

Dear Friends,

During the past few years of Lent, you have been provided with a Lenten devotional book that we've ordered from some publication. This year I wrote a devotional booklet with some readings and prayers for you to use over the next six weeks. There is one set per week.

These reflections and prayers don't follow any theme or trajectory. They are simply random acts of mindfulness. They are meant to engage our mind, body, and soul in some deep examination and imagination. May you be filled with inspiration during this season of reflection and confession, repentance and acceptance.

I invite you to get immersed in this exciting and enriching season of Lent!

Pastor Bob L. Isip

WEEK 1

Hebrews 12:1b-2a "...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, 2 looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith..."

The recent XXII Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia drew the world together to celebrate international competition, competitors, and the myriad of countries and cultures. The games also featured the host country Russia—its heritage, history, and geography. As we focused in on the games themselves we were enamored with the ages and races, the shapes and sizes of the contestants, and their interesting personalities. Thanks for the media and network coverage, we were able to catch glimpse of individual journeys and stories. It was a great delight and treat to be part of this history making event, complete with the beauty, the ingenuity, and the pageantry of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Downhill skiers, skaters, shooters, long distance racers, jumpers and sliders performed on the grand stage to showcase their heroics and superhuman feats. We witnessed their artistry and athleticism, their finesse and power. We saw the unbelievable aerials—twirls, spins, tumbles. We beheld their laser like accuracy, sheer speed, and intricate choreography, athletes pushing the limits of their bodies and their wills. We cheered and experienced with them the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. We marveled at those who competed in multiple Olympics, multiple events, and won multiple medals.

At times, we may entertain fantasies about being an Olympic athlete on the grand stage. Every once in a while I would wish that I was gifted with these extraordinary physical abilities, competing at such a high level, being in the best shape of my life, and being so focused. Yet to reach this level one has to sacrifice a lot, endure hours of hard training, and even struggle through injuries and surgeries. After completing their events, some

athletes said when interviewed, “I’m glad it’s over--the long days of training, the beating up my body, and all the pressure..” Well, maybe being a star athlete it’s not so glamorous as people make it out to be. So perhaps, we wouldn’t want to be a star athlete.

According to Hebrews 12, we are all athletes, spiritual athletes. Our faith requires training, practice, and of course a living out of God’s calling. Lent can be like a time of spiritual boot camp. In our day-to-day quest to complete our courses, manage our demanding schedules, and fulfill our obligations, we encounter challenges and hardships. We go through rough patches, we engage in tough battles, and we dig deep to endure, persevere, and overcome. Each day we face variations on the path, speeding through slippery slopes. We take leaps of faith, glide through some smooth sections, but then hit some bone jarring moguls and unpredictable terrain. Unlike the Olympic Games, the practice of our faith and our Christian journey doesn’t end. We keep on training, learning, and practicing. We keep on running the race, until we cross over the finish line into life eternal.

PRAYER

God of all seasons, we find ourselves on the fast track of life, pushing through the obstacles of uncertainty and unpredictability. At times we find ourselves racing against the clock, or competing against others, or simply struggling to finish. We do our best to prepare, we embrace the challenge, and hope for enough energy to endure. Help us to draw on your Spirit to boost us when we are climbing, to have the faith to stabilize us when we are freefalling, and the consistency and pace to grind through the tough sledding. Make us ready to face what is around the corner, to be able to react in sudden twists and turns, and to emerge victorious, through Christ our Savior. Amen.

WEEK 2

John 4:13-14

13 Jesus said to her (woman at the well), “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Californians have been hearing about the “mega-drought” that has beset the region. More specifically southern Californians have been very concerned after our region has averaged nearly 15 inches per year in rainfall. In the year 2011 the Los Angeles area received 12 inches; in 2012, 8 inches; and in 2013, a measly two inches. The dams have been drying up, the snow pack disappearing, the reservoirs bottoming out, and aquifers emptying.

The prolonged lack of rain water means a diminishing of crop production--fruits, vegetables, and nuts. It then dominoes into the diminishing of jobs, the tightening of our economy, and the threatening of our entire ecosystem. As trees turn brown; as rivers

shrink to trickles; as green valleys deteriorate and become dusty and rocky; as vegetation die, we begin to see a stark, desert like landscape. The ground gets more exposed as the once full acres of lakes are now muddy fields, soon to be caked and cracked.

The response thus far is to divert water from other sources like the upper Colorado River Basin and to tap reservoirs that aren't so low. The immediate response is to conserve water, cut down on consumption, and to switch to lower flow water appliances and amenities. It's time for us to check our water usage and consumption.

But how about checking on our spiritual reservoirs. How are our present levels? Are we full, half full, low or running on empty? As the energy and the outflow of our spiritual tanks is dispersed, what about the intake and inflow? Is there sufficient volume?

Engaging in spiritual practices helps to replenish, restock, and refill low levels of the spirit. Reading scripture, prayer, journaling, meditation, and fasting are some avenues to infilling.

PRAYER

Ever flowing fountain of life, refresh us, shower us, flood us with an abundant outpouring of grace and love. Cause us take the time to fill our faith so that our cup overflows. As we get so caught up in doing and serving, we tend to empty ourselves and let our spiritual levels reach rock bottom. Let us not neglect our bodies, our earthen vessels. Restore us to health, to wholeness, to fullness. Move us to carve out the time for nurturing, for self-care, for retreat, rest, and renewal that we may become refreshing pools, welcoming oasis, and streams of living water, through Christ our source and eternal spring. Amen.

WEEK 3

A few weeks ago, my wife and I saw the movie *The Social Network*, which is about the life of the inventors of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg and his Harvard friends. In 2003 after running the website from their dorm room, they decided to expand. They quickly received huge investment funds, widened their audience, hired more staff, and became an instant internet sensation.

Pretty soon these college kids were accelerating on the gas pedal, raking in members by the thousands. Originally the site was exclusive to Harvard, but then it reached out to other big name universities like Yale, Columbia, and Stanford. As Zuckerberg and company took residence in the bay area of northern California, Facebook became a national movement. Today Facebook span continents, and is wrapped around the entire globe.

I joined Facebook shortly after I came to Torrance. Marlou joined a bit later, but we both are big enthusiast and daily users. It is a way to network, to keep up and communicate instantly, to post electronic pictures albums, to form groups, and just read what's on our

friends' minds at a given moment. The downfall is we may spend too much time at that site, parked in front of the screen.

Though Zuckerberg claims that there are inaccuracies, the film does capture and convey the spirit and speed of our ever fast moving society. Zuckerberg and his staff are always trying to stay ahead of the game by adding features to the website design, tinkering and tweaking, voraciously grabbing more and more members and viewers. The greed of hauling internet traffic, the obsessive and compulsive human consumption of information, and the hyper stimulation that this website generates can be very addicting.

Lent is a time for tempering the appetites, quelling the constant impulses. Lent is a time to tone down the hyperactivity, to take time to stop and think, to reflect, to journal, to pray more. If we find ourselves on hyper overdrive, we need to put on the brakes, slow down, and cruise at low speeds.

PRAYER

Gracious and merciful Lord, you call us to be still and to know that you are God, to taste and see that you are good, and to meditate upon your law day and night. Let us take the time to decompress and to carve out some down time. As we step off the treadmill of life, and take a time out from the rat race, help us to soak and bask in your peace. Allow us to say no to the constant barrage of demands and to decide to lower our heart rates and blood pressure. Fill us with a sense of contentment, help us to tune into joy, and allow us to rest in your shade from the sweltering and searing heat of high expectations. Enable us to recover a sense of balance, a centeredness, and a soulfulness as we momentarily become a minimalists.

WEEK 4

Our church recently sold the El Prado parsonage to an architect, who has been busy gutting the insides of the house. The mega dumpster in the front was filled with boards, pipes, and other debris. Then a week later, the house next to the church was also purchased. The owner is also doing the same, overhauling the insides.

I had a chance to walk around inside the house next to our church. Over the years, the previous owner had added a back house extension with more rooms, a second kitchen, and bathrooms. But in my walk through, what I saw was that no two rooms had the same floor level, they were off by an inch or so in some spots. The counters and cabinetry weren't so appealing, and the second kitchen and upstairs bathrooms looked like they didn't meet current city codes. So it makes sense that this house is being gutted and renovated.

If money were no obstacle, what part of your home would you like to renovate? What other work needs to be done on the outside? My house is about 900 square feet and I purchased it as a bachelor. Now as a married couple we dream about having more space,

different furniture, and new appliances. We have the lot size to add and built and expand. We dream about having more landscaping, a deck, more rooms so that we can welcome guests and relatives. Sometimes it's just fun to let our imaginations loose.

The illustration of a home can be compared to our spiritual bodies—the upper room of our minds, the inner chambers of our hearts, our arteries, the emotions, and soul. What are the conditions of these compartments and chambers? Do they need the master's renovating? Does the mind need de-cluttering from watching too many images from screens? Is the heart in need of some serious overhauling due to picking up hurtful and hateful experiences? Are the arteries, the emotions, the soul filled with plaque?

PRAYER

All wise and knowing God, great architect and grand designer, we offer our physical and spiritual bodies to you. We are in need of a spiritual appraisal, a complete inspection, and some future plans and provisions. As you remove and replace those inner parts that have become neglected, bring to bear your power and wisdom with great precision, that we can experience deep improvements for the long run. Rework our lifestyles, recalibrate our diets, and move us to make new adjustments and plans towards better health and holy living. As you clear away the old and make all things new, give us a new lease on life, through the power of your ever dynamic spirit we ask. Amen.

WEEK 5

Revelation 21:5 And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new. And He said, "Write, for these words are faithful and true."

Several years ago, I joined a group of United Methodists that took a biking tour of Yellowstone National Park, I didn't know about this story at the time.

In 1994, wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park. Over the last 70 years, the region had started to become bare and stark. The deer had grazed the vegetation to the point of destruction and devastation.

What happened after that is called "trophic cascade", which according to the Encyclopedia Britannica is an "ecological phenomenon triggered by the addition or removal of top predators and involving reciprocal changes in the relative populations of predator and prey through a food chain, which often results in dramatic changes in ecosystem structure and nutrient cycling."

Though very few in number, the wolves started to kill the deer. Slowly, the surviving deer began to change their behavior. They began to avoid valleys and gorges. As the deer population receded, the trees quintupled in size in six years—aspen, willow, cottonwood flourished. Then birds nested in the trees and beavers increased with the growing supply of trees. Subsequently the beavers built more dams, which provided habitat for otters, muskrats, ducks, fish, reptiles and amphibians.

Wolves then killed coyotes which meant rabbits and mice multiplied, which attracted more hawks, weasels, foxes, ravens, and bald eagles.

As trees flourished, so did the berries, which attracted the bears. The bears then killed young deer, which again kept that population down.

What was even more profound and startling was that wolves ended up impacting the behavior of rivers. Because there was more foliage and roots taking hold, there was less erosion. Regenerating forests stabilized the banks so that rivers became more fixed in their flows with less meandering. Channels narrowed and pools formed. The conclusion: wolves transformed a whole ecosystem and altered the physical geography of Yellowstone National Park.

This story encourages us to care about the environment and ecosystem.

We see many environments languishing, diminishing, if not dying. What would it take to make such a profound turnaround for people's spiritual lives. For their entire spiritual landscape and geography and community to experience wholesale change, so that everything becomes flourishing. By faith, God's grace, and strategic action all things can become new.

(Story can be found on the website flicxy.com, by Sustainable Man)

PRAYER

Almighty God, Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, what are those enemies and predators that cause us to spiritually languish, to diminish, and to slowly die. We pray that you would remove these forces from our lives and stem the tide of decline. Shore up our footings, reverse the crumbling and tumblings, and set a new kingdom in motion. We call upon you to stop the negative slide of erosion. As we take time for renewal, may we experience new growth, which regenerates new activity and energy, which creates a whole new community and a whole new way of life. Revitalize our dry landscape that we can once again become dynamic and vibrant; that we may become whole new persons and welcome a whole habitation of fresh life. Amen

Week 6

Read Matthew 17:1-9

Dramatic images and pictures have a way of being imprinted in our minds and stay with us for a lifetime--images of newborn babies, beautiful animals, and the grand creations from God's paint brush. When we visit famous places we encounter majestic mountains, far reaching oceans, cascading waterfalls, and full flowing rivers. We take snapshots of

glowing sunsets, glittering night skies, and crisp morning flora and fauna. We also remember and record dramatic events like new births, baptisms, graduations, weddings, anniversaries and reunions. We have this huge roll of film to capture all these images.

However on the flipside, we also remember painful, tragic, and traumatic moments as well. We take mental photos of the dying days of a loved one, national tragedies like what happened on September 11th, and faces twisted in sorrow and sadness. Sadly, we expose ourselves to images created on the movie screens – acts of violence, raw sexuality, and other horrifying and scarring pictures. Our mental galleries are filled with all these frames and slides that hang there and are often revisited intentionally or unintentionally. It's hard to delete or erase those images from our mental microfiche.

In Matthew 17, the transfiguration leaves a great imprint of Jesus in the minds of the Peter, James, and his brother John. They captured a glimpse of the Lord as his face shone like the sun, his clothes dazzling white, along with Moses and Elijah. Then a bright cloud overshadowed them and a booming voice emanates from the cloud. What they saw that day became emblazoned on the tablets of their hearts, fixed within their mind's eye, and recorded there forever. It must have been a picture perfect moment of inspiration and revelation.

With all the technology available to us today; cell phones, digital cameras, and computers, we can store images and photos in a picture diary; illustrations that point us to God and God's beautiful creation. We can retrieve those images to remind us that God is ever present in our lives, that God is merciful, graceful, and faithful, and then to be thankful for all the days that we are given. We can preserve the memories and record all the wonderful and powerful experiences that we have collected over the years and be thankful.

PRAYER

Almighty God, you have blessed us with the gift of sight that helps us to experience color, texture, heights, depths, shapes and sizes, people and places, days of celebration, and days of completion. Forgive us for taking this wonderful miracle for granted, for not fully enjoying and appreciating the beauty, wonder, and grandeur of life. We also confess that we choose to put in front of our faces those things that are not pleasing and unedifying. Help us to look for those images and pictures that inspire life, that celebrate life, and that gives new life. Free us from the temptation and tyranny of evil images, release us from the chains of damaging memories, and shine your face upon us that we may draw upon your light and your goodness all the days of our lives. Let us behold the many facets of Christ Jesus and keep in our hearts a collage of his miraculous encounters. Amen.