2020, with no in-person worship permitted, we were on our own. Martha Reynolds and I had no idea how many or how few people would participate. We thought a dozen would be a “success.”

As the Zoom meeting began, people gathered...and gathered, and gathered. All in, I counted 51 participants. The most poignant moment came when we simultaneously partook of the bread and the cup in communion. To see 50 other people on the screen all sharing in the sacrament was a true moment of solidarity and intentional community in unusual times.

As I thought about it further, I realized that, when we meet in person to share communion, we don't have the benefit of seeing others partake with us. Ironically, communion is largely an individual event. But on this Thursday evening in the Upper Zoom, 51 sets of hands gently broke the bread of life and poured the cup of blessing. In that moment, I understood why my good friend feels closest to Jesus on Maundy Thursday.

-Michael Brooks

*“During the meal Jesus took some bread in his hands. He blessed the bread and broke it.”
(Matthew 26: 26)*



Good Friday, April 2

The Isolated Christ

Many people across the years have speculated that Jesus was an introvert – and a fairly strong introvert at that. Modern day tools used to assess personalities suggest that one's level of introversion – and extroversion – mostly relates to how energy is gained or lost. People who tend toward introversion often need to be alone to recharge themselves, whereas extroverts are rejuvenated by being around others. Biblical scholars point to pivotal times in Jesus' life when, instead of intentionally surrounding himself with others, he retreats.

Our Lenten journey began with Jesus driven out into the wilderness – into isolation – by the Spirit. Later, after Jesus heard the news that John the Baptist was beheaded in prison, "He withdrew...in a boat to a deserted place by himself." (Matthew 14: 13) Despite this, crowds found him. People were in need. There was sickness and hunger. So Jesus came out of isolation to feed at least 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish. But then, just as quickly, "After he had dismissed the crowds, he went up to the mountain by himself to pray." (Matthew 14: 23).

There are other examples. The point is, to be effective in his ministry, Jesus seemed to need to regroup in peace and quiet. And even though Jesus craved escape, he always seemed to know that God was with him – that he was never completely alone. His faith in God endured through wilderness and isolation. Jesus' pattern of action and retreat, action and retreat continued until one day – on that fateful Friday as darkness covered the whole land, while hanging on the cross – Jesus spoke his last words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus knew his Hebrew Bible well. He quoted Psalm 22. His final words were in the form of a question about the presence of God.

Yes, this Jesus who needed time alone to regenerate – in his own darkest hour – this same Jesus also needed the everlasting presence of God to sustain him – even through death. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Have you ever asked this question at a difficult time? Thankfully, even as absence is lamented – even then – we are never alone. God is still with us.

-Michael Brooks

"At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" (Mark 15: 34)

Holy Saturday, April 3

Easter Morning

Easter morning, 2020. If this were a normal year, I would join my church community on the shores of Lake Ontario. We would gather in a small parkette, watch the sun rise, sing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today," read some scripture, and afterwards share a breakfast of fruit and hot cross buns.

But this is not a normal year, and I am in Toronto, not Burlington. The world is in the midst of a global pandemic and I am part of the "vulnerable" age group of 70+ that is particularly susceptible to the COVID-19 virus. For the next several weeks I am "sheltering in place" with my daughter and her family. It is a strange, unsettling time.

My Easter morning begins at 6:00am when I turn on my iPad and join a virtual Sunrise Service on our church's YouTube channel. There are prayers, photos of past Easter mornings on the lake, and a scripture reading of Mary Magdalene visiting the tomb of Jesus. Instead of the body of Jesus, she encounters an angel who asks her, "Why are you crying?"

Just as the minister reads this, I hear a cry from down the hall and I bring my iPad with me to my granddaughter's bedroom. When she sees me, her tears turn to a smile and she holds out her arms. As I change her, I look at her gorgeous curls and her trusting gaze, and I know that Easter has come again.

On Easter morning a year ago, I was about to leave for the Sunrise Service when my phone rang. It was my daughter announcing with anxiety in her voice, "My water has broken." The baby was not due for three weeks, but she clearly had decided to make her appearance early. My granddaughter was born a few hours later, healthy and beautiful. Today she is nearly a year old, full of energy and giggles. I reach to pick her up from her crib. In the background the church service ends, and YouTube randomly selects the next video. It is a singing of Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah*. I hold my granddaughter close and whisper "Amen."

-Ruth McQuirter

"Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalm 30: 5)

Easter Sunday, April 4

Celebration Practices

It's Sunday! In fact, it's not just any Sunday, it's *the* Sunday! Jesus Christ is risen today! Easter Day is the most significant day in the Christian faith. It is the day upon which all other days are patterned. It is the day when life rises from death and when hope overcomes despair.

You are invited to engage in one or more of these spiritual practices to celebrate God's presence in your life and to enact some of the discoveries from the past week's reflections:

Resurrection Cookies

Google "resurrection cookies" and prepare a celebratory food for the day.

Hot Cross Buns

Research the history of hot cross buns and then, if you're able, enjoy one for breakfast today.

Easter Eggs

Paint Easter eggs, perhaps with family members in person (if it is safe to do so) or over Zoom.

Easter Traditions

Take some time to search the internet to discover how people celebrate Easter around the world. Compare various traditions with your own. What is the same? What differs?

Easter Memories

Think of memories of Easters gone by. Choose one and write about it, draw it, or paint it.

Unleashing the Creative Spirit

Even if you do not feel that you are a creative being, try picking up pencil crayons/crayons/markers and drawing your experience of how you are feeling on this Easter Sunday, especially after reading all of the wonderful stories in this booklet! Do not think too hard on it – just let your hand draw. Spend a few moments thinking about all you have read, listened to, and written over these past few months of Lent/Easter. What prayers of gratitude and joy would you like to share with God on this fine Easter day? Celebrate all that this day means for you!

