



TURNING TO GOD LENTEN REFLECTIONS

Beginning with Ash Wednesday and ending on Holy Saturday, Lent is a forty-day period of preparation before Easter. The forty-day period is based on the time frame that Jesus spent in the wilderness. “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.” *Matthew 4:1-3 (NRSV)*

In the early church it was during this season when new Christians prepared for baptism. Fasting has long been a part of Lent. In earlier times, some Christians fasted by eating one meal a day, and abstained from eating any meat. Fasting continues to be a part of the Lenten experience for many individuals, only now some fast by giving up television viewing or chocolate. Lent continues to be a time for Christians to be introspective and repentant. It still is a time for Christians, of all ages, to reflect on those things – behaviors or actions that separate us from God, and then resolve to change them.

This is a season when we, as Christians, are called to turn to God. We are called to turn from anything that attempts to subordinate God’s place and authority in our lives. Busy schedules, responsibilities, willfulness, resentfulness, the inability to forgive, excessive television watching or too much iPod time– all of these things can separate us from God. It is during this season when we acknowledge our sinfulness, come to understand our need for God, and appreciate the ultimate sacrifice God made for our sin through Jesus’ crucifixion.

The writers of the meditations all have connections with the Division on Ministries with Young People, General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church. The writers are a mix of current and transitional staff, division members and friends. Birthed out of the 2004 General Conference, the Division on Ministries with Young People is charged with helping congregations, campus ministries and other ministry settings

Turning to God 

engage, nurture and develop youth and young adults to be world-changing disciples of Jesus Christ. Each reflection was written with the intent of helping readers turn to God. It is our hope and prayer that during this period you will turn to God with your heart, mind, soul and strength, as you prepare for Easter. It is also our hope and prayer that you will come to understand the depth of God's love for you and to know and love God more deeply.

In Christ,

*Lillian C. Smith, Associate General Secretary
Division on Ministries with Young People
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Ash Wednesday

TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Wednesday, February 9

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden as its gardener, to tend and care for it. But the Lord God gave the man this warning: “You may eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the Tree of Conscience—for its fruit will open your eyes to make you aware of right and wrong, good and bad. If you eat its fruit, you will be doomed to die.”

The serpent was the craftiest of all the creatures the Lord God had made. So the serpent came to the woman. “Really?” he asked. “None of the fruit in the garden? God says you mustn’t eat *any* of it?”

“Of course we may eat it,” the woman told him. “It’s only the fruit from the tree at the *center* of the garden that we are not to eat. God says we mustn’t eat it or even touch it, or we will die.”

“That’s a lie!” the serpent hissed. “You’ll not die! God knows very well that the instant you eat it you will become like him, for your eyes will be opened—you will be able to distinguish good from evil!”

The woman was convinced. How lovely and fresh looking it was! And it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit and gave some to her husband, and he ate it too. And as they ate it, suddenly they became aware of their nakedness, and were embarrassed. So they strung fig leaves together to cover themselves around the hips. *Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7* (The Living Bible)

I’m sure there has been a time when you did or said something and the minute that you did, you immediately felt sorry and wanted to take it back? I know I have. At the time what was said or done felt right or seemed right or sounded right. Sometimes we do not even think about it before it happens, only to realize that it is too late. We are regretful and try to make up for it as much as possible

Turning to God

but sometimes there is simply nothing that can be done. It is only a matter of time before we see the effects that it will have on our relationship with God, with others, and even ourselves.

The choices that Eve and Adam made ended up having negative consequences. The results were signs of the limits of their humanity. God had their best interests in mind for the state of their humanity and well-being yet all they wanted was to be like God, having wisdom and knowledge of good and of evil. In their disobedience, they realized how alienated from God humans can become. The craving that propelled them to act left them ashamed, confused, and embarrassed about the new circumstances they faced. Their lack of trust in God brought them one step closer to death, literally and figuratively. Things had changed and the freedom they experienced within divine obedience was lost.

As we turn to God this Lenten season, I encourage you to think of those times when you have felt alienated from God because of the choices you have made. Focus on the feelings that you have and the alienation that you experience. Turn to God for forgiveness and repentance and explore ways to experience new life in a life-giving freedom given by God.

Prayer: Forgive me today, Lord. Help me to live in your life-giving freedom.

Julie O'Neal



TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Thursday, February 10

“While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.” *Psalm 32:3-4 (NRSV)*

I am in my first year of seminary and having to re-learn how to read the bible. One of the things that I have learned to do is to read a passage and pay attention to what grabs my attention. When I read through this passage the phrase “heat of summer” grabbed my attention in a new way.

I grew up on the Gulf Coast in Texas and know what it means to have my strength dried up by the heat of summer. I have many memories of being at Little League practice, feeling the sweat drip from my forehead, and being ready to go inside and cool off. As a sinner, I know what it means to feel my body wasted away. So often I struggle with my will and God’s will. I know that I often follow my own will and fall short of who God has called me to be. When I get overwhelmed by my sin, I find myself anxiously awaiting the opportunity to be back in God’s presence; not that God has moved away from me, but I have moved away from God. So, if you, like me, feel the heat of summer in your spiritual life, come inside and relax in the arms of God knowing that we can turn away from our sinful nature.

Prayer: Creator God, I know that so often I fall short of being the person that you have called me to be. Grant me the courage to admit my sin and to become a new person in your love. Amen.

Dawson Taylor

TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Friday, February 11

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... *Ephesians 2:4-6 (NRSV)*

Everything that “feels good, looks good or seems good” is not necessarily good for us. Although this is a reality that God has long understood, we humans are still slow to reconcile our understanding and actions. At first glance, sin feels good, looks good and seems good. When faced with a temptation, we ask ourselves, “Why shouldn’t we do such and such?” We respond, “It can’t be that bad, can it?” Well, yes it can.

Sin is defined as “an offense against moral or religious law; a transgression of the law of God; a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God.” Sin is anything that separates humans from God. In the Hebrew bible sin demanded a sacrifice of some kind – animal or grain. But those sacrifices were not sufficient. God, in God’s love, understood the need to send his own sacrifice for everyone. The sacrifice was Jesus.

*Prayer: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to live an abundant and joyous life. Today I turn to you for a deeper relationship and understanding.
Amen.*

For reflection, read Ephesians 2:1-10

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Saturday, February 12

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. *Matthew 4:1* (NRSV)

Have you ever felt like you were being tested? Like you were out in the wilderness? If you are in the least bit human, you probably have! Now for the really hard part, have you ever considered that this place of testing might be exactly where God has called you to be?

In today's scripture reading we see Jesus led out into the wilderness to encounter the devil's temptations. The devil offers him food for hunger, and Jesus turns him down. The devil asks Jesus to challenge God's provisions, and Jesus turns him down. The devil offers Jesus power and prestige, and Jesus turns him down.

While we usually talk about this passage from the context of Jesus overcoming temptation, there is another meaning to be gleaned. What if Jesus' time in the wilderness wasn't so much about the devil as it was about Jesus' *becoming* who he is? You see, while the devil's temptations presented roadblocks for Jesus, they were helpful ones. With each decision, Jesus was claiming his identity – the content of his character. As he walked out of the wilderness Jesus had decided that power, prestige, and fulfillment of his own wants were not what he was about. He paved the way for a life of higher purpose.

How are you in the wilderness in your life? What temptations are you facing? Are you willing to look at your trials as tools for defining your identity? As you prepare your heart for the death and resurrection this Lent, consider how your trials may pave the way for a life of higher purpose.

Prayer: Creator God, be with and empower us for the times of hardship and trials that we may seek a life of higher purpose. Amen.

For more reflection read Matthew 4:1-11

Bill Lazor

TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Monday, February 14

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. *I Peter 3: 18a* (NRSV)

Why would God want to bring you and me to Godself? Honestly speaking, I'd probably leave us alone. Humans are fickle, they lie, cheat, steal, and complain way too much. When someone betrays me, I forgive that person but leave him or her alone. But God, who has experienced human betrayal, wants to be in relationship with us. Wow!

God loves humans so much that God used extreme means to redeem them from the hand of destruction. God, through Jesus Christ, brings us to be in relationship with God. Would you have done likewise? I don't think so. But thank goodness that God did.

Prayer: Thank you God! I'd like to get to know you better too!

For additional reflection, read I Peter 3:18-22

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD FROM SIN

Tuesday, February 15

Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. *Romans 5:18-19* (NRSV)

It is sometimes hard to understand why Jesus had to come to the earth. This scriptural passage helps explain it. Adam, the first man, had it all. He had a great relationship with God, and authority over everything. In his encounter with the serpent, a.k.a. the devil, he transferred his authority to Satan and invited death into the human reality. He messed it up for everyone.

God had to send another to right Adam's wrong. From past experience God learned that God would have to take matters into God's own hands. So God sent Godself so that humans can experience righteousness and abundant life. That's God!

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO A NEW LIFESTYLE

Wednesday, February 16

Then one day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John there in the Jordan River. The moment Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens open and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending on him, and a voice from heaven said, “You are my beloved Son; you are my Delight.” Immediately the Holy Spirit urged Jesus into the desert. There, for forty days, alone except for desert animals, he was subjected to Satan’s temptations to sin. And afterwards the angels came and cared for him. Later on, after John’s arrest, Jesus went to Galilee to preach God’s Good News. “At last the time has come!” he announced. “God’s Kingdom is near! Turn from your sins and act on this glorious news!” *Mark 1:9-15* (The Living Bible)

Sometimes I feel like I am the most ordinary person in the world. I live in an “average” home, have an “average” family, drive an “average” car, and lead an overall “average” life. Sometimes because I feel “average” it can be a challenge accepting that God has made me unique and special. But God has a purpose for me and my life. Just as God called ordinary, “average” people like Moses, Mary, and the disciples, God has called each one of us to do some pretty extraordinary things. I’m not talking about superhuman achievements but about life-giving, transforming, and renewing acts in our daily lives that challenge societal norms. Buying products from fair trade markets, boycotting corporations that violate child labor laws, not listening to music that is degrading to women, observing and protecting Sabbath; these acts reveal our true nature and allow us to grow in confidence in God’s ability to act through us in the world. By starting from these counter-cultural reference points, we are empowered to bring God’s vision here on earth.

In this passage, Jesus is anointed to begin his ministry on earth. Jesus Christ gets the inside scoop on God’s call to his life, to be an agent of God’s salvation. Immediately after he receives this blessing, he encounters temptation as well as God’s provision.

 **Turning to God**

Jesus' seemingly "average" status is transformed as he begins to introduce those around him to a different type of lifestyle.

As we approach this season of Easter, may we be resurrected from being "average" ordinary people to extraordinary revolutionaries of God's vision.

Julie O'Neal

TURNING TO GOD'S WISDOM/
THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

Thursday, February 17

“For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” *I Corinthians 1:25* (NRSV)

It is much more common to hear about God’s wisdom than God’s foolishness in the Bible. This passage makes me wonder what exactly is God’s foolishness. Perhaps creating humans, who must independently choose to return to God in heaven, was God’s foolishness. Wouldn’t it have been simpler not to give us any choice? And then, on top of that, when we weren’t making very good choices, God sent Jesus to live among us as an example and die for our sins on the cross so that we could be saved just by believing in Him. If this is God’s foolishness, it is still beyond human wisdom. But then, Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reminds us that human wisdom does not lead to salvation, only faith in the resurrected Christ. Taking on human form might have looked like God being weak, but through Jesus Christ God showed strength.

During Lent we prepare for sacrifice and salvation. We reflect on God’s incomprehensible foolishness over humanity, and we ultimately turn to that foolishness with trust that it is wiser than human wisdom and that God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Prayer: I am humbled, O God, by your great love for me. I will strive this Lenten season to have faith in your foolishness as well as your wisdom as I look toward Easter morning. Amen.

For more reflection, read I Corinthians 1:18-25

Emily Allen



TURNING TO COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Friday, February 18

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you...never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” *Genesis 9:8-9; 11* (NRSV)

It was hard for me to envision the reality of the biblical flood detailed in the story of Noah’s ark. All that changed when I saw news stories about the destruction of the tsunamis. In Asia and Africa, tsunamis leveled cities and wrought utter destruction in the lives of at least 100,000 people. From this covenant we can take comfort in knowing that God didn’t send it to destroy the people. We may not ever be able to understand why it happened. We can know that the covenant was ratified only by God and could only be broken by God. Our God doesn’t break covenant.

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Saturday, February 19

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. *Jeremiah 31:31-34* (NRSV)

How is this new covenant so different? Both covenants are binding. Both are promises. In the former covenant, adherence to the law was prompted by external forces. With the new covenant, those in covenant relationship with God abide by it because of an internal desire to do so. God's law is in your heart. Enjoy and listen to God's divine scripting on your heart.

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD'S PURPOSE

Monday, February 21

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." *Genesis 12:1-2* (NRSV)

Leaving all that is familiar to go to a destination that only God knows is no easy venture. It requires leaving the community of your family and friends. It requires trusting God with your life and your future. Rationally thinking, it is a crazy thing to do. One can only wonder what Abram thought when he heard God's instruction. He might have thought "God, you want me to do what?" Yet wrapped up in God's instructions for Abram was a purpose that would impact Abram, his wife, Sarai, and the followers of three major world religions.

Your plans for your life will not ensure you a future. God knows what is best for you and has plans for you. God's plans are not to harm you. It was never my plan to become an ordained minister. That was the farthest thing from my mind. My plan had been to work in public relations. God's purpose for my life transplanted me from that which was familiar to a place far away. Yet, God's purpose for my life not only blessed me but also enabled me to impact the lives of countless people with the love of Jesus Christ. In my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined the wonderful journey I've had with God. God's plan is to bless you to be a blessing to others.

Prayer: Dear God, today I turn to your purpose for my life. My life is not my own. If you journey with me, I'm willing to go.

For more reflection, read Genesis 12:1-4

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO GOD IN WORSHIP

Tuesday, February 22

O come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! *Psalm 95:1* (NRSV)

A number of congregations have adopted a particular call and response. When the clergy or the lay liturgist says, “God is good,” the people respond, “All the time.” The litany would continue as the liturgist would prompt, “And all the time,” and the congregants would offer, “God is good.” As a child, I really didn’t understand what the fuss was all about. Yes I had been taught about God, but didn’t really understand or know God. As a teenager I was guilty of listening to others during worship service and I’d think, “What are we doing?” Yes, I asked my mother, “Do I have to come to church?”

Can’t tell you when things changed regarding my attitude, but they did. The faith of my parents and grandparents became my own. Worship became something that was important for me to do. The definition of worship is to ascribe “honor, respect to a divine being.” Worship entails intentionally communicating to God, “You are worthy of my love, praise and adoration.”

Life has not always been perfect, but I can see how God guided my life and provided for me. Each day, I try to worship God and offer thanks for God’s faithfulness to me and my family. This day, I turn from the busyness of life to worship God.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your faithfulness. You indeed deserve my praise, and I give it freely.

For reflection, read all of Psalm 95

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO JESUS' GIFT OF SALVATION

Wednesday, February 23

“Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’”
John 3:4-5 (NRSV)

When I was 16 ½ years old, I was in a serious car accident. I was able to walk away from the accident, but the passenger of the car that hit me had to be taken to the hospital. She was 6 months pregnant and the paramedics were concerned about the health of the baby. It was a sleepless night while I waited to hear about the health of the baby and the mother. Early the next morning, I heard the phone ring and walked downstairs to my father’s study where he was hanging up the phone. It was there, standing in the doorway, that my dad looked at me and said, with tears in his eyes, “The mother and the baby are fine. You know, today is the first day of the rest of your life.” It was there that I understood grace in a whole new way. It wasn’t that God had caused the accident but I began to understand the gift of salvation. I began to see my faith and the gift of God’s grace as the opportunity for each day to be “the first day of the rest of my life.”

Prayer: Creator God, I know that so often I live life as a burden to be borne, rather than the joy that it is. Remind me of the gift of salvation and help me make today the first day of the rest of my life. Amen.

Dawson Taylor

TURNING TO LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

Thursday, February 24

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” *Romans 8:6-8 (NRSV)*

I have sometimes wondered why we have two ‘purple’ seasons in the Christian calendar. Are Lent and Advent just the same? After all, they are both seasons of anticipation and preparation. I have decided, though, that they have different focuses. During Advent we lay out the royal purple for baby Jesus. During Lent God invites us to put on the purple ourselves and become more attuned to God’s will.

Fasting is one method people use to “set the mind on the Spirit.” Sometimes we can get so caught up in our earthly needs, such as food, that we lose sight of our spiritual growth. We can do without food for a time, but we should never stop nourishing our souls.

Sometimes people choose to give up a favorite food or some other comfortable habit for Lent, such as ice cream, chocolate, or playing Solitaire on the computer, to remind themselves that these things are not necessary for life in the Spirit. It is difficult to abstain at first, but every denial reminds the faster of his or her commitment to God. I have also found that after Easter I do not return to my pre-Lenten consumption habits: I no longer feel compelled to satisfy that old appetite for ice cream or chocolate or Solitaire. In one small way, I have turned from the flesh to life in the Spirit.

Is there something you can pass up today so that it will not keep you ‘in the flesh?’



Turning to God

Prayer: Spirit of God, when you speak to me I too often drown you out with earthly matters. Use my times of fasting to make your desires known to me, so that I may turn to life in You. Amen.

For more reflection read Romans 8:6-11

Emily Allen

TURNING FROM SELF-RELIANCE TO RELIANCE ON GOD

Friday, February 25

“I lift up my eyes to the hills – from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” *Psalm 121:1-2* (NRSV)

Recently I had to go through my annual job evaluation. I work hard and am loyal, but I still often worry when it is time to sit down face-to-face with my boss and hear what is wrong with my performance. You see, I have one of those bosses who feels that no one is perfect, therefore, he works to find places for improvement even if you are doing a spectacular job. I found my area for improvement very interesting this year. My boss looked at me and said, “Dawson, your biggest problem is that you don’t ask for help when you need it.” At first, I was excited that it was the best thing he could come up with for me to improve on. But the more I began to think about it, the more I realized what a problem this was. Not only do I not ask for help at work, because I don’t want to seem weak, I don’t ask my parents for help because I don’t want to worry them. Not only do I not truly lean on my friends, because I don’t want to burden them, but I don’t lean on God because I want to be Superman. The plain fact of the matter is this: I cannot live life on my own terms. I cannot make it through life by never relying on anyone. We are a people who have been given the greatest gift of all: we don’t have to live life on our own. We have a loving God, who stands ready to help, all we have to do – is ask!

Prayer: Creator God, so often we fail to admit that we need help. So often we want to fix our problems on our own. Forgive us for trying to live life on our own terms. Amen.

Dawson Taylor



TURNING TO TRUST IN GOD

Saturday, February 26

But the people thirsted there for water; and the people complained against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst.” *Exodus 17:3-4* (NRSV)

God had freed the people from slavery in Egypt and accompanied them in the wilderness. God even provided a leader, Moses, to care for them. Why did they think God wouldn’t provide for them in this situation? After the parting of the sea and everything else, did they think God would let them die of thirst?

We are just like them. We remember times when God took care of us. We also remember when we doubted God. God is faithful. In Exodus 17: 6b God instructed Moses “Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink.” Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. We must learn to trust in God’s faithfulness. God’s very nature is faithful. When faced with a seemingly impossible situation, trust in God’s faithfulness.

Prayer: Dear God, forgive me for not trusting you completely.

For additional reflection, read Exodus 17:1-7

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING, IN THANKSGIVING,
TO DOING THINGS GOD'S WAY

Monday, February 28

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses. Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water and we detest this miserable food. *Numbers 21:4-5 (NRSV)*

Use your holy imagination. "How long is this going to take, God?" They probably said. "Can you improve this situation now!?" There are times when bondage seems better than the freedom God gives. At least in slavery, life was familiar. In the wilderness, the experience was always unfamiliar. In this instance, the people's attitude resulted in God's anger, which was not a good thing.

When God provides for your deliverance, don't complain. The trip to the Promised Land may not be perfect, but it is better than where you were. Things will improve. Appreciate God. Freedom is always better than bondage.

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD FOR DELIVERANCE

Tuesday, March 1

Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people unborn, saying that he has done it. *Psalm 22:30-31* (NRSV)

A former campus ministry colleague uses the word ‘wilpas’ in her e-mail address. Wilpas meant “will pass,” or “this too will pass.” It was her constant reminder that no matter what happened in life, it wasn’t going to last always. When troubles, illness, and hard times presented themselves, her response was, “this too will pass.” What a wonderful and powerful way to approach life!

In Psalm 22 the writer details torment and mistreatment. His cries to God for help and frustration seem to fall on deaf ears. After God delivered the writer he thanked God for bringing him out of a horrible situation. God is your deliverer! Turn to God for delivery today.

For additional reflection, read Psalm 22:23-31

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO GOD'S WORK

Wednesday, March 2

Then he said to me, "Speak to the winds and say: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come O breath, from the four winds! Breath into these dead bodies so that they may live again.'" *Ezekiel 37:9-10* (NLV)

In the Hebrew bible we have the word 'ruach,' which means breath. The New Testament's word 'pneuma' is similar: breath, wind, spirit. Apnea is the temporary suspension of breathing; it literally means one is without breath. When the prophet spoke the words that the Lord gave him, those dry bones that were separated came together, connected, received muscle and flesh, skin for covering, but there was no life, no animation, no spirit, because there was no wind to be breathed. Apnea!

Until Ezekiel speaks intentionally to the wind, the wind does not come into the newly formed bodies, even though they are ready for the wind. Until the wind is intentionally called the bodies cannot breathe. No breath, no life! The work cannot be accomplished until every necessary God-ordained word has been spoken. Life and death are just one breath away from each other. If you have everything you need to get started, but things aren't moving like they should, perhaps you need to come up for necessary air. Breathe again!

Action for Today: Today I will call for God's holy wind. I will not remain out of breath today.

David Cassidy



Turning to God

TURNING TO GOD FOR DELIVERANCE

Thursday, March 3

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble...*Psalm 107:1-2* (NRSV)

As a teenager I used to ask, “Why do we have to go to church every Sunday?” The answer I learned is the one that I gave to youth in my confirmation classes. Humans are forgetful. We go to church each week to be reminded of God’s activity on behalf of humanity. The Psalm reminds readers and hearers of all that God has done. To the hungry God provided food. To the thirsty, water. Those in distress who called on the Lord, God delivered. It is God’s love that prompts God’s activity towards us.

When life’s storms rage, it is good to remember God’s deliverance. For additional strength read the entire Psalm. It will bless you!

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO GOD FOR RECONCILIATION

Friday, March 4

But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:11 (NRSV)

This sin thing is a serious matter. In the *New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, bible scholars say the following about sin: "...sin is regarded as an attitude of hatred and mistrust toward God, of senseless pride before God."

Gifted by God with free will, humans choose whether or not to be in relationship with God, to sin or not to sin. Sin severs the relationship between humans and God.

Jesus Christ, through his crucifixion, served as the ultimate sacrifice to atone for the sins of all of humanity. It is through his sacrifice that we can be in reconciled relationship with God. What a gift!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for the gift of reconciliation.

For more reflection read Romans 5:1-11

Lillian C. Smith



Turning to God

TURNING TO GOD'S GIFT OF SALVATION

Saturday, March 5

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” *John 4:10* (NRSV)

This scene shouldn't have taken place. No good Jewish person talked with a Samaritan. To Jews, Samaritans were ritually unclean, and therefore to be avoided at all costs. In this text, Jesus not only engaged in conversation with a Samaritan, but a woman with a questionable background. That in and of itself is another definite no-no.

In the text, Jesus reveals himself as the gift of salvation for all—not just the Jews. The living water is God's gift of eternal life, which is available to all. She needed more than the water she had come to get. This socially unacceptable woman, overjoyed with the good news of God's gift of salvation for her, goes and tells others. Jesus. God's gift of salvation is for all.

For more reflection, read John 4:5-42

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO THAT WHICH PLEASURES GOD

Monday, March 7

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of the light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. *Ephesians 5:8-11* (NRSV)

Living in the light is not really that hard, but it does require a decision. The light signifies that which is right, or moral. The darkness refers to that which is immoral, or wrong. This meditation is not written to condemn or start an argument. Instead it is written to inspire you to do the right thing. The internal guide, the Holy Spirit, guides and prompts you. You know what is going on! Choose to live in the light.

You can live reflecting God's light or live in darkness. No need to rationalize. God is pleased when you choose to live in the light. Do the right thing.

Activity for today: Read and reflect upon Ephesians 4:8-14

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO FOLLOW GOD

Tuesday, March 8

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” *Mark 8:34* (NRSV)

Let’s be real. The thought of carrying a cross is not a welcome one. The cross was the tool of execution, used by the Roman empire, for society’s least regarded individuals — lowly criminals, slaves and foreigners. Truthfully, I’m not feeling the cross carrying thing right now.

The implications for Christians are many. Following Jesus is not always easy. The journey requires humility and an ability to respond to hatred with love. Discipleship requires commitment and radical, self-sacrificing love.

Pray for God to give you strength to follow Jesus.

For deeper understanding, read Mark 8:31-38

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO GOD FOR UNDERSTANDING

Wednesday, March 9

“All right,” Jesus replied. “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.” “What!” They exclaimed. “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you can do it in three days?” *John 19:2-20* (NLV)

God is so intelligent, so cognoscenti, so profound, so beyond the existential, that God absolutely cannot be comprehended without God’s permission. Revelation is God’s permission for our understanding. Nature’s body language, without uttering a single articulate word, but like a mime, in its movements “reveals” the glory of God. Just as the work of a great artist is known by subject, quality and technique when the signature is absent, examining God’s creative ventures reveals the voice and intent of God when it appears that God is not present. Those who know God can see God in nature.

There are some things that will never be understood until after God has accomplished God’s desires. We are left with many questions about many things, but God is never without the answers. Even when God answers us, as Jesus answered the Jewish leaders by providing them their sign; the understanding did not find them. The understanding (albeit post resurrection) only came to those who were in a relationship with Jesus the Christ.

Action for Today: I will improve my relationship with God.

David Cassidy



TURNING TO GOD: WAITING AND ANTICIPATING

Thursday, March 10

I am counting on the Lord; yes I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word. *Psalm 130:5 (NLV)*

Children depend upon their parents for many things that they cannot provide for themselves. When parents cannot provide the basic necessities for their children (food, shelter, health care, supervision) the courts will declare them dependant and neglected. Children never appear to know that their own parents are incapable of taking care of them, even under the worst of circumstances. They have to be taught to distrust their own parents.

There are many things that adults cannot provide for themselves, but unlike our own children we have to be taught how to access the government's provision. Our government might provide, but never without our asking.

There is always an element of waiting when one has to depend upon another for anything. The psalmist is depending on God. Depending on God, anticipating that God will provide and therefore, hoping in God's word. There is no hint or thought that God will not come through. God, for the psalmist, is God's own guarantee.

Action for Today: I will look forward to God's action on my behalf with child-like anticipation. Read Psalm 40:1 and Isaiah 8:17

David Cassidy

TURNING TO GOD'S RESURRECTION POWER

Friday, March 11

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" *John 11:25-26 (NRSV)*

How would you respond to the same question? Martha's situation seemed hopeless. Her brother, Lazarus, had been dead for four days. Her attempt to get Jesus to come and heal Lazarus when he was ill, failed. Jesus did not come when she and her sister Mary sent for him.

When Jesus did arrive, he taught them that his promise of resurrection power was for both the present and the future. He did raise Lazarus and spoke of the future resurrection of believers. The challenge for Mary and Martha was to believe in the divine identity and power of Jesus. That same challenge is ours also.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for your resurrection power.

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD'S RESURRECTION POWER

Saturday, March 12

“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will have life even if they die. And everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Martha, do you believe this?” Martha answered, “Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the One coming to the world.” *John 11:25-27 (NLV)*

Jesus tells Martha, “Your brother will live again!” Martha took Jesus’ words as comforting words. She says, “I know that he will be raised to life on the last day, when the dead are raised.” Martha had been listening to Jesus, but she did not fully understand what Jesus was trying to say. “You don’t understand Martha. I am the one who will raise the dead to life on the resurrection day. If I can raise them up on the last day, I can raise them up on this day. I set the agenda for life and death, and until I say so, ‘He ain’t dead yet.’” Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Jesus never said that one day he would be the resurrection and the life, he did not say he was trying to be, he declared himself to be resurrection and life then and there, right here and right now.

Action for Today: Today I simply choose to live and not die.

David Cassidy

TURNING TO GOD'S PROVISION

Monday, March 14

“Is anyone thirsty? Come and drink—even if you have no money! Come, take your choice of wine or milk—it’s all free! Why spend your money on food that does not provide strength? Why pay for food that does you no good? Listen, and I will tell you where to get food that is good for the soul!” *Isaiah 55:1-9* (NLV)

A source is the place where something originates, begins, or is acquired. Resources are the collective possessions of a person that can be converted into useable assets or supplies. We all know a source, and we know how to access resources. When we are immediately hungry, we turn to fast food restaurants to immediately resolve our hunger. To resolve hunger over a period of time, we go to the supermarket to fill our cabinets. When we need immediate money, we turn to teller machines. For greater monetary needs, we turn to financial institutions.

When it comes to the soul, God’s provision is not only an immediate source, but an eternal resource. The collective assets of God’s economy are invested in God’s word. Access is never a problem; no one is ever refused a response. If we come to God, listen, seek, and call on God, God will convert those assets into useable lingering resources that are immediately and eternally good for the soul’s purpose.

Action for Today: I will turn to God’s word to access what I need this day. *Philippians 4:13*

David Cassidy



TURNING TO GOD'S PROVISION

Tuesday, March 15

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. *Psalm 23:1* (NRSV)

Psalm 23 was the first psalm I memorized as a child. Mrs. Keturah King, our Girl Scout Leader, required us to memorize the psalm and a song entitled, "Cada dia con Cristo." Both have been a source of comfort throughout my entire life because they are a constant reminder of God's provision. The psalm has especially been a constant in my life and helped calm many a fear.

The image of God as my shepherd is a powerful one. Shepherds care for the well-being of their flock. They stay with their flocks to protect them from dangers unseen. When sheep stray, the shepherd goes to get the animal.

In this passage God, the shepherd, is also a host who blesses you generously in the presence of your enemies. The host had to protect guests. During life's most challenging times it has helped me to know "he prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TO GOD IN OBEDIENCE

Wednesday, March 16

Neither did Christ presume to set himself up as high priest, but was set apart by the One who said to him, “You’re my Son; today I celebrate you!” In another place God declares, “You’re a priest forever in the royal order of Melchizedek.” *Hebrews 5:5-10* (The Message)

While he lived on earth, anticipating death, Jesus cried out in pain and wept in sorrow as he offered up priestly prayers to God. Because he honored God, God answered him. Though he was God’s Son, he learned trusting-obedience by what he suffered, just as we do. Then, having arrived at the full stature of his maturity and having been announced by God as high priest in the order of Melchizedek, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who believingly obey him.

One paradox that many encounter while in seminary is of Jesus’ divinity and humanity. It can be hard to comprehend the fact that Jesus was entirely human: flesh and blood with feelings, emotions, and the capability to be fallible; while at the same time being entirely divine: perfect, flawless, complete.

We know that Jesus was human which meant that he faced real human temptations just as we do today. He felt the urge to give up, give in, and spare himself from the brutal society of his day. We have a low tolerance for pain and a high tolerance for easy solutions. We do not like to suffer and when we find ourselves in a struggle, we bargain with God to avoid the pain and inconvenience it seems to cause us.

As the story goes, we see Jesus’ divine side and how his faithfulness to God overcame his human fears and selfishness. He followed willingly and trusted entirely that this painful act was for a greater purpose. He understood that through turning to God

 **Turning to God**

in obedience, he would be modeling a faith that clings to God and he became the vessel through which we are bonded to God and each other. In our own suffering, we are human and can stand in solidarity with each other and support each other during the hard times of life and by doing so, we glimpse divine love.

Julie O'Neal

TURNING TO THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

Thursday, March 17

“The Lord has not chosen any of these.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all of your sons here?” And he said “There remains the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” *1 Samuel 16:10-11* (NRSV)

Be very careful about the way you think about people in ministry. All of us have probably been guilty of thinking, “Are you sure God called them?” What you think about a person and what God thinks about them can be two different things. This was the case in this passage. King Saul had messed up and God was ready to anoint another king. God sent Samuel to see the seven sons of Jesse, for one of them would be the king.

All of them were probably good looking, strong, and filled with integrity. But time after time, the son presented wasn't the one for whom God was looking. For whatever reason, God chose the one everyone least expected. Go figure! Call it foolishness. Call it crazy. But it was this son, David, who later became a noted leader known as a “man after God's own heart.”

Lillian C. Smith



TURNING TO GOD IN FAITH

Friday, March 18

For what does the scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. *Romans 4:3* (NRSV)

Living by faith is probably one of the hardest things in the world to do. We live in a world that values “seeing as believing.” Faith requires just the opposite. Faith requires trusting and believing in God without the outward appearance of that for which we hope.

God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations. That promise was an interesting one for a man for whom the conception of a baby was no longer thought possible for him and his wife. They were very old. But God proved himself faithful and the couple conceived and had a son. They became ancestors of many nations, as God promised.

Trust God. Don't worry about how impossible or crazy God's promise seems. Trust God anyway.

Lillian C. Smith

TURNING TOWARDS THE CROSS

Saturday, March 19

A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” *Matthew 21:8-9* (NRSV)

Tomorrow is Palm Sunday. As you read the passage could you sense the excitement? Imagine yourself in the crowd as the prophet named Jesus entered Jerusalem. People are cutting branches and placing them on the road for the donkey carrying Jesus to walk on. Members of the crowd are shouting for joy because their dreams of peace are seemingly no longer deferred. You have long waited for a leader to save you and your people from the oppressive power of Rome. This man must be the Messiah, the anointed one of God sent to save them. “Hosanna, save us, they shouted.”

You are there. As the donkey proceeds through the road, you run alongside. Palm branches brush against you as they are placed on the road. Can you imagine the excitement of the crowd as Jesus entered Jerusalem? You have been looking for a leader who is just and will save you. This Jesus is the one for whom you’ve been looking. His entry is not heralded by pomp and circumstance, but instead by the power of his ministry and actions. A week later many will grow frustrated and betray him, but for today, how fitting an entry for our Christ who reigns in such an unexpected and often misunderstood way.

Prayer: Dear God, today I turn to you, acknowledging your leadership and authority. Hosanna, save us, from those things that strive to destroy us. In Jesus Name, Amen.

For reflection, read: Matthew 21:1-11

Lillian C. Smith



Turning to God

Monday of Holy Week

March 21

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands wait for his teaching. *Isaiah 42:1-3a* (NRSV)

The Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines justice, as "the administration or maintenance of what is just." So much in the world seems unjust. Reading this scripture reminds us that although we may not see justice immediately, God's justice will prevail. Why? It is because Jesus experienced death by crucifixion and lives and intercedes for us now. His redemption of humanity continues to usher justice into the world.

Activity: Read the text again. What does this text communicate about God? What does it communicate about God's relationship with you and others? Write your thoughts here.

Lillian C. Smith

Tuesday of Holy Week March 22

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. *Psalm 71: 1-2* (NRSV)

This prayer is not a cop out. It is not a misinformed or idiotic way to get relief from a challenging situation. The plea is not the acknowledgement of personal weakness or an unwillingness or inability to do for oneself. The psalmist's prayer instead expressed the realization that we can't live this life all on our own. We need help. More importantly, we need God's love, companionship and help.

When life's complexities get the best of you, it is good to turn to God for strength and understanding. When friends become your enemies. When your enemies try to destroy you. When war, terrorism, and tsunamis confound your very grasp on life, God is the One who can sustain you. Turn to God. Turn to God for refuge for you and others.

No matter how strong, smart or popular you may be, there comes a time when you have to reach beyond yourself to God. Isaac Watts wrote, "O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter in the stormy blast, and our eternal home." God's help doesn't promise the absence of trouble. Instead, God promises companionship and assistance in the midst of the situation. Today, turn to God for help.

Activity for the day: In your prayer time, ask God for help for the things that bother you. Then rest in God.

For additional reflection, read Psalm 71 entirely.

Lillian C. Smith



Wednesday of Holy Week March 23

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart. *Hebrews 12: 1-3 (NRSV)*

What's holding you back from running this race? What's keeping you from fulfilling your ministry? Sure, you will encounter obstacles and cry a few tears. Everyone on the journey will not be your friend. You might have to build up your stamina. Someone may even trip you up. But do you know what? Others have completed the race, and so can you. Countless men and women, young and old Christians have run the race. Those saints join with God and the angels in cheering you on. Daniel, Esther, Samuel, Ruth, Mary and Joseph are just a few people of the bible who ran the race of faith. Who impressed you by his or her life of faith? You can do it also. Jesus did it to show you that you could do it! So drop everything that is holding you back. You can't run with baggage, so drop it! Drop the fear, guilt, and shame of your past. Run on!

Prayer: Dear God, sometimes I don't feel like running. Sometimes I feel like giving up. Help me to run this race.

For inspiration, read Hebrews 11.

Submitted by Lillian C. Smith

Holy Thursday March 24

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. *I Corinthians 11:26* (NSRV)

Think now to the last time you took Holy Communion. Listen to the words of the celebrant. In the United Methodist ritual we hear the following, "...Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." The celebrant then lifts the cup and continues, "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

What exactly are we supposed to remember? In the scripture Paul responds to a situation in the church of Corinth. Some individuals have forgotten the importance of Communion and had become greedy and self-centered, not caring that other believers were not able to partake when they did. He instructs them to remember the importance of the Lord's Supper. Communion is not something to play with. Every time you partake of it you remember what Christ did for a sinful world. For sin, God required a death. In the taking of the cup and bread, we remember our sinfulness and receive God's forgiveness. Now that is something to remember!

Prayer: God, help me to remember the true meaning of your sacrifice for me.

For reflection, read I Corinthians 11:23-32

Lillian C. Smith



Good Friday March 25

“Who are you looking for?” They answered “Jesus of Nazareth.” Jesus replied, “I am he.” So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. *John 18:4b; 12*

There was nothing good about that Friday. It was a horrible day. It was the day when Jesus, God in flesh, was betrayed and arrested. It was the day my Savior was murdered. Friday was the day when all hell broke loose in an attempt to destroy God’s purpose and plan. It was the day when Jesus experienced gross mistreatment, disrespect, beating and crucifixion.

God allowed it. Jesus submitted to it. And we benefited from it. Make no mistake; this day would not have transpired the way it did without God’s permission. It was the reason for which Jesus was born.

Every “Good Friday” is a source of pain for me. But I am reminded, there can be no resurrection without a crucifixion; no redemption without Jesus’ sacrifice.

Prayer: God, today I turn to you in thanksgiving. Your sacrifice accounted for all of my sins, and the sins of the whole world. Have mercy upon us.

For more reflection, read John 18:1-19

Lillian C. Smith

Easter Vigil Saturday, March 26

“But Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.’” *Exodus 14:13-14* (NRSV)

With Pharaoh and his army thundering down upon them, the Israelites felt it was their darkest hour. They blamed their leader, Moses, for bringing them away from the dubious safety of slavery under the Egyptians. They could not see a way out of their trouble, but God could. God had a plan for their delivery from the beginning, but the Israelites did not know how it would end from their perspective in the moment.

In the same way, Jesus’ disciples and friends did not know that their leader’s crucifixion would turn him into the risen Christ. They did not know that God had a plan for their salvation. The day between the crucifixion and the discovery of the resurrection was a dark time for those disciples. They could not see the light but had to put their faith in God. They had to trust that God would see them safely through.

As we keep our own Easter vigil, we can remember the uncertainty Jesus’ friends faced. We know the story that will be told tomorrow, and the joy it will bring, but there are often crises in our own lives that force us to turn to God in trust. When we remember that God has our best interests at heart, we can better face the outcomes.

Prayer: God my Redeemer, in my darkest hour and in troubled times I remember your love for me and your plan for my salvation. I am like the disciples, who could not see their way through, but I have faith that you are fighting for me; I have only to keep still. Amen.

For more reflection, read the 14th chapter of Exodus.

Emily Allen



Turning to God

Easter Sunday **Sunday, March 27**

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.
Matthew 28: 8-9 (NRSV)

Not even death can stop God’s plan. Evil will try but ultimately fail. God’s plan for redemption, peace, love and joy will advance. Jesus lives! Hallelujah! The brave women, who had gone to the tomb to prepare their Lord’s body, encountered him, face-to-face.

The flicker of hope’s candle appeared extinguished, but an ember kept the fire burning and re-ignited on that Sunday. Just as evil couldn’t keep Jesus down, it won’t keep you down either. Today, worship God for the gift of Jesus! Worship God for God’s resurrection power! That power is available today and is confronting evil, oppression and every ism around. Hallelujah! Amen.

Lillian C. Smith

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Lillian C. Smith is the newly appointed Associate General Secretary, Division on Ministries with Young People, General Board of Discipleship, The United Methodist Church. She formerly served as Director, Wesley Foundation at Howard University and as Director, Campus Ministry Section, The General Board of Higher Education and Ministry. Her mission is to share God's good news and help "equip young people for ministry, and building up the body of Christ." Two special young people in her life are sons CJ and Hayward.