

2018  
Volume 7

# A Way in the Wilderness



A Devotional Written  
by Family and Friends  
of Grace United Methodist Church

## **A Note of Thanks**

*A Way in the Wilderness* is a Lenten Devotional written by the friends and families of Grace United Methodist Church. These reflections and meditations come from the heart of the writers who were asked to share evidence of this truth with you. We hope you as the reader hear and see evidence of God working in your life and the lives of others through these stories.

Please use this devotional as a daily practice of reading, meditating, praying, and discovering new things about your relationship with God and others.

Many thanks and much appreciation goes first and foremost to the writers—you really wrote from your faith! We are deeply indebted to Dennis Dubois, parishioner and local artist, for the use of his artworks: “*A Way in the Wilderness*” and “*The Garden*” Also, we would like to thank Chris Dixon in helping to make this happen. Thank you all so much!

*The Grace UMC Staff & Intentional Faith Development Team*

*Introduction*

**2018 Lent / Holy Week Celebrations**

Please join us for worship and celebration this Lenten season.

Shrove Sunday Pancake Breakfast	February 11, 7:30 to 10:30 am
Ash Wednesday Soup/Salad Supper	February 14, 5:45 pm
Ash Wednesday Service	February 14, 7:30 pm
Lenten Wednesday Night Suppers	February 21, 5:45 pm February 28, 5:45 pm March 7, 5:45 pm March 14, 5:45 pm March 21, 5:45 pm
Palm Sunday Services <i>All worship services: 8:25 am, 9:45 am, and 11:00 am</i>	March 25
Maundy Thursday Service	March 29, 7:30 pm
Good Friday Service	March 30, 7:30 pm
Prayer Vigil (24 hours)	March 30-31, 8:30 pm
Easter Sunrise Service	April 1, 6:30 am
Easter Services <i>All worship services: 8:25 am, 9:45 am, and 11:00 am</i>	April 1
Confirmation Sunday <i>All worship services: 8:25 am, 9:45 am, and 11:00 am</i>	May 13
Change the World Day	May 19
Day of Pentecost Services <i>All worship services: 8:25 am, 9:45 am, and 11:00 am</i>	May 20

## Cover Artwork by Dennis DuBois

I struggled with this: “A way in the wilderness?” A literal wilderness, a landscape? Perhaps “wilderness” is a metaphor, for what? Maybe this is to be a wilderness of the mind, Picasso-like?

The reference photo for the painting was taken on a backpacking trip and suddenly came to me in the middle of the night. I got up, found the photo, and knew this is what I was to paint. A metaphorical-theological painting of a literal wilderness! Let me explain. A painting should draw the viewer into the work. Is the trail drawing you into the dark of the “wilderness?” Or are you hiking out of the wilderness into sunlight? Your faith journey may sometimes take you into some dark places you don’t want to go to or make you wonder why you are in a “wilderness” at all. Christ provides the trail when you accept Him into your life. He will always be your backpacking companion, even when you think you may have lost the trail or realize you are perhaps on the wrong trail in someplace you don’t want to be. When you think you are lost, stop, orient your map and compass (Bible), shoot some bearings with your compass to the land features around you (pray), and He will show you the way.

## What is Lent?

Our Lenten journey is one of “turning around,” of changing directions from self-serving toward the self-giving way of the cross.

The word *Lent* comes from the Old English word *lencten*, which refers to the lengthening of days and the coming of spring. Lent is not specifically mentioned in the Bible, but it is Biblical nonetheless. Throughout Hebrew history, based on the Torah, every religious festival required time for preparation, and it is from this example that Christianity has kept this tradition. Thus, Lent is the time of preparation for Easter.

Lent lasts 40 days; why 40? In early times each number was felt to reveal a certain aspect of God. The number 40 meant “complete.” There are many examples in the Bible of the number 40. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness preparing for His own spiritual journey and ministry. Sundays are not counted in Lent, they are considered “little Easters.” Hence, Lent actually lasts 46 days, but again, we only count the 40 days of preparation as Lenten days, and not the *rest* days of Sunday Sabbath.

Christians focus on their relationship with God, often choosing to give up something or volunteering and giving of themselves for others. Why give up something or volunteer and give yourself for others for Lent? Well, perhaps in the giving up or giving of yourself, you may find yourself sharing in the suffering of Christ, or at least coming to a greater understanding of temptation and suffering. Maybe the discipline of “giving up” or “giving” will help you focus on Christ or help you to understand the sorrow over your own sometimes selfish behavior. Maybe it will help you realize that God is ultimately what should fill your life, and not your belongings, desires, or habits.

Because we cycle around to this scenario every year, it also points to a cyclic understanding of spiritual growth. Every time we come to this part of the year, we come as changed, different people. Each time we contemplate the world ending, it is a different world. Each time we set out on a path toward God, we hopefully do it with greater depth and with more wisdom.

## What are all the “other days”?

**Shrove Tuesday** – Shrove means “to repent.” Shrove Tuesday is celebrated the Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday, and is sometimes celebrated in churches with pancake suppers as a reminder of the unleavened bread and the Israelites’ hasty departure from Egypt. Here at Grace UMC we celebrate this event as Shrove Sunday Pancake Breakfast on the Sunday prior to Ash Wednesday.

**Ash Wednesday** – Ash Wednesday is celebrated 46 days before Easter or 40 days not counting Sundays. It may fall anytime from February 3 to March 10. The ashes of Ash Wednesday are burned from the palm branches from the previous Palm Sunday. The ashes are mixed with oil and then a cross is smudged across the forehead as a symbolic reminder that we are all sinners and desperately in need of forgiveness. Although there is not a scripture associated with Ash Wednesday and Jesus did not celebrate Ash Wednesday with his disciples, we can draw on Old Testament references for remorse and sorrow associated with ashes. “O my people, put on sackcloth and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son.” – *Jeremiah 6:26*.

**Palm Sunday** – Palm Sunday is the Sunday prior to Easter and is the first day of Holy Week. Jesus entered Jerusalem and began his final days on earth. A large crowd gathered and greeted him

## Introduction

waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna!” – *Matthew 21:1-11*.

**Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday** – Holy Thursday is celebrated the Thursday prior to Easter. Maundy is Latin for *mandatum novum* or “new commandment” remembering Jesus’ new commandment recorded in *John 13:34*: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Thursday services remember Jesus’ betrayal, His washing of the disciples’ feet, the Lord’s Supper (communion), and His final teachings as recorded in the Gospel of John. Here at Grace UMC the altar is stripped and everything is removed. All leave the worship service in silence as a reminder of the death of Jesus Christ.

**Good Friday** – Good Friday is celebrated the Friday prior to Easter, and it is an alteration of “God’s” Friday. Good Friday remembers Jesus’ crucifixion and His last words from the cross. On Good Friday a Tenebrae (Latin for shadows or darkness) service features scriptures, meditations, and extinguished candles as the Christ candle exits the room.

**Easter Vigil (Holy Saturday)** – The Easter Vigil or Holy Saturday is celebrated the Saturday prior to Easter. This Saturday evening service remembers the promises of God throughout history and the dark moments before the resurrection. Here at Grace UMC we celebrate the Easter Vigil with a 24-hour Prayer Vigil. The Prayer Vigil starts at the end of the Good Friday service and continues through Saturday until 8:30 pm.

**Easter** – Easter is celebrated the first Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or next after March 21, the spring equinox. Easter can be any time from March 22 through April 25. Easter celebrates Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. “He is not here, but has risen.” – *Luke 24:6*.

## **Bible Passage**

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. —*Philippians 4: 4-7 (New International Version)*

## **Devotional**

“Do not be anxious”! – Are you kidding me? During my first 55 years, I made fussing, fretting and obsessing a way of life. As a result, I may have been prepared for many things, but I missed the pleasure of experiencing the joys of the moment. “Intense” was the polite description people had of me for many years. Mind you, I understood this was not really a compliment. Through various serendipitous exchanges with others along my faith journey, I have begun to change my approach (though I am certain only God can detect the change given its slow pace).

I have learned to be thankful for my problems rather than be angry for their presence. Accordingly, I give prayerful thanks for the challenges as well as the opportunities and commit to always seeking the opportunity that exists in each and every challenge. As I have learned to accept the difficulties as part of God’s plan for me, I have learned to express thanksgiving for the small things that I used to overlook or dismiss.

I have learned to pray thanks for the blessings that have happened (or will happen, if I am patient) instead of just asking for things in advance through prayer. I started with the approach of saying three “positive” things for each “negative” thing or for each prayer “request”. While there is nothing wrong with a prayer request, I have found giving Thanks and praising God for things that have happened is very easy because I see them all the time now. Something as simple as “Thank you, Father, for the gift of this new day” or “Thank you Lord for helping me to arrive at my destination safely” flows more regularly.

This approach to giving thanks is known to most people and I do not pretend to have discovered a new, revolutionary method of prayer. Rather, it is new to me and it has had a profound effect on my demeanor (maybe only God sees it, but I feel it), my patience

*Sunday, March 4*

and my outlook. Thankfulness is helping me to have an attitude of gratitude. I hope and pray that others can see it in me as well.

## **Reflection**

To help you meditate on today's devotional, consider the following questions:

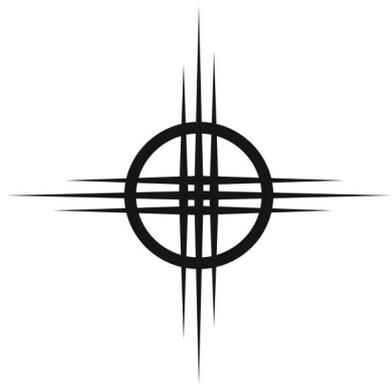
1. What words and images from this devotion capture your attention?
2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gifts of challenge and opportunity. I pray that I will seek the opportunity in each and every challenge as I know it is all part of your plan for me. I pray thanks for the gift of knowledge and awareness that comes with meeting each of these challenges. In Jesus Name, Amen.

## **About the Author**

Blair Jost is an Engineer by vocation and a “gear head” by temperament. Through God's plan and the patience of the people of Grace UMC, he is currently a Lay Leader serving the congregation in ways that he sees anew each and every day. He is immensely grateful to serve fellow believers as they help him along his faith journey.



Monday, March 5

## **Bible Passage**

We can make our plans, but the final outcome is in God's hands. We can always "prove" that we are right, but is the Lord convinced? —*Proverbs 16:1-2 (Living Bible)*

## **Devotional**

I was playing on the playground when I decided to go on the monkey bars. So I go on the monkey bars, and then I think it's the best idea to hang upside down. Then I hang upside down, and start to swing. Suddenly, I slipped and fell on my head. Luckily, I wasn't injured and was okay because God protected me and his will was that he wanted me to be okay.

## **Reflection**

To help you meditate on today's devotional, consider the following questions:

1. What words and images from this devotion capture your attention?
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3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## **Prayer**

Dear God,

Thank you for protecting me and I know that you have a plan for me to be unharmed. Amen.

## **About the Author**

Shane is 13 years old and attends Manassas Christian School.

Tuesday, March 6

## **Bible Passage**

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. —*Deuteronomy 31:6 (New International Version)*

## **Devotional**

All too often, as we go through our adult lives, we lose sight of what is important. It seemed to me that the more I tried to experience life, and thinking I was filling it, the less fulfilled I felt. When things were going well I took credit for being a clever man. When life threw me a curve I blamed others or considered it a run of bad luck. In all my life felt empty and I found myself searching and alone. I came to realize that with Christ in my life we are never alone and what I really wanted was to feel the love that God gives us unconditionally. The Lord comes to us in ways that are unexpected. For me I believe he knew I needed help in staying the course to salvation and made available my wonderful wife, Betsy. Together he has helped us shape a life that has filled us with the Spirit, helping us to support one another to feel the grace and love that the Lord provides.

## **Reflection**

To help you meditate on today's devotional, consider the following questions:

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2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## **Prayer**

Thank you for being by my side, always and forever, in my journey back to you.

## **About the Author**

Steve Buelow is a soon to be retired government contractor with AT&T. He is the father of three and the grandfather of six, ranging in ages from 20 months to 9 years. He has been a member of Grace UMC for four years, and currently is the Chairman of the Worship Committee with his wife, Betsy.

Wednesday, March 7

## **Bible Passage**

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow ... The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord! —*Psalm 146: 5-10 (New Revised Standard Version)*

## **Devotional**

Although I have been in a “Wilderness” a number of times in my life, the deepest was in March and April, 2007. My husband died after an extended illness. He had been fortunate to get a lung transplant - we got an additional four quality years with him. We had traveled, both our son and daughter married, his family flew here from Illinois for a special meal prepared by friends and neighbors. He had reconnected with many very good friends from previous times in his life. Our daughter, son, and I were expecting his death and I do believe such knowledge and time helps one prepare for an expected loss.

Then my Mom died two weeks later, the same day as the Virginia Tech Massacre, and a day before my birthday. With an intact mind she made a decision on Easter to stop eating and die a natural death. My Dad had died the year before. Both of my parents had worried about their deaths—they did not want an extended death process and knew they had the right to die. Lovingly, my sister and brother knew those wishes and the three of us kept a vigil at her bedside.

I had grown up on a farm where I had embraced the circle of life with farm animals, had been a pediatric nurse with terminal patients, a hospice nurse, all steps in the learning and living with loss and grief. Yet now very important folks were not in my physical life.

Bible verses, hymns, and prayers were spontaneous in my mind day and night. For months I would awaken during the night singing in my head old hymns – I Need Thee Every Hour, A Mighty Fortress is our God, Amazing Grace, Jesus Loves Me, How Great Thou Art,

Wednesday, March 7

The Church in the Wildwood, My Faith Looks Up to Thee, etc. I would be near tears and yet felt embraced by Grace Church and God's presence in my life. I was so thankful that I was comfortable with my faith and believed that my husband, father, and mother were in a better place.

## Reflection

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2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## Prayer

Dear Lord, Help us remember the gifts You have given us, Your faithfulness in watching over us, and the resources available to us when we are needy. Give us strength to follow in Your footsteps and be a role model for others. All this we ask in Your Name, Amen.

## About the Author

Katie Swenson and her late husband joined Grace UMC when they moved to Manassas in 1972. She has seen wonderful outreach missions develop at Grace UMC. Katie is proud of our pastors, other church leaders, and cherishes the relationships that are a part of our church family. She now has four wonderful grandchildren! Her hobbies include golf, pickleball, bridge, reading, and gardening. She loves God's creations in our world.



## Bible Passage

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”  
—*Matthew 26:36-39 (New International Version)*

## Devotional

I often retreat to be alone and take a breath. I don't do so for anything particularly constructive like meditating, but the time to process is invaluable. Despite our efforts, and discussion with our small group to strive against overburdening our family schedule, we have nonetheless created a hectic routine. Too often, from the time we awake until bedtime, one of our crew needs to be somewhere else or accomplish a task under deadline. For that reason, time to pause is invaluable.

Restorative acts—to reflect, to listen, and to review successes and failures—I feel most acutely when I retreat into nature, consciously setting a block of time apart. I've always been fond of hiking, camping and fishing. Add to that a penchant to observe, and God's creation speaks to me in myriad ways. It represents a duality for me: comfort with going on an adventure without some access to modernity, and an unease that despite my preparation, the wilds are out of my control.

Most importantly, a hike or the act of fishing simplifies things. One foot in front then the other, and repeat. A rhythm develops. Even in a group, you can concentrate on your tasks while observing how nature interacts with you. The hope is harmony, and not imposing my will, but adapting to nature's established rhythms. These times are not intentionally times of prayer, but that is often what occurs. I am amazed at how far I can be out of touch with such beauty.

I admit my life is out of my hands. I cannot fully grasp everything I encounter, and cannot fully identify the path I've been set upon. It seems true for us all, and I take comfort that Jesus retreated to the wilderness for restoration. Perhaps he was not as overwhelmed as I can get, as lonely as it sometimes feels even in the midst of a

Thursday, March 8

crowd, or as befuddled as I am at how cruelly we sometimes treat our brothers and sisters. But then I step back and remind myself that he knows these emotions, along with a broader spectrum of emotions you might better identify with, beyond our understanding. As comforting as it is that Jesus retreated and pleaded for mercy, what speaks to me in this passage is His surrender. It's not what comes my way, it's how I react to it that matters.

## Reflection

To help you meditate on today's devotional, consider the following questions:

1. What words and images from this devotion capture your attention?
2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## Prayer

Help me to better encounter what comes my way, and adapt to the waves of life, with the confidence of a Christ-follower.

## About the Author

Chris Dixon has attended Grace UMC for over 10 years with his wife, Sabrina, and his sons, Caleb, Ethan and Travis. Chris currently serves as Lay Leader and attends the *Family Life* small group.



Friday, March 9

## **Bible Passage**

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.  
—*Matthew 28:19-20 (New Revised Standard Version)*

## **Devotional**

I recently came across an article in the Washington Post, which gave me pause. The title of the article was “Churches and synagogues in the state are increasingly merging and closing”. The article was about the state of Maryland, but it included some frightening statistics which addressed trends across the United States and the world. For example: 1) Membership in churches and synagogues has decreased twenty percent since world war two; 2) The Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church USA have lost nearly half their members since 1967; 3) More than 1000 Catholic parishes have closed since 1995; 4) More than twenty percent of Americans say they are unaffiliated with any religion, the highest number ever recorded. One church leader summarized the situation in this way: “We no longer live in Christendom. We have to accept that it is a thing of the past.” Regrettably, Grace United Methodist Church is not immune from the continuing changes in our society. At a time when Grace United Methodist Church is ready to vote on a planned expansion of our fellowship hall, men and women of faith have to ask themselves what can be done to arrest and reverse this disturbing trend? The verses from Matthew included above are Jesus’ commission to His disciples, but they are also a commission to all who claim Christ as their Lord. We cannot expect our pastors to shoulder that burden alone. The congregation is Grace United Methodist Church. In the Methodist Baptismal Covenant the Pastor asks the candidates and the congregation: “According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ’s holy church and serve as Christ’s representative in the world?” Similarly, when a new member joins the church he or she is asked “Will you faithfully participate in its [the United Methodist Church’s] ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?” Grace has always prided itself on being a welcoming church, but perhaps the time has come to consider whether we need to focus not only on bringing new members in, but also making an effort to keep the

Friday, March 9

members we already have. I do not claim to know the answer to how to achieve that. But I believe that Christ has commissioned all believers to share the good news with their prayers, presence and service.

## Reflection

To help you meditate on today's devotional, consider the following questions:

1. What words and images from this devotion capture your attention?
2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## Prayer

Heavenly Father, open our minds so that we may understand Thy will, please give us the wisdom to understand what You would have us do and the strength to put those thoughts into action.

We ask that we be called as a witness to Your love by the love we extend to others. Let our actions be a model of Your justice by our commitment to what is right and good. Amen.

## About the Author

John Bennett is a husband, a father of two daughters, a grandfather of four grand-daughters, a retired U.S. Navy (Reserve) Captain and a retired civilian attorney with the Marine Corps. He is an avid golfer and a proud graduate of UNC Chapel Hill and William & Mary (Marshall-Wythe Law School). John leads the Thursday night Men's Bible Study group and is a member of the Applied Life Sunday School class, as well as the secretary of the United Methodist Men's group.



Saturday, March 10

## **Bible Passage**

Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him.

—*Psalms 62:1 (New International Version)*

## **Devotional**

A friend of mine faced some serious health challenges this past fall, and she was hospitalized with an uncertain outcome.

I organize the greeters for the 8:30 service, and she had been a greeter since before I took the job. She was someone I could always count on to fill a slot. She especially liked serving as a greeter during the Christmas season, her favorite time of the year. She was a person of great faith who could find a quotation from the Bible to match any circumstance. Whatever challenges she faced, she knew where to look in the Bible for encouragement and support; and she offered that same encouragement and support to any others she knew who were facing difficulties of any sort.

She was a devoted wife, the mother of two wonderful children, and she was close to and beloved by her four grandchildren. She loved to keep her house sparkling and especially to decorate it for the Christmas season.

She was also an active and faithful member of several churches over the years, finally coming to Grace.

This past year I came to know her as a friend and began visiting her to listen to her talk about her days and to pray with her. We spent many happy hours together that were a real blessing to me. She was truly amazing in her faith and in the way she prayed for others, including me. Listening to her talk about her family, I began to feel I knew them myself. But, being the amazing person that she was, she took an equal interest in my life and my troubles. She always asked about my family members. As we ended our visits, I prayed with her and for her and for her family members, and then she began to pray also, praying for my family.

After she fell and broke her hip, it hurt me to see this amazing person suffer, to see her in a hospital bed when I knew she'd much rather be at home, or failing that, be with her Heavenly Father. Yet she remained faithful and continued to praise God. Finally, though, she succumbed to her injuries and passed from this world to be in that place she'd always been working toward, to be with her Father in Heaven.

*Saturday, March 10*

How fortunate I was to have Catherine Hicks in my life. I will always be grateful that I knew her, and I will never forget her.

## **Reflection**

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1. What words and images from this devotion capture your attention?
2. What is God inviting you to do in response to this reading?
3. Write a one sentence prayer for today.

## **Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we thank you for Grace United Methodist Church and especially for our wonderful pastors. We also thank you for those other individuals who have provided important examples to us, and we pray that we may learn to follow in the paths they have shown us. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

## **About the Author**

Mid Scanlon has been a member of Grace since 2007. She attends the 8:25 am service, belongs to the Applied Life Sunday School class, and especially loves the Wednesday Morning Bible Study. She has also been a Stephen Minister for the past eight years.

She is the mother of four great kids and grandmother to six wonderful grandchildren. She has a companion beagle named Solimar who provides warmth, devotion, lively walks, and fun. She enjoys reading and spending time with family and friends.





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**9750 Wellington Road, Manassas, VA 20110  
(703) 361-7800                      [umcgrace.org](http://umcgrace.org)**