

Congregational Lenten Devotional

2025

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of Royal Oak



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Spirituality | Service | Sharing

*A*s far as we know, this is the first time that First Presbyterian Church of Royal Oak has compiled a seasonal congregational devotional. The main goal of this booklet is to serve as a spiritual guide for the Lenten season for members of the church. But there are some other goals wrapped up in it, too! The Worship & Nurture Committee also intended this project to be a way for members to reflect on their own spiritual journeys and for those who read the entries to get to know other folks in the congregation.

As I have read through and compiled all the entries, I have been overwhelmed by the deep faith expressed here. Many people have vulnerably shared about their life experience and encounters with God. It is no easy task to put words to our experiences of faith in Christ, so I commend those who have taken the risk and the opportunity to do so.

For those who read these entries, I suspect that you will feel deeply blessed, as I have, to peak through this window into your fellow members' experiences. I hope that these entries will guide all of us in our reflection and prayer this season. And that what we read here may encourage deeper conversation and relationships among our congregation.

Many blessings for your Lenten journey,

Pastor Emma

Ashes and Dust—Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday invites us to approach the season of Lent. The symbols of ashes and dust remind us of the frailty and uncertainty of human life.

March 5

Derek Helenberger:

Hearing the phrase “ashes and dust,” I think of Proximo’s lines from the movie *Gladiator* “...We mortals are but shadows and dust. Shadows and dust, Maximus!” Similarly, “ashes and dust” also evokes feelings of mortality. In Genesis 3:19, God says to Adam, “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” emphasizing Adam’s and humanity’s mortality. Later, Genesis 18:27 reads “Abraham answered, ‘Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.’” Abraham contrasts his mortality with God as he bargains with the Lord, attempting to save Sodom.

The phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” is the more familiar form of ashes and dust. Per Google, there are 5,062 songs with this phrase as lyrics, not counting the well-known song from David Bowie with only “ashes to ashes” among its lyrics. Although “ashes and dust” aren’t found in that order in the Bible, they’ve migrated into common usage. The more familiar form of “ashes to ashes, dust to dust” comes from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer funeral service. This is an appropriate appropriation of dust and ashes, as a funeral service is flush with reminders of mortality.

Ash Wednesday symbolically marks Lent’s beginning, and can literally mark the beginning for those who choose to have ashes applied to their skin in an Ash Wednesday service.

Learning—Opening Days of Lent

God calls us to learning during the season of Lent, as we learn more about our faith and ourselves.

March 6

Melissa Ross:

Romans 12:2 (ESV) *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

Attitude: A lesson learned

After a long day of work where things just weren't going as planned and feelings of inadequacy and being overwhelmed, I picked up my daughter from school. “How was your day?,” I asked her. “Awesome,” she said and I thought, “Must be nice.” But truth be told, this was always her response. Each day when asked about her day, “Awesome” was always the reply. It was so often that I heard this reply that I suddenly wanted to know what circumstances would create a different reply, so I asked her.

“So, What has to happen for your reply to be negative? What would cause you to say “not so good” or “Oh, it was okay”?”

And just as quick as the question came, her response without hesitation was “Nothing, Why would I let something that happened ruin my attitude?”

And there it was, the best response I could have ever asked for. I had no idea she had such wisdom at a young age. It was then that I realized. She was right. Circumstances do not have to determine attitude. We are children of God that have been blessed beyond measure. Let us live as such and not as if we are of the world.

March 7

Joan Wesa:

I think of Lent as a time of **learning** how to slow down and ignore or put away my everyday worries and concerns; and **learning** to substitute instead a time to listen and reflect upon and implement what God is leading me to do.

March 8

Derek Helenberger:

Lent is the season of the church calendar where believers prepare to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus at Easter. This preparation can take many forms, including repentance, reflection, and fasting.

Both of my children were born in the spring, with one born during Lent and one born after Easter. I learned to be a parent of a newborn during Lent. I definitely did not feel fully prepared when my oldest was born five and a half weeks early. We had not even finished the childbirth class we were attending. I did go to the next class and report that the baby had arrived early, mother and child were fine, and we would not be back to finish the class. Despite not feeling fully prepared, I learned that I was prepared enough. I was prepared to feed the baby; to swaddle the baby; to hold the baby; to change the baby's diaper; and to lay the baby down to sleep. So while I did not feel fully prepared, I had enough of a foundation that I was prepared enough.

My preparation for Easter takes many forms, including prayer, readings, and some fasting. While I may not feel like I am fully prepared, I have enough of a foundation that I am prepared enough.

Journey—First Week of Lent

We often view the season of Lent as a journey. The journey may be a physical one or a journey in faith. The metaphor of a journey is also a common one that can guide our faith.

March 9

Denise Huebner:

Deuteronomy 31:8 *“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”*

I can visualize my journey with our Lord easier through physical ways. I walk everyday knowing the Lord is by my side—either holding me up or pushing me forward.

A couple years ago, we visited the Finger Lakes in Upstate New York. We were in search of waterfalls. It was always the thrill of the hunt. Some were easy, right off the highway, some were short treks and some long hikes. We went in August and some were dried up from lack of rain. Most falls had some form of signage to help us find our way. There was one however, with no assists. It had twists and turns and forks in the paths.

We worked together to choose which way to go. We got deeper into the forest. No one else was around and we were unsure if we made good choices or not. We decided to turn back. We thought we were on our own!

Of course, we weren't! God was with us—finding our way back and leading us on to the next waterfall. He still had much for us to see, in all the glorious beauty of God's earth. It was maybe a setback (or so it seemed) but, God is always with us on our journey—leading us on—one step at a time!

March 10

Helen Dusenbury:

One memorable trip I took was to an island called Spitzbergen in the archipelago of Svalbard off the coast of Norway. It's near the Arctic Circle, and even though we went there in the spring, it was cold. Fortunately, we wore warm winter jackets and long underwear, with plenty of inner wear.

We often left the ship to take short trips in a Zodiac to uninhabited islands in the archipelago. I was amazed at the scenery which consisted of huge, dark mountains seemingly floating on the ocean, bare of vegetation, and empty. I was soon to find out that the emptiness was a mirage. The residents were birds and animals! Small plants were growing through the snow.

As we disembarked from the Zodiac, (I was glad we wore waterproof boots) we waded through the shallow icy water onto the island. We were encouraged to walk around the island to explore. The going was tough trudging over the soft tundra, so I found a spot to sit on a rock while the others went farther afield. The amazing sight in the distance was a "pile" of walruses, cuddled together having a nap. They didn't move much and seemed to be enjoying the day resting. I looked up and saw flocks of birds, thousands of them, flying around the cliffs. These were kittiwinks and guillemots, companion residents who nest in the cliffs. Small plants grew near the rocks.

The sights were beautiful and thrilling, a treat for the eyes. But what occurred to me most was the quiet. There were no traffic sounds, no people's conversations, no phones ringing, no TV's, no restaurants with background music, no ringing doorbells. I had never been fully aware of the noisy world I lived in until I sat on that rock and experienced the quiet. The Island reminded me that we sometimes need quiet to fully realize God's presence. I felt the spiritual quiet in company with the birds and animals.

During Lent there is a similar quiet, although not quite like that island. Lent is my time for reflection as I did on the island. I was alone but not lonely, even though I had lost sight of our group. I found myself completely out of sight from people. Lent is a time to remove myself from others and reflect on God's presence. I became strongly aware of God's presence then, and now when I am in prayer. God's presence is with us always, and I am thankful!

March 11

Heather Gleason:

Winter is hard. The long nights, gray days, and snow on snow in the "bleak midwinter" affect many of us, I think, both psychologically and physically. And when we're in the time of Lent, at least in our area of the world, we are dragging ourselves through the end of the gray, longing for the sun, warmth, and a little green. I think about the metaphorical "winter" journeys I've experienced in recent years—chronic illness, going back to college during the pandemic, worrying about a struggling child, and loving fiercely family members who struggle with afflictions, those in hospice care, and those that leave us. But with each of these life events, there was always a sense of acceptance or resolve and eventually, peace. I've recently learned that while I might not be able to control some of the "tough stuff," if I quiet my mind, just for a little while, and send that stuff up to God, I find that He is there with me along my journey. And then, I can breathe again. I don't particularly "give up" anything for Lent, but sometimes I'll replace that tradition with adding something positive each day like a little extra "gratitude" or "kindness." I find that trying to be a source of light or warmth helps to get through the gray because Spring is coming, and spoiler alert...Jesus lives!

March 12

Gretchen Hirsch:

Psalm 16:8 *"I keep the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."*

Hind sight is great! For me, hind sight has put into sharp focus just how much the Holy Spirit has been present my life. From a childhood guided by loving parents in a magical location on the shores of Lake Michigan, to an education and career I loved, 'falling into' the purchase of a home in a wonderful neighborhood, and an unbeatable retirement, every step has been guided by a loving God. At the time, they seemed to be happy coincidences.

Several situations have been blatant ‘God is here!’ reminders: a deep pink and purple sunset just before my father died that no one else seemed to have seen, eating (at Linda Wade’s funeral luncheon) with a total stranger from VA who turned out to be the daughter of a woman I grew up with, and side-stepping an unnecessary surgery.

I am so thankful that now I can see how God has been present in my life, and hopefully in yours, too.

March 13

Elaine Roseborough:

Many years ago, I "was born of the spirit" as I made the decision to become a disciple of Jesus. That decision embarked me on a spiritual journey as God has led me to a mature and deep faith. As I look back over the years, I can identify times when God has opened my eyes and directed me through challenges and my faith deepened. One such challenge has been when I have doubts about the validity of my beliefs. There have been times when occurrences, statements of others, events, etc. have caused serious doubts to enter my heart. With God's help I have been able to face my doubts squarely and work through them. Invariably I found that the experience taught me something important and as a result my faith grew stronger and deeper. So now, if I experience doubts, I don't despair. I rejoice! God is speaking to me! There is something important God wants me to know.

March 14

Norm Bayne:

Galatians 6:2 *“Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

No one should ever think that they are ever totally independent and don't need help from others. The church functions only when members all work together for the common good. Do you know someone who has suffered a loss or experienced a tragedy in their life? Maybe this person needs someone to just listen patiently. Or possibly you have encountered someone facing a tremendous task that is just too much for one person to accomplish. Here is where other people need to work together for the common good. This world is made up of diverse cultures where we all need to assist others without prejudice or judgement.

March 15

Lynne Sullivan:

Romans 5:3-5 “And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

When I reflect on my journey of health and hope since 2014, I realize that my diagnosis of a brain tumor led me to early “retirement,” acceptance, and increased involvement in this church and my community.

From the beginning of my journey, I felt scared of course. I also had faith that things would be okay, and I was not going to die. I relied heavily on prayer and on my friends and family. Some journeys allow you to prepare or plan, but the journey of a health challenge doesn’t include time for taking out a “map” or doing much research before the event. Praying is a way to prepare, to reassure yourself that a higher power has your best interest and outcome in mind. When everything feels beyond your control, a journey of faith is needed.

You can rely on yourself to do the best you can and rely on expert medical doctors to do the best they can, but ultimately, it feels like only the greater power of God can affect the outcome.

If the outcome of a journey is not what you hoped for, I have learned that you need to try to travel with acceptance and optimism. Do the best you can and ask for help when needed. Accept change instead of becoming negative. Think about what is possible rather than what has been lost or left behind.

Wilderness—Second Week of Lent

Jesus spent time in the wilderness where he faced obstacles and remembered his identity as God’s own. Wilderness times can be both challenging and powerful for our faith.

March 16

Andrea Richards:

When I think of Jesus alone in the wilderness, I often think he must have felt confused, maybe scared, and questioning why God allowed it. We all experience times in the wilderness—when situations don’t make sense, we suffer and long to understand why, God.

Several years ago, I experienced the loss of my father and the loss of a pregnancy within days of each other. One month later, my husband told me he wanted a divorce. I learned he had been having an affair. I have never felt so much pain. I was grieving the loss of my father, my baby and my marriage. It was devastating and I didn’t know how to cope—but I knew how to pray and pray I did. I had long conversations with God asking for his guidance.

I imagine Jesus felt the same way in the desert, but like me, he knew God was with him every step of the way never failing him. I felt God’s presence with every tear I shed, and I felt His encouragement when I felt all was lost. After some time had passed and I began to heal, I realized all was *not* lost. God saved me from an unhappy marriage and put me on a new path that has led me to new opportunities and happiness.

One of my most favorite Bible verses is I Thessalonians 5:18, which says, “Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” I recite it to myself often as it reminds me that no matter what I’m going through, it’s a part of God’s plan and with His love and guidance I can get through anything!

March 17

Beau Woehrle:

Into the wilderness and back

In our modern world, escaping into the wilderness—away from the noise of civilization—can feel nearly impossible. Yet, sometimes, we don’t even realize when we’ve already stepped into it. After retiring from the service, I struggled to find my way. Desperate to prove I could navigate life on my own, I pushed forward blindly, believing I was making

the right decisions. In truth, I was walking away from the good in my life—straight into the wilderness—without even knowing it.

My family warned me not to make choices I couldn't undo, while friends cheered me on, convinced this was my next chapter. But through it all, God was at work, moving in ways I couldn't see, preparing to nudge me when the time was right. It took setbacks, failures, and moments of deep uncertainty for me to finally listen.

In that wilderness, I learned hard truths: I'm not a salesman, I struggle with stress, and most importantly—I must trust God's plan. Now, though life isn't always easy, I listen, watch, and walk where He leads.

March 18

Melissa Ross, Part 1:

Webster Dictionary defines “wilderness” as an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community. I can provide a more descriptive definition and example of wilderness.

As I entered the building, and our eyes met, several thoughts ran through my mind, “Does he recognize me? If he does, will he know the year and the day that we are in? Is he experiencing peace? And to be transparent, how long will I have to stay?”

What a different thought for me. I was the youngest of four and the only girl. As a child, I idolized my dad and always wanted the most time with him. As we grew older, I no longer idolized him but loved him deeply and still cherished every minute we spent together. We had a bond that I thought was unbreakable and then dementia entered our lives and crushed the bond with one blow that continued to break and crack throughout the days of his life.

My dad died in May of 2015 after suffering with dementia. For some, this can be an experience that lasts for many years but for my dad and those surrounding him, it came quick and after about 3 years, it was over. Quick but gradual. Dementia leaves a person so reliant on so many other people that one person's illness becomes the story of several others. There is enough left of the person to raise a smile, remember a happy day, enjoy something tasty, or hum along to a tune on the radio but slowly the activity level reduces, the physical issues become more frequent. The organs still appear to function but the signals and messages controlling them are weaker and more confused. Eventually the body closes down, the vital signs disappear and the curtain closes.

Experiencing someone with dementia is the definition of walking through the wilderness.

The wilderness is a scary place. The wilderness is a dangerous place. The wilderness can kill you! In his book, *Drink Deeply with Delight*, Howard Hanger says this about the wilderness: “The problem with the wilderness is that you’re not in charge. The problem with the wilderness is, things aren’t organized. The problem with the wilderness is, life doesn’t run on schedule—or at least your schedule. The problem with the wilderness is... it’s wild.” I could literally take out the words “the wilderness” and replace it with dementia and it would all be true. True for those with dementia and true for those that love someone with dementia.

But can the wilderness also be a holy place?

March 19

Melissa Ross, Part 2:

I find it very significant that before Jesus called his first disciples, preached his first sermon, or healed his first leper, he deliberately chose to spend 40 days in the wilderness—certainly without a compass and probably without a tent. Why did he do this? Howard Hanger gives this clue: “When it comes to discovering who you are and what you’re about, never discount the value of a little time on the wild side.” Jesus was on the verge of discovering who he really was and what he should do with the rest of his life. Perhaps he instinctively knew he needed time alone with his God, stripped of all the familiar people and trappings of his ordinary life. He needed to encounter not only himself, but also his God “face to face” (in a way). He needed to trust God to show him the next step to take in his life.

Before my dad experienced “the wilderness,” he was very involved in his faith. We often attended church together and he chose the living center that he spent the last years of his life in because of their inclusion of Bible studies, religious activities and belief in the living savior. And then after he passed and we cleaned out his room, we found several copies of different devotionals and many of them had passages that were underlined. I was not surprised by this. My dad was an avid reader but in the time of experiencing his wilderness, when he needed time with God and to come face to face with his own mortality, he reached out.

And for me personally, I was in the wilderness every time I saw him hoping to see *him* and not this new version of him; every time I wanted to call him and share my day with him but knowing that was no longer

possible; every time I wanted my new beautiful daughter to experience the love of a grandpa but knowing that he didn't even know who she was or understand how she was suddenly part of our life. Something that should bring such joy was bringing loneliness and discomfort. But it was also bringing me closer to God. I was not in control and was left with just giving it up, loving my dad for who he was and still cherishing the time that we did have together. I stopped trying to control the destination and just experienced the love of my dad and the love of God and the true frailty of life.

The words in the song "The Wilderness" by the Issacs express what I was feeling best:

*I know it feels all wrong
But the wilderness ain't home
You won't have to be there long
So keep movin' on

You might have to wait
You might have to pray more than you usually do
You may be afraid
You may have lost your faith in all you ever knew
But God won't lead you where He won't keep you
And He'll be with you
In the wilderness*

I hope whenever you experience the wilderness, you are able to find God. The wilderness can be a scary place where we are not in charge, where we do a lot of waiting, where we experience loneliness. But it can also be the place where, like Jesus, we encounter God in a new and life-changing way. For God is always with us in the wilderness. It is the place where God does some of God's most creative and beautiful work!

March 20

Chris Klein:

Genesis 2:8-9 *"And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."*

In the Bible, references to trees can symbolize life, growth, fertility, God's wisdom, creativity, and provision. The following are examples: The

Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; The acacia tree where the Israelites built a tabernacle out of its wood to house the ark of the covenant; The fig tree which provided food and helped the economy in ancient times; The cedar of Lebanon which symbolizes Mary's spiritual stature and perfection; The sycamore tree which symbolizes regeneration and transformation; The oak tree which symbolizes strength; The palm tree symbolizing victory; The tamarisk tree representing God's provision.

Jesus wandered among olive trees which are frequently mentioned in the Bible. Perhaps he found answers and guidance as he wandered through the slow-growing olive trees, thinking about the how they offered shelter, oil, fruit, building materials and such. Take some time during your Lenten journey to wander through trees at your home or local park. Notice the tree roots, bark, branches, and leaves. Do you know any history of your trees? What do they offer you and your neighbors?

Think about it: Think about a special tree in your neighborhood or where you grew up. Do you have any memories of interacting with it? What kind of tree is/was it? How does/did it provide for creatures in your neighborhood? Is it still there? Does it symbolize something to you?

Is there a person who has instilled in you the value of trees, nature or environmental concerns? How did they go about showing you the value of the natural world? Plant a tree in honor or in memory of that person(s).

March 21

Kay Aquilina:

1 John 4:16 *"Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them."*

I love being the namesake of my maternal aunt, Katherine (Kay) Vogtmann. She was a member of our church and I was favored with our special relationship for 66 years. During the last few years of her life, I visited with her often and I knew our time together was limited. I wanted to be near at the time of her passing from this realm to the next.

It was time to leave for a planned vacation to the mountains and wilderness. I was torn and asked God to keep her alive until I returned. Before hiking to a very high elevation, I made sure my cell phone was not in a mode where I would receive calls or roaming charges. At the mountain summit, my phone rang! My aunt's son called to say she had passed. Crying, I concluded the call and looked around. The panorama

was spectacular; the perfect place to reflect and celebrate her life and to ask for God's help to keep me from blaming myself for being away.

God will take care of me. As the verse says, "Whoever lives in love, lives in God and God in them." I keep my aunt in the altar of my heart which God has built.

March 22

Chris Klein:

Psalm 104:10-18, 33-35; Psalm 104:12 *"By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches."*

Using Senses in Our Natural World

*In the hush of ancient trees, my soul finds rest,
Where sunlight dances, dappled on the crest,
A symphony of wind through leaves so green,
A whispered language, only nature's seen.*

*The earth beneath my feet, a grounding beat,
The scent of pine, a wild and earthy sweet,
A river's song, a melody so pure,
In this embrace, my spirit feels secure.*

*The hawk's keen cry, a soaring call to flight,
The deer's soft gaze, in the fading light,
I am a thread within this tapestry grand,
A tiny part of this untamed land.*

*With every breath, I feel the wild unwind,
A primal rhythm, etched within my mind,
In the wilderness, my spirit truly thrives,
A connection deep, where my true self survives.*

Think about it: How does this poem capture the feeling of nature? Which sense(s) is the speaker using to connect? Do you use your senses when in nature? What do you see, smell, touch, taste and feel? Do you ever explore nature at night? Do parts of nature bring you peace and a sense of belonging? Do you feel closer to God as you explore?

Turning—Third Week of Lent

During Lent, we are called to turn away from sin and to turn toward God. Other words for this are repentance or penitence. Sometimes a change in direction can bring us closer to God and into deeper spirituality.

March 23

Pat Johnson:

When I retired in 2021 from healthcare chaplaincy, I had several health issues that needed addressing. That is what I did, and when I felt better, I kept asking God what God wanted me to **do**. My job was so satisfying and creative. I missed it! I began to feel as if I needed to **do** more than I was doing. I kept asking. And I kept not listening. When nothing “meaningful” came my way, I was listless and a bit depressed.

Honestly, I had not really fully recovered from the health issues. Some were still lingering or needed to be fully accepted as is. God kept trying to tell me that God was with me, directing my path. It wasn't until I stopped struggling that I faced a new direction. It meant that I needed to be completely open to what God was bringing my way, and mostly, it meant that I was **doing enough**. God was not displeased with me because I wasn't **doing** more. I think God was saddened that I kept struggling to engage in more activity.

These days, I am much more at peace because I have accepted God's way instead of my own way. It meant turning to face the other way. It is riskier and less predictable, but it makes me depend on God more instead of myself!

March 24

Julie Thomas:

Ephesians 6:13 *“Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand firm.”*

After thinking about this verse and reading it, I believe it is something we need to read and pray on every day. We do not know what will happen to us every day when we step out of the door, nor how Satan will try to attack us. But we must be prepared. God's suit of armour is key to being on guard against the enemy these days. With God's help, we can turn away from evil and turn toward God.

March 24

Ken Millinger:

Last summer I was playing horseshoes with my nephews. We were at my sister's. My nephew Bryan was home from Las Vegas. He doesn't get back to Ohio very often. I had made a call earlier in the year to my sister emphatically stating that I wanted to see Bryan the next time he came to town.

This might not have happened had I not taken a Lenten Bible study with Pastor Neeta Nichols a few years ago. There wasn't much I liked about the class except for one thing. She passed out a handout from Pope Francis suggesting things to give up for Lent. One of them was bitterness. "Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy," he said. The Holy Spirit made me search my heart. And there it was. It was my sister's first husband. I was a teenager, and Bryan was a toddler when they divorced. Her ex played with me and my army men, he taught me how to throw a curve ball, we fished. We played with firecrackers.

I had chosen not to speak to him after the divorce. I never visited Bryan in Las Vegas. I was afraid I would encounter his biological father. At the end of the Lenten season, after Pastor Neeta's class, I decided to leave the bitterness behind.

I am planning a trip to Las Vegas later this year when the rodeo is in town. I can go with Bryan. I will experience joy as promised!

March 26

Douglas Ryan:

Growing up, my family attended church services at FPCRO nearly every Sunday. It became a routine. When I entered the workforce, I chose a career that involved shift work. When I started on the job, I was assigned to the first shift (day shift). This prevented me from attending church services every other Sunday because I was at work in the mornings. While I enjoy my career, I was disappointed that my shift prevented me from attending church as often as I wanted. After I accrued enough time on the job to pick my shift, I chose the afternoon shift. This shift allows me to attend services more regularly and participate in the Chancel Choir, among other church activities. During Lent, God calls us to "turn," to change direction. I am glad that a change in direction occurred in my professional life that allowed me to resume my frequent attendance of Sunday services at FPCRO.

March 27

Amanda Curry:

Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

When life is difficult or doesn't go as planned it's easy to get angry or want to give up, it takes a lot to learn to trudge through bad times and continue on.

God has given me the gift of perseverance, something I wouldn't have, if I hadn't turned to him during the hardest time in my life.

In 2020, one of my worst fears came true: my aplastic anemia was no longer in the "watch and wait phase" and I required a bone marrow transplant. It was the middle of the pandemic, I was already terrified of leaving my house, and now I would have to endure a long hospital stay with no visitors. On the day of my admission, my husband came with me to get my central line placed, and then was able to spend a mere 30 minutes with me in what would be my room for the next three-plus weeks before we said our goodbyes. I would not see my girls (Charlotte age three and Madelyn, three months old), during this time either, except for window waves and FaceTime calls. Trying to remain positive and hopeful when you're isolated is challenging. I had no control over even the smallest things throughout my day, and had to turn to God for strength. After a week of chemotherapy, transplant, and engraftment, I was finally on my way home after 21 days, only to have a viral reactivation that sent me back to the hospital two days later. This virus, amongst other things, caused me to lose my new graft, and I was at God's mercy to give me strength to endure a second bone marrow transplant. The second time around I was extremely depressed, and honestly not sure if my body or mind would be able to endure it all over again. I lost all motivation and spent many hours just binging TV in bed or crying and asking "why me?" Had it not been for my family and God, I'm not sure if I would have found the drive to keep going. Thankfully, after this round of more intense chemotherapy, I engrafted again, and was able to come home. To say the hard part was over is an understatement. I had another two viral reactivations which sent me back to the hospital along with three bouts of sepsis.

Throughout all of these trials I prayed, and gave my worries to God.

March 28

Joelle Jarrait:

One of my favorite things is to visit the shores of the Great Lakes. I find a peace and a connection with God in the sounds and power of the water. I often get lost in the motion of the waves coming to shore and going back out again. They move as far as they can go and then turn to go back. I am reminded of how even the waves obey at the command of God. And then I think, if the waves can obey, then why can't I?

How often do we test the boundaries before we feel the need to turn around and move back toward God? We easily get caught up in things that take us off course. When we make a turn toward God, we turn away from the things that interfere with our relationship with God. Lent is an opportunity to take that turn and let go of what holds us back from a deeper connection with the one who created us. What can we let go of to make room for prayer? What spiritual practices might we try to make time and space for God?

Jesus turned toward the cross and endured unimaginable pain and death. All so that we are able to turn toward God who waits patiently and with grace for us to obey as we are redeemed children of God.

March 29

Suzanne Lewand:

Repentance and penitence have such a negative feel to me. The implication is that we have done wrong, and need to be punished in order to be forgiven. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, "Penitence implies sad and humble realization of and regret for one's misdeeds." "Repentance adds the implication of a resolve to change." When you look at these definitions, the idea of repentance or penitence, or turning from sin, seems a bit less daunting. For me personally, this is much more in line with what the Bible teaches us; that we are fallible and prone to sin. But Jesus teaches us that if we recognize this and strive to live as he teaches by treating others with love and compassion, respecting the world God has given us, and following the teachings of the Bible, by God's grace, we are forgiven.

Change is almost always difficult, but I find that if I break a change down into small steps, it becomes easier. I see the Lenten journey as a path with many turns. At each, we have the opportunity to look at ourselves and make a decision of which way to turn. Who is the person God is leading us to be? How can we use each turn to get us closer to

that ideal? The changes do not have to be completely life altering. Even the smallest turn towards the way God is leading us brings us closer to the life God is leading us to.

Self-examination—Fourth Week of Lent

Examining our lives and faith helps reveal who we are and who God is calling us to be. God can reveal much about us when we take a closer look at our own hearts.

March 30

Carol Hilliard:

I am a work in progress. Each morning, I pray to the Lord for guidance to help me be kind, help me to not respond to words of hate, ignore false prophets and be a faithful servant.

As a small child I was taught the prayer, “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep.” At the age of five, I was invited to attend a Methodist Vacation Bible School. The teacher, also a neighbor, gave me an oval wooden plaque with a likeness of Jesus on it. On the back she added the scripture reference John 3:16. This was my first Bible verse. At the age of ten, my family joined St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church. I was baptized, confirmed and married there. I sang in the youth choir and taught Sunday school to three- and four-year-old’s. Fast forward, Bill and I moved to Royal Oak and due to a close friend’s invitation, we joined FPCRO.

Late in life my mother had many hospitalizations. On one occasion a nun approached my sister and I and asked if we would like to pray. My sister responded that a prayer would be fine but we were not religious. I thought to myself, “that doesn’t include me, I attend church.” At that point only by “attending” church” was I walking the talk?

I am now striving to walk the talk. I want to be true in saying, “Here I Am Lord” and I pray when the time is right God will respond by saying “faithful servant, you did well.”

March 31

Kevin Schnieders:

Psalm 139:23-24 “*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*”

I believe my purpose in this life is to help put people in front of a better mirror. How can I walk beside someone, listen for understanding, and provide support on their journey?

Lent provides an opportunity for me to stand in front of my own mirror. It is an opportunity to examine how I am living my faith in my everyday life. How can I solicit meaningful feedback from people who care about me? How can I continue to learn and grow? How can I use the strengths God has given me to be of additional service?

I hope to experience a Lenten season where my self-examination yields greater perspective and understanding of how I can follow the Holy Spirit and serve others in the most meaningful ways.

April 1

Ken Millinger:

1 Kings 6:7 *“The house, while it was being built, was of stone prepared at the quarry, and neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool was heard in the house while it was being built.”*

There is a lesson to be learned from the construction of Solomon's Temple. This edifice, dedicated to the glory of God, was built in silence. The stones were prepared at the quarry, meaning no noise at the building site. This silent construction symbolizes the deep, inner work God performs within each of us.

I am in the process of building an invisible workshop. I am writing this from my invisible porch on January 20, a spare second-floor bedroom that has become my sanctuary of creativity and reflection. It's in this heated, invisible porch where I often retreat to commune with God and meditate on His Word.

The act of building, whether it be a physical structure or our spiritual lives, requires intention. Solomon's Temple was not just a building; it was a sacred space dedicated to God. Similarly, our lives are meant to be living temples where God's presence dwells.

In our invisible workshops, the tools we use are prayer, meditation, Scripture, and worship. These tools help us shape our character, refine our thoughts, and align our will with God's will. Just as the stones for the temple were prepared with care and precision, our spiritual lives require the same meticulous attention.

April 2

Robin Hanks:

Lent is a time for reflection both spiritually and personally. It is an opportunity to think about our relationship to God and how God's word impacts our lives. Self-examination allows one to listen to the inner self and think how God works through us.

April 3

Ellen Burns:

Psalm 139:23-24 *“Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”*

Self-examination for many of us is not an easy thing. It can be painful and threatening to look inward at ourselves in the way that we look at and judge others. It is so easy to coast along at a comfortable place in our faith journey. But Lent is the perfect time to break through that barrier of comfortableness and to do some reflection on ourselves and our faith. Looking inward can be difficult for many people. Many years ago, during my marriage to a psychotherapist, I underwent therapy to deal with personal issues. The therapist told me that I was introspective, and thus a good candidate for the analytical type of therapy that she did. I took it as a compliment but still found the process often agonizing. It did end up helping me in the long run. But I still find it hard to bare my soul to God sometimes and open myself up to what He wants for me, and how I can atone for my sinful ways. I tend to cling with all my might to comfortable spots and to resist change and moving in new directions. That's my nature. I pray to God, especially during Lent, to open me up to spiritual growth and a deeper relationship with God. *“Dear God, help me to open myself to you and to listen to your calling. Please show me how I may grow in my faith and love for you and your Word.”*

April 4

Lindsey Harris:

During challenging times, I ask God for guidance, wisdom and strength. Afterwards, I reflect and ask myself, *“What is God revealing? What is he trying to teach me?”*

I have been a pediatric nurse for almost 40 years. My personal life experiences have shaped my professional life the most and how I

provide care. I have been the one waiting for a phone call to hear the next step for a loved one's medical plan that sometimes never comes. I have watched anxiety soar in a dear friend or family member because of poor communication from their medical team.

These experiences have directly impacted how I provide care to my patients and their families. In these experiences, God is giving me the vision to help others. In these challenges, God is revealing the gifts He has given and how to use them.

I have been in my current position since the start of COVID. The hours are long and sacrifices have been made, but I feel this opportunity was given to me to use the gifts that have been revealed to me through my own challenges and experiences. At the end of the day, every phone call and email is answered. I leave knowing I have attempted to reduce anxiety, answer questions or provide a better understanding of the unknown.

I am who I am today because of self-examination, combined with thoughtful reflection during the challenges and life experiences put before me.

April 5

Julie Matthews:

Many years ago I was helping with Vacation Bible School at our church. The theme song that year was "How Great Thou Art" and we sang it every day, several times. By the end of the week it was imbedded in my memory. Since then, when I encounter something awesome in our natural world, especially when walking on the beach by the ocean, I find myself singing 'When I look out from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze, then sings my soul my savior God to Thee, how great Thou art, how great Thou art...A walk in the woods, a gentle rain, thunder clouds, or a beautiful rainbow, the flowers in the garden, all this and more touch my soul and remind me of the greatness of God. I find myself singing or repeating the words in my head. All we need to do is look around, sing our praise, and thank God for His abiding presence in our lives. The last verse of the song, 'When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation and take me home what joy will fill my heart...How great Thou art! This hymn is such a beautiful affirmation to remind us of His amazing, abiding love.

Spiritual Practices—Fourth Week of Lent

Observing a holy Lent often includes the invitations to prayer, fasting, and works of love. Various spiritual practices can become meaningful in our lives and guide us through this season.

April 6

Steve Kucharski:

Jeremiah 29:11-14 *“For surely, I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart.”*

Lord I have tried, but I can't do it by myself. These days there are more than enough things to worry about. From chauffeuring the children from place to place, added responsibilities at work, increased rush hour traffic, balancing relationships with increased political tension, not to mention what's for dinner. Feeling overwhelmed and out of control may seem to be the norm. Life is full of challenges but it is also extremely rewarding. Taking the time to reflect on all that is good in your life, along with all the blessings you have received, can be comforting. Take time to pray, lifting to the Lord the needs of your heart and giving thanks for all the good in your life. The Lord is waiting to hear from you.

April 7

Kay Rediers:

Sometimes I just find a quiet place and just be. No agenda, specific prayer, or intention. Just take the time to feel the quiet energy wash over me. It can be energizing and renewing, and helps me to come to a place where I can focus on prayer, reflect on something that I may be struggling with, or even come out of a creative block. Just allowing the stillness and openness to what God has in store for me is comforting and renewing.

April 8

Victoria Dusenbury:

We pray about health, family and friends during Lent. Jesus died for our sins. Lent starts when it is dark and cold and moves with more light and warmth towards Easter. Acts of love and spirituality have more meaning. Jesus won his victory over death and that gives us a new birth.

April 9

Matthew Nickel:

Throughout scripture, God offers breath as a life-giving gift. In Genesis, God breathes life into the first humans which was the same breath that formed all of creation. The Hebrew word for breath is also used for “air” and “spirit.” When the disciples hid in an apartment following the crucifixion, Jesus came to them and offered breath saying, “receive the holy spirit.” At Pentecost, when the people who followed Jesus first gathered as a congregation, the Spirit of God blew around them like wind and the people received a graceful experience of God’s presence. Again, God’s breath as a gift. Human life began with and is designed to life with sacred breath. Sometimes, when prayer is difficult, or something causes fear or the next steps seem uncertain, what is most needed is breath. Deep breathing that includes full exhales, calms the nervous system and attunes people to their bodily experience; again, a gift from God. When we prepare ourselves for something exciting, intentional breathing can prepare a person for their experience. When we sing and read unison prayers in worship, our breath syncs with other people. The practice of breathing is a gift and can be prayer. James Nestor, a writer on the science of breath, suggests that “the perfect breath is this: breathe in for about 5.5 seconds, then exhale for 5.5 seconds. That’s 5.5 breaths a minute for a total of about 5.5 liters of air...and prayer heals, especially when it’s practiced at 5.5 breaths a minute.”

April 10

Derek Helenberger:

Lent spans forty days, mirroring the forty days and forty nights Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness as recounted in Matthew 4:1-2, Mark 1:12-13, and Luke 4:1-2. While Mark does not specify fasting or eating nothing, all three accounts refer to this timeframe.

In modern times, fasting often takes the form of giving up something potentially unhealthy, like chocolate, alcohol, or junk food. I read that one of the thoughts behind fasting was to use the time saved by not preparing and eating food to feed your spiritual side by praying and reading the Bible.

I have not attempted a forty day fast, but I do follow a pair of fasting practices during Lent. I try to fast at least one day a week during Lent, with no food, just water. Sometimes it's not easy, but I feel a stronger

connection with God as I struggle with my fast. Praying and asking God for help to make it through the day brings me closer to God and gives me the strength I need to get through it. I feel God's strength in me denying the feelings of hunger.

The other fasting practice I follow during Lent is to not eat meat on Fridays. This feels easier to accomplish, with the abundance of fish fry's and bakes. While it is not as connective to God as a full day fast, I feel a sense of connection to and community with the Christians around the world that are also following this practice.

April 11

Sally Gilreath:

Psalm 141:3,8 *“Set a guard over my mouth, O LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips. But my eyes are turned towards you, O GOD, my Lord; in you I seek refuge.”*

Recently, I have begun a practice of guided meditation. When I first started practicing, a five-minute meditation seemed to go on forever, and I was not sure meditation was for me! Yet, I stuck with it, and am finding, the more I practice, the easier meditating has become. Psalm 141 says, “set a guard over my mouth” and through the practice of meditation, I am learning to listen to my breath, quiet my mind, and turn towards the quiet voice of God deep within. Much like a meditation practice, Lent affords the opportunity to take the time to turn within and listen to the breath of God moving through the body.

April 12

Emma Nickel

When I attended a continuing education conference last fall, the leaders invited us to set some intentions for life when we returned back home. What new spiritual practices could we do to live the life God was calling us to? The leaders encouraged us to keep our intentions small, so that we could actually *do them when we got home; rather than getting home to realize that the practices we hoped to do would too easily get pushed to the sidelines.*

I kept my intentions pretty focused. Mornings at my house can be hectic, as any parent knows. They don't always bring out the best in me or anyone else: getting everyone up, breakfast on the table, lunches packed along with water bottles and snacks, teeth-brushing, leaving the house on time, and so on! So I decided that every morning when I came

downstairs in the dark, before all the chaos began, I would light a candle and ask for God's presence. It was a small spiritual practice that I have been able to keep up with. I light the candle and say in my mind, "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest." I take a breath, then it's off the races. It's a really small thing. And I don't remember to do it every single morning. But it does matter and it does change the way the morning feels. The candle reminds me that the light of Christ is present with us, always.

Passion and Suffering—Holy Week

At his arrest, trial, and crucifixion, Jesus suffered. All suffering is not redemptive. But sometimes our suffering reveals to us something about God that is hard to learn any other way.

April 13

Bart Huthwaite:

2 Peter 1:5-8 *"For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

Viktor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor who studied why some prisoners survived and others didn't later wrote in his book called [A Man's Search for Meaning](#), "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete." If this is true, then the question becomes how do we navigate suffering.

Frankl also said "Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." If we can't change the situation we're in, then we need to change how we're dealing with it. The same holds true for suffering. It's up to us to decide how we respond. We must have the courage and discipline to overcome our fears and face our challenges

The last three years for me have been very trying and I hit rock bottom last February. I was living a life without meaning and attempting to escape my pain through pleasure. I was in a dark place, running from my fears and numbing my pain. After a life changing

event, it became clear that no one can rescue me and that I needed to be the one to save myself. I needed to make a choice between vice and virtue, the easy or the hard way. This is a timeless choice and one we all face on a daily basis.

While I know I needed to be the one to save myself, I was not alone. I truly felt God working in my life to help me realize that I deserved better from life and so did the ones I love. In reality I think God had been trying to show me the way for some time, but it took a swift smack upside my head for me to hear the message. One of the first actions I took was to visit FPCRO and it has made a huge difference. I have found community, compassion, and peace. Having time to reflect helps me to stay focused and recommit to the person I want to be and the life I want to lead.

Thankfully we don't have to face existential suffering all the time, but we all face challenges on a daily basis. We have a choice in how we respond. Our challenge is to stay on the virtuous path and face suffering as Jesus showed us and Peter told us how.

April 14

Rick Dusenbury:

Suffering. It is something that humans must all endure. We suffer in so many ways and degrees. It is never a good thing. At times in my life, I have suffered, too. But each time that I have suffered, I have moved on and resolved the suffering or learned to live with it. Quite simple. The suffering of Jesus to resolve our sin, despite his innocence is my guiding light. To know that even that terrible suffering was triumphed over by His resurrection is a model of what I can do as a Christian as I suffer. It is through my worst times that my spiritual growth has come. Each time I go through another ordeal, I emerge stronger and more able to face it through faith in Jesus, Our Lord and Savior.

April 15

Candace Rieck:

Finding the Joy in Darkness

The disciples had left their lives behind to follow Jesus. In a short time, everything changed. Jesus had been recognized as the Savior with wide support. By the end of the week he had been arrested, beaten, and now sentenced to death. Other leaders, like Peter were denying knowing Jesus. The disciples were in fear of being arrested themselves.

Was it all for nothing? On the day Jesus was crucified, all seemed lost. A dark day indeed.

Out of this darkness came the joy of forgiveness and everlasting life for all believers. After Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples went on to spread the good news and transform the world. Life for the disciples was not easy, but the reward was certain,

In our lives, we need to remember Jesus's promises and not to despair because things do not appear to be going our way. Whether it is a job, relationship or an election, the joy we are seeking may be just around the corner.

April 16

Haley DeFeyer:

Watching one of my family members battle alcoholism has been one of the most painful experiences of my life. I've prayed countless prayers for their healing, begged God to break their addiction, and pleaded for change. But time after time, they have relapsed, leaving behind broken promises and heartbreak.

In my frustration, I've asked God hard questions: Why won't you heal them? Why do our prayers seem unanswered? There were moments when hope felt foolish, and I wondered if God was listening.

Yet, in this suffering, I've seen God in ways I never expected. I've learned to love my family member without conditions, just as God loves us. And I've learned that redemption doesn't always come the way we want—but it doesn't mean God isn't working.

Some days, the pain still feels heavy. But I've found God in the small moments—when my family member reaches out, and when I see glimpses of the person they were before addiction took hold. I don't have all the answers, but I know God is present. Even in suffering, He has not abandoned us.

Maundy Thursday, April 17

Joelle Jarrait:

When I think of times in my life when I have felt true suffering, there are some that come to mind. I suffer in the death of those I love deeply. I suffer when I sit at the bedside of a loved one not knowing what the test results will show or what the next hour will bring. I suffer when my children struggle or experience loss of their own. I suffer in a world full of uncertainty and acts of evil. It is in my suffering that I often recall

familiar hymns for comfort: “Be still, my soul! the Lord is on your side; Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; Leave to your God to order and provide.” These words by Kathrina von Schlegel remind me how God walks beside us in our suffering.

In Lent and the events of Holy Week, we see how suffering is part of being a follower of Christ. However, it also means we can stand firm on the promises of God’s love and grace. As we follow Christ through the wilderness and down the dark road to the cross, may we do so with hope of God’s everlasting promise of salvation.

Good Friday, April 18

Karen Kline

Revelation 21:4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Breath in. Breath out. Breath in. wait. wait. wait. Breath out.

I am sitting at the bedside; of my mother, my great Aunt, my friend’s husband, while death comes. Not softly, as has sometimes been described, but in a raggedy gap-filled slog. This is hard work; the wait for impending death and the waiting for release. But in the release that death brings, peace and wholeness arrive. I consider it an honor to be bedside as God lifts up the dying and restores them to beauty.

It is a privilege to sit vigil as death arrives. I do not fear it, but I absolutely grieve the loss deeply. Sadness and grief come alongside peace and understanding. Our own tears and pain will give way, as did the pain and tears of those who we lost. Jesus provided us the model for death....that resurrection will come and wholeness in the Lord will be granted. Alleluia. Amen.

Holy Saturday, April 19

Emma Nickel:

Holy Saturday is not a really a *thing* in our Presbyterian tradition. So we don’t always know what the meaning of this day might be or how to mark it in a spiritual way. Many traditions hold a worship service, called an Easter Vigil, that begins in the evening on Holy Saturday, traces the whole of God’s story from creation to salvation, and traditionally ends with the beginning of Easter celebrations at midnight. FPCRO enjoyed Vigils for a few years in the past.

For me, the meaning of this day is more about waiting. It's about allowing ourselves to sit with the knowledge that Jesus is in the tomb. We modern-day Christians know what is to come on Easter, but we aren't there yet.

That sense of already-but-not-yet is a major part of our Christian experience. God's reign has already begun, but is not yet complete. We know that Christ has risen, but the fullness of the kingdom has not yet come. This day can be about sitting in that tension while we wait—acknowledging the pain of where we are with the joyful anticipation of what is to come.

A lot of daily life is like that anyway. We must be honest about the hardships in life, even as we hold onto our hope in the goodness of God. May you find the blessings in the tension, in the waiting, and in the anticipation.

Easter—Sunday, April 20

Emma Nickel

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! A previous congregation I served had a tradition of gathering in the narthex (the entryway to the sanctuary) on Easter morning. The doors to the sanctuary remained shut and it was dark inside. As the service opened, someone knocked loudly on the door. And then a voice from inside shouted “He is not here. For he has been raised, as he said!” Then the congregation would burst into the sanctuary, the lights would go on, and the strains of the hymn “Jesus Christ is risen today!” would rise on the organ. It was quite a theatrical way to celebrate Easter Sunday!

Maybe enacting the scene is a way to help us understand the surprise and awe of that morning? Even though Jesus had told his friends what to expect, they still weren't prepared. We have the privilege of knowing what to expect from the Easter story. Our calling is to live into the story; to find ways to embody the hope and new life Jesus offers; and to remember that the empire didn't get the last word—God's love did, and still does!

Recently, a friend asked if we could get together saying, “I'm hoping you can make me feel better about the world.” I was happy to get coffee. But *I*, by myself, couldn't just make them feel better. The reason people like us can muster hope in the face of a challenging world is because of God's story of life and love, which we see borne out so clearly at Easter.

Notes and Journaling

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