Compassion in a Deserted Place

_When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick._

Matthew 14:14

Deserted places. Desert places. Wilderness. Wasteland. We can discover desert places throughout the world. We can experience desert spaces within us—places of depression, fear, loneliness, rejection, grief. Jesus went to a deserted place to find solitude for prayer and rest. When he arrived, he discovered a crowd of people who brought their interior desert spaces to that desert place. They came for healing of physical pains, discouraged spirits, social rejection, or poverty-bred survival trauma. Jesus’ desire for desert solitude began to dance with their desire for desert healing. The dance was called compassion.

Companions of Jesus will sometimes find themselves wrestling with God in desert places, calling to God from barren hope, dancing with God in a tango of healing. Compassion means we are never alone, whatever our desert experience. There are others who also dwell in deserts, there are others wanting to be assured they are not alone, and always there is God—God of compassion, God who is the heart at the center of all creation!

_God, may compassion bloom in our desert places._
_Amen._

Jeff Cook, Winnipeg, Manitoba
When we think about Jesus as our role model, we think of the things he did to serve. We try to imitate his work: feeding people at food pantries, visiting shut-ins, providing support for unhoused people, and so on. But how often do we look to Jesus to show us how to take care of ourselves?

Today we meet Jesus in a self-care moment. He had been surrounded by crowds, healing, teaching, and feeding, and hadn’t even had a moment to grieve the murder of his cousin, John. Jesus was on the verge of burnout and needed to get away for some downtime. This wasn’t the first time. And it wouldn’t be the last. Jesus seemed to know when he needed to take a break so that he would be able to continue his work. What would happen if we built this into our lives? What would it take for us to clear our calendars and create space for the grace of self-care?

Teach us to rest, O God. We aren’t very good at it, and we need it so that we can be useful in your kingdom work. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
The disciples knew the water. They knew the waves. But that didn’t prevent the chaos of one more storm from battering them. Though hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, and firestorms are trackable, even predictable, there’s nothing we can do to stop them. Power lines go down; streets flood; crops are destroyed; homes are washed away, blown down, or burned up; livelihoods and lives are lost. And when our ability to control our environment is disrupted, it can feel like the chaotic upheaval will last forever.

In the beginning, when chaos was the nature of things, God spoke: “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). In the midst of David’s chaotic reign, God said: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). In the chaotic aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion, Jesus said: “I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20). These weren’t simplistic platitudes. These words are meant to cut through the chaos in our lives—to serve as a mantra we can repeat, a rock to which we can cling, a light that can shine in one corner of the very dark places we find ourselves.

Find me, O God. I am lost in the chaos. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Dead Space

And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear.

Matthew 14:25–26

Respiratory therapists understand “dead space” as the air we take in that doesn’t take part in the oxygen/carbon dioxide exchange because it never gets to our lungs. Even breathing takes energy, yet the faster we breathe, the more we lose the ability to make that important exchange. Though our instincts tell our bodies to speed up, it’s actually better to slow down and breathe deeply. But fear makes that very, very, difficult. Though our body’s response is to anxiously accelerate our breathing, hyperventilation creates the ultimate vicious cycle.

The disciples were caught in a dead-space cycle. The storm had already made them breathless. When they see Jesus walking on water, it sends them right over the edge. They are hyperventilating, trying to get in control. But what they needed to do was stop and be deliberate about what would give them hope. What they needed to do was take a breath. And then another one. And then another.

Holy Spirit, bring us the gift of hope found in deep breaths and slow respiration. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Safe Space

*But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said,*
*“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”*

Matthew 14:27

When Jesus spoke these words—don’t be afraid—they were meant to penetrate the sound and fury of the storm with hope. But if the disciples heard him at all, they must have been mystified: What we need is someone to help row, to help manage the sails! Does Jesus think his words will save us? Does he think this will actually make things better for us?

The good news for the disciples in that boat is that Jesus was never about the quick fix, the easy word, the hurried consolation. When Jesus said, “Do not be afraid,” he reclaimed God’s covenant—a covenant of solidarity, of salvation, of truly safe space. These four words were meant as a reminder that Jesus had not abandoned them and that his connection to them was unbreakable. We are called to offer this same safe space of accompaniment. This is the promise we make every time we say, I’ll pray for you. It’s the hope we give when we say, I’m here for you.

*Holy One, help us mean what we say. Amen.*

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Brave Space

Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

Matthew 14:28–29

In community-organizing space, an important practice is the creation of a “brave space.” In brave space, we recognize that in order to address oppression and inequity, we have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. In order to break down the barriers created by racism, we have to do more than just look at the ways we participate in systems and structures that oppress. We have to struggle with, confess, and try to eliminate them in ourselves, in our families, among our neighbors, and in our churches. This requires vulnerability, trust, and commitment.

Peter’s desire is to be like Jesus. He wants to take up Jesus’ work—to walk bravely at Jesus’ side. But it’s impossible for him to do what Jesus did without putting himself at risk. Peter’s move out of the boat and into brave space is the first (and necessary) step. And we know the end of the story—that brave space extended to Calvary and an unmarked grave.

When we are challenged to change in deep ways, God, be our strength. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Personal Space

He became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Matthew 14:30–31

“Rugged individualism” nurtured the perception that we can be completely independent, totally self-reliant. One place this is clearly seen is in the replacement of the front porch with the fenced in backyard and patio. We perpetuate it, celebrating when our children proclaim: “I can do it by myself!” We embed it by claiming our personal space while communal undertakings, such as worship or community volunteering, often take a back seat.

Maybe Peter was the first “rugged individualist”—always stepping out front to volunteer an idea and to take leadership. Peter failed to understand that when Jesus gathered twelve people around him, situating himself within a larger community, it was because he knew that courage, strength, and skills don’t just appear. Jesus understood that the help that comes forth in the midst of life’s storms emerges from the beauty of community solidarity and the support we find whenever two or three are gathered.

Widen our circle, Lord. Help us see the gift of living in and with community. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Breathing Space

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Matthew 14:32–33

From the experience of the storm to the near drowning of their (foolish) friend, the whole thing must have been pretty horrific. Yet when it was all over, they didn’t collapse or row quickly to shore. They celebrated, acknowledging out loud who Jesus was. And though this story unfolded in a boat on the middle of the sea, Matthew’s listeners understood that in the retelling, they, too, were making a public proclamation that Jesus was the Son of God.

Can we can take a risk and follow their example—proclaiming out loud and on purpose who Jesus is for us? Though we probably won’t face physical death, we could feel the sting of disbelief in a largely nonreligious environment as we go public with our faith. We might not face expulsion from our community, but we might feel the heat of embarrassment rise in our cheeks as friends and neighbors look at us sideways when we tell them who Jesus is for us. But this is our call. May it be so.

Make us bold to speak your name out loud. Give us courage to worship you. Amen.

Debra Avery, Peoria, Illinois
Surprised by the Spirit
Scripture: Genesis 45:1–15

Surprising Grace

So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

Genesis 45:1b

They all thought he was dead. They had sold him to some Ishmaelites and figured they were rid of him. Reuben had always felt badly about it. He had managed to save his brother’s life, but he had still let insecurity and jealousy get the best of him. None of the brothers thought they would ever cross paths with Joseph again, even less did they imagine that they would come to him for help. But perhaps most surprising of all: he does help.

Joseph is so glad to be reunited with his family that he weeps—for lost time, for lost trust, for lost memories. Apologies haven’t yet come, but Joseph does not waste any more time. He has seen the grace of God in his life, and, with God’s help, he is able to extend that grace to his brothers as well—even though they do not deserve it. It’s not a cheap grace. It’s a scandalous grace, one that surprises and challenges everyone, including us.

God, this week, may we be surprised by the giving and receiving of undeserved grace. Amen.

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Surprising Turn of Events

“God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God...”

Genesis 45:7–8a

The Lord works in mysterious ways. I believe that. I know I do not understand all that God has in store nor the purpose for everything under heaven. I also know just how unhelpful it is to face difficult times and then have someone pat my shoulder and tell me God has reasons for everything I’m going through. Those words more often relieve the discomfort of the person speaking than give comfort to the one who is hurting.

In our Scripture, Joseph finds meaning from his suffering for himself—a crucial difference. He was ripped from the only life he knew by his family’s hands. He was enslaved, sexually harassed, and jailed. He feared for his life. Yet he has come to the other side of his distress and seen God’s hand holding him up. God found a way for Joseph out of no way, but I, for one, am grateful no one forced that understanding on him.

Ever-present God, help us to sit with those who suffer and allow them the space to see and find that you are with them as well. Amen.

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
"You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen."

Genesis 45:13a

Surprising Life

Bragging that his brothers would bow down to him is part of what got Joseph in trouble to begin with, but here his words ring a little differently. Having feared him dead for years, Joseph wants his father to know that he is not just alive, but he has been greatly honored for the lifesaving work he has done. Everything has turned out OK—more than OK, really. He sends his brothers back loaded down with good things to help his father believe that such good news could really be true. Although, let’s be honest, he probably wanted to impress his dad too.

When Jacob hears the news, it is as if his son has been resurrected. He sets out immediately to see his once-dead-but-now-alive son. I’m betting that the donkeys and grain Joseph sent didn’t matter to him at all, though they may have helped him believe what he had only dreamed could be true. Joseph was alive. It was the best possible surprise.

Though we worry about impressing others, God, more often it is our presence that brings the greatest joy. Help us to maintain connections that bring us all life. Amen.

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Surprising Abundance

*It is like the precious oil on the head,*
*running down upon the beard,*
*on the beard of Aaron,*
*running down over the collar of his robes.*

Psalm 133:2

The image of oil running over Aaron’s head, beard, and collar is one that is supposed to evoke abundance and joy, but it always makes me feel icky. I know that oil was expensive, that one would never pour it this lavishly, and that I should feel overwhelmed by the blessedness of this extravagance, but I tend to scrunch my nose and twitch a little instead.

Then again, sometimes I get a little twitchy trying to live into abundance anyway. I have more than I need, but I hold onto it more tightly than I ought. My debts are forgiven weekly, but I hesitate to forgive my debtors. Grace is poured over me like this oil over Aaron, yet I still begrudge small things. What am I worried about? Do I think grace will run out? Do I fear the thriving of others? I hope not. Still, if I was pouring that oil, I wonder if it would reach Aaron’s beard.

*Abundant God, help me to open my hands, my heart, my mind, my wallet, and my spirit. Help me rejoice in your abundant love and grace. Amen.*

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Surprised by the Spirit
Scripture: Matthew 15:21–28

Surprising Response #1

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Matthew 15:24

No matter how you slice it, this response by Jesus is surprising. We don’t expect so much from the disciples. They try to send people away all the time, but isn’t Jesus supposed to be different? He heals the leper, gives sight to the blind, and all that jazz. What has made him turn away? Why does he seem to wall off this woman from God’s healing and care?

Some folks argue that he was just testing the woman; he always planned to help her. Maybe. He’s pretty convincing in his deception, if that’s the case. And while that explanation safeguards Jesus from ever being wrong, I’m not sure his answer makes him look any better, quite frankly. I recognize his response, but I wish I didn’t.

God of all people and places, remind us that the lines we draw between us may keep us apart, but they never keep anyone from you. Amen.

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Surprising Response #2

She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Matthew 15:27

If Jesus’ response was surprising, the woman’s is as well. She isn’t cowed by everyone telling her to go away. Her daughter is sick. She needs help. She will do anything to get it, even if that means standing up to men who refuse to see her as more than a begging dog. I don’t know if it is pure guts, desperation, or a little bit of both, but she is tenacious and demanding in all the best senses of the words. She shall not be moved.

I wonder what Jesus thought when she didn’t shrink away? When she didn’t give up or apologize, what went through his mind? Was he impressed with her bravery or frustrated that she wouldn’t give up? I cheer her on. Jesus’ next line makes it seem like he did, too, but I still wonder if he was taken aback at first. She was bold, this surprising woman, and if she was afraid, she didn’t show it.

Persistent God, Psalm 23 says your goodness and mercy will pursue us, but sometimes we must pursue it too. Help us to both seek and be caught. Amen.

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Surprised Response #3

*Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Matthew 15:28

We forget to be surprised by Jesus’ words because this is the response we expected all along, but Jesus went from calling this woman a dog to fulfilling her request all within just a few verses. He had just shut her out, but now her faith has required an adjustment. Her persistence has served as testimony, and she can no longer be ignored. He must act.

I love this story because it places the very humanness of Jesus right alongside his divinity. Don’t we all have those days when we are trying to figure out the limits to what we have to do and who we have to love? This woman reminds Jesus that there are no limits on God’s love and that everyone can be fed at the Lord’s table. We are told that the woman’s daughter is healed instantly when Jesus speaks, but I wonder, did something happen to Jesus then too?

*Gracious God, both human and divine, help us to find the gift in being challenged just as you did.*

*Amen.*

Mamie Broadhurst, Louisville, Kentucky
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian in Nazi Germany known for his opposition to Hitler’s systematic enslavement and destruction of Jewish people. When many members of the churches were silent in the face of genocide, as an act of faith, Bonhoeffer chose to speak out in resistance.

The midwives in the Exodus story faced their own faith dilemma. Should they systematically kill all the male Hebrew babies as commanded, or should they let them live? Oppression—the cruel and unjust use of power and authority—often targets people of different races, classes, and religions. How we respond to the oppression of God’s people is a matter of faith.

Do we value the dignity of humans created in the image of God, or do we exploit those who are different at home and abroad for cheap clothing and food? Do we speak out against systematic racism that costs people their lives and freedom or remain conveniently, comfortably silent?

*God of rescue, we thank you for those who speak and act on behalf of the oppressed. May I have the courage to be one of them. Amen.*

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
From Compassion to Action

_He was crying, and she took pity on him._

Exodus 2:6

One of my children was a colicky baby who cried for many heartbreaking hours at a time. She’d be passed from one set of arms to another as my partner and I tried to soothe her. We walked miles up and down the hallway of our home, singing and gently bouncing her in our arms. As exhausting and frustrating as it was, we didn’t leave her alone with her newborn tears. Like Pharaoh’s daughter, our first response to the sound of a child crying was compassion, followed by action.

Pharaoh’s daughter and, later in the Gospels, Jesus, allow pity or compassion to move them to action for people who are vulnerable or broken. Often though, compassion, literally _suffering with_ someone, makes most of us feel awkward and uncomfortable. Instead of looking at and then reaching out to a crying addict or homeless woman, it’s easier to look and walk away. What would our world be like if we allowed our compassion to inspire us to look and then respond instead of to look and then look away?

_Jesus, we praise you for your ministry to those who are vulnerable and difficult. Help us to do the same. Amen._

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
Escaping the Fear

We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.

Psalm 124:7

The night before I started chemotherapy, I panicked. I realized cancer had caught me in its net, and there was no easy way forward. Treatment promised months of misery, but skipping the treatment meant death. Like many people with a life-altering diagnosis, I looked for an escape. I prayed for instant healing. I searched alternatives online. I bought prayer beads and listened to James Earl Jones read the New Testament as I lay nauseous in the dark. I searched desperately for something that would allow me to break free. I wanted escape. But that was not to be.

Breaking the snare that had caught me was not about escaping the situation but being set free from the fear. Like the psalmist, I had to trust that the Lord was on my side. God’s freedom for me wouldn’t be an instant escape, but a slow miracle coming drip by drip from the chemo bag. God promises to be with me.

Lord, in times of trouble, we trust that you go with us and offer us a way to cope. Amen.

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
As a producer of an overnight talk show, I would screen calls from folks who couldn’t sleep at night and wanted to talk. The host was a kind, gentle man—a healer more than a pontificator. My first question was, “What is your name?” because there were no anonymous callers allowed. “Mrs. Thomas” or “Mrs. Wilson” many of the older women would reply. “No,” I’d say, “What is your first name?” “Mrs. William Thomas,” they’d reply, adding their husband’s first name.

Names offer us identity and grounding—connection to a time, place, or culture. But like women only known by their spouse’s identity, names can confine and trap us. The psalmist recognizes that there is one name that can free us—the name of the Lord. The name of the Lord can help us when we are overwhelmed or angry or even when we can’t sleep. The Bible offers many names for God and compels us numerous times to “call on” the name of the Lord, a God we know and on whom we can depend.

Lord, we call on your name to help us face the challenges of our lives. Amen.

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
One of Us and One with God

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”*

Matthew 16:13

The meeting for vacation Bible school seemed to be going on forever. We had discussed the general theme and then started talking about who had registered. For the small, tightly knit community that meant looking at each child’s information and remembering how they fit into our group. “That’s so-and-so’s grandson,” or “she’s the friend that my nephew brought last year,” or “her parents just bought the old farm on the hill.” Each child had a connection in the history of the church community. When Jesus asks the disciples who he is, they are trying to connect Jesus to their history and their community, to connect him to what they already know. They link him to John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah.

But Jesus’ identity goes beyond his heritage and community. He is the Messiah, Son of the Living God. He is both one of us and at one with God. He is the embodiment of God’s hope and the friend we invite to participate in our lives. Jesus connects us to something bigger than ourselves.

*Jesus, thank you for coming into our lives and connecting us to God. Amen.*

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
Do the Work (of Jesus)

“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Matthew 16:19

“Don’t feed the beast.” That saying has become my shorthand for not escalating the negative emotions that surround me, whether it be angry children, unhappy church members, or political strife. We often hold the keys that allow us to “bind” and “loose” certain things into the world around us. We don’t choose what happens in our lives, but we can choose how we respond.

We can let loose the metaphorical beast with a stream of negative thought, talk, and action when things get stressful. Or we can learn to bind and tame the beast so that it doesn’t hurt us or others.

We can learn to manage our own fear and anger and pain so that we don’t send it out to others. The life and teachings of Jesus give us keys we need to do the emotional and spiritual work needed to manage our responses to the world around us. The keys Jesus gives us include prayer, Scripture, companionship, shared meals, healthy touch, and forgiveness. What other keys has Jesus given you?

Jesus, we are grateful for the keys you have given us. Amen.

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
The Body Renews the Mind

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

We each know how our body responds to fear—a pounding heart, weak knees, or sweaty palms. I’ve experienced this bodily fear when I’ve faced surgery, gone to “rough” neighborhoods to invite kids to vacation Bible school, and stepped into a pulpit. But these responses have also come with renewed insight into what God is doing in my life.

So often we think about “renewing the mind” through study or debate, with the brain leading the way. But neuroscience research is showing us that what happens with our bodies has an impact on our thoughts. What we see, hear, touch, and feel influence how and what we think. This was certainly true of the apostle Paul when he was struck blind on the way to Damascus and heard the risen Christ. His body and his beliefs together underwent a total transformation. We can renew our minds by leading with our bodies, literally stepping out in faith to encounter God in totally transformative ways.

Word become flesh, thank you for the gift of renewal that comes from our bodies and minds. Amen.

Sue Washburn, Apollo, Pennsylvania
Praise the Lord

Glory in [God’s] holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Psalm 105:3

The words of the psalmists can express our praises to God and voice the pain that leaves us too broken to speak. They show us how to speak honestly and openly to God. Pray your own psalm by filling in the blanks of this prayer:

O Lord, I call on you: my God, the one who __________ me. I give you thanks for _______________. Wherever I go, I will share your loving kindness. I will sing your praises.

May my life tell of your wonderful works. May your ____________ be known through my words to others. For holy is your name. My heart rejoices in you.

Lord, I seek your strength in ____________. May I know your ever-presence with me. When overcome with doubt, may I remember your wonderful works. For you have ____________ when I was ____________.

I have seen your miracles, for you have done ____________ in my life. You have guided me and granted me wisdom. For I am your child, chosen by you. Praise the Lord!

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O Lord, you are my song, refuge, wisdom, and redeemer. I will always praise you. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Genuine love is rare in this world. Even in our best intentions, our love is constrained by our human limitations. How, then, do we know what genuine love is?

Paul writes that love is mutual, requiring relationship. We may appreciate things and at times need them, but we cannot genuinely love things. Genuine love was born from the image of God and the breath of life.

Love honors the other. Imagine for a moment how the world would look if we outdid one another in showing honor? Genuine love elevates others.

Love is zealous and shows itself in what we do. As we serve the Lord, love multiplies. Genuine love is abundant. It is not scarce; it will not run out.

Love bears fruit. In times of hopelessness, love offers the joy of hope. In times of suffering, love becomes our patient presence with others. And in all times, genuine love perseveres each time we pray.

Genuine love is accepting God’s love for us so that we may genuinely love others.

God, you are love. Help me hold fast to you so that my love may be genuine. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Saint or Stranger

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Romans 12:13

We are called to love not only in our personal relationships but also in our relationship with the wider world. Paul begins by exhorting us to contribute to the needs of the saints. This is easy enough; why wouldn’t we care for good people? But Paul sets our care for the saints alongside our response to strangers.

First-century hospitality was an intimate act, offered in the home. Hospitality wasn’t measured by the one receiving it but by the character of the person offering it. We rejoice and weep with the ones who do so not because we know them but because it is who we are. Stranger, persecutor, lowly, enemy: it makes no matter.

Reading all of Romans, we find that Paul refers to us in these same ways all the while declaring God’s love. No matter how we came, Christ welcomed us, saint or stranger. Christ recognizes the image of God in us, responding to our deep needs and extending gracious hospitality. May we go and do likewise.

With open arms and great love, you welcomed us.
Dear Jesus, teach us to do the same for others. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Jesus tells the disciples he must suffer and die. Peter rebukes him, and Jesus responds with a rebuke of his own. Neither got the reaction they wanted. Regardless, both their responses were right.

Our feelings can’t really be wrong. We may not think them through completely, and we may base them on incorrect facts or misunderstanding, but they are still what we feel. We should acknowledge and honor them—in ourselves and in others.

Peter could have shared his feelings more appropriately. But he also could have swallowed his doubt, fear, and anger, pushing them down and ignoring them. Had Peter been silent, we may not have received Jesus’ teaching about life and death. Peter may not have stayed to see Jesus transfigured. He may not have been there to deny Jesus in the courtyard or to be a witness to the resurrection.

Jesus can handle all of our feelings. The Word made flesh understands. But first, we must acknowledge these feelings ourselves.

Jesus, help me honor my feelings and those of others. Especially when I am afraid or anguished, may I come to you for understanding. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
What Life Is

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Matthew 16:24

The description of Jesus’ suffering and death was difficult for everyone. This was a path no one would choose, but it was the way it would be. When faced with suffering, Jesus reminds us to set our minds on divine things, even as we struggle through the human things. This isn’t ignoring the realities of our situation but seeing it in the context of the eternal.

Jesus isn’t telling us to ignore our humanity but rather to deny that this life is all we have. As we pick up the cross, we are recognizing our broken humanity while also proclaiming our hope in the resurrection.

Four times in these three verses, Jesus uses the Greek word psuche for “life.” Psuche is more than our biological life. It is the life within us, the eternal fullness of who we are. Jesus teaches us what life really is—and in whom we find it.

Jesus, you showed us that you care for both our bodies and our souls. Knowing the realities of our broken humanity, you walk with us in our suffering while lifting our eyes to the promise of eternal life. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Turning Aside

God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!”
And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

Exodus 3:4–5

Moses saw the burning bush on what started as an ordinary day. Surely a burning bush that did not really burn would catch his eye. But had Moses been scrolling through Twitter or wearing earbuds, he might have missed the extraordinary thing God was doing. Moses might have missed standing on holy ground in the presence of God or missed the call to be part of God’s plan of salvation.

We live most of our lives in ordinary time and have become good at distracting ourselves from the mundane. But have we considered what we might be missing? Could we have been standing on holy ground and not been aware of it?

Maybe it’s time to unplug and be present to what is happening around us. God waits for us to turn aside and notice. It may not be a burning bush, but God is doing the extraordinary in the ordinary around us. Will we turn aside or walk right by?

Holy God, help me to be present to the ordinary in my life so that I may become aware of the extraordinary. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Kings never welcomed Jeremiah’s words because he brought a message of truth they did not want to hear. He was mocked, placed under house arrest, and thrown into a cistern. Recounting his own faithfulness, Jeremiah called out to God in anguish. God was his delight and joy, but these things had been replaced by unceasing pain. As we often do, he wondered how he could suffer so much when he had given God his life.

We wish God’s promise was a life without suffering—or at the very least, we wouldn’t suffer as a result of our faithfulness. It seems a broken contract for God to call us and then allow it all to fall apart. But God doesn’t promise us success either.

God does promise presence. God reminds us that success is not based on whether others are faithful but on whether we are. God promises that ultimately we will be delivered from all that threatens to defeat us.

When the difficulties of faithfulness threaten to prevail, overwhelm me again with the delight and joy of your presence. Amen.

Michelle Henrichs, Mequon, Wisconsin
Sacred Remembrance

*This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.*

Exodus 12:14a

After having promised to kill all the firstborn of the Egyptians and provided detailed instructions for preparing the sacrificial lambs for Passover, God commends this day to his people as a holy day of remembrance. And, for thousands of years, the celebration of Passover has been a cornerstone of faith and tradition for our Jewish brothers and sisters. We, as Christians, might hear echoes of it in the words of Jesus when he says, “do this in remembrance of me.”

Remembrance is a sacred act in which the lines between ourselves and that which we are honoring become blurred. It’s as if our commitment to remembering is so strong and sincere, perhaps out of a fear of forgetting, that we want to take it right into ourselves—as with a Passover Seder or the Last Supper. It seems no coincidence that both sacred acts involve food shared and eaten with others. Perhaps we do this so that we not only honor the past but we also, in our remembrance, model and shape the future.

_Holy God, remember me when you come into your kingdom. Amen._

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario
What about Those New-Fangled Songs?

*Praise the LORD!*

*Sing to the LORD a new song.*

Psalm 149:1

I could see the displeasure on her face before she even got to me at the back of the church. “I didn’t know any of those new-fangled songs today! Why don’t we ever sing the old ones?” Choosing hymns for Sundays is always a fraught exercise: there are so many beloved, beautiful old favorites but also so many new ones waiting to be discovered, sung, and loved. The psalmist tells us to “sing to the LORD a new song” so that we don’t get stuck in our old ways of thinking about God, our faith, and our role as disciples.

If we sing only old songs or think and do everything as we always have, we’re destined to see both the world and God in the same old ways. Yet God is always doing a new thing (Isa. 43:19); we will be able to perceive it only if we get out of our ruts and routines and discover—and indeed sing—new songs.

*Help me listen and sing new songs to you, O Lord, even as I cherish the old ones. Amen.*

Daniel Benson, Toronto, Ontario