Bless The Lent We *Actually* Have
40-Days to Reflect, Pray, and Bless Our Imperfect Days

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AN INVITATION

Sometimes we wait. Spiritually, I mean. We just wait.

And wait. Maybe something will happen?

In the meantime, our days are complicated by feelings that don't seem altogether very spiritual. Deep annoyance. Rehearsals of old fights. Anger at friends who are, in our defense, pretty frustrating sometimes. Our bodies ache. We are consumed by somebody else's problems and we are fairly certain their lives are rushing toward despair.

So we wait. At least I do. I assume that in some future day I will feel the truth of my spiritual belief that God is with us. That God never leaves. That God's presence is best (and I can't prove that this is theologically true) on bad days. When life is headed downhill, I tend to wait.

When Lent rolls around every year, we are offered a chance to stop waiting. We are in the part of the story when Jesus is an arrow pointed straight at his own end. He will die. But first he will suffer and be betrayed; religious and political structures will conspire and conform to great evil; nothing will be peace on earth or goodwill to all humankind. No wisemen and starry nights. It's misery.

And it should make us pause. *That* is where we meet Jesus. We meet him on his way down.

Lent is our annual rehearsal of the cosmic moment when Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection will change how we experience death. Death will not be the defining truth about us. Someday we will be freed from the gorgeous and horrible limitations of our human lives and we will live forever with God (which is VERY DIFFICULT FOR ME TO IMAGINE. But it's the truth.) But first Jesus suffers and dies. We walk with him. And he walks with us.

Jesus will walk with us through whatever kind of Lenten day you are having. The lovely one. The garbage one. The one that barely seems like it counted at all. As we toggle through every kind of emotion—boredom, devastation, happiness, irritation—we want to say: *bless this Lent.*

This little guide is your invitation to bless whatever this season is actually bringing you. So let's stop waiting. This is the one we have. Let's bless it all.

WHAT IS LENT?

Lent marks the forty days leading up to Easter, mirroring the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness. It is a practice that began during the 4th century as a way to prepare Christians for the holiest days of the year.

During Lent, we ask God to show us the world as it is. We begin with the reality of our finitude rubbed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday—from dust we were made, to dust we shall return. Then, we walk through that reality in a kind of dress rehearsal. It's the downward slope of God—the Great Descent, where the whole Church walks toward the cross.

Frankly, Lent is my favorite part of the church calendar because it is a time when the whole church is on the losing team. A time when we all get a minute to tell the truth: Life is so beautiful and life is so hard. For everyone.

Of course, the cross isn't the end of the story, but this season of grief is carved out to acknowledge the reality of Christ's sacrifice. And the reality of suffering that so many of our circumstances reflect too—our own pain and grief and despair. Easter is coming, yes. But for now, we sit in the ashes of our broken dreams and broken hearts, knowing that God sits here with us.

Many people practice Lent by giving something up—alcohol, meat, chocolate, social media. Some take up something new—a new prayer practice or swearing profusely like I did one year (you probably remember reading about this in *Everything Happens for a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*).

But Lent is an incredible moment for the spiritual honesty we are practicing here. Together, we're going to bless the days we have, while longing for the future God promised when there will be no tears, no pain, no email.

We have selected forty blessings that you might use in the days leading up to Lent.

This free guide includes scriptures to read, discussion questions, and a place to reflect on the journey through Lent. Whether you are practicing Lent solo or using this book with your church, in a book club, or around the dinner table with your family, my hope and prayer is that we can understand that our actual days—pain-filled, lovely, ordinary, garbage—might be blessed.

Onward, together,
Kate

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:

- **THE LIVES WE ACTUALLY HAVE**: This reflection guide is designed to be used in conjunction with our new book of blessings, *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. Each day's homework reflects on a blessing from our new book. Of course, you can just use this free guide by itself, but you might find the most richness and depth when used together. It can be used by churches, book clubs, small groups, or by individuals.
- **WHAT TO EXPECT**: We've designed each day's homework to take around 20 minutes. That includes time to read the assigned scripture, to read that day's blessing, to reflect on that day's question, and to pray a closing prayer. There are opportunities to dive deeper into our themes and topics by listening to suggested podcast episodes and reflecting on the songs on our Lenten playlist. Zero pressure. Just pick the options that fit whatever day you're having best.
- **FREE SMALL GROUP GUIDE**: Like anything, Lent is better practiced together. We've designed a free small group companion guide to use alongside this individual guide. If you want to gather some friends, neighbors, co-workers, family—in person or on Zoom, the Small Group guide gives you a way to orient a weekly-meeting on these themes and questions. You can download it here. It's totally free.

- **FREE SERMON GUIDE**: If you're a pastor or chaplain or just want to preach to yourself, we put together a 7-week Bless This *Actual* Lent Sermon Guide with homily ideas based on the lectionary text that tie into this theme of blessing our *actual* lives (in all our pain and joy and fear and hope). We also have a bunch of marketing and branding materials you can use in your churches too. All totally free. Download them all, here.
- **A NOTE ABOUT SUNDAYS:** Lent lasts for a full 40 days, but Sundays don't count. They are mini-Easters where we take a day off from whatever we are abstaining from, days to remind us that we are made for both—grief and joy, sorrow and delight. Strangely, this might feel like a hard thing to do—to make yourself stop working or worrying or checking off your day's reading—*and really rest*. But over the next six weeks, you're invited to press against that part of your wiring that tells you that you must always be accomplishing, producing, processing—that everything must be *for* something. And take a day off from the Lent-y feelings to practice the discipline of Sabbath. Rest! Eat! Enjoy!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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For more free resources like this, go to katebowler.com/resources.

Fat Tuesday

Fat Tuesday—also known as Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras or Pancake Day in my household—is the last day before Lent. Lent is traditionally a season of fasting where people give up luxuries like meat or alcohol or, maybe a more modern version like abstaining from social media or watching The Bachelor. To prepare for a season of fasting, many people use the day before Lent to feast on all the goods they won't partake in for the next 40 days. There are parties and costumes and King Cakes, donuts and pancakes and pastries. How will you celebrate Fat Tuesday this year?

Lent Week Two – Blessed are the Fragile

Day 1 — Ash Wednesday

Wednesday, February 22

Many churches offer Ash Wednesday services throughout the day. Some near you may even offer a drive-through experience. Even if you've never done it before, find a local church that is participating (many Methodist, Catholic, Anglicans, Lutherans, Moravians, Nazarenes, and other denominations observe the holiday) and experience receiving ashes on your forehead. You don't need to know what you're doing when you get there. They will walk you through!

"Did you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?"
—Rev. Jan Richardson

Read: "For Ash Wednesday" from page **200** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 51:1-17

Prayer for Cleansing and Pardon

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy,
blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
5 Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
6 You desire truth in the inward being;[a]
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right[b] spirit within me.
11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing[c] spirit.
13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
17 The sacrifice acceptable to God[d] is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Ask: Check in today. Are you feeling more durable or more fragile? What do you need to be reminded of in your durability? In your fragility?

Listen: The Rev. Liz Tichenor spoke to Kate about her profound Ash Wednesday experience when she was reminded of the power of community in times of great grief. Listen to their conversation: https://katebowler.com/podcasts/liz-tichenor-being-church-on-our-worst-days/

Pray: *God, on my best days when I feel capable and unwavering, remind me of my dependence on you. And on the days when I feel inside out with inadequacies and anxieties, remind me of your enoughness for today. Though my days and moods and fears and circumstances seem always in flux, you remain. Amen.*

Day 2 — for this beautiful, limited day

Thursday, February 23

Read: "For this beautiful, limited day" from page **174** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 11:25-29

Jesus Thanks His Father

25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank[a] you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes,

Father, for such was your gracious will.[b] *27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Ask: In all our to-do lists and adulting, inboxes and carpool lanes, we can lose sight of what really matters. Reflect on the question that today's blessing wonders: "Am I counting items instead of knowing what counts?" Do you find yourself more concerned with counting items or knowing what counts?

Do: Think of a practice that brings you rest like Jesus describes in Matthew 11:25-29. Yoga or pickleball. Make-believe game with a kid in your life. Writing snail mail to a friend you haven't seen in a while. Dancing to your favorite song. Hitting snooze for five extra minutes. Try one today as a reminder that the value of a day is more than the sum of your productivity.

Pray: *God, today feels like a great undoing. There is too much to do and not enough of me to go around. For my overwhelm, give me peace. For my exhaustion, find me rest. For my resentment, love. And for my frustration at the never-enoughness, pull me in. Amen.*

Day 3 — for learning to delight again

Friday, February 24

> *"Joy is a mystery because it can happen anywhere, anytime, even under the most unpromising circumstances, even in the midst of suffering, with tears in its eyes."*
> —Frederick Buechner

Read: "For learning to delight again" from page **176** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 36:5-9

5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains;
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
8 They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
9 For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

Ask: Take inventory. How easy does experiencing joy feel today? Possible? Impossible? What simple pleasures might you sip from, as a refuge in the shadow of God's wings?

Reflect: Read Mary Oliver's poem,"The Summer Day" and reflect on her question: "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" What do you think Mary Oliver would suggest doing?

Pray: *God, let the smallness of this place become a refuge for me, a resting place under the shadow of your wings, so that just for a moment I might awaken to delight once again. Lord, thank you, that even the tiniest of pleasures tell me a gorgeous story about you, and about your love. Amen.*

Day 4 — for when you need to hold on or let go
Saturday, February 25

Read: "For when you need to hold on or let go" from page **178** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 63:1-8

5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains;
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.
7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
8 They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
9 For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.

Ask: What is the good that you hunger for today? What is the thing you know you want to release?

Listen: Learning to "let go" sounds wonderful if what you're carrying is a heavy addiction, unforgiveness, or failure. But what if we're holding on to so much that we can't live without—a sick kid, an aging parent, or our own fragile hearts. Listen to Father Richard Rohr explain the strange math of knowing when to hold on and when to let go.
https://katebowler.com/podcasts/richard-rohr-learning-to-hold-on-learning-to-let-go/

Pray: *God, help me pry my fingers off, one by one, and let go of what I know does not actually help or satisfy. Awaken my desire to the place where You will meet me, Oh Lord, in Your beauty and goodness. And help me return again and again to this ebb and flow that is life-giving. Amen.*

SUNDAY - A Mini-Easter
Sunday, February 26

Nehemiah 8:9-10: Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the Law. Then Nehemiah told them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send out portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

In the midst of Lent, as we inch toward the darkness and sorrow of the cross, there are regular parties. Every Sunday, we get to take a pause and celebrate a mini-Easter. So today, search around inside, rummage through the stuff of gloom and penitence, and find those Eastery feelings that are longing to come out. Splurge a little as a symbol of God's extravagant love. And be sure to cast aside any lenten practices. Sundays are Feast Days.

Lent Week Two – Blessed are the Imperfect

Day 5 — for an unfinishable day
Monday, February 27

Read: "For an unfinishable day" from page **180** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: 1 John 3:1-3
3 *[1] See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. [2] Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when*

he[a] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.[3] And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Ask: "In this culture of more, more, more, make me less," today's blessing prays. Fill in the blank with your own answers to to how you want to move against our culture's exhausting pressures to be MORE:

In this culture of *perfection,* make me _____.
In this culture of *effortless success*, make me _____.
In this culture of *judgment*, make me _____.
In this culture of _____, make me _____.

Watch: Years ago, Kate took a day trip with her dad to see one of the crown jewels of Portuguese Catholic architecture, the towering Batalha Monastery. But the most striking part was a cathedral that was missing its roof. It was ornately decorated yet unfinished. And isn't that the story of us all? Beautiful, striving, and never, ever done. Reflect on the ways that this unfinished cathedral shows us something about us in our imperfections.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqbeVRGzw6o

Pray: *God, I am grateful that when You look upon me, you see your very own creation, being made new in Christ. I love your eyes, God, seeing me this way. A work of your love. Amen.*

Day 6 — for beginnings and endings
Tuesday, February 28

Read: "for beginnings and endings" from page **182** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 43:16-21

16 Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
17 who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
18 Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise

Ask: What changes (big or small) are you experiencing right now? What does this change feel like in your body (e.g. sweaty, butterflies, bubbly)?

Do: Make your own ritual to say goodbye to what you're leaving behind. Throw a party or ceremony to honor for what was (e.g. the end of a relationship, retirement, a changed body). Light a candle, buy a flower and choose the color to represent what you are leaving behind, and throw it in the river. Say a prayer of thanks for the freedom that this change represents. And then open your heart for what is to come next.

Pray: *Read today's blessing again (page 182 of* The Lives We Actually Have*), changing the word "we" to "I," making it personal and specific to your situation. Spend some time asking God for the kind of courage or strength you need in this time of change. Conclude with a prayer of gratitude for what has led you here, and for what you are leaving behind.*

Day 7 — for the courage to do something difficult
Wednesday, March 1

Read: "for the courage to do something difficult" from page **184** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: John 16:33

33 I have said this to you so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution, but take courage: I have conquered the world!"

Ask: Take a step back from the difficult thing you know needs to be done, as if observing it from a distance. Ask, what do I know that is true about it? What do I have already to meet the need? What is the next first step to get it done? What's stopping you from taking it?

Do: Write yourself a thank-you card, a written prayer expressing gratitude for the hard thing you are doing today. Send it off, and look forward to being surprised when it comes back to you.

Pray: *God, I want to be the kind of person that doesn't put off the hard thing. Give me courage, today, right now, to do what needs to be done or say what needs to be said. Infuse me with wisdom and grant me your peace that transcends understanding even (and especially) when I'm afraid. Amen.*

Day 8 — for when we want more
Thursday, March 2

Read: "for when we want more" from page **186** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 32

The Joy of Forgiveness

1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
2 Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
3 While I kept silent, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up[a] as by the heat of summer. Selah
5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah
6 Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress,[b] the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
7 You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah
8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
10 Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.

11 Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Ask: The psalmist talks about how hiding our human-ness from God compounds it, but when we tell God the truth about our condition, God becomes the place of safety we had longed for. Secretly, honestly, and perhaps under a blanket, offer to God the "God-sized project" of being fully known and loved in all our imperfections.

Do: Draw a self-portrait (it doesn't have to be good!). On the page, write down the things that make you, you. Maybe your kindness or stubbornness (for better or worse) or the way your nose crinkles when you smile. Take time to notice the humanity in your gifts and imperfections (that are sometimes gifts if we look close enough!).

Pray: *Pray today's blessing again (from page 184 of* The Lives We Actually Have*), and add a secret prayer of response to God that is yours alone.*

Day 9 — for the life you didn't choose
Friday, March 3

Read: "for the life you didn't choose" from page **188** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 46

1 God is our refuge and strength,
a very present[a] help in trouble.
2 Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
3 though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah
4 There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
5 God is in the midst of the city;[b] it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
6 The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
7 The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.[c] Selah
8 Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
9 He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;

he burns the shields with fire.
10 *"Be still, and know that I am God!*
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."
11 *The Lord of hosts is with us;*
the God of Jacob is our refuge.[d] *Selah*

Ask: In the aftershock of sudden grief, in the tender place of wonder and dread, what part of Psalm 46 feels true for you?

Listen: Maintaining hope in the midst of the lives we didn't choose can sometimes feel impossible. Sometimes it can help to look toward people who really get it—like Jay and Katherine Wolf. Listen to this tender conversation which offers a wide view of their story of hardwon hope. https://katebowler.com/podcasts/wounded-healers/

Pray: *God, as I invite my soul to stillness, help me be aware that you are already present to me, and that you are here right now. Bless the stillness and the wordless wisdom that comes forward to my mind. Give me loving actions to do, that I might be for others in crisis, the presence that reminds them: You are held. You are safe. You are loved. You are loved. You are loved. Amen.*

Day 10 — for who you might become
Saturday, March 4

> *"You have made us and drawn us to yourself,*
> *and our heart is restless until it rests in you."*
> —Augustine of Hippo

Read: "for who you might become" from page **190** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Living by Faith

16 *So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.* *17* *For our slight, momentary affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure,* *18* *because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.*

Ask: What period of time do you find yourself living in most—past, present, or future? What are the gifts and drawbacks of spending too much time in each? To where do you need to pull your attention today?

Do: Write a note of gratitude to your past self. Thank them for what they did with what they knew. (Sometimes it helps to have a picture of younger-you in front of you. Look at how cute you were!) Now, write a note to your future self. Thank them for the courage it takes to become someone new. (And tell them their hair looks great!) Whisper a word of thanks to God for who you are in this moment.

Pray: *God, what if. What if I walk out on this ledge and feel only the taste of my fear? What if I discover that what I carry cannot be shouldered? What if I live too long without that feeling? That I can set this, this, this down. God, fill me with a love that staves off all the darkness. Comfort me when I can't think another reasonable thought. And if I can't, I mean, I just can't feel your nearness, hear you telling me that I am loved, send your armies of do-gooders, tuck my name inside their hearts. Give me people who love to hold more than this day can manage. And if you can't send more than one because more than one would be nice, just send the nearest person to take things out of my hands and into theirs until I know again today that I should never be expected to walk this road alone. Amen.*

SUNDAY - MINI EASTER - Sunday March 5th

Today is a Mini-Easter, which means we abstain from our Lenten practices and practice the act of feasting in the truth of the resurrected Christ. Make room for celebration today—even if it's a quick shout of joy or a kitchen dance party to your favorite song.

Lent Week Three – Blessed are the Curious

Day 11 — for this garbage day
Monday, March 6

Read: "for this garbage day" from page **132** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 88

Prayer for Help in Despondency

[1] O Lord, God of my salvation,
at night, when I cry out before you,
[2] let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
[3] For my soul is full of troubles,
and my life draws near to Sheol.
[4] I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
[5] like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave,
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand.
[6] You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep.
[7] Your wrath lies heavy upon me,
and you overwhelm me with all your waves. Selah
[8] You have caused my companions to shun me;
you have made me a thing of horror to them.
I am shut in so that I cannot escape;
[9] my eye grows dim through sorrow.
Every day I call on you, O Lord;
I spread out my hands to you.
[10] Do you work wonders for the dead?
Do the shades rise up to praise you? Selah
[11] Is your steadfast love declared in the grave
or your faithfulness in Abaddon?
[12] Are your wonders known in the darkness
or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?
[13] But I, O Lord, cry out to you;
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
[14] O Lord, why do you cast me off?
Why do you hide your face from me?
[15] Wretched and close to death from my youth up,
I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.[a]
[16] Your wrath has swept over me;
your dread assaults destroy me.
[17] They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.
[18] You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me;
my companions are in darkness.

Ask: What is it like to be you right now? No need to be polite. Don't hold anything back. Now that you've spoken that truth, what are the tiny, tiny graces that are noticeable in the midst of the garbage parts? And if you can't do it, thank God for honest communication.

Do: Make a list of five things you are thankful for at this moment, but practice compressing your attention. The smaller the better. (When things were very bad, I could even say things like: "I hate this less than yesterday." Don't worry about being honest!)

Pray: *God, show me the life I actually have, the reality that is truest now—the whole of it. Let me hold the doubts and questions together with the graces that are here too. And in your kindness, help me begin to understand how to live more, with fewer explanations. Amen.*

Day 12 — for when you are afraid
Tuesday, March 7

Read: "for when you are afraid" from page **134** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 23

The Divine Shepherd

1 The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;[a]
3 he restores my soul.[b]
He leads me in right paths[c]
for his name's sake.
4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,[d]
I fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
6 Surely[e] goodness and mercy[f] shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.[g]

Ask: How and where in your body does fear affect you? Ask God to comfort you there.

Reflect: Play the song, "The House of God, Forever" by Jon Foreman. What phrases, words, or themes do you need to cling to today?

Pray: *Read today's blessing again, adding your own thoughts, feelings, questions, and needs. Be specific.*

Day 13 — for when you can't love yourself
Wednesday, March 8

> *"Rejoice that you are what you are; for our Lord loves you very dearly."*
> —Abbé Henri de Tourville

Read: "for when you can't love yourself" from page **138** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: John 10:10-11

10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Ask: What would "life in all its fullness" look like for you?

Listen: What do you do with a world that is full of things to fear, people we won't please, kids who die, and parents who don't change? Writer Anne Lamott doesn't sugar-coat a single terrible thing, but knows that we also need the kinds of truths we can stand on—like that we, warts and all, are loved and chosen by God. Listen to her encouragement here.
https://katebowler.com/podcasts/anne-lamott-loved-and-chosen/

Pray: *God, who do I need to become, now that this is the world we have and this is the people we are—holy, imperfect, sloppy, joyful, angry, irritated, tired, or maybe just hungry, loved and chosen. So let's start there. Let's be people together with all of our frayed edges, with the things we admit only to our best friends, with the people who are hard to love, impossible to forgive—beginning with ourselves. Amen.*

Day 14 — for when you're feeling grouchy
Thursday, March 9

Read: “for when you’re feeling grouchy” from page **140** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 43:1-7

Restoration and Protection Promised

43 *But now thus says the Lord,*
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Cush and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my sight
and honored and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 I will say to the north, “Give them up,”
and to the south, “Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

Ask: Redeemed. It’s a word we use today only transactionally, like when we have a voucher we redeem for a discount. In Isaiah 43, the meaning is love in action. It is what God did through Jesus, whose dying became our living. Re-read this passage, inserting your name: “I have redeemed you, _____. I have called you by name, _____. You, _____, are mine.” Bring all your frustrations out into the light of *this* unconditional love for you.

Reflect: Listen to Mary Gauthier’s song, “Mercy Now.” Where could you use a little mercy today? Where could you offer it to others? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vL6JoP0KCoo

Pray: *God, let me crawl up into your lap, and rest my head on your chest and hear you say to me again, "You are loved. You are safe. You are chosen." Let me stay and stay and stay, knowing that this is that starting place. For everything. Amen.*

Day 15 — for when you're not getting any better
Friday, March 10

Read: "for when you're not getting any better" from page **142** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 131

Song of Quiet Trust

[1] O Lord, my heart is not lifted up;
my eyes are not raised too high;
I do not occupy myself with things
too great and too marvelous for me.
[2] But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a weaned child with its mother;
my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.[a]
[3] O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.

Ask: Where is contentment possible within the small space that is your life today?

Reflect: Listen to "Poetry" by Taylor Leonhardt. Reflect on Taylor's lyrics—that you are God's poetry. What does it mean to you to hear that the poet God doesn't waste a word?

Pray: *God, I want to believe that I am as precious and thoughtful to you as poetry. But my mind is racing to keep everything held together. Calm my mind from the things of tomorrow. Settle me in today. Help me find a place of contentment and peace right here, with you. Amen.*

Day 16 — for when you feel stuck
Saturday, March 11

> *"I do not understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us."*
> —Anne Lamott

Read: "for when you feel stuck" from page **148** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Revelation 22:1-5

The River of Life

22 *Then the angel[a] showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb* ***2*** *through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life[b] with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.* ***3*** *Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him;* ***4*** *they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.* ***5*** *And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

Ask: Being stuck may feel like living in a deserted place, with no landmarks and no map. The river of the water of life and the beauty of the garden might feel unattainable. But don't forget that it flows underground. Ask yourself, what do I already know of love, even here? How can I send down roots into the hidden places where love still lives?

Do: When we are stuck spiritually or emotionally, we could use a spiritual reset, but we often can't engineer it for ourselves. If we could, we would! But what we can do is to use our physical bodies to playfully disrupt our habits. We can deliberately switch things up, to see how unclenching from our patterns can create new ones. For example, if you usually sit down to pray, then stand or walk or kneel or lie face down on the floor. Or get into a pool or bathtub and float through your prayers. Somehow, changing one thing can lead to the sense that other things are possible.

Pray: *God, release what is stuck, and let all that I am holding flow into the vast ocean of your love. Let all that I desire flow to your heart of compassion. Let all that I long to do mingle with your power already at work in the world. Amen.*

SUNDAY - MINI EASTER
Sunday, March 12, 2023

Did you know that in the midst of Lent, toward the darkness and sorrow of the cross, there are regular parties? Every Sunday, we get to take a pause and celebrate a mini-Easter. So today, search around inside, rummage through the stuff of gloom and penitence, and find those Eastery feelings that are longing to come out. Splurge a little as a symbol of God's extravagant love. And be sure to cast aside any lenten practices. Sundays are Feast Days.

Lent Week Four – Blessed are those who Suffer

Day 17 — for this overwhelming day
Monday, March 13

> *"It is the narrowness of the riverbanks,*
> *after all, that gives strength to the river."*
> —Rob Des Cotes

Read: "for this overwhelming day" from page **90** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Luke 10:38-42

Jesus Visits Martha and Mary

38 Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village where a woman named Martha
welcomed him.[a] 39 She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's[b] feet and listened to what
he was saying. 40 But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked,
"Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to
help me." 41 But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by
many things, 42 but few things are needed—indeed only one.[c] Mary has chosen the better part,
which will not be taken away from her."

Ask: Do you feel pressure to do more, be more? What happens in your body, mind, or spirit when you are running low on time, energy, or resources? In what situations are you tempted to override the awareness and keep pressing on, despite consequences?

Listen: We are limited beings, but often the idea of saying "no" can feel uncomfortable. Melissa Urban's (CEO of The Whole30) experience of chronic illness forced her to accept her body's limitations. She teaches how to set healthy boundaries as a way to protect our relationships, manage our limited capacity (especially for those of us navigating chronic pain or illness or caregiving), and remind ourselves of our inherent worth (regardless of how much you can do). https://katebowler.com/podcasts/melissa-urban-worthy-of-boundaries/

Pray: *God, show me the contours of what is mine to hold, and mine to do. Help me with the discomfort, the push-pull of recognizing my limitations and working within them in a way that is creative and sustainable. And connect me to others so it is fruitful for all of us. Amen.*

Day 18 — for when you can't catch a break
Tuesday March 14

Read: “for when you can’t catch a break” from page **92** of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 57

Praise and Assurance under Persecution

1 Be merciful to me, O God; be merciful to me,
for in you my soul takes refuge;
in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge,
until the destroying storms pass by.
2 I cry to God Most High,
to God who fulfills his purpose for me.
3 He will send from heaven and save me;
he will put to shame those who trample on me. Selah
God will send forth his steadfast love and his faithfulness.
4 I lie down among lions
that greedily devour[a] human prey;
their teeth are spears and arrows,
their tongues sharp swords.
5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.
Let your glory be over all the earth.
6 They set a net for my steps;
my soul was bowed down.
They dug a pit in my path,
but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah
7 My heart is steadfast, O God;
my heart is steadfast.
I will sing and make melody.
8 Awake, my soul!
Awake, O harp and lyre!
I will awake the dawn.
9 I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples;
I will sing praises to you among the nations.
10 For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens;
your faithfulness extends to the clouds.
11 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens.
Let your glory be over all the earth.

Ask: Check in with yourself. Are you at high capacity—I feel able to juggle everything on my plate—or low capacity—I don’t have the energy to do it all today?

Given today's reality, is there anything you can take yourself off the hook for, ask for help completing, or punt to another day? Or, if you are feeling high capacity, is there something you could take off someone else's plate to help them out?

Listen: The obligations never stop, do they? How do we get off the achievement train and build a beautiful life within constraints? Writer Shauna Niequist was on the fast track to burnout when she received advice that changed the pace of her life entirely. Listen to Kate and Shauna talk about the productivity myths we believe and how to embrace a slower, smaller life marked by delight. https://katebowler.com/podcasts/shauna-niequist-spread-too-thin/ What do you notice about the cues that made Shauna aware that burnout was at hand?

Pray: *God, I see it, the truth that you made me in love, for love, so I'm letting You into all the places within me. The glad places, the needy places, the sad places, the overwhelmed places, and the awful places. Come there too, and rearrange any furniture you like. Clean up any messiness. I see now that I really want that, because the transformation is what will unfold more of what I am meant to be, your child—no matter how old I get—looking more like you every day. Amen.*

Day 19 — for when you suffer alone
Wednesday, March 15

Read: "for when you suffer alone" from page 98 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 25:16-17

16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me[a] out of my distress.

Ask: If loneliness or loss could be felt as a specific pain in a specific part of your body, where would you feel it? In your stomach? Your throat? Just take a few minutes to notice.

Do: Pray the breath prayer below for yourself, sensing the truth of your situation, and peace that comes when it is fully acknowledged and shared. Then turn your thoughts to someone else who may be feeling lonely, and pray the breath prayer for that person. Sit awhile calmly with the awareness of their situation. Perhaps something will come to mind as to how you could reach out to them.

Pray a Breath Prayer:

Inhale: *God, turn to me and be gracious to me,*
Exhale: *for I am lonely and afflicted.*
Inhale: *Relieve the troubles of my heart,*
Exhale: *and free me from my anguish.*

Day 20 — for when the road is long
Thursday, March 16

Read: "for when the road is long" from page 102 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 81

God's Appeal to Stubborn Israel

1 Sing aloud to God our strength;
shout for joy to the God of Jacob.
2 Raise a song; sound the tambourine,
the sweet lyre with the harp.
3 Blow the trumpet at the new moon,
at the full moon, on our festal day.
4 For it is a statute for Israel,
an ordinance of the God of Jacob.
5 He made it a decree in Joseph,
when he went out over[a] the land of Egypt.
I hear a voice I had not known:
6 "I relieved your[b] shoulder of the burden;
your[c] hands were freed from the basket.
7 In distress you called, and I rescued you;
I answered you in the secret place of thunder;
I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah
8 Hear, O my people, while I admonish you;
O Israel, if you would but listen to me!
9 There shall be no strange god among you;
you shall not bow down to a foreign god.
10 I am the Lord your God,
who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.
Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.
11 "But my people did not listen to my voice;
Israel would not submit to me.
12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts,
to follow their own counsels.
13 O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!
14 Then I would quickly subdue their enemies

and turn my hand against their foes.
15 Those who hate the Lord would cringe before him,
and their doom would last forever.
16 I would feed you[d] with the finest of the wheat,
and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

Ask: The Psalm speaks of the nourishment God desires to give, saying "open your mouth wide, and I will fill it…with the finest of wheat, with honey from the rock I would satisfy you" (verses 10, 16). But sometimes we are too tired to eat. How might rest be yours until you can open up for what would satisfy?

Reflect: Choose one of these worship songs to listen to on the theme of "O Taste and See." One is meditative and the other is joyful and exultant. Allow the words to wash over you. What truth of God do you need to notice and savor today?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOzf0VrDNGU (Shane & Shane – meditative)
or
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfW2mkkMTAg (Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir - exultant)

Pray: *Dear God, I am so tired, body and soul. What I need most is rest, true rest that curls up in the cup of your hand until the refreshment comes. Keep me from running off to do whatever seems pressing. Rest your hand on me so I begin to trust that the first thing is actually rest. And the second thing, and the third. Then God, feed me with honey from the rock. Amen.*

<u>Day 21 — for when you feel forgotten by God</u>
Friday, March 17

Read: "for when you feel forgotten by God" from page 106 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 13

Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies

1 How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
2 How long must I bear pain[a] in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

[3] Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
[4] and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
[5] But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
[6] I will sing to the Lord
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Ask: The psalmist says, "I am shaken" (Psalm 13:4, ESV). Is this true in your life?

Do: Make a list of the people, places, circumstances in your life and in the lives of your family, friends, and community that are aching for restoration. Pray the words of Numbers 6:24-26 over your list—if you have the extra time, do it name by name. (E.g., "The Lord bless and keep INSERT NAME. The Lord make his face shine upon INSERT NAME, and be gracious to INSERT NAME. The Lord lift up his countenance upon INSERT NAME, and give INSERT NAME peace.")

Pray a breath prayer from Psalm 13:
Inhale: *I am shaken,*
Exhale: *but I trust in your steadfast love.*

Day 22 — for when it is too much to handle
Saturday, March 18

Read: "for when it is too much to handle" from page 108 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 56, making a list of all the emotions the psalmist describes.

Trust in God under Persecution

To the leader: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. Of David. A Miktam, when the Philistines seized him in Gath.

[1] Be gracious to me, O God, for people trample on me;
all day long foes oppress me;
[2] my enemies trample on me all day long,
for many fight against me.
O Most High, [3] when I am afraid,

I put my trust in you.
4 In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I am not afraid;
what can flesh do to me?
5 All day long they seek to injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
6 They stir up strife; they lurk;
they watch my steps,
as they hoped to take my life.
7 Do not deliver them for any reason;[a]
in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!
8 You have kept count of my tossings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your record?
9 Then my enemies will retreat
in the day when I call.
This I know, that[b] God is for me.
10 In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise,
11 in God I trust; I am not afraid.
What can a mere mortal do to me?
12 My vows to you I must perform, O God;
I will render thank offerings to you.
13 For you have delivered my soul from death
and my feet from falling,
so that I may walk before God
in the light of life.

Ask: What feelings might you invite to tea today, so you can sit with them? What are they telling you?

Reflect: Listen to this choral arrangement of "O let all who thirst, let them come to the water." Bring your whole thirsty self, remembering that God invites you to come just as you are. God models for us the giving of unconditional love, that we also may learn to make room for others, just as they are.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuMrTV2RrpY

Pray: *God, I need Your loving kindness in this tender place. Come and sit with me as I allow myself to name all that is so hard, all that is so precious and yet so precarious that it makes me afraid. Comfort me. Amen.*

SUNDAY - MINI EASTER

Sunday, March 19

Today is a feast day, a mini-Easter. Take a break from the weight of Lent and let joy in.

Lent week five – Blessed are those who feel alone

<u>Day 23 — for when hope seems lost</u>
Monday, March 20

> *"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."*
> —Psalm 30:5, NKJV

Read: "for when hope seems lost" from page 120 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 62

Song of Trust in God Alone

1 For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from him comes my salvation.
2 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall never be shaken.
3 How long will you assail a person,
will you batter your victim, all of you,
as you would a leaning wall, a tottering fence?
4 Their only plan is to bring down a person of prominence.
They take pleasure in falsehood;
they bless with their mouths,
but inwardly they curse. Selah
5 For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
6 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
7 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
8 Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah
9 Those of low estate are but a breath;
those of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.

10 Put no confidence in extortion,
and set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.
11 Once God has spoken;
twice have I heard this:
that power belongs to God,
12 and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.
For you repay to all
according to their work.

Ask: The psalmist cycles through alternating thoughts of trust and distress. What are the movements of your heart today—are you leaning more toward trust or distrust? Hope or despair? Somewhere in the middle?

Listen: What do you do when all hope feels lost? Visual artist Lanecia Rouse Tinsley is no stranger to the hopelessness that comes with grief. We could all use a bit of what Lanecia calls, holy seeing. In this episode, Kate and Lanecia discuss how creativity can be an act of resistance and the hope she discovers on a blank canvas.
https://katebowler.com/podcasts/lanecia-rouse-tinsely-when-hope-seems-lost/

Pray a breath prayer based on Psalm 62 (repeat as many times as necessary):
Inhale: Find rest, oh soul.
Exhale: My soul finds rest in God.
Inhale: Find hope, oh soul.
Exhale: My hope comes from God.

Day 24 — for when this pain doesn't make sense
Tuesday, March 21

Read: "for when this pain doesn't make sense" from page 122 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 53:1-6

53 *Who has believed what we have heard?*
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
2 For he grew up before him like a young plant
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
3 He was despised and rejected by others;

a man of suffering[a] *and acquainted with infirmity,*
and as one from whom others hide their faces[b]
he was despised, and we held him of no account.
4 *Surely he has borne our infirmities*
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
5 *But he was wounded for our transgressions,*
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.
6 *All we like sheep have gone astray;*
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Ask: Isaiah 56 speaks prophetically of Jesus who knows pain from the inside out. How does it feel when you first realize that the person you are talking to really knows and understands your pain?

Listen: Why doesn't God fix our pain? Listen in to hear world-renowned theologian Stanley Hauerwas' thoughts about why Christians are not exempt from difficult circumstances. He gives the best advice: The ability to live well is the ability to live without so many reasons." https://katebowler.com/podcasts/more-life-fewer-explanations-2/

Pray: *Read the last half of today's blessing for yourself or for someone else: "God, make this pain matter…"*

Day 25 — for when you're tired of broken systems
Wednesday, March 22

Read: "for when you're tired of broken systems" from page 124 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 10:1-4

Woe to those who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
2 *to turn aside the needy from justice*
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
to make widows their spoil
and to plunder orphans!

3 What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the calamity that will come from far away?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth,
4 so as not to crouch among the prisoners
or fall among the slain?
For all this his anger has not turned away;
his hand is stretched out still.

Ask: What broken systems make you angry? How can you move beyond "thoughts and prayers" into action—even if it is a small action—today? What is in your power to control, fix, or heal?

Reflect: Audrey Assad rewrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Listen to her nonviolent version, "Your Peace Will Make Us One." What line stands out most?

Pray: *God, don't let my anger turn inward. Let it flow out into the world as work done in love for the strong cause of justice. Show me the fight that is mine, and make me brave with the kind of power that is fully under your control and direction. Make me a channel of Your peace! Amen.*

<u>Day 26 — for when you need a little hope</u>
Thursday, March 23

Read: "for when you need a little hope" from page 40 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 6:5-15

Concerning Prayer

5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.[a]
7 "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
9 "Pray, then, in this way:
Our Father in heaven,
may your name be revered as holy.
10 May your kingdom come.
May your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.

11 *Give us today our daily bread.*[b]
12 *And forgive us our debts,*
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
13 *And do not bring us to the time of trial,*[c]
but rescue us from the evil one.[d]

14 "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you,15 but if you do not forgive others,[e] *neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

Ask: Circle the words that best describe your relationship to prayer (any and all):

It comes easily. It is difficult. I always know what to say. I never know what to say. I don't think prayer works. I think God listens. Prayer makes me feel better. I pray whatever comes to mind. I prefer scripted prayers. I pray when I don't know what else to do. I pray to be changed by God. I enjoy praying for myself. I enjoy praying for others.

Listen: We don't always know how to move through seasons when there is hope for someday, but someday is not now. Perhaps here, we need to learn how to pray. Jesuit priest Father James Martin describes how prayer is for everyone—believer, doubter, or no-thank you-er. Listen here: https://katebowler.com/podcasts/father-james-martin-what-good-is-prayer/

Pray: *Pray the words of The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 5:9-13 slowly, as if you are saying them for the first time. What stands out? What do you need, especially today? Settle on that part of the prayer and make it your own.*

Day 27 — for when you're hanging on by a thread
Friday, March 24

Read: "for when you're hanging on by a thread" from page 42 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 55:1-3

Hear, everyone who thirsts;
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread

and your earnings for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
3 Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

Ask: Can you remember a time when you were just barely hanging on? Maybe that is today. God says "Come, you who are thirsty, you who have nothing, come."

Do: Grab a pen and paper. You are about to draw something–anything– that reminds you of your situation right now. Give yourself permission to be a little wild. No need to worry about representational accuracy! Just a playful drawing that maybe only you can recognize. (Yes, that IS a pickle in a jar. Don't you see it?) So now, all around that central image, draw or write what represents the resources you have right now, the help you have, the people you can call, the chocolate that is still in the back of the fridge. Now write the date at the top of the page. The resources you have are your starting point. What is possible here? Just for today.

Pray: *God, in the calculus of what is possible, help me start with resources and work from there, not from the problem backwards with all the weight of it bearing down on me. What can I do that is actually sustainable? Show me in real time, as I go, because I'm feeling a little fuzzy in my thinking, so action is probably my best bet. Let's start there. Amen.*

Day 28 — for truth-telling—however bitter or sweet
Saturday, March 25

Read: "for truth-telling—however bitter or sweet" from page 28 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Romans 12:9-15

Marks of the True Christian

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.
14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep
Ask: Think of a time when you were able to truly "weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice" (Romans 12:15). Think of someone who was able to do the same for you in a

time of need. Thank God for the gift of being able to give and receive this kind of presence and compassion.

Reflect: Listen to this simple Taizé song "Stay With Me." Let it represent the presence that brings comfort. These were the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane when he asked his friends to stay with him while he prayed about the cross he was about to face (Matthew 26:36-37). Think of a time you needed this same kind of loving-presence from people in your life.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WNY7vKiMjY

Pray: *God, give me the freedom to be able to tell the truth to myself, and the gift of someone who will listen to it. But God, when I have to say hard truths to someone, help me slow it down and prepare them, invite them. God, let my truth come gently. Amen*.

SUNDAY - MINI EASTER
Sunday, March 26

Happy Mini-Easter, my dear. Take a break from any sad, heavy feelings (even if just for a moment). And do something that makes you feel buoyed by gladness.

Lent Week Six – Blessed are those who mourn

Day 29 — for when so many are suffering (and you don't know what to do)
Monday, March 27

Read: "for when so many are suffering (and you don't know what to do)" from page 156 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: John 11:1-45

The Death of Lazarus

11 *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha.* ***2*** *Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill.* ***3*** *So the sisters sent a message to Jesus,*[a] *"Lord, he whom you love is ill."* ***4*** *But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather, it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."* ***5*** *Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus,* ***6*** *after having heard that Lazarus*[b] *was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

7 Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” 8 The disciples said to him,
“Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?” 9 Jesus
answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not
stumble because they see the light of this world. 10 But those who walk at night stumble because
the light is not in them.” 11 After saying this, he told them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep,
but I am going there to awaken him.” 12 The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep,
he will be all right.”[c] 13 Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought
that he was referring merely to sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead. 15 For
your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” 16 Thomas,
who was called the Twin,[d] said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with
him.”

Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus[e] had already been in the tomb four days. 18 Now
Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, 19 and many of the Jews had come to Martha
and Mary to console them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she
went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been
here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever
you ask of him.” 23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” 24 Martha said to him, “I
know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” 25 Jesus said to her, “I am the
resurrection and the life.[f] Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,26 and
everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” 27 She said to him,
“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah,[g] the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”

Jesus Weeps

28 When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary and told her privately, “The
Teacher is here and is calling for you.” 29 And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to
him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met
him. 31 The Jews who were with her in the house consoling her saw Mary get up quickly and go
out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep
there. 32 When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him,
“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” 33 When Jesus saw her weeping
and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply
moved. 34 He said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” 35 Jesus
began to weep. 36 So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” 37 But some of them said, “Could
not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

38 Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying
against it. 39 Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him,
“Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” 40 Jesus said to her, “Did I
not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” 41 So they took away the stone.
And Jesus looked upward and said, “Father, I thank you for having heard me. 42 I knew that you
always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may

believe that you sent me."[43] *When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"* [44] *The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

The Plot to Kill Jesus

[45] *Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.*

Ask: Re-read John 11:1-45, but place yourself in the scene. Where are you standing? What do you see? What emotion bubbles up? Imagine what it would have been like to have been there, to see Jesus' tears for his friend. This is the face of God's compassion for us in our sorrow.

Do: Pull out a piece of paper or a notebook. Make a list of the people in your life in desperate need of healing or hope—of all those you know who are suffering right now.

Pray: *Just speak the names you listed aloud to God. No need to fill in any details if you don't want to. God knows. It's a way to overcome the feeling that you can't possibly make a big enough difference to help all the sick ones, the hurting ones in your awareness. God hears you.*

Day 30 — for the ones who choose to break their hearts for ours

Tuesday, March 28

> *"Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness."*
>
> —Walter Brueggemann

Read: "for the ones who choose to break their hearts for ours" from page 158 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Isaiah 58:6-9

[6] *Is not this the fast that I choose:*
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
[7] *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry*
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator[a] shall go before you;
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
9 Then you shall call, and the Lordwill answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."
If you remove the yoke from among you,
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

Ask: Isaiah 58:6-9 describes the religious act of fasting as intrinsically linked to action. Do you imagine the religious acts you practice (prayer, fasting, giving, worship, attending church) as more for you or for others—or maybe both?

Listen: Certain people decide to make other people's pain their own. Gary Haugen, founder and CEO of International Justice Mission, is one of those people. But how do you sustain heartbreaking work? "Joy," Gary says, "is the oxygen for doing hard things." Listen here and be encouraged: https://katebowler.com/podcasts/gary-haugen-joy-is-the-oxygen/

Pray: *God, show me the gift I have to offer others. Blow your winds of love all around my efforts, so they have that whiff of joy about them. Amen.*

Day 31 — for the ones who bear witness

Wednesday, March 29

> *"Death always thinks of us eventually. The trick is to find the joy in the interim, and make good use of the days we have."*
> —Ann Patchett, *These Precious Days*

Read: "for the ones who bear witness" from page 160 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Acts 1:7-9

7 He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." 9 When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Ask: Jesus' friends were those who followed so closely, they knew every one of his ways. They were witnesses to the big stuff—his miracles, his death, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven. But also the little details too—how he parted his hair, his lunchtime preferences, and the face he made when he was really upset. Think of one close person in your life—your best friend,

your child, a partner, or co-worker. What are the quirky and individual and irreplaceable things you love about them?

Listen: Bestselling novelist Ann Patchett knows how to walk right up to the edge with people she loves. She is the friend who sits with you during chemo, or lets you spill your secrets in the car. She shares what powerful lessons she learned early on about how to approach suffering with humility, knowing you can rarely change a life, but you can be there to witness and be amazed. https://katebowler.com/podcasts/ann-patchett-behold-these-precious-days/

Pray: *O God, I love that you know me completely, and that you make it possible for me to know you through Jesus Christ. Thank you that you sent your Holy Spirit to be with us, through these precious days. Show us how to move through them as those who are truly alive. As witnesses to You, with Your joy shining through. Amen.*

Day 32 — for when loving your enemy seems too big an ask
Thursday, March 30

> *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness,*
> *only Light can do that.*
> *hate cannot drive out hate,*
> *only Love can do that."*
> —Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Read: "for when loving your enemy seems too big an ask" from page 164 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 5:43-48

Love for Enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Ask: Who is your enemy or archnemesis? Maybe a rude neighbor or that &$%! who cut you off in traffic. Or maybe it is a sibling or in-law you can't seem to forgive. That colleague who wronged you or that friend you always seem to be competing with. Hold their name (or face, if you can bear it) in your mind.

Reflect: Madeleine L'Engle said, "We must bless without wanting to manipulate. Without insisting that everything be straightened out right now. Without insisting that our truth be known. This means simply turning whoever it is we need to bless over to God, knowing that God's powerful love will do what our own feeble love or lack of it won't. I have suggested that it is a good practice to believe in six impossible things every morning before breakfast, like the White Queen in Through the Looking Glass. It is also salutary to bless six people I don't much like every morning before breakfast." Try blessing your enemy today. How did that make you feel?

Pray: *Read today's blessing again and make it a prayer, with this particular enemy in mind.*

Day 33 — for the givers who need to receive
Friday, March 31

Read: "for the givers who need to receive" from page 168 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Acts 20:32-36

32 And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace, a message that is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all who are sanctified. 33 I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. 34 You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. 35 In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' "

36 When he had finished speaking, he knelt down with them all and prayed.

Ask: When you read today's blessing, did someone come to mind who needs this kind of support? Or perhaps it's you? How can you show support to them today?

Do: Think of what would feel like support to the person you thought of and do it. Send an encouraging text or a coffee gift card. Offer to mow their lawn or drop off a meal. If you're the one in need of support, will you tell a friend how they could be supportive of you today? It can feel difficult to ask for what we need, but shouldering one another's burdens is what can help get us through sometimes.

Pray: *God, help me be open to see the suffering around me. Give me the willingness to come close, and be with them right there in the hard place. Show me what's important in their world right now, and please give me the words to say, or perhaps even just the quality of silence that is most meaningful. Amen.*

<u>Day 34 — for your great, big, dumb heart</u>
Saturday, April 1

Read: "for your great, big, dumb heart" from page 170 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: John 15:9-17

9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.
12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants[a] any longer, because the servant[b] does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.
Ask: Think of someone whose love for you made a huge difference. Maybe it was a grandparent or teacher, friend or pastor. What about their love felt transformative?

Do: Write a little Valentine's note for the person you thought of in the previous question. (Yes, I know it's a little late for a Valentine's card). It can be someone who is no longer with us or someone you have lost touch with. The act of writing the card is as important as the act of sending it. Express to them the way you felt changed by their love. How did it feel to be loved like that?

Pray: *Thank you, God, that your love ever reached me, and for that person who first brought it to me through their love beyond limits. I knew even then that this was different. Important. Irreplaceable. God, help me be that difference for someone else. Amen.*

PALM SUNDAY - MINI EASTER
Sunday, April 2

This Sunday is another Mini-Easter. It is also the day we celebrate Palm Sunday—when Jesus entered Jerusalem. Read the story found in John 12:12-18. Put yourself in the story. Who are you? What are you experiencing? What emotions do you feel? Then read "for Palm Sunday" on page 202 in *The Lives We Actually Have.*

Lent Week Seven – Blessed are those who are rejected

Day 35 — for the courage to try… and the wisdom to know when to stop
Monday, April 3

> *"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*
> *courage to change the things I can,*
> *and the wisdom to know the difference."*
> —The Serenity Prayer

Read: "for the courage to try… and the wisdom to know when to stop" from page 72 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 26:38-39

38 Then he said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." 39 And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want."

Ask: In his prayer towards the end of Passion week, Jesus stared down the reality that he hoped would not have to come to pass. What is it that you are facing? Express it to God, knowing God can handle your honesty.

Listen: Katie Couric was at the top of her career as a television anchor when her young husband died unexpectedly from colon cancer. She has so much to teach us about what happens when our problems cannot be easily solved—no matter how hard we try. She shares candidly about the lengths she went to avoid grief, but why she had to learn to face it nonetheless. We need the courage to try (and the wisdom to stop).
https://katebowler.com/podcasts/katie-couric-the-courage-to-try-and-wisdom-to-know-when-to-let-go/

Pray: *Lord Jesus, I want to walk with you through this week, to be present to the tumult of all that you experienced, to wait with you, to watch as rough hands took hold of your all too human flesh, as you experienced betrayal and rejection. Let me see you, and weep that such a thing ever happened to you, O spotless Lamb. Amen.*

Day 36 — for collective grief
Tuesday, April 4

Read: "for collective grief" from page 74 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Psalm 137:1-6—this is the lament of a people when captured and taken from their homeland to be held in captivity.

Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

1 By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down, and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 On the willows[a] there
we hung up our harps.
3 For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
4 How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Ask: Today's blessing says, "Blessed are we who ask and wait, and ask again for answers that may not come, for hope that seems hard to find, for comfort that is not easily found." What are the answers you wait for, that may not come?

Do: Right now, people across the country and world are feeling collective grief on many different scales. The grief that comes with the loss of those who have died due to COVID-19. The war in Ukraine. And too often, we wake to the news of another mass shooting. Getting involved in your community—even in small ways—can help the collective grieving process. Consider the ways in which your community needs to heal. Are there ways you can help and get involved? Our team loves the work of Together Rising who "transforms collective heartbreak into effective action."

Pray: *Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer; from the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I, for you have been my refuge, a strong*

tower against the enemy. Let me dwell in Your tent forever! Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings. Amen. (Psalm 61:1-4)

Day 37 — for the day of mourning
Wednesday, April 5

Read: "for the day of mourning" from page 76 of *The Lives We Actually Ha*

Read: Psalm 22

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

[1] My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?
[2] O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night but find no rest.
[3] Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
[4] In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.
[5] To you they cried and were saved;
in you they trusted and were not put to shame.
[6] But I am a worm and not human,
scorned by others and despised by the people.
[7] All who see me mock me;
they sneer at me; they shake their heads;
[8] "Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights!"
[9] Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother's breast.
[10] On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.
[11] Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is no one to help.
[12] Many bulls encircle me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;
[13] they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.
[14] I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;

15 my mouth[a] is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they bound my hands and feet.[b]
17 I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.
19 But you, O Lord, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!
20 Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life[c] from the power of the dog!
21 Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued[d] me.
22 I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;[e]
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
23 You who fear the Lord, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me[f]
but heard when I[g] cried to him.
25 From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.
26 The poor[h] shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!
27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.[i]
28 For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and he rules over the nations.
29 To him,[j] indeed, shall all who sleep in[k] the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.[l]
30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord
31 and[m] proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Ask: What are you grieving, my dear? Big or small—lay out the whole of it all. No tear goes unnoticed.

Do: Food has a beautiful way of making us feel less lonely in our pain or in our isolation or in our grief. My friend, Kendall Vanderslice, founded the nonprofit, Edible Theology, founded on the belief that deep healing and connection takes place best over food and at a table. She even has a Lenten bread series on her blog. Kendall says, "Every time I bake, I am reminded that death is necessary for resurrection. The tartness of sourdough is a sharp reminder that when wheat, or dough, or beloved friends die, by God's mercy they bear much fruit." Click here to listen to Kitchen Meditations with Kendall Vanderslice, stories of how God meets us at the kitchen and at the table. And who knows, maybe you will bake something delicious today.

Pray: *God, there's pain now. Awaken me to what it is, that I might lean into it a little closer. Help me see what it is, and understand a little more about the nature of what is hurting—in my mind, in my body. Give me words for it, that I might see a way through it, or around it. Give me courage to somehow live here, right where I am, but also wide awake to where I might bravely go. O God of all compassion, help me, lead me. Amen.*

Day 38 — for Maundy Thursday
Thursday, April 6

Read: "for Maundy Thursday" from page 204 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 26:1-30

When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, 2 "You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified."
3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the courtyard of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, 4 and they conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. 5 But they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

The Anointing at Bethany

6 Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper,[a] 7 a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. 8 But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? 9 For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum and the money given to the poor." 10 But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. 11 For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. 12 By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. 13 Truly I tell you, wherever this good news[b] is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus

14 Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. 16 And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

The Passover with the Disciples

17 On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" 18 He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and say to him, 'The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.' " 19 So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.
20 When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve disciples,[c] 21 and while they were eating he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." 22 And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" 23 He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me.24 The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born." 25 Judas, who betrayed him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?" He replied, "You have said so."

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

26 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it[d] he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the[e] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."
30 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Ask: Honoring Jesus while he was near, that was the beauty of the lavish gift outpoured. How can the remembrance of this woman's loving act guide you this day?

Reflect: This ancient Latin hymn "Humbly We Adore Thee" is about the sharing of the bread and the cup at the Last Supper. It has a beautiful English translation, given below, and you can follow it as you listen to this sublime recording:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9FK03RBuso Translation: found here:
https://liturgy.ng/hymns/humbly-we-adore-thee

Christ, our God and brother Hear our humble plea; By this holy banquet Keep us joined to Thee. Humbly we adore Thee, Christ Redeemer King, Thou art Lord of Heaven, Thou to whom we sing. God, the mighty, thou hast come, Bearing gifts of grace; Son of Adam, still thou art, Saviour of our race. Jesus, Lord, we thank Thee For this wondrous bread; In our land Thou dwellest, By Thee we are fed. We who share this mystery, In thee are made one; Ev'ry act we

offer thee In Thy name is done. Thou who died to save us, Live on as our light; Though our eyes are blinded, Yet our faith gives sight. Christ, do thou be merciful; Lamb for sinners slain; We in grief confess our guilt; Cleanse our souls of stain.

Pray: *My Jesus, I love you. I pour out all my adoration as oil upon your feet. All my gratitude. All my joy. I come hoping to receive from you the food I need. Fill me with your very self, that I may live as one satisfied, and able to nourish and care for others with the kind of sustaining love you have for me. Amen.*

Day 39 —for Good Friday
Friday, April 7
Read: "for Good Friday" from page 206 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Luke 23:1-47
Then the assembly rose as a body and brought Jesus[a] before Pilate. 2 They began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man inciting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to Caesar and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king."[b] 3 Then Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He answered, "You say so." 4 Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, "I find no basis for an accusation against this man."5 But they were insistent and said, "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place."

Jesus before Herod

6 When Pilate heard this, he asked whether the man was a Galilean. 7 And when he learned that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him off to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time.8 When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had been wanting to see him for a long time because he had heard about him and was hoping to see him perform some sign. 9 He questioned him at some length, but Jesus[c] gave him no answer. 10 The chief priests and the scribes stood by vehemently accusing him. 11 Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him and sent him back to Pilate.12 That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies.

Jesus Sentenced to Death

13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people 14 and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people, and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him. 15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death. 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him."[d]
18 Then they all shouted out together, "Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!" 19 (This was a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection that had taken place in the city and for murder.) 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again, 21 but they kept shouting, "Crucify, crucify him!" 22 A third time he said to them, "Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death; I will therefore have him flogged and then

release him." [23] But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified, and their voices prevailed. [24] So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted. [25] He released the man they asked for, the one who had been put in prison for insurrection and murder, and he handed Jesus over as they wished.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

[26] As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. [27] A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. [28] But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. [29] For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' [30] Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' [31] For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"
[32] Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. [33] When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus[e] there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. [[[34] Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."]][f] And they cast lots to divide his clothing. [35] And the people stood by watching, but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah[g] of God, his chosen one!" [36] The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine [37] and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" [38] There was also an inscription over him,[h] "This is the King of the Jews."
[39] One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding[i] him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah?[j] Save yourself and us!" [40] But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? [41] And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." [42] Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come in[k] your kingdom." [43] He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

The Death of Jesus

[44] It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land[l] until three in the afternoon, [45] while the sun's light failed,[m] and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. [46] Then Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last. [47] When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Ask: What kind of love is this? Consider this question as you read the account in Luke 23:1-47.

Do: Attend a Good Friday service at a local church or online. Good Friday is a powerful day of truth telling and honesty. It's the ultimate moment of God's condescension. If you've ever wondered how far God would go to be with us, this is it. All the way to the end.
"I asked Jesus, 'How much do you love me?' And Jesus said, 'This much.' Then he stretched out His arms and died." —Author unknown

Pray: *God, draw me to the cross, there to stand with the others whose love for you feels the weight of it as loss, as grief. Your enemies thought they could end what you were doing, and render you powerless. Little did they know that love never fails. Show me again the truth of all that happened here. Amen.*

Day 40 — for Holy Saturday
Saturday, April 8

> *"Blessed are those who mourn,*
> *for they shall be comforted."*
> —Matthew 5:4, NRSV

Read: "for Holy Saturday" from page 208 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: Matthew 27:57-66

The Burial of Jesus

57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was himself a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. 59 So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth 60 and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The Guard at the Tomb

62 The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' 64 Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise, his disciples may go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "You have a guard[a] of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can."[b] 66 So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Ask: The Harrowing of Hell is celebrated today on Holy Saturday. The day when tradition affirms that Jesus descended into hell, showing us that there is no place you can go where God will not find you and lead you home. All the scars that cover us, all the wounds that we have inflicted on others, all the pain that you carry—don't matter in the end. All our dirt will be cleansed, our incisions healed, our grief wiped away. Nobody who wants to go with him gets left behind. Reflect on that truth. What does the depth of Holy Saturday mean to you today?

Reflect: The Harrowing of Hell is often depicted in art. The icon "Descent to Hell," written by Duccio Di Buoninsegna in 1308-11 depicts Jesus holding a staff with the cross on top. Jesus is

standing in front of the broken doors of hell and his right foot is standing on top of Satan's side of his body. Satan is laying on the ground with his belly facing outward towards the audience of the picture and his face is looking up at Jesus. Jesus is reaching through the broken walls of hell, offering his hand to those who still stand inside the walls. There are 12 people sticking their heads out of the broken walls of hell. The first person to reach Jesus is an older man, depicted by his long white beard and long white hair, this is assumed to be Adam. He is bent down on one knee in front of Jesus. A woman, assumed to be Eve, is dressed in blue and is leaning towards Jesus behind the older man, she is also on her knees. Behind Adam and Eve is a row of 4 men standing, all with white beards and two wearing golden crowns. Three of these men have their hands in a prayer position in front of their chest. The last man in the row has his hand reached out towards Jesus. Directly behind these men are 4 more men, 3 with darker hair and looking much younger, the 4th having white hair and a much shorter white beard then the other men with white hair. One of the younger men in the back row is also wearing a golden crown. There is one more man drawn in between the rows of men, harder to depict but looks to be darker brown in skin color than the rest of the white men and women in the picture. Take note at how Jesus is described as pulling Adam by the hand out of hell. Reflect on the description of this painting. What does this painting stir up in you?

Pray: *God, come find me in the places I'm a little lost and don't know it. Help me in my honest questioning, my earnest longings, and lead me home. Amen*.

Easter Day 1 — for Easter Sunday

Sunday, April 9

Read: "for Easter Sunday" from page 210 of *The Lives We Actually Have*

Read: John 20:1-30

The Resurrection of Jesus

20 *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb*
and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ***2*** *So she ran and went to Simon Peter*
and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord
out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." ***3*** *Then Peter and the other*
disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ***4*** *The two were running together, but the other disciple*
outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ***5*** *He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings*
lying there, but he did not go in. ***6*** *Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb.*
He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ***7*** *and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying*
with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ***8*** *Then the other disciple, who reached*
the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, ***9*** *for as yet they did not understand the*
scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ***10*** *Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look[a] into the
tomb, 12 and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at
the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said
to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When
she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it
was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"
Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir,[b] if you have carried him away, tell me
where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and
said to him in Hebrew,[c] "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not touch
me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am
ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " 18 Mary Magdalene went
and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and she told them that he had said these
things to her.

Jesus Appears to the Disciples

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the
disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with
you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced
when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent
me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the
Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any,
they are retained."

Jesus and Thomas

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin[d]), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus
came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I
see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in
his side, I will not believe."
26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the
doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he
said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my
side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said
to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and
yet have come to believe."

The Purpose of This Book

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this
book.
Ask: The Apostle John says in verse 30 that many things Jesus did and said are not recorded in scripture? What things would you like to have seen or read?

Do: Celebrate with Easter Joy! The season of Lent is over. How will you mark the move into Eastertide? What will you take with you from this Lenten journey?

Pray: *God, let the truth of it sink in. You have overcome death! Help me find my alleluias, and let them rise from my throat with the raw immediacy of what this means. For me. For those who have gone before. Awaken me to shout and sing at the top of my voice! Christ is risen! Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen.*