**Astounding Glory (3/2/2025)**

Transfiguration

WHITE

**Luke 9:28-36 (37-43a)**

Can you recall a time when you were in a place so incredibly breathtaking that you wished you could have stayed forever? Perhaps you even began envisioning building your dream home there.

Tucked in our hearts are such places in which the very thought of them can renew our spirits. Jesus knew this. That is why he took Peter, James and John to the mountain top. He wanted them to experience the astounding glory of God — and to hold on to that experience when hard times came.

And hard times were coming.

Jesus was about to begin the last leg of his journey to the cross and, with each step taken, he knew his friends’ courage would be challenged. For a brief mountain top moment, though, they would have their souls stirred.

They would see Jesus being transfigured, his face and clothing shining radiantly as he talked with the pillars of Jewish law and prophecy — Moses and Elijah. And as a divine cloud enveloped them, a voice spoke, saying, “This is my Son. Listen to him.”

We can see why Peter never wanted to leave the mountain and suggested building shelters in which to reside in. But that was not to be for him. Or for us.

For my friends, our most transformative faith moments are often had in the valley lows rather than on proverbial mountain tops. Yet we do our best skirting those valleys, expending more energy to scaling mountains.

We are on the cusp of the 40-day season of Lent. It is a journey that leads us to the gates of Jerusalem where in a week’s time cheers welcoming Jesus turn to jeers calling for his death.

Are we ready for a journey that will bring us face-to-face with the fickleness of hearts, including our own? Will we heed God’s voice and listen to Jesus when doubts and fears grip us? Will the memories of God’s glory glimpsed on our own mountain tops — or ocean fronts or pine-scented forests — be enough to sustain us during times of trials?

God’s glory witnessed on the mountain was indeed astounding. But even more astounding is this: When we, in the depths of our valley despair, find ourselves still in awe by the glory of God that is always shining upon us.

*Mighty God, as we step into the season of Lent, give us the courage to leave the beauty of our mountain tops and enter bravely into the valleys of life. May the knowledge of Your glory sustain us, and may we continually listen to the loving voice of Jesus who guides us now and always. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Wilderness Companions (3/9/2025)**

Firs Sunday in Lent

VIOLET

**Luke 4:1-13**

Where are you most likely to turn to when needing comfort or encouragement? A loved one? A trusted friend? A Google search? How many times do we turn to God’s Word first?

After her death, Laura Ingalls Wilder’s family discovered where the author of the “Little House on the Prairie” books sought refuge in life. Tucked between the pages of her Bible was a list of go-to scriptures for all of life’s circumstances.

Facing a crisis? The pioneer girl turned to Psalm 46. Discouraged? Laura’s heart found healing in Psalm 24. And when lonely, it was Psalm 27 she would read.

Leaning into God’s Word was exactly what Jesus did when facing his 40-days of wilderness wandering and wondering. After emerging from the waters of his glorious baptism, the Spirit led the Son of God into the harsh desolation of the desert. Then, at Jesus’ most vulnerable moment, the Devil appeared tempting Jesus to tap into his divine connection to God to save himself.

Jesus, though, knew better. He turned to God’s Word for help, overcoming every temptation with the preface “it is written.”

**Devil:** *I bet you are hungry, Jesus. Why not turn these stones into bread?*

**Jesus:** *It is written, you shall not live by bread alone.*

**Devil:** *I will give you all these kingdoms if you worship me.*

**Jesus:** *It is written, worship only the Lord your God.*

**Devil:** *Throw yourself from the highest point of the temple, for it is written that the angels will attend to you.* (Yes, even the Devil turned to God’s word, but that’s another *Sunday Bulletin* devotion for another day.)

**Jesus:** *It is written, do not put the Lord your God to the test.*

And with that, the Devil departed.

Hearing the story of Jesus in the wilderness on the first Sunday in Lent is as much of a church tradition as reading the birth narrative on Christmas Eve. The story sets the stage for the 40-day season, where mimicking wilderness depravation often plays out as some holy diet plan with the giving up of chocolate.

Rather than denying ourselves, though, why not take on the spiritual practice of turning to God’s Word daily. For my friends, those words were Jesus’ wilderness companions, and they are ours as well, always waiting to be called upon in our times of trial and temptation.

This Lent, let us make a go-to scripture list to turn to always. Even perhaps tuck that list into the pages of a Bible, knowing that someday someone will meet our wilderness companions and discover just how helpful they can be.

*Loving God, may we remember to turn to Your Word in our times of need, for that Word will soothe our troubles, light our paths and bring clarity to the many questions we have. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Strong and Tender (3/16/2025)**

Second Sunday in Lent

VIOLET

**Luke 13:31-35**

With each step toward the cross, Jesus’ reveals sides to him that are rarely seen. Like his feisty side here in Luke’s Gospel. After being warned by some Pharisees to leave because Herod wants him dead, Jesus replies, “Go tell that fox … I will keep driving out demons. I must press on.”

Strong words, indeed. Yet soon after those words are uttered, Jesus laments over Jerusalem. It is in this lamenting we see a softer side, as he expresses a tenderness in wanting to take the Holy City’s children and protect them under his wing like a mothering hen.

Anyone who has raised chickens — or perhaps knows of someone who joined the backyard flock craze a few years ago — knows how sweet it is to gaze upon balls of yellow fluff peeping underneath their mother’s wing. It tugs at the most hardened of hearts.

There once was an old farmer who admitted that there were many nights where he would sit in the barn and watch a hen and her chicks, noting that he could stare at the endearing scene forever.

Yes, we know Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We know him as the Prince of Peace, Counselor, Friend, Teacher and Healer. Yet how many times does the image of Jesus as Mothering Hen come to mind?

Take a moment now and hold that side of Jesus in your mind. Envision yourself being protected from the harsh world underneath the mothering wings of Jesus. How does that make you feel? Warm? Loved? Secure?

It was that image that held Karolina Sandell-Berg in her time of grief. When she was 26, Sweden’s prolific poet and hymn writer, witnessed her father, a Lutheran pastor, being swept over the side of a ship during storm. There was nothing she could do to save him.

So distraught, she did what she knew best. She wrote a hymn focusing on the protective wings that shield us in times of danger and sorrow. “Thy Holy Wings, O Savior” (1865), set to a Swedish folk tune, soon became a beloved hymn often sung as a children’s lullaby.

This Lent, let us spend more time getting to know Jesus’ soft, mothering side. Find a day this week and light a candle, read Luke’s Gospel lesson for today again, and search for Sandell-Berg’s hymn on Apple music or Spotify. If you don’t have access to these, ask a friend to help you find “Thy Holy Wings, O Savior.” Then let its words and melody lull you into a place of healing and serenity.

*Lord, God, may the words to this hymn be our prayer for today: Thy holy wings, O Savior, spread gently over me, and let me rest securely through good and ill in thee. O be my strength and portion, my rock and hiding place, and let my every moment be lived within thy grace.* *Amen.*

**Open Invitation (3/23/2025)**

Third Sunday in Lent

VIOLET

**Isaiah 55:1-9**

There’s a general store in a sleepy New England village that hasn’t sold a stick of penny candy or a bolt of fabric for more than 50 years. Residents are now turning the storefront into a community center, hoping to restore a sense of neighborly belonging that has vanished in recent years.

While clearing out cobwebbed corners and opening squeaky drawers, a thick leather ledger was discovered. Amid its columns, fading ink revealed not only the cans of corn and bottles of milk families consumed, but that many had not yet paid for the items. Page after page were the words “payment to come.”

An elderly man who bought many a stick of penny candy as a boy smiled when he heard about the ledger, remembering how the store’s owners would always give what was needed to families even if they could not pay for the items just yet. It’s no wonder the store didn’t survive, he mused.

Perhaps the storeowners, though, crafted their business plan from the words of the prophet Isaiah, who delivers an open invitation to us now on our Lenten journey to come, drink if we are thirsty, eat even if we have no means to pay for the bread. Come, no matter who we are or what our circumstances, and find belonging, acceptance and sustenance.

Come, and let us take in all that God is offering.

This passage from Isaiah is so full of welcome, with God imploring us to come — and listen. Listen to the words of life. Come and listen — and look. At what? Look first at the past, remembering God’s care and grace. And then, look to the future and know this care and grace is still abundant.

What are we thirsting for this day? What are we hungering for? Do we remember in our wanting that God is really all we need. Are we listening to the voice of love? Are we looking for the grace that was, is and will always be? Can we accept that we this day are being given an open invitation to experience the goodness of life?

There’s a general store in a sleepy New England town seeking to offer something other than the penny candy and bolts of fabric of yesteryear. It wants to restore community. And that’s perhaps, my friends, the thing we are most thirsty and starved for. For there is a divine ledger in which by our name our running tab is marked “paid in full.”

Let us pray.

*God of community, let us say “yes” to that open invitation to come as we are before Your glory. Let us drop our pretenses and let go of judgments. Let us remember that there is a banquet table where all are invited to find fullness once again. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Embracing Love (3/30/2025)**

Fourth Sunday in Lent

VIOLET

**Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32**

For centuries, renowned artists have captured the varied emotions among the characters in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, depicting on canvas and in stone the forgiving father, the bitter brother and the repentant prodigal.

If you were to pick up a brush on this the fourth Sunday in Lent, which of the characters would you paint first? Who would it be that you — answer honestly now — relate to the most? The one extending forgiveness or the one bitter because that forgiveness has been extended. Or maybe you are putting on those ancient sandals, trekking back home to make amends?

Don’t worry too much about your answer, because over the course of our lives we will find ourselves identifying with each of these characters. There will be times where we are grace-filled, times where we begrudge forgiveness, and times where we are truly sorry for the things we have done.

Famed Dutch artist, Rembrandt, has two versions of the prodigal son in which he painted in his lifetime. The first was done while he was a young man at the height of his fame and domestic bliss. With a loving wife, children and an audience who clamored for his work, Rembrandt had it all. It’s not surprising that at this time in his career he depicted himself as the prodigal without a care in the world, a woman seated on his lap, and a drink lifted high in his hand.

Life though changed for the artist. His children and wife died. His wealth was gone, as were his patrons who once commissioned works created by his hands. Rembrandt returned to the prodigal son for one of his last paintings before his death. Only this time, each brushstroke revealed a man who knew all too well what it meant to be broke and broken.

Great artists create from what they know in life. Rembrandt was no exception, capturing in his prodigal son paintings a joy that was fleeting and sorrow that was soul crushing. It would be the latter that would become the artist’s most well-known painting.

And in the end, Rembrandt found himself running home into the loving arms of God. He died on Oct. 4, 1669, and was buried with no family and no fanfare in a grave set aside for paupers that was owned by the church.

We will all someday find ourselves running into the arms of a loving and forgiving God, who will welcome his prodigal children — always. But for now, how do we get better at extending this holy and healing forgiveness to others? How do we not become bitter? How do we find the strength to make the amends we must make? How would a great artist paint us right now in such a story of grace?

*Praises to You, O God, who never turns Your back on us — no matter how far from home we have ventured. Embrace us now with Your love and may that love soften our hearts to the point where we our arms begin to open wider to all Your children who are lost and lonely. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Something New (4/6/2025)**

Fifth Sunday in Lent

VIOLET

**Isaiah 45:16-21**

If someone asked who your favorite prophet was, who would you say? Would it be “the weeping prophet” Jeremiah? Or maybe Hosea? He displayed the redeeming love of God by marrying a prostitute, repeatedly taking her back after many attempts to return to her former vocation. Perhaps it would be Micah, who spoke of a Shepherd King who would lead God’s children. What about Isaiah?

Often referred to as the prophet of Advent, Isaiah makes a rare Lenten appearance with his reminder that God is one who makes all things new — starting with creation, then with the foretold birth of a Mighty Counselor — Jesus — whose death and resurrection opened a path of new beginnings for us.

Hearing Isaiah speak to us in the season of Lent is our invitation to a holy reset. And we love resets, don’t we? The internet is full of promises that by following this plan or that we will have more energy, restful sleep, perhaps even a smaller waistline. We will be better than ever.

Isaiah’s Lenten reset, though, doesn’t involve gimmicks or empty promises. His reset is simply this: Remember once again that God is God and there is no other. That is all we need to bring focus back to our confusing and chaotic days where our Good Friday crosses forever loom on the horizon.

For just as Isaiah says in today’s passage, God had no intention for Jacob’s descendants to seek the Lord in vain. Rather, they would seek AND find. So it is for us today. Seeking the Lord is never an exercise in futility.

There’s been a lot of news lately about the mental health epidemic plaguing all ages. For the young, social media has ironically created a sense of isolation. For the elderly, loss of loved ones and no strong family network is fueling loneliness. Even those who have social supports in place are experiencing an emptiness inside.

Perhaps you or someone you know is experiencing a soul-crushing emptiness right now? If so, take heart. Your Lenten reset is here. Seek the Lord and you will find. For God who made the earth, did not create it to be empty. There is so much glory to take in and beauty for our eyes to see, our ears to hear and our hearts to embrace.

We were not created to be a shell of ourselves. Now is the time for our Lenten reset that leads to a full and fulfilled life.

*God of great grace, may we remember that You sent Your Son Jesus to us so that we could have life abundant. Fill our hearts with this knowledge as we seek to love and serve You now and forever. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Into Jerusalem (4/13/2025)**

Palm/Passion Sunday (Sixth Sunday in lent)

RED

**Luke 19: 28-40**

Palm Sunday marks the start of Holy Week, where the passion of our Lord will play out before us, ending in his death on the Good Friday cross. But for now, we gather with that ancient crowd, waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Hosanna!” (which means “save us!”).

On this day, we praise Christ our King who gave new meaning to that title “king.” For Jesus wasn’t like King Saul who towered in physical strength nor was he like King Solomon who was surrounded by wealth and great wisdom. Jesus was a king who chose the way of servanthood and who rode a humble animal rather than a warhorse. And yet the streets still overflowed with people wanting to welcome this man who had stirred the countryside with his radical message of God’s all-encompassing love.

Before riding into Jerusalem, Jesus asked his disciples to get a donkey and a colt. The disciples questioned Jesus if the animals’ owner would give them freely. Jesus replied, “Just say the Lord needs them.” Sure enough, the disciples didn’t run into any hesitation and were able to secure the animals for their friend.

We rarely linger on this detail in the story of Jesus’ passion, preferring to focus on the palm-waving fanfare. But let’s leave that cheering crowd for a moment and linger, asking ourselves what it is that the Lord needs of us.

Perhaps not a donkey, but a trusting heart? Perhaps not a colt, but our time to help others no matter how stretched our time seems to be?

Can we give drink to the thirsty, food to the hungry and clothing to the naked? Can we give Jesus our commitment to stay by his side when others fall by the wayside? Can we wait in patient faith for resurrection promises amid our dark nights of the soul?

My friends, the truth is that the Lord needs much more than a humble animal to ride on. He needs our hearts.

Come, let us rejoin that Palm Sunday crowd knowing that all too soon those hosannas will fade. Hold on to your palm branch tightly, though. Hold on and listen for all the Jesus is asking of you.

*Redeeming God, we are quick to sing Your praises when things go our way, but when life’s cheers turn to jeers, we quickly doubt and run from the grace of Your Son Jesus. Help us to be present now and always to our Savior, giving whatever it is He asks of us this day. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Resurrection Joy (4/20/2025)**

Easter Sunday

WHITE

**John 20:1-18**

The morning sun was peeking over the hills of the cemetery where the faithful had gathered to sing the first alleluias of Easter. As the sky turned from black to gray to an orangey pink, casting a warm glow on the sleepy headstones, the pastor spoke of a stone rolled away, an empty tomb revealed, and angels in bright clothing asking the living among the dead, “Who are you looking for?”

It was then a young woman attending the sunrise service could no longer hold back her tears. With them flowing freely, she offered no apologies but rather she proclaimed the message of Easter more eloquently than any pastor ever could.

*It’s amazing that Easter joy begins in a graveyard! There is resurrection all around! We live because He lives!*

Those around her smiled. Some even joined her in the tears she shed.

Yes, isn’t it amazing, my friends, that Easter joy begins in a graveyard. Isn’t it amazing that God brings new life from what has passed away? Death does not have the last word. Endings are new beginnings. Good-byes are followed by blessed hellos.

And yet, how many times do we fully embrace the Easter promise, believing beyond belief that the end is never the end with God?

The late Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong once said that “the Easter moment is a call to life, to love and to the courage to be all that God created us to be.” We will never get to that Easter life, though, if we linger among that which is dead. For what are we hoping to revive? What are we clinging to? Who are we looking for?

As the angels proclaimed that first Easter morning, Jesus is alive. He is waiting to meet us on our paths where we discover the Risen Christ in the care shown to us from strangers as well as the compassion we give in return. We might not always recognize Jesus, but He is indeed there. Our cynical eyes just need to see through the lenses of faith.

May this Easter we stop our woeful gaze into the tomb of dead dreams and hopes and shout to the world, as Mary did, “I have seen the Lord!” For you have. He is alive among us — within all our hearts.

*God of Easter new life, we thank You and praise You for fresh beginnings. May we begin to live as Easter people, holding tightly to the promise that death is no more. With our Risen Lord by our sides, there is always hope and amazing possibilities. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Resurrection Witness (4/27/2025)**

Second Sunday after Easter

WHITE

**Acts 5:27-32**

There once was a church sign that read, “Easter Is Over, Now What?” Good question. We have received the promise of new life, but how are we living that promise? Do our lives look different from that of a week ago when we joined our voices in singing “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.”

For starters, let’s point out the error of that church sign. Easter in NOT over. Easter is not a one-day celebration in which the memory grows as stale as a leftover marshmallow Peep. Easter is our invitation to live as resurrection people, always seeing the God possibilities amid the impossibilities.

The early church embraced Easter as a 50-day celebration that led to the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. During the days of Eastertide, also known as The Great 50 Days, it was a tradition to read through the Acts of the Apostles, where among the pages are stories of faith and courage — and persecutions — as Jesus’ followers boldly tell of the Risen Christ among them.

In today’s reading from Acts we see Peter in trouble with the Sanhedrin all because he called upon the name of Jesus to heal a crippled beggar. The Sanhedrin are angry for they warned Peter and his friends to not invoke Jesus’ name in their healing and teaching. But Peter cannot stop. Nor can his friends. Nor can we. For the Easter moment was the moment when we all became witnesses to the resurrection power that is among us.

In this season of Easter, we are to sing, dance and celebrate that love wins, love is alive, and love can redeem all things. Are we showing the world that we are walking with our Risen Lord, that we are choosing to live with great joy despite all the world throws our way?

If the Lenten season called for us to observe 40 days of following Jesus to the cross, then shouldn’t we give the same attention to these 50 days of now witnessing to the resurrection?

As Andrew Peterson, a contemporary Christian musician once observed, “the Easter feast far outweighs the Lenten fast.” It is time for us to feast. It is time for us to step into our role as resurrection witnesses.

*God of resurrection hope, we are honored to be witnesses of the redeeming love of our Risen Lord. As we continue the Eastertide celebration, we ask that you strengthen our hearts and make loud our voice so that we have the courage to speak truth to power and show love amid hate. May we truly become your Easter people in the world. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**The Way Forward (5/4/2025)**

Third Sunday after Easter

WHITE

**Acts 9: 1-6, (7-20)**

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught that "the only constant thing in life is change." Who can argue with that? Afterall, who hasn’t had their world suddenly turned upside down?

As unsettling — and unwelcomed — as these life-changing events are, they are often the pivotal moments that move us forward in directions we never would have imagined going.

So it was for Saul of Tarsus. The noted persecutor of Christians, who searched them out relentlessly and punished them mercilessly, was on one such trip when he suddenly heard a voice from the heaven. “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The voice was that of Jesus. Saul was then blinded where, for three days, he sat in darkness, fasting and praying.

During this time, Ananias of Damascus, a follower of Jesus, received a vision to heal Saul. Given Saul’s reputation, it’s understandably that Ananias was not keen on doing that. But he did as he was told. Saul regained his sight, but even more importantly he was healed from his spiritual blindness.

And in true biblically tradition, once someone’s life is changed forever by the grace of God (remember Abram became Abraham, Sarai become Sara), Saul became Paul. He would then go on and become one of the most influential spokespersons of the Jesus way.

It’s always good for us to revisit Paul’s backstory because his conversion gives us an amazing hope that change is possible. His story reveals the boundless mercy of God who isn’t turned off by our shadow selves. Paul shows us that with God no one is beyond the Divine One’s loving reach. There’s always a way forward.

Many times, though, we get stuck in the muck of a past that we believe defines our present. We let the heavy chains of grievous mistakes and hurts hold us captive from a future full of hope. But if someone like Saul can be redeemed, so can we all.

Yes, one day we are going about our business and the next we find ourselves startled by just how Jesus Christ enters our hearts, changing everything we ever knew and setting us on a new way forward. May it be so.

*God of grace and mercy, enter our hearts this day, forgive our mistakes, remove our guilt and set us free to move forward on paths that shine with Your divine light. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Life-giving Acts (5/11/2025)**

Fourth Sunday after Easter

WHITE

**Acts 9:36-43**

In this season of Easter — where we journey 50 days to Pentecost — we continue to see how the power of Jesus, our Risen Lord, is now in the hands of his followers as they teach, preach and heal in his holy name. Today we have one such healing.

Peter is in the city of Joppa, a prosperous port on the west coast of Israel, where he learns of the death of a faithful widow named Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek). Her great acts of charity and kindness are spoken of by the number of mourners who come to her home. Many are widows themselves wearing dresses made by Tabitha, who was a skilled seamstress.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus, Peter revives the dead woman by calling out to her, extending his hand and commanding her to get up once again. And she does. There is celebration, and news of this incredible life-giving act spreads throughout the populous city, gaining a record number of Jesus believers.

Bringing someone back from the dead is the ultimate life-giving act. But as Jesus followers in 2025, we need to remember that that life-giving act is still possible through each one of us. We might not be reviving the actual dead from their slumber, but we can bring life back to those who are among the walking dead — spiritually or emotionally. An inspiring word of encouragement reaching the ears of someone who has been belittled all their life is a life-giving act. A strong hand extended to lift the one who has been kicked to the gutter is a life-giving act.

There was a recent social media post from a resident of a tiny rural community thanking an anonymous donor for paying her ailing cat’s veterinary bill. Some selfless soul, hearing of the woman’s financial situation, opened wide their wallet to ease the stress and burden. A life-giving act for a worried fur mom and her elderly cat.

Life-giving acts are still possible.

And perhaps the great act in our reading today in not Peter’s raising Tabitha from the dead. Perhaps the acts of life that we should applaud are the many ways Tabitha served others, performing life-giving acts daily without ever drawing attention to herself — a new dress, a listening ear, an understanding heart. Tabitha shows us this day that faithfulness is better than greatness. Tabitha showed that serving others is out we serve God. Who are the Tabithas among you this day?

*God of new life, we praise you for the Tabithas who selflessly give to make this world better. We ask that you open wide our hearts and hands so that we may also perform life-giving acts to those in need who you place on our paths. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Imagine (5/18/2025)**

Fifth Sunday after Easter

WHITE

**Revelation 21:1-6**

There’s a magical place in New Jersey where children have been letting their imaginations run wild since 1954. It’s called the Land of Make Believe and, just as its name says, it invites children to literally step into the nursery rhymes read to them at bedtime. There are the homes of the three little pigs to run through and the old lady’s shoe — the one with so many children she didn’t know what to do — to slide down from.

For years it was thought that as we grew older, we no longer visited these lands of make believe. It was thought our ability to imagine faded with each passing year. Researchers from Kent University in England proved otherwise as a recent study among 470 people between 4 and 81, showed that adult imagination was not only as vivid as a child’s but became more vivid with age.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could right now play in our own lands of make believe? Wouldn’t it be even better to enter God’s land of belief that John is inviting us to do this day?

The beloved friend of Jesus writes to us from his seclusion on the Greek island of Patmos. It is there in a dank cave where he penned the visions, he received that would later become The Book of Revelation. And one such revelation calls for us to revisit the promise that God will indeed make all things news — a promise echoed all throughout scripture.

Today, we are being called to imagine a new heaven and a new earth for the former ones have passed away. This new heaven and earth don’t necessarily mean that the current ones have been destroyed and something different has emerged. Rather the ancient Greek word for “new” — *kaine* — means “new in character” or “fresh.” John is talking not about the *next* heaven and earth, but rather a *better* heaven and earth.

Let’s now imagine together what this “better” might look like, especially for our earth today? Close your eyes. What do you see? How would you characterize this better earth? And more importantly, how is God asking you to be a pivotal player in making this better earth a reality rather than make believe?

Imagination is a wonderful thing for all ages — and it can be a powerful spiritual practice to engage in daily. For who wouldn’t want to step into a place where God is making all things new, where death and crying and pain are no more? Let our imagining become the prayer portal for making this possible.

*God of new beginnings, help us to look beyond the realities of this world and toward a better heaven and a better earth, where all Your children are fed, loved and safe. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*

**Disciples Together (5/25/2025)**

Sixth Sunday after Easter

WHITE

**Acts 16:9-15**

*We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing …* such is the opening line to the treasured Dutch hymn that was translated into English in the late 1890s.

Since then, U.S. congregations have traditionally sung these words during the season of Thanksgiving, as it captures so beautifully the image of scattered and busy families gathering around a warm and welcoming table to break bread together.

There’s perhaps no better way to strengthen the bonds of humanity with this fractured world than by slowing down and sitting down to a table to share a meal with another.

Yet studies show that those meaningful meals have fallen by the wayside. Gone are the Sunday roasts that filled grandma’s kitchen with heavenly smells. Gone are the suppers where families sat down and talked to one another rather than texting others. Gone are many of the beloved church dinners as the saints who cooked and cleaned are now serving at the heavenly banquet with cheerful and glad hearts.

One of the key components of following Jesus is that we are not meant to go through this life alone. We were meant to be disciples together. Jesus illustrated this for us when early in the training of his disciples he sent them out in pairs to heal in his name. And he showed us the power there was in the sharing of the common cup. Something that Paul continued to do as he traveled sharing the news of Jesus.

It was outside of a city gate, we are told, that Paul went to the river to pray. He attracted the attention of a group of women who, after conversations with the apostle, were then baptized in the river. One of the women, Lydia, a dealer of purple cloth which was an expensive and a much-coveted item, invited Paul to stay at her home to share a meal and talk some more.

When was the last time we were intentional about inviting someone to join us for a time of fellowship — the new widow, the divorced parent or the single person who often feels forgotten amid all the couples?

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s book, “Life Together,” the German theologian noted that there is an amazing blessing of “being able to gather with other believers.” As many, he observed, walk a lonely road “in the isolation of infirmity and age.” Bonhoeffer then added, “it is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community.”

My friends, we are called to be disciples together always remembering that it is nothing but grace that allows the blessed community that we all need to be formed.

*Life-giving God, may we become disciples of love, reaching out to the lost and the lonely. May we slow down and set our tables once again, inviting all to share more than a meal, but to share in the sustaining beauty of community. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.*