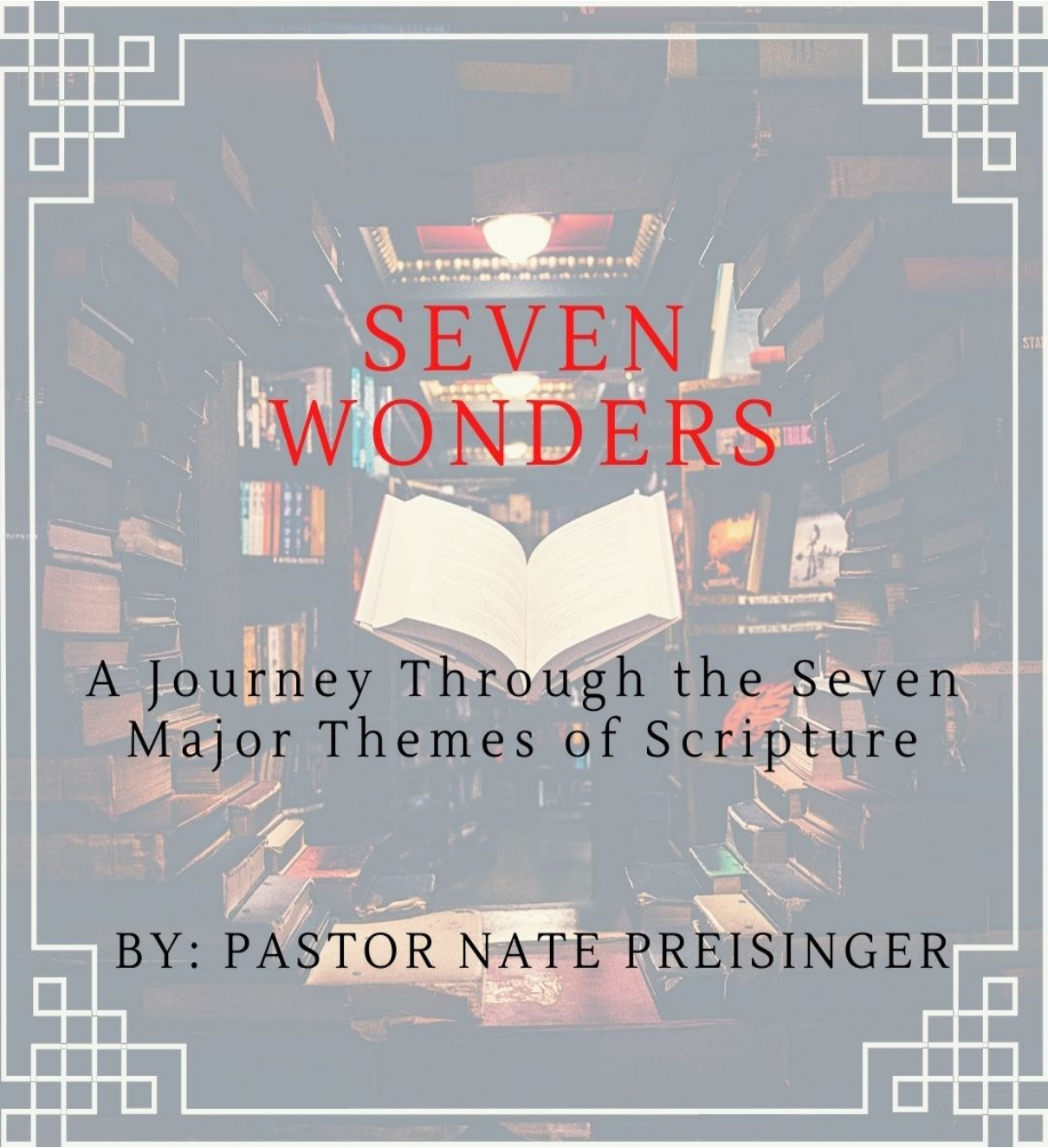




SEVEN WONDERS

A Journey Through the Seven
Major Themes of Scripture

BY: PASTOR NATE PREISINGER

INTRODUCTION

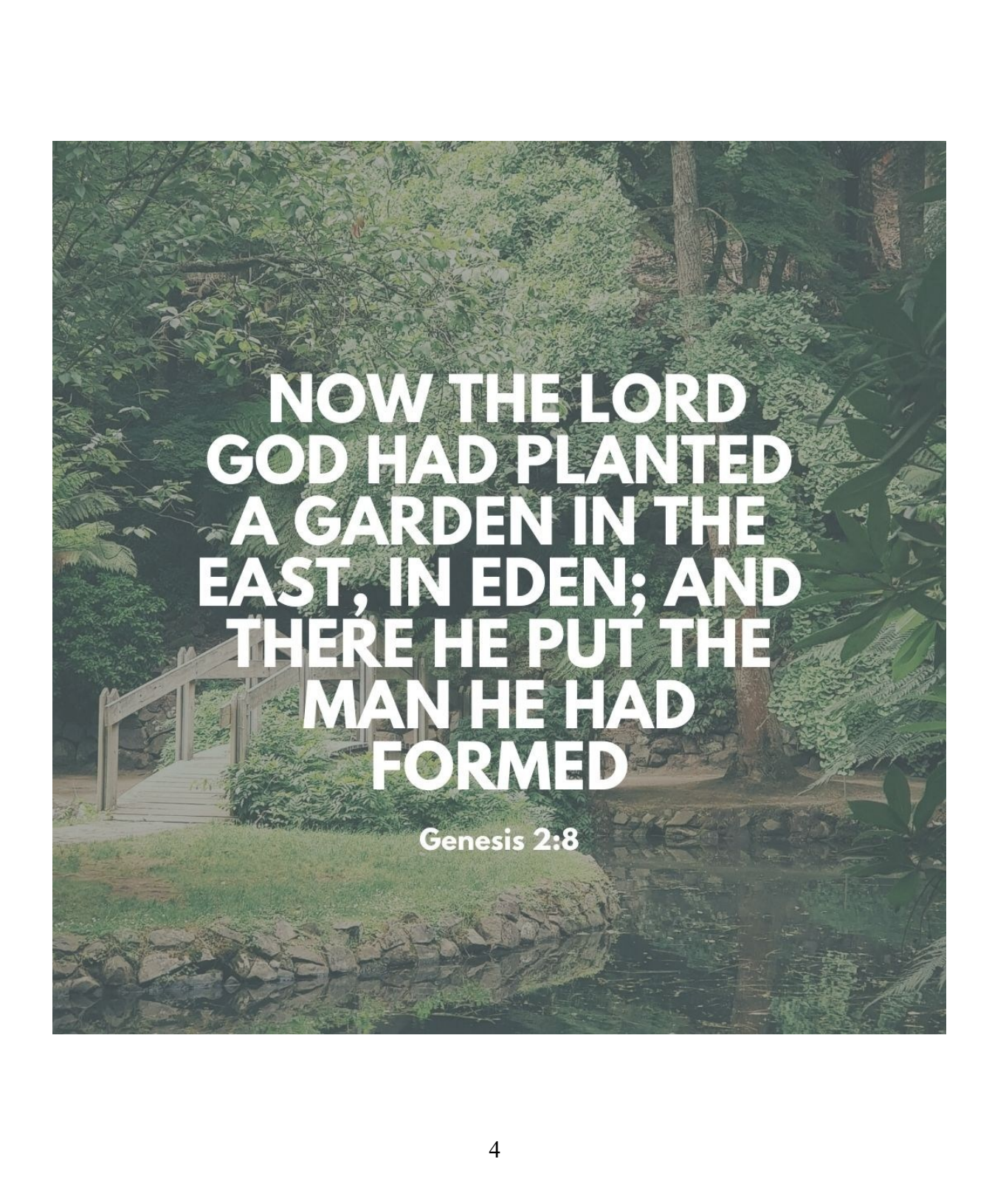


In the summer of 2020, my colleagues and I were looking for a way to provide faith formation activities to members of our church who were stuck at home during the Covid19 pandemic. We ended up creating an interactive game for our youth and families called the “The Seven Wonders Quest”. Over the course of 7 weeks, those who played the game traveled to 7 different locations mentioned in the scriptures. They completed puzzles and tasks and learned about the important themes that took place in those 7 locations.

This book is a similar journey through the entire story of scripture. You are invited to slowly make your way through these pages and to reflect on the character of God that is revealed to us in our Bibles. As you encounter the larger themes that make up the scriptures, reflect on how God’s story and your story intersect and overlap.

I pray that this devotional will give you new insights to the larger story taking place in the Bible and that, above all, you’re filled with a sense of wonder, hope, and gratitude for God’s ongoing work in our world.

Peace and Grace,
Pastor Nate



**NOW THE LORD
GOD HAD PLANTED
A GARDEN IN THE
EAST, IN EDEN; AND
THERE HE PUT THE
MAN HE HAD
FORMED**

Genesis 2:8

Eden | Blessing | Monday

Our journey begins in Eden. Eden is a mysterious place, no one really knows where it may have been. We're starting at Eden because that's where everything got started.

Genesis 2:4-9

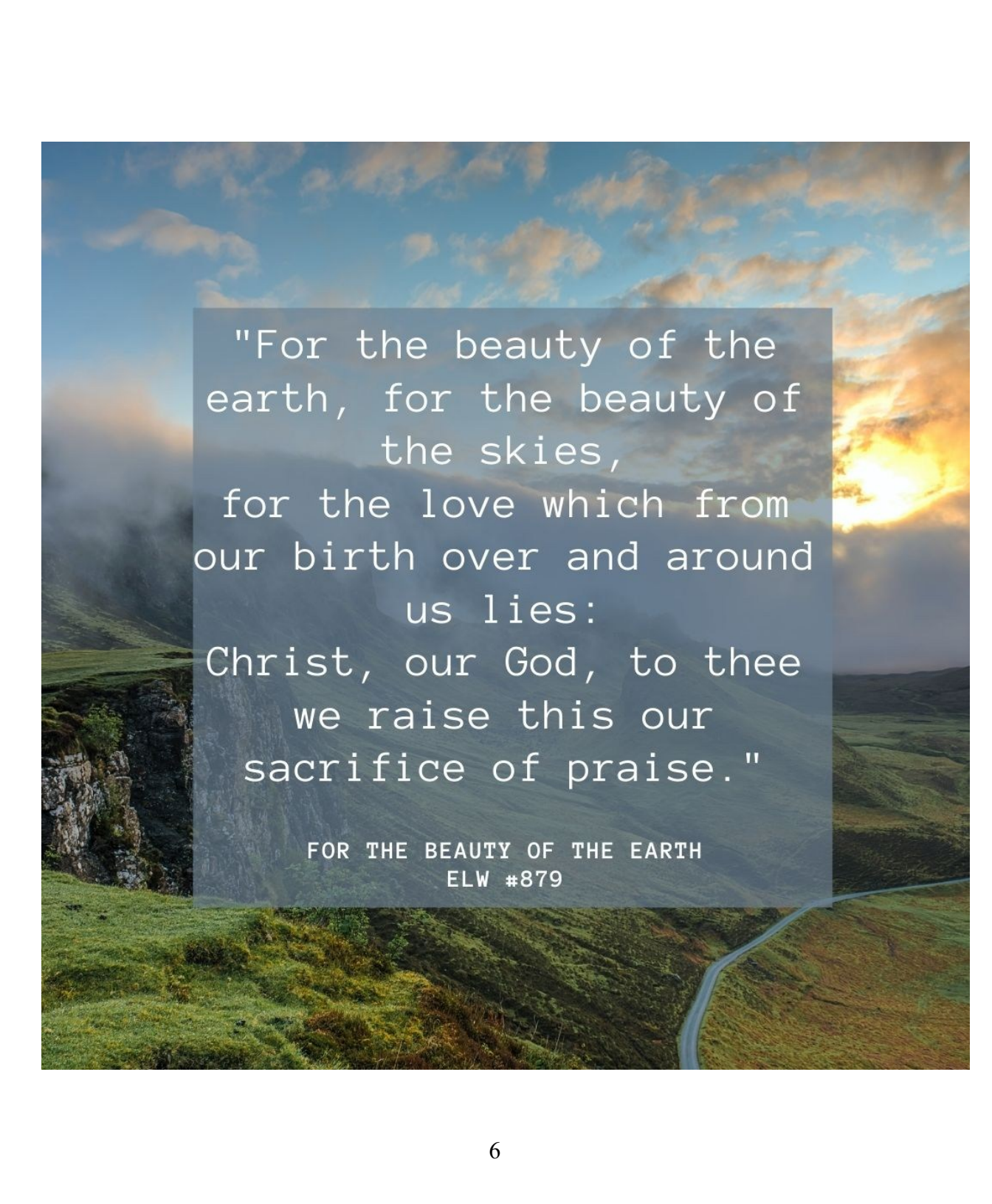
4 This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens.

5 Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, 6 but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. 7 Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

8 Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. 9 The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In the beginning, God created. Not because God had to create or because human beings deserved to be created or because human beings were finally good enough to warrant being created. In the beginning, God created, because God is loving and generous. So often people look at the story of creation and investigate it as a story about Original Sin, but some scholars have been keen to point out that the Creation story is a story of Original Blessing. God creates and blesses the world because it is in God's nature to do so; because most of all, God is generous.

The devotions that follow for this week are all based around this idea of Original Blessing; about naming and claiming the ways that we see God's generous blessings in our life.



"For the beauty of the
earth, for the beauty of
the skies,
for the love which from
our birth over and around
us lies:
Christ, our God, to thee
we raise this our
sacrifice of praise."

FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH
ELW #879

Eden | Blessing | Wednesday

The hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth” reflects on the beauty of God’s creation and the many forms that beauty can take. It’s a beautiful hymn of praise that invites us to recognize the many forms that God’s blessing takes in our life.

Take time to use these words as a prayer, or if you like, listen to the recording at (<https://tinyurl.com/7wondersDevo1>) and quietly reflect on all the ways you see God’s blessings in your life.

1. For the beauty of the earth,
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies.

Refrain: Lord of all to Thee we raise
This our hymn of grateful praise.

2. For the wonder of each hour,
Of the day and of the night,
Hill and vale, and tree and flower,
Sun and moon, and stars of light. (*Refrain*)
3. For the joy of human love,
Brother, sister, parent, child,
Friends on earth and friends above,
For all gentle thoughts and mild. (*Refrain*)
4. For the church, that evermore
Lifteth holy hands above,
Offering up on every shore
Her pure sacrifice of love. (*Refrain*)
5. For Thyself, best Gift Divine.
To our race so freely given,
For that great, great love of Thine,
Peace on earth and joy in Heaven. (*Refrain*)

A stylized illustration of two hands, one in shades of blue and green, the other in shades of red and orange, holding a heart. The background is a vibrant, abstract pattern of geometric shapes in various colors. The entire illustration is framed by a white border.

MARC SCANDRETTE

“We were made for
creativity and freedom,
to be collaborators with
God in the ongoing
work of creation.”

Eden | Blessing | Friday

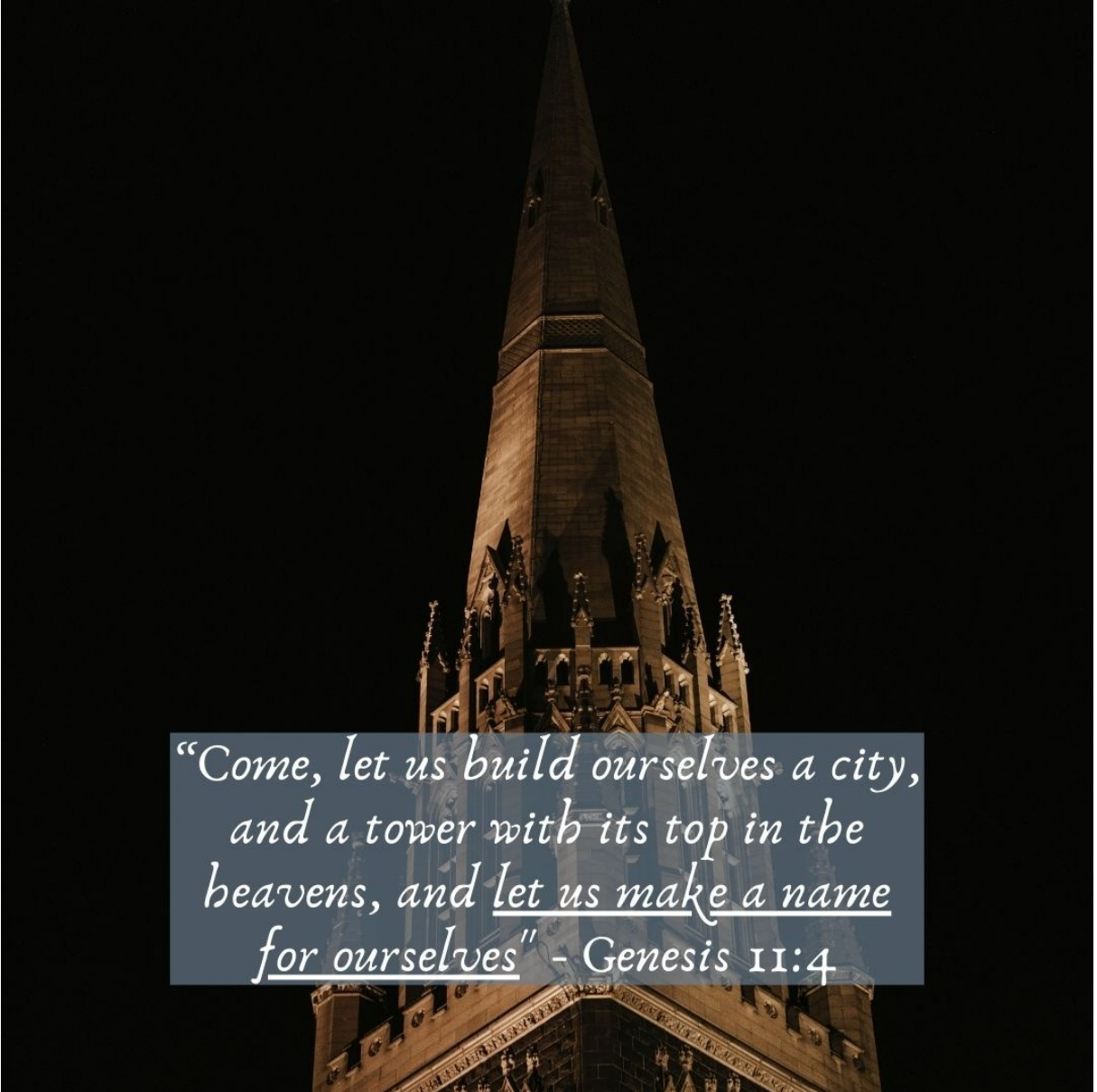
In Eden we hear a message about God's original blessing and generosity. But Eden is also the place where God instructs humans to continue caring for the world that God has made. We are called to be a blessing to others. We are called to be generous with others. We are called to keep creating.

“We were made for creativity and freedom, to be collaborators with God in the ongoing work of creation. Our creativity and freedom are often blocked by dark imaginations and the shadows of selfish will. If we were made to work on the open canvas of creation, we have too often exchanged that canvas for a coloring book, assuming that it all comes down to whether we color inside or outside the lines. What if our true destiny is to flow with the freedom of the Creator, painting a life of goodness and beauty on the canvas of Earth and eternity?”

– Mark Scandrette

Drawing, painting, music and other works of art are ways in which we can continue the creative work that God first began at Eden. We connect with God in a unique way when we create something new.

Today, take time to be creative. Draw a picture, color in a coloring book, improvise a song, write a poem, paint on a canvas. However you choose to be creative, don't worry about the finished product, instead experience the task of creating something new as a form of prayer and conversation with God.



*"Come, let us build ourselves a city,
and a tower with its top in the
heavens, and let us make a name
for ourselves" - Genesis 11:4*

Babel | Idolatry | Monday

Shortly after the story about the Garden of Eden and God creating the world, the narrative heads to a place called Babel. Babel is the place where humanity gets everything confused and jumbled.

Genesis 11:1-9

1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." 5 The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. 6 And the Lord said, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech." 8 So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

Idolatry is what happens at Babel. The people thought they were just as good as God. They thought they could build a tower that brought them up to heaven all on their own. It can be easy to chuckle at this story and shake our heads at how foolish the people were back then, but the truth is, we still behave like this today. All too often Religion is used as a system where we try to build ourselves up to God.

In short, idolatry is that moment when we try to earn or achieve God's blessings. This is part of our human journey. We are originally blessed by God, but sometimes we end up in Babel, we end up turning blessings into idols.

This week, our devotions will explore the theme of Idolatry. It's an uncomfortable topic, but an important one.

A photograph of a sandy beach with gentle waves in the background. The sand is a warm, golden-brown color. The text is written in a white, elegant script font, centered on the page. Below the text, there is a faint, hand-drawn heart shape in the sand.

*Create in me a
clean heart,
O God.*

Babel | Idolatry | Wednesday

Often times, as part of our preparation for Holy Communion, we will sing the song below: “Create in Me a Clean Heart”. This is a hymn of confession where we ask God to forgive and renew us. Just like the people at Babel, we can sometimes begin to think ourselves equal with God and our actions often reflect this mindset. Through this hymn we sing a prayer to God asking for a renewed and cleansed spirit.

Take time to use these words of this hymn as a prayer, or if you like, listen to the recording at (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo2>) and talk with God about the parts of your life that need forgiveness and cleansing.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence;
And take not Thy holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation;
And uphold me with Thy free Spirit.



**"The truth
does crush
us, but the
instant it
crushes us,
it somehow
puts us back
together into
something
honest."**

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber
Pastor, Author

Babel | Idolatry | Friday

What happened at Babel is what happens in our world and our lives day after day. We make mistakes, we forget about God's purpose for our lives, we value other ideas and activities more than a relationship with God. No matter when or how it happens, it is idolatry and we need to repent. Every Sunday we take time during the church service for something called The Order of Confession and Forgiveness. It's a time when we collectively admit our idolatry; that we have put our desires in front of God's.

"Eventually, the confession and absolution liturgy came to mean everything to me. It gradually began to feel like a moment when truth was spoken, perhaps for the only time all week, and it would crush me and then put me back together... The truth does crush us, but the instant it crushes us, it somehow puts us back together into something honest. It's death and resurrection every time it happens."

- Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber

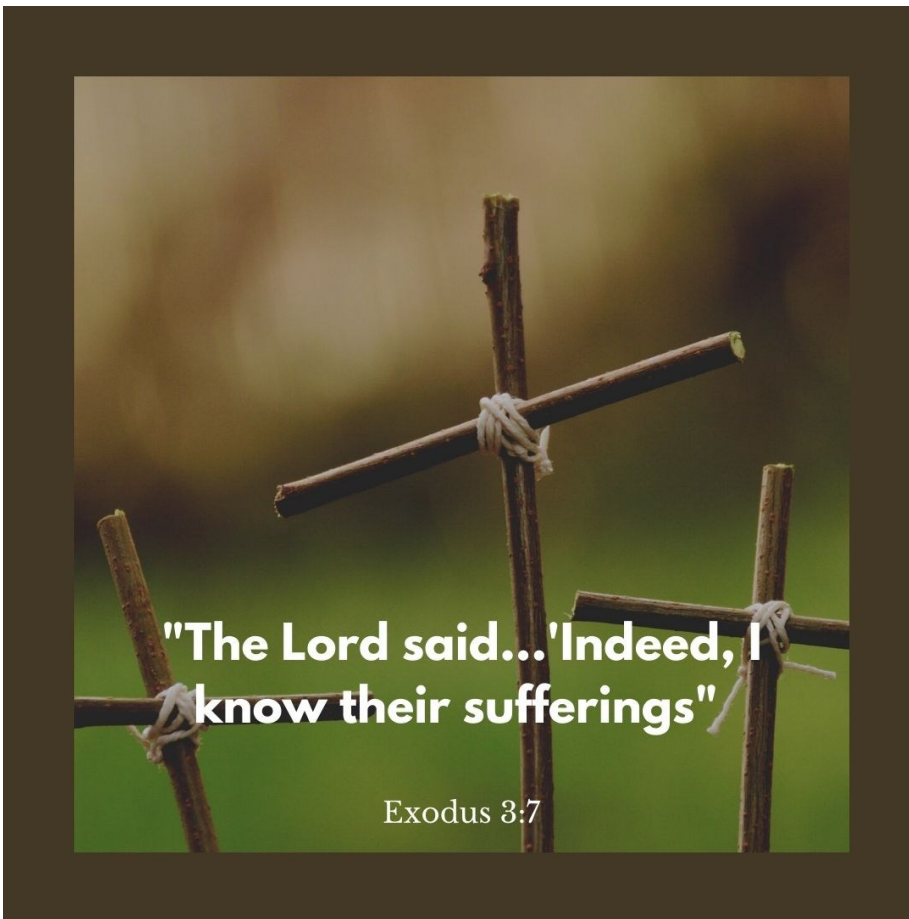
Below are the traditional words of Confession used during a Lutheran worship service. Take time to pray them quietly. Allow this moment of confession to be a time of honesty, a time of letting go, and a time of healing for you. Above all, know that God hears your confession and forgives you.

Confession

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Silence for self-reflection

Most merciful God, we confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.



Egypt | Suffering | Monday

The book of Genesis details the stories of Abraham and his descendants. We hear stories about Isaac, and then Isaac's sons, Jacob and Esau, and then Jacob's twelve Sons, one of whom was Joseph who was sold by his brothers and ended up in Egypt. Eventually, the descendants of Jacob's 12 sons (also known as Israelites) also ended up in Egypt, as slaves.

For 400+ years the Israelites suffered as slaves in Egypt. God sees the misery and suffering of the Israelites and calls Moses to be a part of freeing them from their oppression. The following reading from Exodus 3 illustrates God's compassion for the Israelites:

Exodus 3:1-10

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. 3 Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." 4 When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." 5 Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." 6 He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, 8 and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. 9 The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. 10 So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Suffering is a theme that comes up a lot in the Bible and just as often, the Bible also describes how God sees the suffering of God's people and sends help. The story of God liberating the Israelites from their suffering in Egypt is a story of paramount importance to Christians and Jews alike because it reveals a God that sees suffering and oppression and, in response, sends healing and liberation.

This week, we consider the suffering in our lives and in our world and more importantly we look for all the ways that God is sending help and healing.

A photograph of a narrow, paved path winding through a dense forest. The trees are tall and thin, with their branches reaching over the path, creating a canopy effect. The ground is covered in dry grass and fallen leaves. A soft, golden light filters through the trees, creating a misty or ethereal atmosphere. In the center of the image, there is a dark brown rectangular box containing white text.

HEALER OF OUR EVERY
ILL, LIGHT OF EACH
TOMORROW, GIVE US
PEACE BEYOND OUR FEAR,
AND HOPE BEYOND OUR
SORROW.

Egypt | Suffering | Wednesday

While in Egypt, the Israelites built bricks day after day after day. Seven days a week for 52 weeks a year for over 400 years they made bricks in the hot, hot Egyptian sun while slave drivers violently kept them on task. But God saw their suffering and pain and God sent help.

Through a burning bush in the wilderness, God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom and eventually to the promised land. Every year at Passover, Jewish people tell this story of liberation and freedom and they remember that God still sees our pain and sends healing.

The hymn below reflects this very idea. Take time to use these words as a prayer, or if you like, listen to the recording at (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo3>) and find hope in this promise: that God sees our suffering and can bring peace beyond our sorrow.

Healer of our every ill,
Light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear,
and hope beyond our sorrow.

1. You who know our fears and sadness,
grace us with your peace and gladness.
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts (*Refrain*)
2. In the pain and joy beholding
how your grace is still unfolding,
give us all your vision, God of love (*Refrain*)
3. Give us strength to love each other,
every sister, every brother.
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide (*Refrain*)
4. You who know each thought and feeling,
teach us all your way of healing.
Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. (*Refrain*)



——— ” ———

In turning our gaze to
this divine truth — In
dropping our many
modes of scapegoating
and self-justification —
we gain compassion
toward ourselves and
all others who suffer.

——— ” ———

FATHER RICHARD ROHR
PRIEST, AUTHOR

Egypt | Suffering | Friday

While they suffered in Egypt, the Israelites continued to call to God for help, healing, and liberation. And God heard their call. In the same way, God saw the pain and suffering present in the world and so God sent Jesus to bring healing, forgiveness, and new life. As Father Richard Rohr notes, Jesus' life and crucifixion reveal to us something new about the way God understands the suffering in the world:

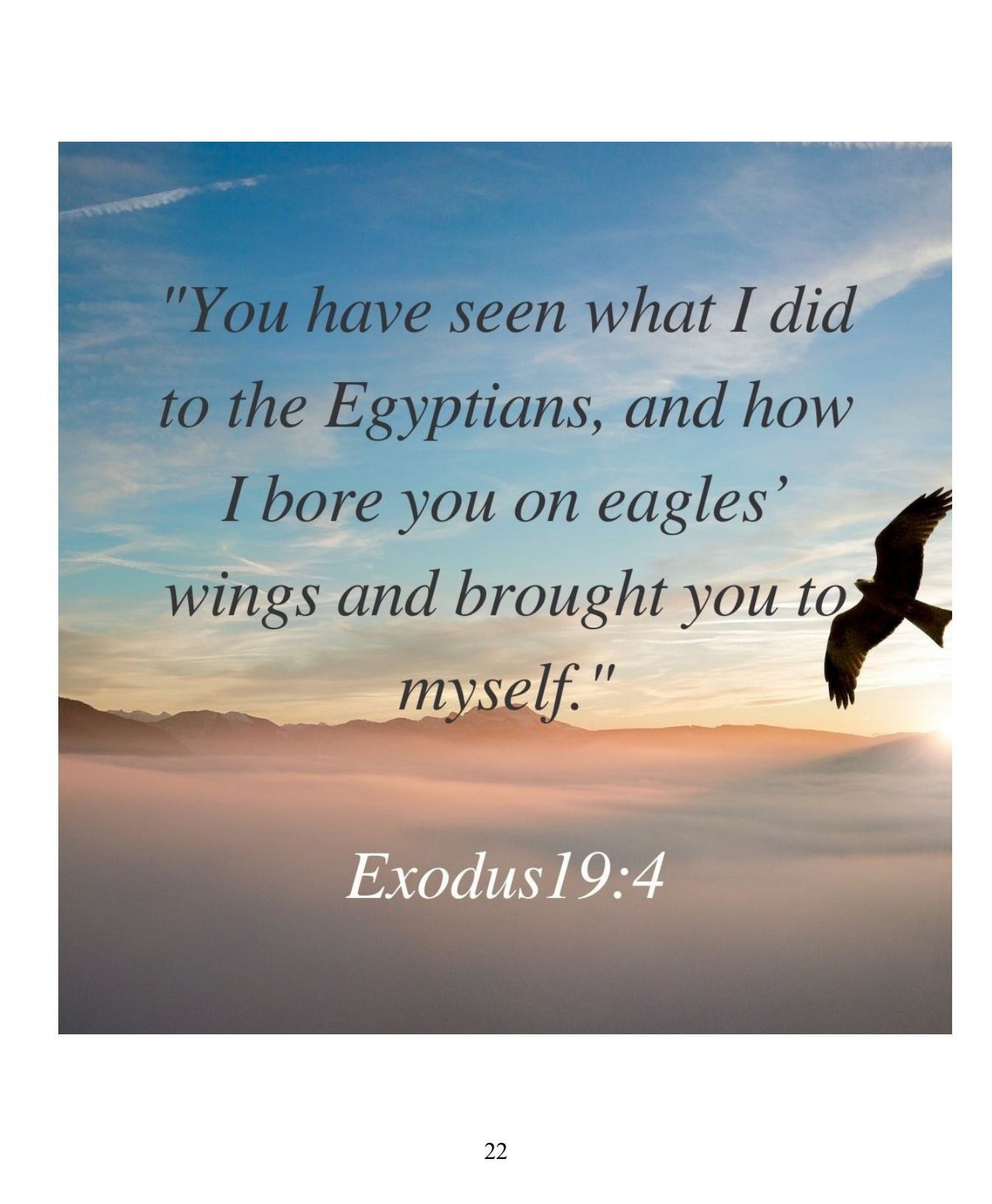
I believe that we are invited to gaze upon the image of the crucified Jesus to soften our hearts toward all suffering, to help us see how we ourselves have been 'bitten' by hatred and violence, and to know that God's heart has always been softened toward us. In turning our gaze to this divine truth — In dropping our many modes of scapegoating and self-justification — we gain compassion toward ourselves and all others who suffer.

- Richard Rohr

Today, we invite you to reflect on all the ways that Jesus knows the depth of your despair and suffering through The Jesus Prayer. This ancient prayer has been said by Christians for thousands of years. It is a short prayer meant to be said many times. These are the words:

“Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Simply recite the prayer again and again, as many times as you need to create a quiet and peaceful place in your heart for Jesus to enter in again. As you repeat the prayer remember: Jesus forgives you and God has compassion for your suffering.



*"You have seen what I did
to the Egyptians, and how
I bore you on eagles'
wings and brought you to
myself."*

Exodus 19:4

Sinai | Promise | Monday

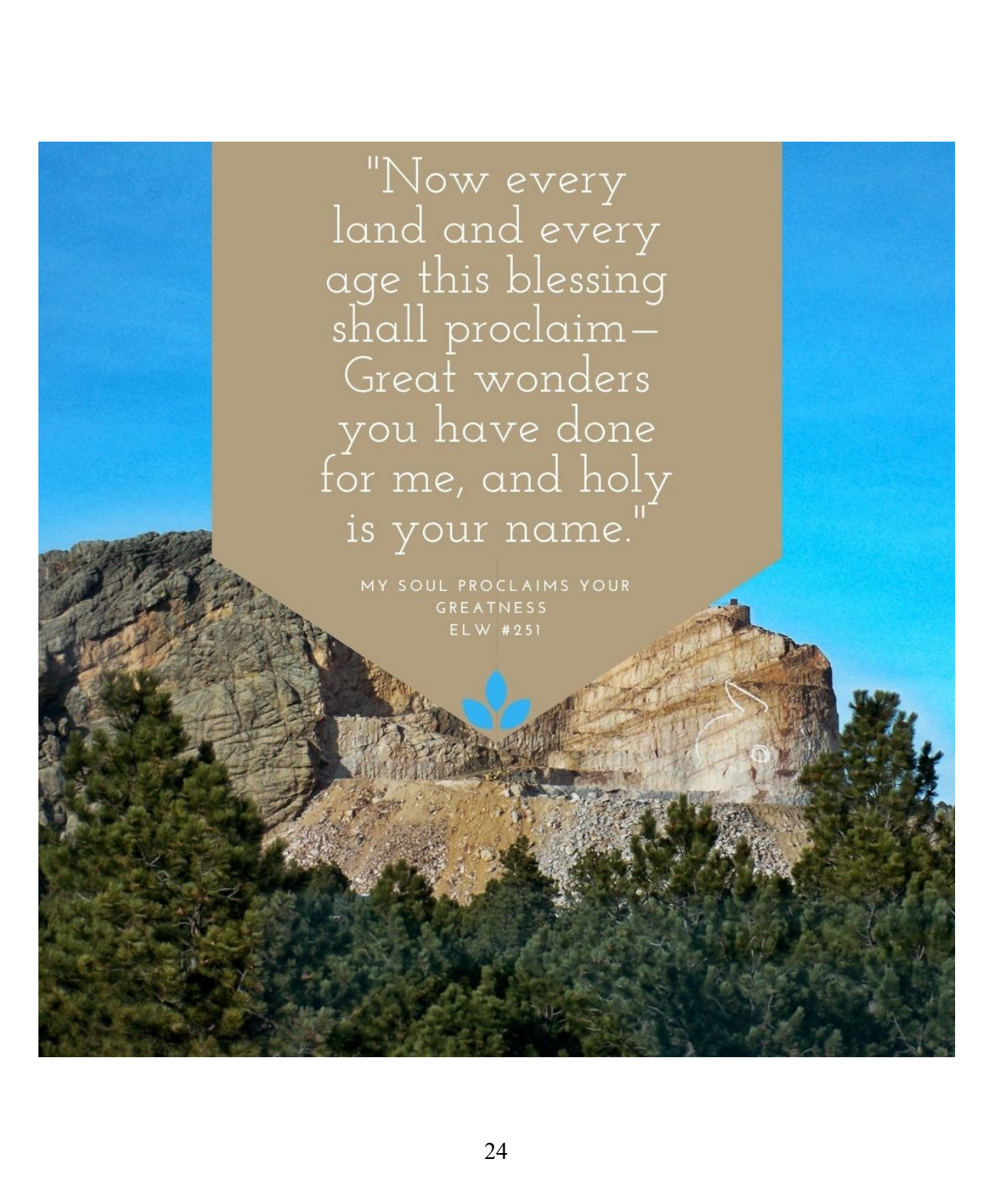
After the Israelites were freed from slavery and suffering in Egypt they wandered in the wilderness for a while. Eventually, they found their way to Horeb, also known as Mt. Sinai. And Moses went up the mountain to speak with God and there God gave the Israelite people a totally new way of being in the world.

Exodus 19:1-6

1 On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. 3 Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: 4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, 6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

At Sinai, God made a promise to the Israelite people. God said that the Israelites were God’s “treasured possession”. God promises that the Israelites are the Chosen People of God and so they are to live in the ways that God instructs them. At Sinai, God promises to guide and protect and save the Israelites. Always.

This week we focus on the theme of promise. God makes promises to God’s people and nothing —no one— can take those promises away. What a comforting thought; to know that God has made promises to us that can never be nullified.



"Now every
land and every
age this blessing
shall proclaim—
Great wonders
you have done
for me, and holy
is your name."

MY SOUL PROCLAIMS YOUR
GREATNESS
ELW #251

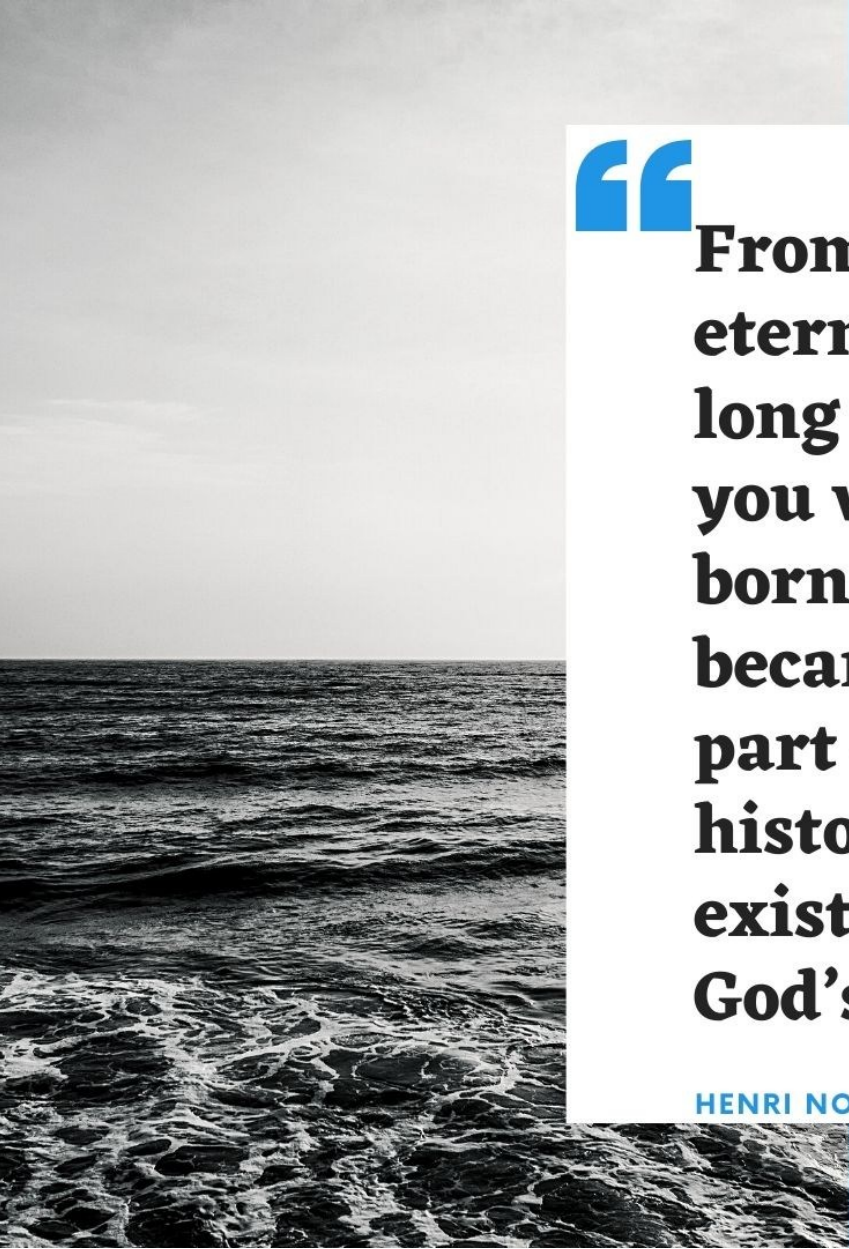


Sinai | Promise | Wednesday

God does not just make promises to the Israelites at Sinai. The Bible is full of stories of God making promises to other people and communities. Several thousand years after Moses climbed Mt. Sinai, an Angel of the Lord appeared to a young Galilean woman named Mary. The Angel told her that she would bear God's Son and in response to this promise Mary sang a song of joy and hope.

You can read the Song of Mary (often called the Magnificat) in your Bible at Luke 1:46-55. The hymn below is based on this Song from Mary and it reflects the ideas and joy of Mary upon hearing the Good News from the angel Gabriel. Take time to use these words as a prayer, or if you like, listen to the recording at (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo4>) and reflect on wonder and power of the promises that God has made to you and to all people.

1. My soul proclaims your greatness Lord; I sing my Savior's praise!
You looked upon my lowliness, and I am full of grace.
Now every land and every age this blessing shall proclaim—
Great wonders you have done for me, and holy is your name.
2. To all who live in holy fear your mercy ever flows.
With might arm you dash the proud, their scheming hearts expose.
The ruthless you have cast aside, the lowly enthroned I stead;
The hungry filled with all good things, the rich sent off unfed.
3. To Israel, your servant blest, your help is ever sure;
The promise to our parents made their children will secure.
Sing glory to the Holy One, give honor to the Word,
And praise the Power of the Most High, one God, by all adored.



“

**From all
eternity,
long before
you were
born and
became a
part of
history, you
existed in
God's heart.**

HENRI NOUWEN, AUTHOR

Sinai | Promise | Friday

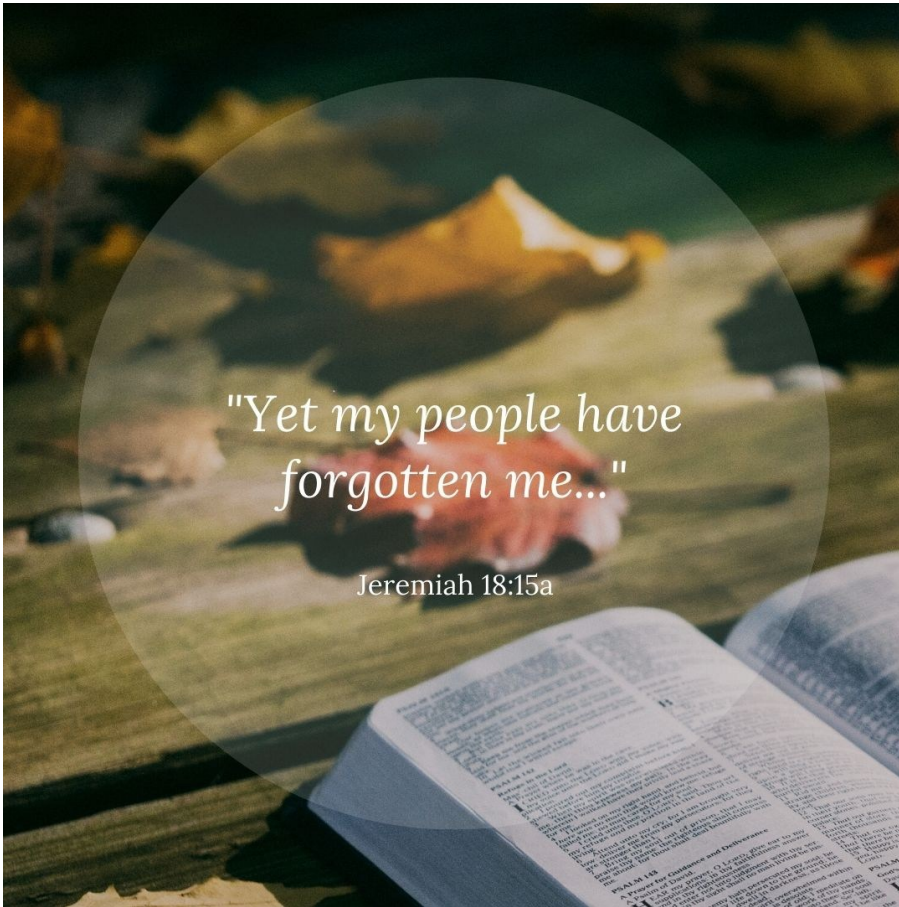
God continues to make promises to us. In our baptism, God claims us as God's children forever. We are promised that this identity can never be taken away from us. While we might make mistakes and while the realities of the world can make us feel far from these promises, they remain true.

“From all eternity, long before you were born and became a part of history, you existed in God’s heart. Long before your parents admired you or your friends acknowledged your gifts or your teachers, colleagues and employers encouraged you, you were already ‘chosen’. The eyes of love had seen you as precious, as of infinity beauty, as of eternal value.”

- Henri Nouwen

One of the best ways to keep our hearts and minds connected to the unwavering promises of God is by simply taking time to be grateful. Consistently reflecting on our blessings and naming our gratitude is a powerful spiritual practice that connects us to God and to the joy that God longs us to feel.

Today, take some time to write down all of your gratuities. How has God blessed you? Where do you see the promises of God? Create a long list of all that you have to be thankful for and then return to that list when you are feeling down. Let this Gratitude List be a consistent reminder of all the ways that God keeps God's promises.



Jerusalem | Forgetfulness | Monday

After Mt. Sinai and wandering in the wilderness and judges and kings and a handful of prophets and a whole lot of other events the Israelites finally established themselves as a mighty nation in Jerusalem and things seemed really good. They had a kingdom and a king and a fancy Temple. Only one problem, when everything is going well that can often cause you to forget about God.

The prophet Jeremiah shared this message of God with the forgetful Israelites:

Jeremiah 18:12-17

12 But they say, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will."

13 Therefore thus says the Lord:

Ask among the nations:

Who has heard the like of this?

The virgin Israel has done

a most horrible thing.

*14 Does the snow of Lebanon leave
the crags of Sirion?*

*Do the mountain waters run dry,
the cold flowing streams?*

*15 But my people have forgotten me,
they burn offerings to a delusion;*

*they have stumbled in their ways,
in the ancient roads,*

*and have gone into bypaths,
not the highway,*

*16 making their land a horror,
a thing to be hissed at forever.*

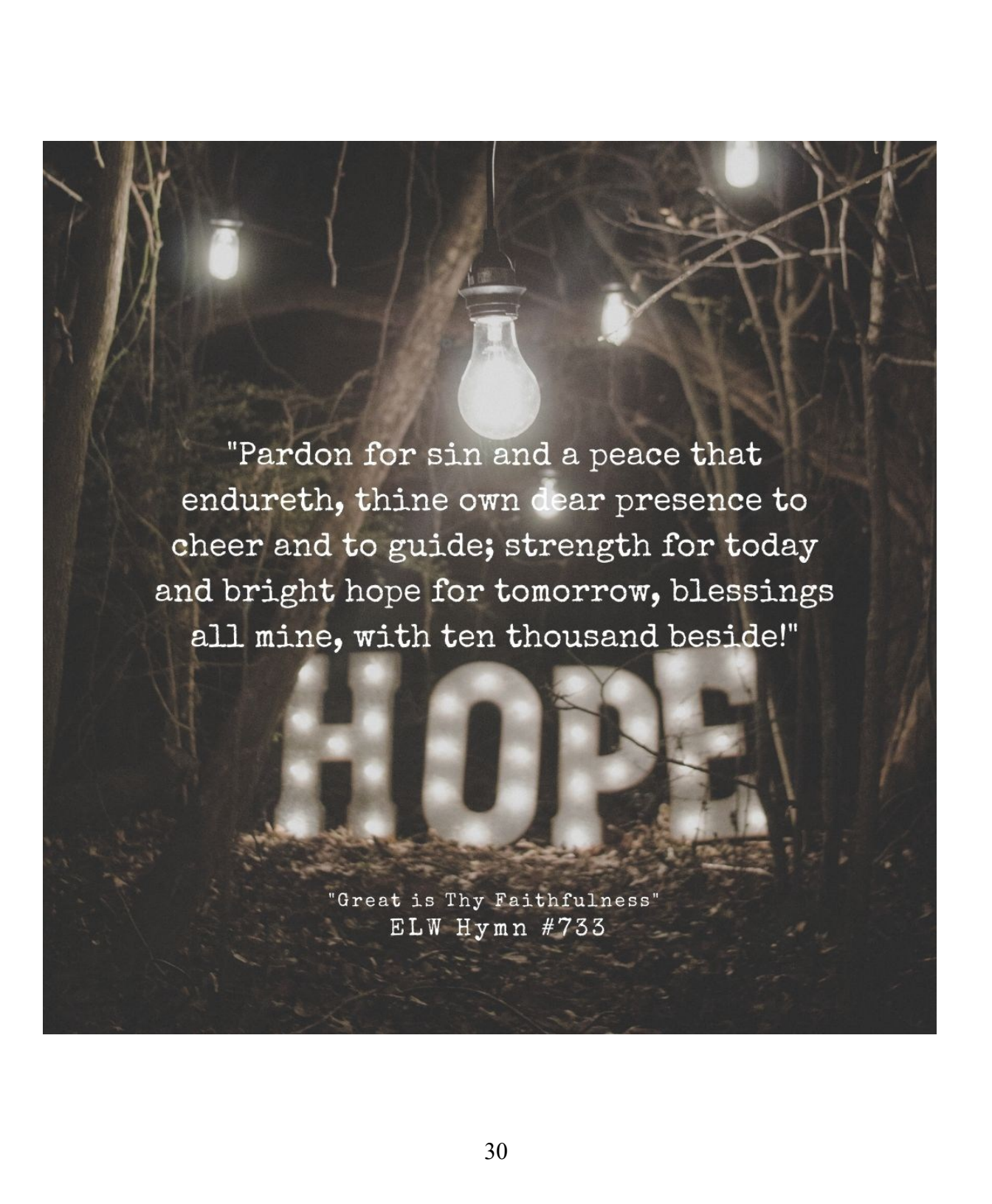
*All who pass by it are horrified
and shake their heads.*

17 Like the wind from the east,

I will scatter them before the enemy.

*I will show them my back, not my face,
in the day of their calamity.*

In Jerusalem, God became angry with the Israelite people for their forgetfulness. They forgot the promises of God and their identity as God's chosen people. This week, we will explore the importance of remembering God's promises and our identity as Children of God.



"Pardon for sin and a peace that
endureth, thine own dear presence to
cheer and to guide; strength for today
and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings
all mine, with ten thousand beside!"

"Great is Thy Faithfulness"
ELW Hymn #733

Jerusalem | Forgetfulness | Wednesday

When the Israelites had been in Jerusalem for a little while, all of their success started to distract them from the good God had done. They became so focused on getting more land and more power that they began to forget about God.

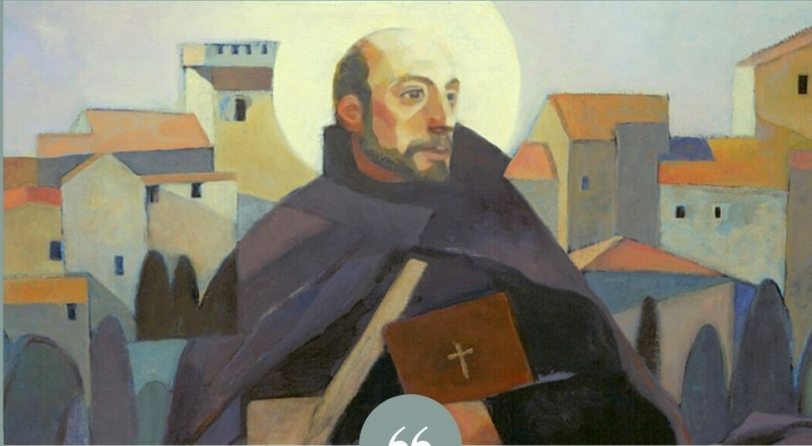
Anytime we forget about God, we fall into sin because we are not putting God first in our life. But there is an easy solution to this; the way to reverse forgetfulness is to remember. When we gather for worship, when we read our Bible, when we pause to say a prayer or read a devotional, we are deliberately remembering that God is a part of our life and our world.

Another way to remember God is through song. Our hymn this week reminds us of God's faithfulness and activity in our life. Take time to use these words as a prayer, or if you like, listen to the recording at (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo5>) and reflect and remember what God has done, what God has promised, and who you are in God's eyes.

1. 'Great is Thy faithfulness,' O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be. (*Refrain*)

Refrain: 'Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
'Great is Thy faithfulness,' Lord, unto me!

2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love. (*Refrain*)
3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! (*Refrain*)



“

Love ought to show
itself in deeds more
than in words

- St Ignatius of Loyola

Jerusalem | Forgetfulness | Friday

Taking time to remember God and look for the activity of God in your life is a daily discipline. It can be easy to become overwhelmed by the stresses of life or too comfortable with life's successes. Either way, we can often fall into a rhythm that forgets God altogether.

Spiritual disciplines help to keep us grounded in an understanding of God's enduring presence. And when we remember that God is active in our life it gives us helpful perspective, suddenly our troubles don't seem so large and our successes don't cause us unnecessary pride.

One spiritual practice that can help us see God's activity in our life is the St. Ignatius Examen. Below is an explanation of the Examen from the Xavier University website. Take time to pray through these questions today.

Begin with a pause and a slow, deep breath or two; become aware that you are in the presence of the Holy.

Thanksgiving

What am I especially grateful for in the past day . . .

The gift of another day...

The love and support I have received...

The courage I have mustered...

An event that took place today...

Petition

I am about to review my day; I ask for the light to know God and to know myself as God sees me.

Review

Where have I felt true joy today?

What has troubled me today?

What has challenged me today?

Where and when did I pause today?

Have I noticed God's presence in any of this?

Response

In light of my review, what is my response to the God of my life?

A Look Ahead

As I look ahead, what comes to mind?

With what spirit do I want to enter tomorrow?



EZEKIEL 11:19

I WILL GIVE THEM ONE
HEART, AND PUT A
NEW SPIRIT WITHIN
THEM; I WILL REMOVE
THE HEART OF STONE
FROM THEIR FLESH
AND GIVE THEM A
HEART OF FLESH

Babylon | Exile | Monday

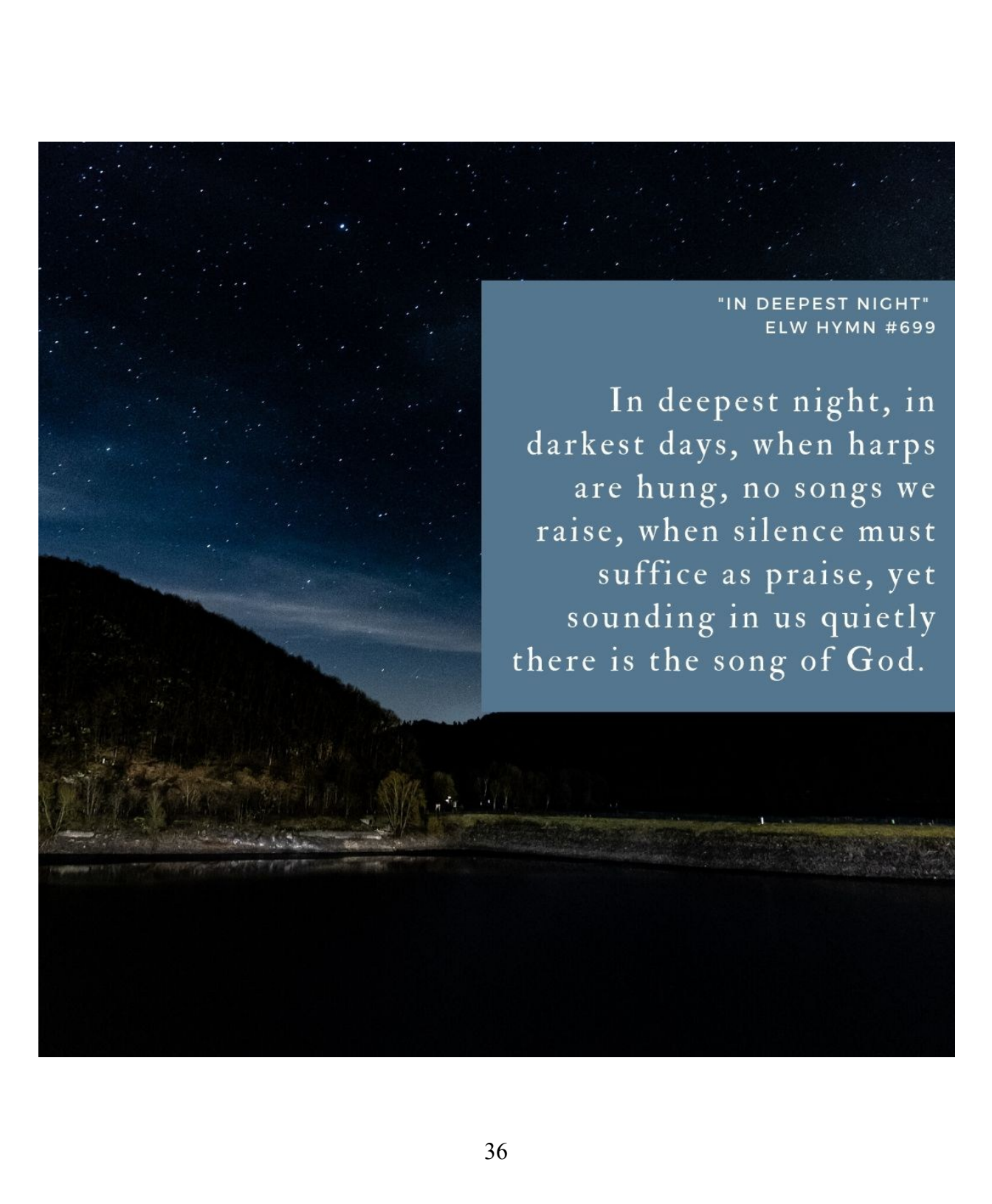
As we learned last week, Jerusalem is where the Israelites forgot about God. Babylon is where the Israelites ended up after their armies were defeated and Jerusalem was destroyed. The Babylonians stormed in and defeated the Israelites and destroyed their city and took them back to Babylon as captives. This was a time of exile.

In exile, they couldn't worship God in the usual ways. They were separated from family and loved ones. They were forced to work for the Babylonians. In other words, exile in Babylon wasn't that different than when they were slaves in Egypt. These were very painful times for God's people. They felt lost and alone and scared, but even in exile, God's people had not been abandoned.

Ezekiel 11:16-20

16 Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: Though I removed them far away among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone. 17 Therefore say: Thus says the Lord God: I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. 18 When they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. 19 I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

This week, we'll be examining the difficult topic of exile. Those times in our life when we feel cut off from God; times when we feel lost, alone, scared, and lonely. Where is God when life is so difficult? Where is God when we feel like we are in exile?

A night landscape photograph. The sky is dark and filled with many stars. A dark, forested hill rises on the left side. In the foreground, there is a body of water that reflects the light from the sky and the hill. A semi-transparent blue rectangular box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing text.

"IN DEEPEST NIGHT"
ELW HYMN #699

In deepest night, in
darkest days, when harps
are hung, no songs we
raise, when silence must
suffice as praise, yet
sounding in us quietly
there is the song of God.

Babylon | Exile | Wednesday

Hymns and Songs are not just written for praising God. Some are laments; songs written to express deep anger or pain. When the Israelites were in Babylon they wrote songs of lament to express to God their agony and loss. The song below, is lament from our hymnal. Pray through the words, or listen to the recording (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo6>), and take time to honestly speak with God about the pain, frustration, and anger in your life.

- 1.** In deepest night, in darkest days,
when harps are hung, no songs we raise,
when silence must suffice as praise,
yet sounding in us quietly
there is the song of God.

- 2.** When friend was lost, when love deceived,
dear Jesus wept, God was bereaved;
so with us in our grief God grieves,
and round about us mournfully
there are the tears of God.

- 3.** When through the waters winds our path,
around us pain, around us death:
deep calls to deep, a saving breath,
and found beside us faithfully
there is the love of God.



The establishment of a practice, I think, must be to remind us of those old events, in some visceral, bodily sense, even as our lives are different from our ancestors'

- NORA GALLAGHER

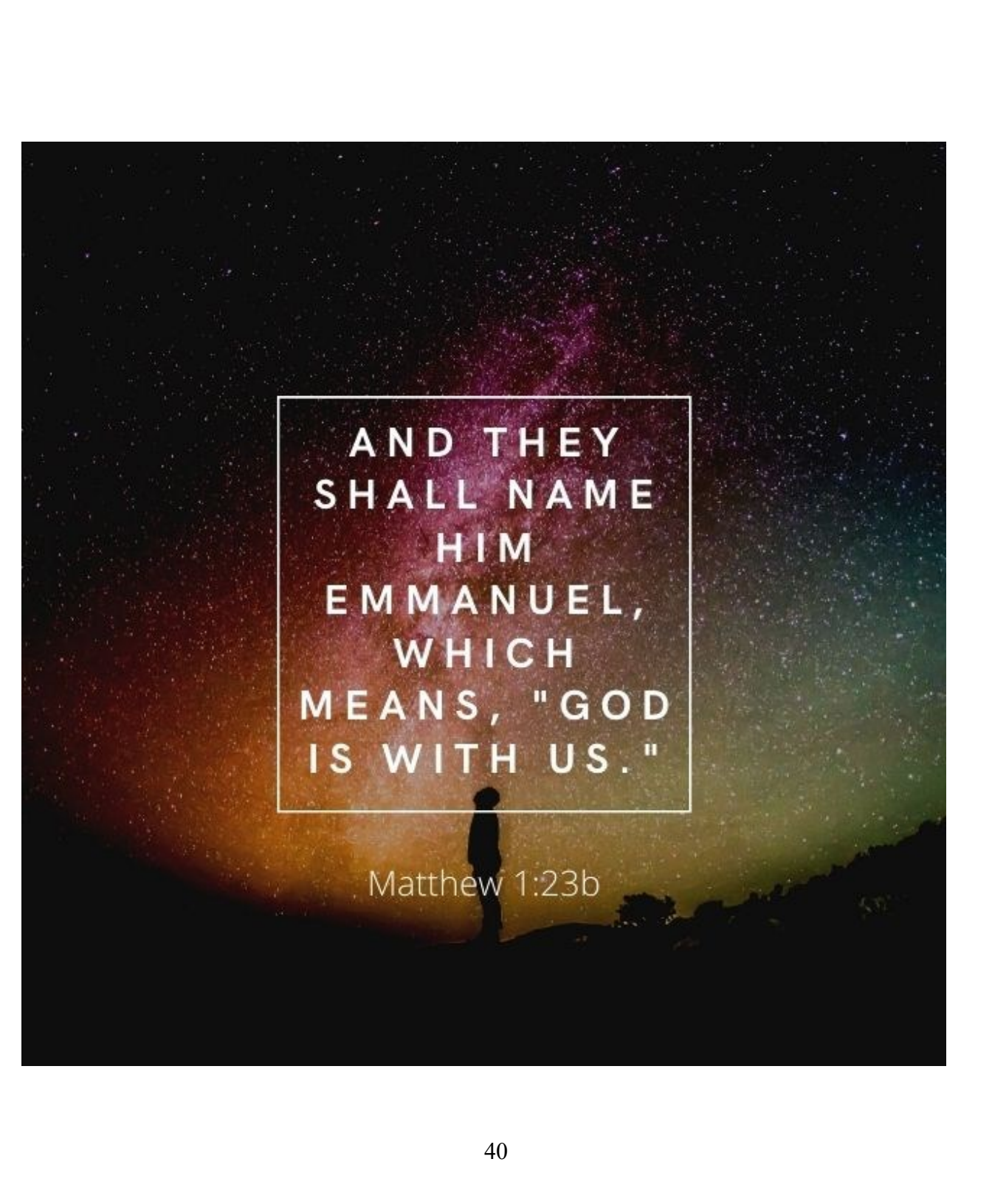
Babylon | Exile | Friday

The time in exile was incredibly difficult for the Israelites. They were a displaced people, cut off from their traditions, their religion, their way of life. But even in exile, they continued to pray to God and pass down the stories of God's saving activity amongst the Israelite people. Sharing these stories, and taking part in rituals helped the Israelites remember how God had saved their people in the past and that in turn gave them hope for the future.

The establishment of a practice, I think, must be to remind us of those old events, in some visceral, bodily sense, even as our lives are different from our ancestors'. Jews are reminded of survival and pleasure in the ritual of Sukkot. The practice of Communion reminds Christians of a meal and many meals shared by followers of a man who wanted them to see a new kingdom. The practices are 'after words,' after the events are long in the past, and whatever words attached to them may no longer be accurately recalled. The practice remains to keep us in tune with what the original event pointed toward and so that we can add to its meaning and history.
- Nora Gallagher

Journaling is a valuable spiritual practice for many because of the ways that it reminds people of God's presence throughout their life.

Take time today to write down a story from your faith life. When was a time that you really sensed God's presence in your life? Or a time when it really seemed as if God had miraculously intervened? Write that story down, and when you find yourself feeling cut off from God, re-read that story and remember that God is still at work in your life.

A person stands in silhouette on a dark, grassy hill, looking up at a vast night sky. The Milky Way galaxy is visible, stretching across the frame from the bottom left towards the top right. The sky is filled with stars, and the colors of the galaxy range from deep reds and oranges near the bottom to purples and blues higher up. A white rectangular box is centered in the image, containing text.

AND THEY
SHALL NAME
HIM
EMMANUEL,
WHICH
MEANS, "GOD
IS WITH US."

Matthew 1:23b

Bethlehem | Emmanuel | Monday

The Bible begins with God's blessing in Eden.

And then there was idolatry at Babel.

Next we experienced suffering in Egypt.

Followed by God saving and making promises at Mt. Sinai.

But we often forget what God has done, like the people in Jerusalem.

And so we find ourselves in a form of exile at Babylon.

It is a cycle that keeps repeating itself.

Which is why God did what God did at Bethlehem.

Bethlehem is the place where God comes to turn our idolatry upside-down and to put an end to our forgetfulness and suffering, once and for all.

Matthew 1:18-23

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

*23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us."*

Bethlehem is where Jesus was born. It is the small, unassuming town where God entered into our human existence. Bethlehem is where God came to be with us so that the cycle of sin and suffering might finally be undone.

*"The hopes and fears
of all the years are
met in thee tonight."*

O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM
ELW #279



Bethlehem | Emmanuel | Wednesday

The famous Christmas Carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” is a favorite hymn of many. The melody is one of the most familiar Christmas songs in our hymnal. But the Carol is also a beautiful theological text. Bethlehem is the town where “the hopes and fears of all the years” were confronted by Jesus Christ.

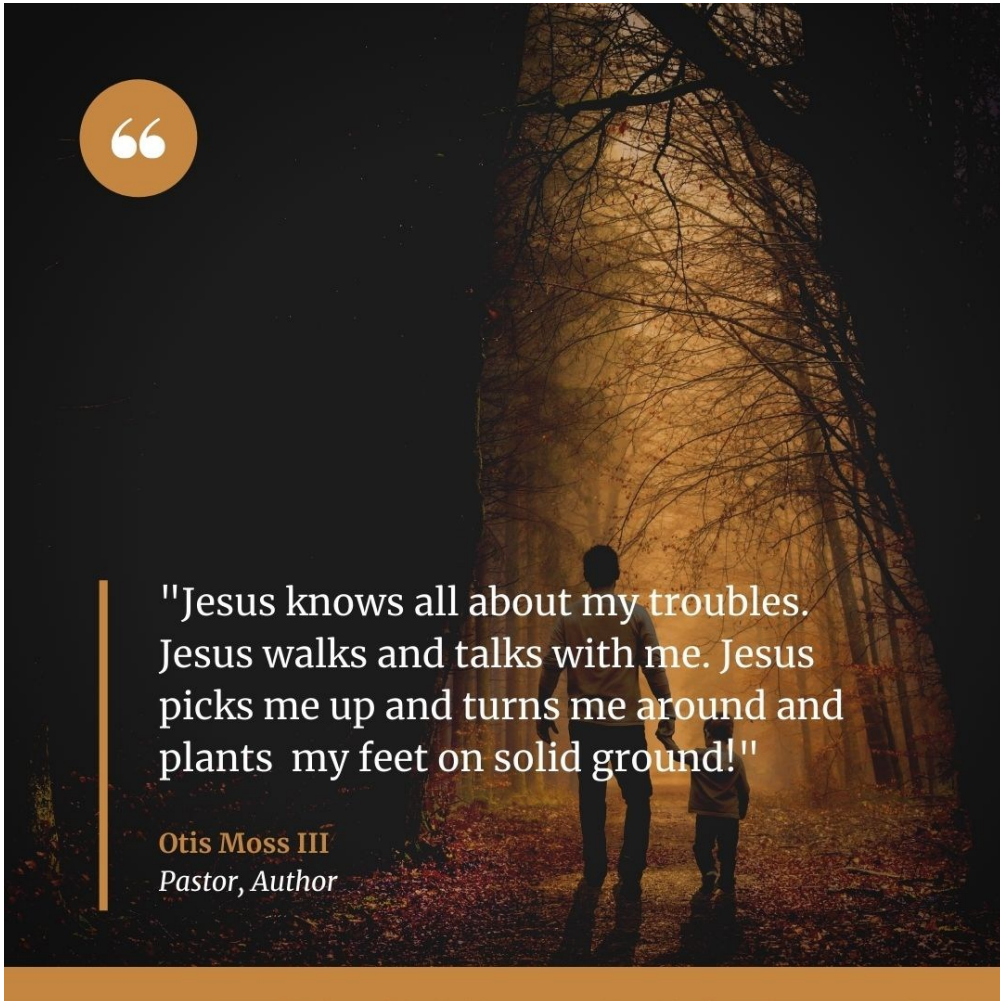
Take time to pray through the lyrics below, or if you would like to listen to a recording go to (<https://tinyurl.com/7WondersDevo7>), and notice the way the lyrics reflect the beautiful promises of God that became a reality at Bethlehem.

1. O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight

2. For Christ is born of Mary and gathered all above
While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love
O morning stars together proclaim the holy birth
And praises sing to God the King and Peace to men on earth

3. How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven
No ear may hear His coming but in this world of sin
Where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in

4. O holy Child of Bethlehem descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us our Lord Emmanuel



Bethlehem | Emmanuel | Friday

God is with us. God became human in the person of Jesus so that we would always know that God is intimately a part of the world we inhabit. Even when we are suffering, or when we forget about God, or when we feel like we are in exile... God is with us.

Otis Moss III reminds us that Jesus is real, and so that means God is with us in real, meaningful ways.

Jesus knows all about my troubles. Jesus walks and talks with me. Jesus picks me up and turns me around and plants my feet on solid ground! Jesus is a mind regulator, a heart fixer, a friend at midnight, a balm in Gilead, trouble over deep water, and bread in a starving land. Jesus understands my predicament.

Why does he understand my predicament?

Jesus lived a life as a colonized person and as a minority in a community that was under siege by an occupying army.

Jesus understands poverty created by an empire, Jesus knows about racial profiling, Jesus understands mass incarceration, Jesus is frustrated with the traditional church, Jesus experiences state sponsored torture, knows what it's like to have a public defender who lacks competency, was executed for a crime he did not commit and understands character assassination in the media before and after one's death.

Jesus even knows what it is like to be stopped and frisked.

Jesus is acquainted with patriarchy, since not a single brother would listen to any of the sisters when they announced, "Guess what y'all, the tomb is empty!"

Jesus knows all about our troubles . . .

Jesus wrestles with tragedy but does not fall into despair.

- Otis Moss III

God entered our human existence as the person Jesus, and Jesus experienced the difficulties of life on earth. Therefore, we know that God understands our struggles and that God is truly with us in each moment—each breath.

Choose a short prayer such as “God is here; with me now” and break it into two parts. Breathe in deeply and say the first half of the prayer quietly. As you exhale, quietly say the second half of the prayer. Repeat this process at least 10 times, trying to deepen and slow your breath with each cycle.



**THE CHURCH IS THE LIVING,
BREATHING, LIFE-GIVING,
SYSTEM-CONFRONTING,
EMPIRE-SUBVERTING
PICTURE OF THE NEW
HUMANITY.**

ROB BELL

Conclusion | You

The Grand Story of Scripture reveals to us a God that is loving, gracious, and compassionate. The cycle that we see in the narrative of the Bible is a cycle that we still struggle with today. We forget about the promises and blessings of God and our forgetfulness can often lead us to places of suffering and exile. Yet still, God comes to be with us, to forgive, heal, and liberate us from the cycle of sin and death.

But there is one last theme that needs to be mentioned. This devotional explored the Seven Major Themes of Scripture and yet there is an eighth theme that must be mentioned:

You.

The scriptures are written to us and about us. As we've seen, the themes of the Bible continue in our lives today. And the work of God that we see within the scriptures also continues today, through us. Jesus came to be with us and then Jesus died for us and then Jesus commissioned us to be the Church, The Body of Christ. We are called to continue God's work in the world.

We are called:

To be a blessing and a force for creativity, like God was in Eden.

To speak out against idolatry, like God did at Babel.

To have compassion for the suffering of others, like God did in Egypt.

To be faithful to our promises, like God did at Mt. Sinai

To remind others and ourselves about God when we forget, like God did in Jerusalem.

To bring words of hope to those who are despairing, like God did in Babylon.

To break the cycles of sin and death at work in the world, like God did at Bethlehem.

The Grand Story of Scripture continues today as we care for the people and the world that God has made.



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