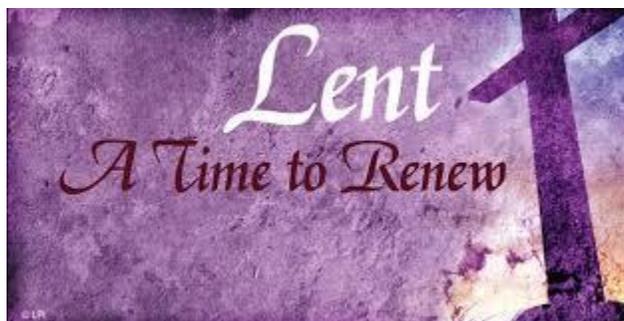


# Meditations for Lent 2020

## Forest Grove United Church of Christ



### Ash Wednesday, February 26

#### Joshua 24:15

*Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.'*



Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could "choose this day" to serve God, then check that off our list and move on to the next thing? But, as so often in life, it's not quite that simple! The choice to follow in God's way is one we make over and over in our daily lives. For instance:

Showing patience with that person who drives us nuts

Choosing not to get angry at an inconsiderate motorist

Exercising self-discipline to complete a task or fulfill a commitment

Speaking up when it is uncomfortable to do so

The trick is remembering in the moment: "This is the choice I have already made – to serve love, peace, order, and justice."

These everyday challenges we all encounter are opportunities to remind ourselves that God is in charge, and to live our choice to serve God.

God of Love and Wisdom, help me remember my choice to follow in your way, and to let go of whatever stands in the way of my living that choice every day.

—Susan Armentrout

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**Wednesday, March 4**

**Romans 12:2 Common English Bible (CEB)**

*Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.*



I once had a pet rat named Mortimer. He was a good, friendly sort of rat...the kind you could hold in your lap or play with on the floor. In his cage, Mortimer spent most of his time running laps on his wheel. His life was simple...eat, sleep, play with me, run laps...eat, sleep, play with me, run laps...etc., etc. Yes, he was a good rat, but his life was a pattern of limited options...options available to pet rats. He seemed happy with those limited choices, perhaps because he had never had the opportunity to experience anything else.

But you and I aren't like that, are we? As human beings, our options are limited largely by our imaginations. If what we imagine is not possible due to the physics or biology we are forced to live with, our imaginations give us a means of overcoming those limitations, even if only in our own minds. We can communicate those imaginings in our literature, plays, and films.

So why do we still like to live according to a certain pattern or rhythm in our lives? I think it is because we like to have life be at least somewhat predictable. Predictability is comforting. It gives us a sense of control. And so we go to work from 9 to 5 on weekdays, take the kids to soccer practice every afternoon, eat pizza once a week, always go to Grandma's for Thanksgiving. Weekends are reserved for planned chaos.

Of course, some of us don't have any recognizable pattern at all to our lives. Every day is different, perhaps full of unpredictable drama and chaos. Many people live for years that way, preferring it to a well-ordered, structured existence. Or at least that's what they are used to.

Paul would recognize both ends of the spectrum as patterns of this world, patterns that we have come to accept as the way things are. But Paul tells us that is not enough. In order to live in God's kin-dom, our minds need to be transformed and renewed. We need outside-of-the-box thinking. What could be different about how I am living that would bring me and those around me closer to God's rhythm for the world?

Imagine! You can do it if you try.

— Michael Colvin

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## Wednesday, March 11

### Thessalonians 2:16-17 (The Message)

*May Jesus himself and God our Father, who reached out in love and surprised you with gifts of unending help and confidence, put a fresh heart in you, invigorate your work, enliven your speech.*



My life is like a bubbling and vivacious stream that threatens to drown me from time to time. I work all day at a job I enjoy then come home to my family whom I adore. I unwind by simultaneously cooking dinner, helping with the homework, and wondering if the chickens my boys wanted three years ago have managed to survive another day of neglect. One task leads to another until at the end of the night a torrent of “To Do’s” has deposited me lifeless in front of a screen with Netflix.

Sometimes I forget that God has surprised me with gifts of unending help and confidence. My heart gets tired and my work devolves into putting one foot in front of the other. How wonderful to be reminded that we are not alone – that Jesus himself and God our Father is reaching out to us in love! Put a fresh heart in us, invigorate our work, enliven our speech! Let us delight in our gifts of unending help and confidence as we walk boldly in the footsteps of love.

— Larissa Garfias

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## Wednesday, March 18

### 1 Corinthians 15:58 (from The Living Bible)

*“So, my dear brothers, since future victory is sure, be strong and steady, always abounding in the Lord’s work, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever wasted as it would be if there were no resurrection.”*



As I considered this passage, it seemed easy to recognize the truth of it, but it was much more challenging for me to give it some meaningful interpretation. I turned to my small collection of reference works, and came across a chapter in the book, God Is In The Hard Stuff, which, to me, is a great illustration of its truth. This was the situation:

A man had a deadly brain tumor. Before his scheduled surgery, several of his friends gathered and held a healing ceremony. The surgery was performed, and the friends continued their prayers, but the man did not heal. He was visited by his friends a few weeks before he died, and when they asked him if he was disappointed that God had not healed him, the man’s reply was, “God has healed me in ways you can’t imagine...All will be well.”

The man then gave his friends a prayer which he had paraphrased from Mother Teresa:

*Dear Jesus,  
Help me to spread Your fragrance everywhere I go.  
Flood my soul with Your spirit and life.*

*Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly  
that my life may only be a radiance of Yours.*

*Shine through me and be so in me  
that every soul I come in contact with  
may feel Your presence in my soul.*

*Let them look up and see  
no longer me, but only Jesus!*

*Stay with me  
and I shall begin to shine as You shine;  
so to shine as to be a light to others;  
the light, O Jesus, will be all from You.*

*None of it will be mine;  
it will be You shining on others through me.*

*Let me praise You in the way You love best,  
by shining on those around me.*

*let me preach You without preaching,  
Not by words, but example,  
by the catching force,  
the sympathetic influence  
of what I do,  
the evident fullness of the love  
my heart bears to You.*

*Amen*

Though the efforts of the doctors and the prayers of his friends did not bring a physical healing to the man, they contributed to a more important inner healing and sense of peace. This, to me, is a perfect illustration of the idea that "...nothing you do for the Lord is ever wasted."

Poem taken from God Is In The Hard Stuff, by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, pp 187-188.

— Myra Beeler

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## **Wednesday, March 25**

### **Romans 15:13**

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*



There is a lot of difference between human expectations and God's hope.

The news tells us to expect rain; we expect TV to solve a murder mystery in one hour (with commercials.). We expect government to fix things. We expect to win points if we just play computer games longer. And we expect our children to perform perfectly and without complaint.

All these expectations place our focus on the future, which never comes. And that sets us up for delusion, disappointment, and despair.

God's hope for us is to experience joy and peace in the moment. I see a spot of sun and step outside. I get caught up in a good book. I see someone who needs help. I pick up a pen and get inspired. I interact with children and am amazed.

With God's hope, we can find joy and peace in every moment; and, after all, the present moment is all we ever really have.

— Sandy Freeman

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## Wednesday, April 1

### Matthew 4:1-2

*“Then Jesus was led out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, to be tempted there by Satan. For forty days and 40 nights he ate nothing and became very hungry.”*



The house was quiet when I researched which Lenten passage to write about. For background music I used my new voice-prompted wireless device to play Peter, Paul and Mary songs. I listened to “Jet Plane,” “Where Have All The Flowers Gone” and “I Dig Rock n’ Roll Music,” while I looked up each scripture on the list.

When I’d finished researching, a harrowing but beautiful song came on that gripped me—“The Great Mandala.” It’s about a young man who conscientiously objects to killing, is incarcerated for that choice and is fasting in an attempt to influence an end to war. My decision of what scripture to pick became clear at that point, intrigued by the common central theme of fasting in both.

The song’s narrators are the son (pacifist), the father (patriot), the public (haters) and a neutral voice (the mandala). The son dies from his fast and the public takes that as a reason to continue hating because he is no longer around to resist! (“Death has gagged him”). The two specific deaths in the song are the father’s first son, who died in war and his second son, who died protesting.

The mandala chorus keeps reminding that both deaths are a waste and a loss, suggesting ultimately the view of choosing a winning scenario over a losing one.

Soon after being baptized by John, Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit to the mountains to fast. Satan tempts him in three ways (verses 4,6,and 10). Jesus’ wisdom and forbearance declining Satan’s temptations preserve his life and his integrity. He follows the dictates of God as he knew them to be and so made the winning choice. This enables him to carry out and succeed in his ministry to the people of Israel, ultimately inspiring billions over centuries. Now that is indeed a win!

Mother-Father God, Help us to speak our truth as we know it to be, and be wise in our choices. Amen

— Val Evers

## Wednesday, April 8

### Psalm 23... A Psalm of David

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want!*

The Lord looks after us as a shepherd cares for his sheep. He gives us what we need and his spirit is always within our reach.

*He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

Being a child who was free to roam on beautiful “green farm fields,” I felt the connection early in life to the spirit of God. Looking at the beauty on this earth had an impact on me about how loving our God was for giving us such a gift. When I was upset, I would walk into the woods and down to the creek. I felt like the sound and movement of the water washed away my sad feelings and calmed my soul and gave me a sense of peace. For all of us he gives us those blessings.

*He restoreth my soul; he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

There are so many ways he restores us. Our faith in his word brings us newness and peace. The sweet presence of a newborn baby, the closeness of family and friends and even a gentle touch given to another person can impact us. The amazing beauty of this earth, that can take our breath away and bring us to tears, can lift us beyond words.

The paths of righteousness for his name sake! Governed by that still small voice in all of us, we desire to follow in his teachings of love and kindness to our fellowman and ourselves. While we all have choices, his teachings guide and direct our decisions. Listening to the prompting of the spirit helps us to make good decisions and live a full life in faith and love.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

2014 changed my life. I was diagnosed with cancer and after the first chemo treatment I spent 4 days in isolation in the hospital. Later my doctor told me it was a good thing I came in when I did. I had felt very calm as I knew I was in good hands. I was not consciously thinking about the 23rd Psalm, but it kept repeating itself over and over in my mind when I was very sick, until I started verbally repeating it to myself. My daughter stayed with me and would write Bible verses on the white board near my bed. Every morning there would be a new verse for me to read but the 23rd Psalm stayed with me throughout the days. Even though we go through the valley that may reflect death, discomfort and uncertainty, God stands right beside us. He is the One guiding us, protecting us and keeping us in peace as we journey through life.”

I had an experience in 2010 when I stood in the “light” and a voice said to me. “You are not to fear anything. It is all taken care of.” I did not know exactly what that meant but it changed my life. When I was diagnosed it all made sense. The overpowering feeling of love during that experience and the message I received guided me through stage 3 cancer. I knew I was going to be ok. Faith and fear cannot exist in the same space. Faith restored me.

His rod is our protection as a shepherd protects his sheep. The Hebrew word for rod is “Shevtecha” The staff has power to make change, to lean on, to rest and to find peace. It is used to help us stay on the path, or to get back to the path that He has for us and exhorts us to move forward. This also applies to His staff.

*Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

God provides our enemies with a closer look at how God gives us what we need in preparing a feast/table before us. It was manifest that this was from God -- proof of the divine favor -- and it furnished an assurance that he who had done this would never leave us. His protection still stands.

You anoint my head with oil. You have poured onto me the strength and confidence that I need in life. This expression denotes abundance, divine favor, prosperity and joy.

We belong to God first and foremost. We will be forever thankful for our cup running over. We can give our love, joy, faith and abundance away in whatever manner we choose. All to His glory! All for love.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

AMEN!

— Windi Withycombe

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## **Good Friday, April 10**

### **Romans 5:8**

*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*



*“We are not so bad, God is not so mad.”*

The beauty of atonement, the forgiveness of sin, barely masks the horror of the atonement act itself.

I can easily envision the distraught cries of a child who cannot understand why her pet lamb, the one she has carefully groomed to have no spot or blemish, is the one selected for sacrifice. How could the blood of a lamb save her and her family? (Exodus 12)

The offering of animal sacrifices was codified in the book of Leviticus. (Chapter 16) and continued to the time of Christ. The bloody sacrifice covered the sins of the petitioner until the next year, when another sacrifice would be made.

On the surface, we have to agree with the little girl — why would God require such a terrible thing? It was an annual reminder of the terribleness of sin. Sin that hurts ourselves, sin that is rebellion against our Creator and sin that destroys the innocent.

Seeing Jesus, John the Baptist cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!” (John 1:29) The blood of animals was not sufficient. Only the perfect, sinless Son of God is everlastingly sufficient.

We have a cross in front of the sanctuary. The cross, an instrument of gruesome death, has been transformed into beauty, because of the atonement. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we remember this sacrifice, this atonement, for our sins.

Paul, the author of Romans, reminds us that this once-for-all sacrifice was not done because we recognized our need and were ready to repent and change our ways.

No, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

The reality is this: we are bad — we are sinful. The Bible says, “There is none righteous, no not one!” (Romans 3:10) And God’s anger at the sin that separates the Creator from his/her creation is real.

But God’s love is demonstrated on the beautiful cross — while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And because of his righteousness, not ours, we are forgiven. We’re not bad any more. And because of the Lamb’s perfect and complete sacrifice, God looks on us with favor as sons and daughters. Love replaced wrath.

— Joana Jones

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## **Additional Meditations for Lent**

### **Psalm 23**

*The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths  
for his name’s sake.*

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.*



Today my eyes are drawn to ‘the valley of the shadow of death.’

My 35th year I spent more time beside my dying father than I did at home; and I was pretty much ticked off with God. Five years ago, our son was diagnosed with cancer, and I was totally immobilized for two weeks.

A childhood dream kept coming to me:

*I'm running away from something, and I am afraid. A narrow side street takes me past many doors - all locked. There is no sound but the beating of my heart. I am afraid, and alone. I finally push a door open and rush down steps to a cold and totally dark basement. In time, my eyes adjust and I see a speck of light, crawl over to it and discover a tiny green leaf. Over time (I don't know how long,) I nurture it (I don't know how.). It grows. My focus changes, and eventually I walk up the stairs and step outside.*

This is my 23rd Psalm dream. Now I pull it out of the drawer like a well-used tool.

May we all use this Lenten season as a time to consider our own songs of trust; for while our faith may not change circumstances, it will always provide hope, and hope will sustain us as we walk through the shadows.

— Sandy Freeman

### **Psalm 89:1**

*I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, for ever;  
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.*



It's so easy to get caught up in the divisiveness of the day. But if we keep our focus on God's love, we can let go of our bitterness, let go of anger and disappointment. We can be steadfast in continuing to do our best in the world and let God handle the outcomes. Just set the table with love, and welcome all to eat.

— Sandy Freeman