

# Grace United Methodist Church 2022 Lenten Devotional



## Divine Encounters



## **Wednesday, March 2, 2022 – Ash Wednesday**

### **Scripture:** Matthew 10: 29-31 (The Passion Translation)

You can buy two sparrows for only a copper coin, yet not even one sparrow falls from its nest without the knowledge of your Father. Aren't you worth much more to God than many sparrows? So don't worry. For your Father cares deeply about even the smallest detail of your life.

### **Message:**

I have often worried about what the future holds for each of our five grandchildren. In particular, I wonder what the future will be like for Chloe, our seven-year-old granddaughter who is on the Autism spectrum. Chloe has many of the typical characteristics often seen in this communication disorder, including very little verbal language, limited eye contact or facial expressions, and dependence on specific routines.

One day in September a few years ago, I was not focused on future, big picture concerns, but worried about some very immediate challenges. Grandpa and I were doing our first multi-day babysitting including getting Chloe off to school in the morning and we were pretty nervous! Would she tolerate having us there instead of her parents, which was clearly outside her morning routine? Did we dress her in the correct clothes? Would she eat breakfast? Were the right things packed in her lunch box? Would she get on the bus successfully? A problem with any one of these things could have resulted in an autistic "meltdown" – an involuntary rage triggered by an overwhelming situation.

As her departure time approached, I took Chloe's hand and walked out the front door to await the bus, feeling a slight bit of relief because we had almost gotten through the morning routine. As soon as we walked outside, Chloe looked up at me, gazing directly into my eyes, with the biggest, most radiant smile on her precious face. Then she sweetly and simply uttered, "Tweet! Tweet!" She heard the beautiful chorus of the many birds in the neighborhood on this glorious morning. Then with a hop and a skip, she ran toward her school bus. I continued to listen to the birds that I hadn't even noticed before because I had been so preoccupied with concern. The sound was beautiful – as exquisite as a rare spoken word and a focused look from our granddaughter. This was a clear message to me, through Chloe, that God cares for all of us, even as he does the birds. I don't need to worry about Chloe. Her future, and all of ours, is in the faithful hands of our Lord and Savior.

### **Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, thank you for caring for us. Help us to recognize and appreciate our unexpected blessings, to set aside our worries, and to always trust in You. Extend an extra measure of your unending grace to those with special needs and their caregivers. In Jesus's name. Amen.

### **About the author:**

Linda Way, along with her husband Andy, joined Grace UMC in 2018. She is a member of Prayers and Squares, the Soul Sisters small group, Wednesday morning Bible study, and helps with the Osbourn High School kids with special needs who are in work-study at Grace. Following a career in IT Management, she enjoys quilting, reading, traveling, and helping out with her grandkids in retirement.

**Thursday, March 3, 2022**

**Scripture:** James 1: 1-3

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you to know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

**Message:**

Over the years I have heard people tell of their encounters with God. Some of these encounters involve a dramatic event that has had a life-changing consequence for them. I have no such lightning bolt-thunder clap moment to share with you, although perhaps someday I will. For 29 years I worked as a police officer in the District of Columbia. During this time, I had assignments including Patrol Officer, Detective Sergeant, and later as a Command Official. Much of my early career was spent patrolling and investigating crime in the most impoverished and crime ridden sections of Northwest and Southeast D.C. Over the years I came to the realization that living in this type of environment often will cause a person to either summon incredible strength and perseverance or conversely, abandon hope and surrender to a life of drugs and crime. During my career I encountered both the strongest, most caring people, and unfortunately at times some of the most evil. What touched me the most were my encounters with grandparents, that because their children were addicts or in prison, were raising their grandchildren, often despite not really having the resources to even care for themselves. They willingly made these sacrifices knowing that for some reason God had led them down this path. Witnessing their courage, devotion and hope in the midst of hopelessness was something I will never forget. Almost without exception, among the few possessions in the household was a Cross or picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. I have no doubt that having God's presence in their lives was what allowed them to not only survive, but rise up each day and make a positive difference in a child's life. As it turned out, I encountered God many times in those years.

**Prayer:**

Lord, give me the strength and will to accept that both good and evil will be with us in our lives. Remind me to daily search for the good things in life and your presence in all that I see. Amen

**About the author:**

Bob Rule and his wife Diane have lived in Manassas and worshiped at Grace for over 40 years. Their two children, Kevin and Kim are grown and married now and Bob and Diane enjoy spending time with their grandchildren, Jack (6) and Catie (2). Bob retired from the United States Park Police in 2007 after 29 years.

**Friday, March 4, 2022**

**Scripture:** Acts 8: 26-40 but especially, 29-31

Then the spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

**Message:**

This year, our Young Adults have been studying Acts. This is a book of the Bible that shows us what the disciples did next, in the early days after Jesus' Resurrection. The disciples and the followers were filled with the Spirit which helped them proclaim the Good News to all who would listen.

In this scripture, Philip was guided to run up to a chariot carrying an Ethiopian eunuch. This is significant because, someone from Ethiopia was physically different from Philip. Also, the eunuch was someone who was tasked to be in charge of the Queen's whole treasury, and in order to make sure he was loyal, the eunuch had endured the greatest sacrifice, castration. Due to being "different" the eunuch was not considered part of the "in" crowd. He was lonely and an outcast.

Philip found the eunuch reading part of the Old Testament, Book of Isaiah, where it talks about the prophetic fore shadowing of Jesus. Because the Spirit nudged Philip, he had the opportunity to share about the Good News of Jesus.

This shows me that the Good News of Jesus is for all: all persons; exotic or different, or someone outside of our comfort zone. And in this sharing, the eunuch became part of the best "in" crowd. The crowd of Christian believers. This is the only "in" crowd that matters.

In Lent, I cannot help but think about the end result, the joy of the Resurrection and how that promise of eternal life is so worthy of the bad stuff: betrayal, suffering and darkness. It is honestly the only way I can keep from wallowing in the sadness. We all know the joy of Easter morning. People must know the Good News of Jesus. People must know and so we must tell them. No matter if they are exotic, or different, we must share the Good News of Jesus. "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born" and died and rose from the dead.

This year, I have been guided by many to learn and hear the good news, I am so grateful. As long as I keep learning, I will keep growing. I hope you will put yourself in the position to hear others, to be guided by the spirit and to be included in the "in crowd" as someone who is filled with the Spirit, the joy of knowing and sharing the Good news of Jesus!

**Prayer:**

Most welcoming Spirit, keep nudging your believers to step out of our comfort zone and share your love and light to all. Help us to be bold and patient. Help us to sing at the top of our lungs or whisper to someone who is weary. Come to us in the quiet places of our hearts and help us to hear the Good News of Jesus over and over while sharing with all those around us who are lonely, different, and in need of your Word. We accept your nudge and pray you will help us to act on it! Amen

**About the author:**

Debbie Cali is the Director of Student Ministries. She is on the Board of Ordained Ministry, a district delegate to Annual Conference and a delegate for the Southeastern Conference, and an alternate delegate to General Conference. Most importantly, she is a growing Christian who loves to study and do the work God places before us which her husband, Brian, and golden doodle puppy, Beignet, support!

**Saturday, March 5, 2022**

**Scripture:** John 1: 2-3

He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through Him and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created.

**Message:**

My favorite place for Divine Encounters has to be the Grace Garden. I see God everywhere I look - the miracle of a tiny seed growing into a plant and bearing fruit, sunflowers reaching upward, and giant bumble bees buzzing in the flowers. And when the Carilion bells start playing a hymn, it is definitely divine!

One year in the dead of winter, I found red hibiscus seeds in a shop and I imagined the wonderful tea I would make from the pods. I bought the packet and then forgot about it until a year and half later when I was sorting through my seed collection and found the packet. Once again, I imagined all the wonderful tea I would make and planted the seeds. All summer they grew, until by the end of August the plants were five feet tall. Unfortunately, there was not even a single flower! By mid September, when there were still no flowers, I was determined to pull them out because they were shading my tomatoes. Then a friend texted me that she had seen a flower! Over the next several weeks, it flowered profusely and by mid-October I had an abundance of hibiscus pods. I was wondering what do with my bountiful harvest when a fellow gardener happened to be there and was thrilled that I had hibiscus in my plot. She told me she knew exactly what to do and would love to help me harvest my crop. So, we made a date to harvest the next week. We spent a glorious afternoon gathering pods while she told me stories of growing up in Jamaica where hibiscus grows in abundance. We shared how the Lord had been working in our lives and had beautiful a time of fellowship! She even gave me a recipe for the special Christmas hibiscus tea she makes.

Turns out that each pod only has a few of the petals you use for tea and they are very difficult to extract. I only had one cup of hibiscus tea that year and my Christmas tea was a bust, but I do have a precious memory of a divine encounter in the Grace Garden.

Would you like to join us in the Garden?

**Prayer:**

Lord grant us the eyes to see You everywhere we look. Your creation – the beautiful sunsets, the variety of birds, and the Grace garden - reminds us that you are Lord of all.

**About the author:**

Beth Anderson and her husband, Allan, have been attending Grace for about 10 years. Currently, she assists with Sunday School for the 3 and 4 year olds and helps with the Grace Garden. The golden raspberries are her project in the garden and she invites everyone to come by and pick a few this summer.

**Monday, March 7, 2022**

**Scripture:** Isaiah 58:11 MEV

And the LORD shall guide you continually, and satisfy your soul in drought, and strengthen your bones; and you shall be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

**Message:**

Sometimes people are faced with challenging situations or adversity and have a difficult time responding and accepting them. They are consumed by the unknown and fear related to that incident. This was the case with me when I was involved in a severe/near-death car accident nine years ago. Initially and during most of my recovery I asked "Why me?" I was angry and depressed it had happened to me and how it had changed my life. When I returned to work several months later, my job description had changed due to my limitations. This mentally affected me. I adjusted to my new role and found to love it. I am able to personally relate to patients about their pain and challenges.

Initially, I was lost not knowing why, angry, defeated, and confused. One day interestingly enough I saw a jogger running by. This triggered something inside of me and made me realize how lucky I am and that I have a purpose, God has a plan for me. After praying and self-reflection, I realized I was given a chance make a difference in my patients' lives and be a better physician assistant.

God was with me the entire time...before, during, and after my car accident, just in different ways. Although I was initially unfocused and lost, He stood by me and guided me when I needed Him the most. He has revealed His purpose for me. He gives me strength every day so I can grow spiritually, mentally, and physically. His purpose allows me to relate to people on many levels and show compassion.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, as we sometimes have setbacks, things we do not understand or are difficult to accept. Help us keep ourselves focused on you. When we are human and get angry, help us to open our eyes to the signs right in front of us. We ask for a special blessing on the first responders, healthcare professionals, and all those who bless us as well as those we love who need to face a difficult medical condition. Thank you for the blessing of healing our bodies and minds. Amen.

**About the author:**

Jenna Pataluna grew up as a youth with Grace. She moved around for several years due to school and found herself back volunteering with the youth group as an adult leader. She has worked as a physician assistant in orthopedics and pain management for 10 years.

**Tuesday, March 8, 2022**

**Scripture:** Luke 10:33-34

“But a Samaritan while traveling came upon (the man beaten and robbed), and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, treating them with oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”

**Message:**

Many of us think of neighbors as being those who live beside us, across the street, or the apartment next door. Maybe people in our neighborhood or town. Perhaps, this is what the wealthy young man had in mind when he asked Jesus to tell him, specifically, “Who is my neighbor?” He wanted to know the limits of what is expected of him; how far his love and care needed to extend. Rather than answering directly Jesus chooses to share a story about a foreign man who helps a Jewish man in desperate need.

Read Luke 10:25-37

This was an especially challenging story for his audience because Jesus chooses to make the hero of his story a Samaritan - the age-old enemies of the Jews. Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans returned the sentiment. Who would this be in our modern context? If Jesus was telling us this story - what race or nationality would the hero be?

When I worked with the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, I often traveled to the former states of the Soviet Union - Ukraine, Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and a number of cities in Russia. (Yes, there actually are a number of United Methodist Churches in these areas). On one trip we spent four days with church leaders in Sochi, Russia. The area that hosted the winter Olympics several years ago.

In my lecture I told them about growing up in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. We were taught that the Soviets had hundreds of nuclear missiles pointed at us ready to be launched at a moment's notice. That the Soviet Union wanted to take over the world. That they were evil people who wanted to destroy us. And all of us students needed to prepare ourselves for a Soviet attack by kneeling and hiding our heads under our desks. I think we practiced these drills as often as we practiced fire drills.

My Russian students, fellow United Methodists but citizens of Russia, said that they were taught these same things about the United States. We were evil. We wanted to control the world. We had hundreds of missiles pointed at them ready to be launch. And they too practiced jumping under their desks for protection in case of nuclear attack.

These were people I had been taught to hate, enemies I had been taught to fear. Yet, in our conversations, I learned that they were people much like me. They had families. They struggled to make a life. They had hopes and dreams. They loved to sing and laugh. And they loved the same Jesus I love. In fact, many of the hymns and choruses we sang together were familiar American songs and hymns translated into Russian.

God is the God of all people everywhere. All are made in the image of God. Children of God. Loved by God. People Jesus died to save.

In my head I knew this was true, but when I met these Russian Christians, I came to know it in my heart. Who are my neighbors? These are my neighbors. People God is calling me to love.

**Prayer:**

Living God, fountain of life, creator and lover of all whom you have made. Open our hearts and minds to be converted by your presence, to see the world as you see the world, to see the face of Christ in others, even those we have been taught to fear. You have loved us, O God, even when we have turned away. Help us return to you and be filled with a love that casts out fear and embraces life.

**About the author:**

Rev. Clayton Childers is married to Denise Childers, a proud father and grandpa, a singer in the Grace Chancel Choir, a teacher in the Progressive Sunday School Class, and retired clergy.

## Wednesday, March 9, 2022

**Scripture:** John 1: 5, 9

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”

**Message:**

Early each morning I light a candle and stand facing east with my palms up high as I say this prayer: “Lord, You are the Light of the world. Shine on me, in me and through me that I may shine Your light on someone today.”

I am afraid of the dark. A couple of childhood experiences left me with this phobia. I tried several ways to change this, and none worked. Once I did run down a hill to the beach in the darkness to escape an argument. I was more afraid of that than the darkness. To my surprise the light from the stars lit my way and I was able to return, make peace and share a healing hug.

The Lord has guided me with His light as I have visited with hospital patients and listened to their hopes and fears. I have offered compassion and encouraged their hopefulness. When they have asked me to do so, I have prayed for them and felt His light work through me to give them the words they needed to hear.

He has guided me as I sought to make peace with others. When I’ve been discouraged, I have felt His light in some unexpected way – usually through someone’s kind word, loving gesture and a hug.

One night I went to sleep after my prayers for others and then for myself on a day when I was feeling a lot of darkness. In a dream I saw a tall man with a bare chest and open, beckoning arms. He was bright and also surrounded by light, and he was beckoning me toward him. I thought that it was inappropriate for me to go near him as I am a married woman and would not seek some other man’s embrace.

I soon realized this was not just another man. He was someone extraordinary and extraterrestrial. I leaned into him, my head turned against his chest, and felt his arms hold me. The peace and love I felt were overwhelming!

I awoke startled but amazingly comforted. I was clear that I had just been hugged by our Lord and Savior – an amazing gesture of love for me, His child. This had been a divine encounter.

You may know the Christian song “Jesus, the Light of the World” by Jesse Dixon. The refrain is this: “Walk in the light, beautiful light, come where the dewdrops of mercy shine bright. Oh, shine all around us by day and by night, Jesus, the light of the world.”

Jesus, the light of the world, thank you for your hug. You have infused my soul with your love.

**Prayer:**

Shine on us all, precious Jesus. May we be Your light in the world today and always. Amen.

**About the author:**

Edie Clark lives with her husband Tim Smyser near the Occoquan River. She has visited patients at the PW Medical Center for six years and also loves to write and do gardening. She has been a member of Grace UMC since January 2019 and is in the Applied Life study group.

**Thursday, March 10, 2022**

**Scripture:** Ecclesiastes 3:11

"He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end."

**Message:**

Do you believe in fate? I know this is a silly question but, for me I like to think about it related to God's timing. I grew up in a pretty rough situation and thought my life would be ruined and I would continue a cycle of abuse or addiction. But I wanted to try and get my future set. So, I went to NOVA, but I needed a new job to pay for it. I decided to apply to Olive Garden and ended up getting the job! After working there for 6 months a new girl came in, she reminded me of one of my friends I had in youth group. I had been praying to God for quite a while for a friend and when I saw her I heard a voice say "she's going to be your friend". I decided to be a little brave and asked her if she wanted to be friends. Well, more so told her saying, "We are going to be friends." Regardless she agreed to start a friendship. And a few days later we hung out after work and shared our life stories with each other. There have been moments in our 3-year friendship that I thought "she's being a bad friend" or "I don't want to be friends with her anymore it's just so much work!" But I heard a voice saying "don't give up" so we've continued our friendship. Recently she invited me to a young adult group out in Warrenton. I was a little nervous, but I knew that I needed to give it a try. I was in a spiritual drought and had tried several other groups, but none seemed to fill my cup. Going to this group I have met so many like-minded people who've challenged me spiritually. I now have a group of girls I hang out with weekly and do a worship service with. I may not have seen an angel or watched a blind man see, but I feel like I heard God's voice. He knew where I was, and he puts people in your life to strengthen and challenge you. God's timing is impeccable and boundless. I never thought I would make a friend who would lead me back to Christ, but God knew. God puts these challenges in your life to strengthen you and shape you into a tool to help another person. So, when you are wanting a divine encounter, look a little deeper at your surrounding and watch for God.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, please give me patience in my moments of stress. When everything feels like its crashing down show me what beauty you will create. Lord give me strength to continue my faith in your will. Thank you, God, for loving me. Thank you, God, being with me. I have faith in you Lord. In your heavenly name. Amen.

**About the author:**

Mayce Combs is a government and law student at Northern Virginia Community College who will be continuing her studies at Liberty University in Fall 2022. She is also the assistant to Children's Ministries here at Grace. She enjoys hiking, painting, and spending time with friends and family.

**Friday, March 11, 2022**

**Scripture:** Psalm 139: 23-24

Search me, God, and know my heart; Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there is any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

**Message:**

Lent is a time of introspection. We need to take a look at our lives and see if Jesus, indeed, is the center of our existence. We were the center of His life on Earth. He was created not only to split Heaven wide open, but to show us how to live and love. The fact that He was born to die, must have been a heavy burden on Him. Psalm 139 tells us how intimately God knows us and loves us. His omnipresence alone is more than we can understand. As a younger woman I was encouraged to find a life verse or verses. I chose this Psalm 139 and its last 2 verses. These verses embody, for me, the essence of how we approach lent. I hope that they speak to you today.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, open our hearts and minds as we examine ourselves this Lenten season. Guide as we strive to keep Jesus as the center of our existence. Amen.

**About the author:**

Barbara Dehn-Wittkel has been a widow for 5 years and has always loved the Lord and music. She is the very proud mother of 3 grown sons, two who live in Virginia and the other is Law Professor at Loyola University in Chicago. She was born and raised in the Buffalo, NY area. Before moving to Virginia, she lived in Oklahoma for 40 years. She was privileged to attend university as an adult to study music. She began teaching at the age of 45. She has been an EMT, and a Red Cross instructor for CPR and First Aid. She paints watercolors, reads for fun, and dearly loves all animals.

Saturday, March 12, 2022

We are about 10 days into the Lenten Devotional. Use today to catch up on any readings you might have missed and ponder the artwork provided by Grace's own, Denny DuBois.



“The Least” - oil on canvas. “Stand by those who are considered the least in the world to find that together we share God’s greatest gift - His eternal love.” Janet Salbert. These words strongly influence my work. Similar to Mathew 25:40. This guy seemed to immediately evoke Pastor Janet’s words. That happens often when I feel “inspired” by a scene. Whatever talent I have as an artist is God-given. He provides the inspiration and gets the credit. I do the work — with His help. Sometimes I hesitate to engage an individual and this was a case of I didn’t feel he should be disturbed. The least or the One?

**Monday, March 14, 2022**

**Scripture:** Proverbs 3: 5-6

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

**Message:**

I am not a decisive person. I will change my mind 6 times in 5 minutes while ordering dinner. I second guess, I rewrite the email 2-3 times before I send or delete. But the big life altering decisions have always come easily. College was an early decision application to UVA. When I decided to change my career path from medical school to occupational therapy, it was a quick google search and a call home to my parents. I did hours of research for programs over the next 3 years while substitute teaching and living at home and decided Columbia University in New York was the right fit for me. I applied there, to the surprise of everyone I told, no there was no back up, it was in God's hands. If it was the right place for me based on his plan, I would get in, if not, I could always apply somewhere else the following year. Spoiler alert – I got in. Without question, I know God was with me in each of these decisions. I didn't pray or seek his guidance, but I just knew, without question, that he was guiding my path.

In my last semester of my graduate program, I was offered an opportunity to go to Trinidad and Tobago for my final internship. I knew nothing about the country or the culture, but my professor thought I was the perfect candidate for this opportunity and asked me to consider it. At the time, my grandmother was preparing to celebrate her 90th birthday right around the time I was scheduled to be there, another family member was planning his wedding, my high school reunion was coming up, and there were some other life things going on with my family that made me question if I could go that far away for 3 months. Though I lived in New York City, I was home at least once a month if not more frequently and relied on the ease with which I could be back in Virginia in less than 5 hours by any mode of transportation. Could I leave everything for 3 months to go that far away, by myself? It was on one of my weekend trips home when I was sitting in the pew at Centreville United Methodist Church that I was consumed with this question. I wish I could tell you the verses that were read or the sermon that was preached that day, but I don't recall either exactly, I do, however, recall doodling all of these questions on the sidebar of the bulletin and as I listened, I heard the answer - "Go". In that pew on a Sunday morning in May, sitting with my family, God clearly told me to go, everything else would be OK. I felt peace and a calling that I continue to look for when I pray over my big decisions and listen closely even when others are doing the talking.

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, thank you for guiding me on my path and showing me the way for the big decisions in my life and for the grace provided through your son, Jesus, when I err. I pray that you will continue to provide your guidance and wisdom to me in times of doubt that I may know I am using my gifts to work toward your purpose. May it be your will and not mine, I place my trust in you in all things and pray in the name of your son, Jesus, Amen

**About the author:**

Gretchen Ward is an occupational therapist and serves on the Grace Leadership Board. She was born and raised here in Manassas, but feels just as much at home in Charlottesville, New York City, or Port of Spain. Though she leaves a bit of her heart in each place she has lived, she returned to Virginia to be closer to her family and is devoted to serving the community that has given her so much.

**Tuesday, March 15, 2022**

**Scripture:** John 10: 14 (NIV) - "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

Luke 15: 4 (NIV) - "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"

**Message:**

The Good Shepherd knows His sheep and finds them where they are. Jesus Christ lives within us as the Living God, so that we can touch others through him. Good shepherds (Samaritan and Non-Samaritan) know their sheep, go out of their way to help them, and know the world in which the sheep get lost. The shepherds come in all shapes and sizes and arrive in an assortment of conveyances. Some shepherds are old others young, some are experienced and some are inexperienced, some are healthy while others are struggling, some shepherds are happy to listen, lay down, sit, walk, hike, jog, run, or swim along side you at whatever pace you are going. Over the last two years, I have had more than the usual encounters with good shepherds.

In April 2020, I was infected with covid. It comes with 200+ documented symptoms. It is a disease that produces an environment where it is easy to get lost mentally, medically, and physically. Many good shepherds searched out, found me, and/or heard my cries for help. My good shepherd nurse director sister knows me and covid. She encouraged supplements and breathing exercises which bumped my oxygen 2% temporarily to keep me from getting more physically lost. She also monitored my oxygen, pulse, and temperature 3 times per day to ensure I sought out more treatment, if necessary. She offered to take family medical leave if I needed to be hospitalized. She and her office staff prayed for my recovery and monitored my symptoms. My brother checked on me daily with a daily voice phone call. He had lost some neighbors and wanted to know I was ok and was happy to hear that I was getting better.

Grace family members and staff prayed for me, called and asked if I needed anything, and set up a grocery run when my grocery deliveries were delayed. One of the Tuesday night cycling riders told me to just call if I needed anything. Many cycling buddies encouraged my 1 and 2 mile bike rides at 8 mph with thumbs up and kudos on the Strava bicycling App (a phone computer program, which lets friends share their riding routes and speed). We used to cycle 15-30 miles at 15mph together. Zwift, a bicycle simulation internet program, provided people I had never met the opportunity to give me thumbs up, as I placed 2201 out of 2201 riders. Skyline soaring ([skylinesoaring.org](http://skylinesoaring.org)) buddies would ask about my progress and encourage me to work to get better. Co-workers and supervisors were fantastic, with being ok with lunch naps and flexible work schedules. Only 3 days of work were missed, but a whole summer of vigorous activity was lost. As, I felt bike wrecked, ship wrecked, and air ship wrecked.

The covid support groups where helpful as we understood our challenges, searched for answers to slow the downward trend, searched for answers to stabilize, and searched for answers to get better.

I am so grateful for the many Good Shepherds that God provided throughout my whole life, who brought light, life and hope to this and other times in my life. And, I try to be good shepherd to others in good times and bad. Your friend in Jesus Christ

**Prayer:**

May the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, touch us, provide us with good shepherds throughout our lives and equip us to be good shepherds to our fellow travelers. Amen.

**About the author:**

Joel Hough has worshipped with the Grace family for over 3 years, and assists with Upstreet, and the AV booth. He is an active cyclist, glider instructor, and small boat sailor.

**Wednesday, March 16, 2022**

**Scripture:** Genesis 1: 24-25

“And God said, ‘Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.’ And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.”

**Message:**

About 4 years ago I was sitting alone on a bench in the woods journaling. I started to look around and I saw a tiny spider crawling around the broken leaves on the ground. I was amazing watching it move in and out with a purpose and stopping along the way when it found something good to eat. I was struck by the thought that this spider, though probably fairly insignificant to the food chain of this mountain, and though probably no human has ever seen it other than me, it was here. It was created and put on this mountain by our amazing God. For the first time during this retreat, I stopped focusing on the big places I saw God: the mountains, the stars, the sunrises. I saw God here in this tiny spider smaller than the fingernail on my little finger.

Our God is a God of details. He made every little thing on this Earth, and also made every little detail of us. I am pretty good at praying for the big things in my life, but usually don't bother God with the little things. This encounter with this spider, which I think was more than seeing a spider in the woods, reminded me that God cares about every detail in our lives, big or small. This experience has helped me remember to pray and thank God for the little things in life. I now notice the glory of God in the little things day to day: the first little flower that pops up right before spring, the quick hugs my students sneak me when they walk past my desk, even my first sip of coffee in the morning.

This spider in the woods wasn't my first or last encounter with God, but it was a significant one because it fit my daily life. It offered a reminder that I can take with me all the time: that God is with me every moment, of every day, no matter what I am doing or where I am.

**Prayer:**

God, we thank you for loving and paying attention to every little detail, even when we don't notice. Thank you for walking with us on our daily journey so we are never alone. Help us to see you in the small things today. Amen.

**About the author:**

Riley Moran grew up in Manassas and is a 1st grade teacher. She is a member on the Grace Leadership Board, is part of the young adult ministry, and volunteers with the youth group and vacation bible school.

**Thursday, March 17, 2022**

**Scripture:** Joshua 1: 9 (NET)

I repeat, be strong and brave! Don't be afraid and don't panic, for I, the Lord your God, am with you in all you do.

**Message:**

I found the first one in April of 2007. I was having one of those moments when everything seemed too hard and too much. My husband was deployed overseas for a few weeks, and I was juggling two young kids, three sports schedules, schoolwork, meal prep, and my own work responsibilities. I was overwhelmed. As we hustled along a wooded path from one team practice to the next, I glanced down at the ground and spotted a dime. I picked it up, and in my head, I heard God say very clearly to me, "You have got to calm down. It's okay, I've got you." I remember raising the dime up to the sky and replying, "Okay, God, I hear you." Sometimes I can make mountains out of molehills, and I clearly needed a reality check.

I'll admit that I don't often hear God that clearly in my head, so this encounter made an impression on me; but by the next day, I had laughed it off, figuring it was all just truly "in my head." After all, would God really tell me to relax? Over the course of the next several months, however, I found one dime after another, often in crazy, unexpected places. I cleaned the kitchen after dinner one night and found a dime sitting on the counter next to the stove. A few weeks later, I brushed my teeth before bed and found a dime sparkling on my bathroom sink. I accused my husband of messing with me - obviously he was leaving dimes all over the house for me to find. He denied it. A few mornings later as he was getting ready for work, he shook me awake to show me that the "rock" in his shoe turned out to be a dime. Was I messing with him now? Nope. Even the kids started finding dimes. I started collecting them, and at one point, I had well over a hundred! What did this mean? I kept thinking about the words I'd heard... "I've got you." Was this a reminder that God is with me at all times and in all that I do? Yes!

It's been fifteen years now, and I still find dimes. They don't come as frequently as they did in the beginning, but when I find one, often on my walks, I can't help but smile and say, "thanks, God, I know you are with me." In November of 2019, my husband received one of those unexpected phone calls from the doctor's office following some lab work. He scheduled a mid-morning appointment, and we got up that day and took a walk together around our neighborhood. We were feeling unsettled - okay, maybe even panicky - and we needed some calm. Can you guess what we found on our walk? You got it...we found a dime as we rounded our street. Even though we had no idea what the doctor might say or diagnose later that morning, in that moment, what I heard was, "calm down, I've got you." It was time to be strong and be brave. God was and is with us, and that is a divine encounter available to all of us at any given moment.

**Prayer:**

Almighty God, sometimes we get so wrapped up in the activity and stresses of our daily lives that we forget that you are right there. Help us to be strong and unafraid, knowing that you are with us in all that we do. We praise you for your faithfulness and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

**About the author:**

Sandy Risko and her husband John have been members of Grace for over 20 years. Their two little boys (from back in 2007) are now grown men on the cusp of exciting life changes. Ben, who lives in Greenville, SC, will be married in September, and Alex will graduate from Christopher Newport University in December.

**Friday, March 18, 2022**

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:9-13

After this manner therefore pray: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

**Message:**

Isn't it funny how certain phrases or litany's can become so much more than just words when we need them to be? Some of you may know a little of my past – my incarceration, my brush with Grace, and my making Grace my home, but you probably didn't know how these verses enabled me to make it to this point in my life. They were my lifeline and my floaties! You see, I was in a relationship for 29 years, one that started off fairly normal as a high school romance, but ended in despair and danger. To this day I pray for the person I was with and I feel for her; but to be with her was brutal and fearful and dangerous. The abuse, both mentally and physically, has left me scarred and broken. As the years progressed (I stayed out of misplaced loyalty and devotion to a person I felt was sick and needed me), and the beatings got more fierce and vicious, I would say the Lord's Prayer over and over, like a mantra, but only mouthing the words and not fully feeling the connection. You see my Ex was a jealous god herself, and had long broken me away from my family, and the church, and the way I was brought up. As I changed as a person, doing anything to escape the wrath, I did horrible things. I stole, I caused fights, and I said mean and hurtful things to others, but the escape never worked for long, and I would go back to my mantra as a way to float outside myself.

I went to jail more and more frequently – and that time I spent inside made me start to realize I could in fact get away for good. Labor Day Weekend 2014! That's when God stepped into my Hell once and for all – no longer waiting for me to help myself. I was arrested and taken to jail. It was a violation and I knew I'd be away for a long time. The reason being so unfathomable as I had let myself sink to the lowest point possible. God knew I couldn't take anymore. He knew that lowest point was leaving me only one way to go unless He took up His sword to save me. I didn't care if I lived or died, hoping the threats I heard everyday would come true so I could be done with it! God carried me to jail and held me while my brain slowly came back to itself. Surrounded by 90 other women who hated themselves as much as I did, he lit a fire inside me to come out on top. He introduced me to dozens of volunteers, all taking their time from their own lives to come into a jail and talk to women who were judged unworthy and unwanted, not only by their peers, but by themselves. One volunteer in particular became a personal Angel of God – Grace's Ginny Heyward! Dear sweet Ginny who led the abuse class and saw me for who I was and who I was meant to be – not who I had become. I spent 25 months inside – healing, recuperating, and regrouping, and it was all God's work! His Divine Intervention – all leading me back to who I was supposed to be – who I was made to be. Leading me, literally, to the love of Grace and my passion for others in full motion! No one should ever feel unworthy because no one is ever unworthy! God put His prayer into motion in my life! Not just a mantra anymore, a way of life! Praise be to God.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord, Thank you for this beautiful day. Lord please give us the strength to be the people you made us to be! Suspend our frailties', our judgements and our prejudice. Give us Humility, Obedience and Faith. Lord please let us see the worthiness in all life and let us nurture and grow the love we all need to survive. Thank you. In Jesus' precious name we pray, Amen.

**About the author:**

Barbara Barrick is happily married to Kelly Barrick and they are enjoying their new home that they were blessed with last year! Barbara leads the Local Transition Ministry here at Grace and would love to tell anyone who wants to listen about all the opportunities for service in our local community. She has heard her call and she heeds it! But if you can't find her, she has hit the road for a family daytrip – feet and paws on the dashboard!

**Saturday, March 19, 2022**

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 29: 11-13

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart,

**Message:**

You're Asking the Wrong Questions

I did everything I could to get the job. I sent the right emails, I contacted the right people, I was charming during the interview, I sent a follow up email - I did everything right. At long last, it seemed as though everything was finally going to work out just as I had planned. It was at that point that I took the time to quiet my soul, my life, my mind, and to ask God to give me guidance on this decision I had already made.

Of course, I had done it all wrong. Of course I had waited too long to seek God's guidance and support. I made every part of the process harder on myself by not turning to Him sooner. When I finally sent up the prayer of, "Lord give me guidance...", the response was not what I was hoping for. I felt a heavy weight on my heart; God was telling me, "You are asking the wrong questions."

I was shocked. I was appalled. I was disheartened. I was lost. "What does that mean?", I wondered. "What question am I supposed to be asking?"

I had two days to decide whether or not I was going to accept the job, and suddenly I was feeling hesitant. This job that I have been working so hard for - that I had put in long hours and late nights, interviews and conversations, busy days and sleepless nights - and now, when I finally got around to seeking God's confirmation of my choices, He was telling me that I was "asking the wrong questions." I didn't know what to do. So I kept praying. I kept considering and talking with loved ones.

"This new school will be a lot different from your current school. The teachers will be even more stressed than your current coworkers," my husband told me. "Yes, but this new school is a lot more like my first teaching experience. I've done it before and I know I'm good at it. I can be a support to these teachers at this new school." And that was my moment of clarity.

I kept asking how this would serve my needs. God wanted me to ask how I can be of service to His people. When I finally stopped thinking about myself and started considering God's greater purpose in leading me to this new career opportunity, I felt a great calm wash over me and knew I had been following His lead all along. This perspective shift was imperative to my success and happiness in this new experience.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, When we hear Your voice answering our prayers, it's often not the response we are expecting, and sometimes it's not what we want to hear. But, Lord, open our hearts to seek the right questions. Guide us to the path You have set for us to be of service to Your people. Lord, when we stumble, we ask that You continue to give us grace, peace, and understanding. Amen.

**About the author:**

Allison Scott has been a member of Grace since 2001, when her mom, Denise Childers, was the associate minister. She met her now-husband, Ben, when they were in the youth group together. They were wed at Grace by Pastor Rudy in 2008. Allison and Ben live in Manassas with their 4 children: Mason (11 years), Parker (8 years), Ellie (5 years), and Colton (1 year). Allison has been teaching elementary school for 14 years.

**Monday, March 21, 2022**

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12: 9

"But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, therefore I am strong.

**Message:**

I continue to struggle with my spiritual identity and growth. Part of the reason I do is that I honestly don't feel worthy of the grace afforded to me. Now this verse speaks to me and is very special. It gives me the hope I need to keep searching for my inner spiritual peace! When I learned the theme this year was divine encounters, I knew I'd have something to write about!

Even though I question a lot about religion and my place in it, I know my life has been completely formed, at least in the last 8 years, by divine encounters! The positive changes I've had in my life in the last few years are innumerable! I met Barbara. We had a roof over our heads at the hotel. We got out of the hotel. Barbara found work so we could survive on our own, and has continued to grow in the workplace. We got married. We got a car. We got sweet Violet. We just bought a house...oh the list goes on and on! And all these things have nothing to do with randomness! All the beauty and glow that has descended upon my life has been divinely given! None of these things were by chance or coincidence.

Even when we don't know if we believe, God still holds us and shows us His majesty. Even in our doubt and misunderstanding, God watches and works and orchestrates our lives. He knows at some point we will be ready to look up and finally accept His love. But unlike humans, He still works hard for us even when we don't appreciate or acknowledge what he's doing. So I accept all the great things life has given me, and all the rough stuff that comes along as well. Lately the good is outweighing the bad tenfold! And I know the Divine has a big hand in that ratio.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, Please continue to have patience with us. Please continue to wait for us. Please continue to love us until we love ourselves. Amen.

**About the author:**

Kelly Lynne Barrick is married to Barbara Barrick. They just bought their dream house and happily live there with Violet Grace – puppy queen of the world! Kelly is an avid crafter and, now, with her second-floor craft room, can design and create almost anything her heart desires!

**Tuesday, March 22, 2022**

**Scripture:** Matthew 11: 28-30

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light."

**Message:**

I was in a very frightening place in my life. A family member was going through a time I could not understand. Depression and behaviors not seen before were her life. I did all I thought I could to help. Nothing was helping. We feared the worst. Late phone calls were answered praying it was not authorities with bad news. Visits when called, happened frequently to the calls for help.

Blessed to part of a Twelve Step Program I shared the struggles. I was advised by many to give the problem to God! I could always share my love to our loved one, but I was not the one to "fix the problem". I needed to "let go and let God." At first, I resisted feeling they didn't understand. I was a mother and this was my responsibility. After endless prayer and listening to many loving friends, I turned her care over to the Lord. Miraculously, soon, she allowed medical help. Today she is the loving lady we always knew. As soon as I got out of the way and gave her life back to the Lord, He cared for all her needs. I believe she was saved with prayer by many and her decision to turn her will and life over to the care of God.

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father. Remind me daily to ask you to guide me, to remember that you are God and in control. I pray for your blessings on my family, to protect and guide them as you see their journey to be. I ask your Grace for me to not ask why but to have faith that you have plans. I thank you Father, for all your many blessings given so freely if we just trust and obey. In Your Son's precious name, Jesus Christ, Amen.

**About the author:**

Grace has been home Christine Lowe and her husband Bill since they moved to Manassas in 1974. A nursing career led Chris to pray to share her nursing skills as part of the mission field. The 90's opened this door through Grace's mission trips to many places, including Haiti. Most of their vacation time was spent on mission trips. Music, kids, grandkids, time outside, and having the time to participate in Grace activities are the gifts today with the blessings of retirement. Chris has too many blessings to count. Bill and Chris give thanks daily for the cup that overflows with God's Love.

**Wednesday, March 23, 2022**

**Scripture:** 1 Samuel 3

**Message:**

Looking for “divine encounters?” There’s good news! The Bible confirms that with patience and persistence (see 1 Samuel 3) we can expect them! Here’s my experience:

Following the counsel of scripture, I seek to live a life of thanksgiving and gratitude. That begins each morning (ok...just about every morning) laying under a heating pad on the living room floor! While the heat warms up some tight muscles, I read several devotionals and prayers from some of my favorite authors. Prayer time comes next and while each occasion may vary a bit, a pattern exists:

- giving thanks for the rest of the night and the promise of the new day.
- giving thanks for God’s goodness and mercy that have followed me thus far (see Psalm 23:6) and for graces that will surround me in the day ahead.
- giving thanks for life and health, family and friends, home and provision.

My prayer then shifts from thanksgiving to intercession...praying for the hurts and concerns of the world and lifting up those particularly near and dear entrusting all into God’s care.

Mindful of Jesus’ words, “to whom much is given, much is required,” (Luke 12:48) my prayer becomes more personal still..

“Lord, here I am...(see 1 Samuel 3 again)...use me this day as you will...put me where you need me to be...surround me with the people I need to be with...give me eyes to see you... ears to hear you...and a heart that senses your presence...give me courage to act in love and speak in truth...so that...I will experience more of you in each person and situation and those in my company will also see you in me.”

Through the years, God has honored this prayer and one “God moment/encounter” after another has followed. So I keep praying it looking forward to (and anticipating) what new wonders God will reveal next. May it be so with you! Blessings - Rudy Tucker

**Prayer:**

O Lord, our God, thank you that each and every day presents opportunities for us to experience your presence. Through your grace that continues to amaze, help us to see you more fully, love you more dearly, and follow you more faithfully, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

**About the author:**

Rudy Tucker is a retired United Methodist minister who had the privilege of serving here at Grace for a time. He enjoys long walks in the neighborhood, getting dirty in the yard, chatting with friends, old and new, at Costco, (and other places too!) and worshiping at Grace...from the back pew...while continuing to give thanks for the “God moments/encounters” that come!

**Thursday, March 24, 2022**

**Scripture:** Galatians 6: 9-10 CEB

"Let's not get tired of doing good, because in time we'll have a harvest if we don't give up. So then, let's work for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity, and especially for those in the household of faith."

**Message:**

His name was Leonardo. He was tall, lanky, and loving. He was 19 or 20 and full of life. But most importantly, he was full of faith.

I was on my first international mission trip when I met him. I was part of a team serving in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in one of the slum areas of the city. We slept and ate in the church we were painting and repairing. We taught VBS to the children who lived in the homes supported by the church. There were bars on the windows and we were locked in at night for safety. We went into the community only in a group and always with a local guide. At night we would hear gun shots, and were told it was from the drug dealers nearby. We were in a dangerous spot with few resources or opportunities.

In the midst of what looked like a bleak reality and future, Leonardo was a man of vision and hope, because of his deep faith. He was generous and kind. He believed in a God that was bigger than his circumstances and what seemed and felt overwhelming and impossible to me, seemed possible to Leonardo. I learned a lot being around him.

At the time I was a pastor and a parent of two young children. I had many privileges and a wonderful place to return home to. As we parted company after our two weeks of work, worship and building friendships, I was saying a very tearful goodbye to Leonardo and our other team members. Honestly, I couldn't wait to get home to see my family and to take an actual hot shower.

As Leonardo and I embraced, I ugly-cried my goodbye. Leonardo, with a smile and an enormous hug, took my face into his hands and said something like this: "Do not worry about us Pastor Denise. God is with us. God will provide. All will be well." Leonardo embodied a trust in the presence and power of a God that could truly move heaven and earth.

I never saw Leonardo again. I don't know what his life path looks or looked like. But his faith changed my life. His words of trust in a really big God comforted my heart that was breaking for him and his community. I can only hope that something I had to offer, gave him reason to hope as well.

Working for the good of all whenever we have an opportunity is what you and I are called to. I am grateful for Leonardo and for all who in the midst of great challenges, carry and live into a God-shaped future. I, too, aspire to be one of those faith-filled disciples.

**Prayer:**

God of all people, thank you for our siblings around the world. In the midst of distress and despair, may they and we discover your powerful and loving presence. Through our tears, show us your face and fill us with the hope of possibility.. Form each of us as your disciples, I pray, and give us renewed energy for the work we are each called to. Amen.

**About the author:**

Denise Childers is privileged to work with the senior adults here at Grace. She is incredibly grateful to serve alongside amazing pastors and a wonderful staff and congregation. She loves being close to her grandchildren and the experience of watching them grow in faith and be welcomed into the life of this congregation is a huge blessing.

**Friday, March 25, 2022**

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2: 8

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not your own doing; it is the gift of God.”

**Message:**

Sandra and I have participated in and served at a variety of spiritual retreats since we have been married. These retreats are generally done in a three-day format over a weekend with lots of activities geared towards individual and community spiritual growth. They have been a meaningful experience for both of us.

One particular weekend that we were attending was in February at Camp Hanes which is a YMCA camp near the Sauratown Mountains in North Carolina. It was a chilly but pretty day when we went inside to listen to a talk from one of the team members on God’s Grace. During this talk the speaker was describing God’s grace using a metaphor of how God’s grace surrounds us like being in a snowstorm. Just as the words left her mouth, a side door to the room burst open to reveal an actual snowstorm that was so thick you could hardly see anything but snow.

Needless to say, God made sure that everyone in that room would always remember that his grace surrounds and covers us like a snowstorm, and we did nothing to deserve it!

**Prayer:**

Lord, Your grace astonishes and amazes us. Like a snowstorm it surrounds and envelops us covering us from head to toe. It knows no bounds nor strangers. Only that is it freely available to us all. Thank you for this gift of grace. Amen.

**About the author:**

Pat Pate and Sandra have been members of Grace Church since they moved to Manassas. They have been married for 36 years and have been involved in many ministries since they met at UNC. Currently, Pat is serving on the Grace Church Board.

Saturday, March 26, 2022

Another 2 weeks have passed in our Lenten Devotional. Please take time again to catch up on any readings you might have missed. Below is more artwork from Denny DuBois.



“Shoe Shine” - graphite on paper. Outside a local Peruvian market. He set up his shoe shine stand just outside the entrance to the market. As I passed by he asked: “Shoe shine?” I tried to communicate to him that I was wearing tennis shoes! He just replied: “Shoe shine?”. Finally he understood I wanted to take his picture. When I was done I paid him the price of the shoe shine and he replied with a smile: “Shoe shine.” How many “shoeshines” have I passed by on the street? He was among the “least of these”. Was he the One?

**Monday, March 28, 2022**

**Scripture:** Genesis 1: 9-10

Then God said, "Let the waters below the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dry land appear"; and it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the gathering of the waters He called seas; and God saw that it was good.

**Message:**

I recently went on a 6 day kayaking trip out in the ocean, which included tent camping each night. We had to pack everything - food, water, clothes, tents, stoves, etc - in our kayaks which meant only bringing what was absolutely necessary. In this simple state of being, traveling, resting, eating, and sleeping I found God in the wilderness. The winds that moved our boats; the sand that we slept on. A group of people who shared stories and hope. Our common bond was God, which allowed for incredible faith-filled questions of how to find God in the wilderness and how to bring that hope back home with us.

**Prayer:**

Dear God, Thank you for creating the heavens and the earth. It is so good to live in this world full of vibrant greenery and water in so many hues of blue that we are in awe every time we see it. Help us, this day, to find respite in the beauty of this earth. Amen.

**About the author:**

Kristin Matthews is the Communications Coordinator of the church. She lives in Bristow with her husband, Ned and children Connor, Sophia, and Grace. Water sports are her jam. Reading cookbooks, planning menus, and cooking are her favorite activities.

**Tuesday, March 29, 2022**

**Reading:**

Scared Silent by Mildred Muhammad – Chapters 2-7.

**Message:**

To me, Devine Encounters means, overcoming obstacles, staying the course, and never giving up, even if others may tell you just to give up. It might mean that you might have to listen to your spirit. And sometimes, your spirit might tell you just to be still. And sometimes, you may have to change and do things the way God tells you to do them.

I read a book called Scared Silent. It is written by Mildred Muhammad, She is the Ex Wife of John Muhammad, who took part in the DC sniper shootings in 2002. Domestic violence is something that happens way too often, And in Chapters, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7, she talks about the things John Allen Muhammad was doing. Eventually, John Allen Muhammad was kicked out of the house because he refused to work on committing to the marriage, when the marriage counselor told him to do so. Eventually, their Father kidnapped their children, and it took authorities 18 months to find them.

Though it took 18 months, the one example of a Devine Encounter is, Mildred never gave up. She stayed the course, and never let John do anything to harm her. She did exactly what she had to do to get her children back, and was able to go to court, and get full custody of her children. I am very proud of Mildred for standing up for what was right, and she never gave up.

**Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today about Devine Encounters. Help us to listen to you, and do what you tell us to do, when you tell us to do so. Help us to trust your judgment, and keep going, and never give up. Amen.

**About the author:**

John DuBois is blind and hearing impaired and is a General Clerk at Didlake Incorporated. He wrestled in high school and remained unpinned from Sophomore to Senior year. John is also an Eagle Scout.

**Wednesday, March 30, 2022**

**Scripture:** Ephesians 2: 4-10 NIV

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

**Message:**

The campsite was almost surrounded by muddy, angry water. The canoes were floating that had been tied to the tree the night before. It rained hard all night and the river was up by more than three feet. We all knew that this was not good. We ate our cold, soggy breakfast and discussed what we should do. Try to hike 23 miles over the mountain with all of our gear. Or try to brave the raging river for 18 miles to our pre-arranged take-out point. With no trails or easy routes out, Tom, Ted, my son Kirk and I decided to brave the river. We are all experience paddlers and felt that we may go swimming a few times but that we could make it down, even though we had never paddled the South Branch of the North Fork of the Potomac River before. I said a little prayer for our safety, and we cast off.

Shortly after setting off, we realized that we were in trouble. Three-foot standing waves and very fast water is too much even for canoes with flotation and skirting. We went swimming very quickly, lost most of our gear, wrapped a canoe around a rock and had to rescue not only the vessel but the paddler. My son got caught in a tree and was screaming 'please help me I think I've broken my leg'. Tom and I beached our canoe on the opposite shore and fortunately had a rope that I tied around my waist. I asked, "God, please help me" and swam the rapids to my son who was pinned under branches in the bottom of the canoe. I was able to grab a limb about the size of my finger and it held. Miracle #1 - I reached down into the canoe and ripped out the support bars the were riveted to the canoe. Miracle #2 - I then reached down and picked up my 150lb son like he was a child and was able to ferry him to the opposite shore. Miracle #3 - When we were safely on the shore, I checked my son and he was not hurt, only scared. We lay back on the warm rocks and I thanked God for his help in silence. We finished the trip and did not speak much about it after. It was traumatic for us all. I have sense spoken about it many times because God showed his love for me and my son and all of us that day. Amen

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father: Thank you for loving me, protecting me, and giving me strength when I need it most. You love me, even a sinner like me. I am saved by your Grace and love, and I will try to share that love with all I meet.

**About the author:**

Bill Lowe is a retired businessman having owned 2 salons in Northern Virginia. He is a Certified Horticulturist and loves playing in the dirt. He is always pruning something as he loves the art bonsai as well as working in his garden. He enjoys swimming, boating, and especially his 8 grandchildren. Bill and his wife Chris, have been members of Grace since they moved here in 1974 and have worked in missions in Haiti, Ukraine, Mexico, Russia, Dominican Republic, New Orleans, Virginias Eastern shore, and here locally with Serve. They are truly blessed to be part of such a giving church community.

**Thursday, March 31, 2022**

**Scripture:** 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

**Message:**

Every Lent, I find myself pondering Simon Peter’s journey with Christ. His story is remarkable to me as an accurate depiction of the weaknesses that exist in all of us, and how God uses them. I find him so relatable. Peter was a Jewish average Joe, a fisherman. He was neither scholar nor religious leader and was untrained in Mosaic Law. When Jesus called Peter to follow him, Peter said no and called himself too sinful. Jesus told him not to be afraid. This tells me Peter’s refusal was about fear, not sin.

How many times have I said no to a life-changing opportunity because of my fears? Too many to count, I hate to say. How many times have I feared the challenge of becoming an active, visible witness to God because I might not be good enough, smart enough, or faithful enough? Again, too many times. But Simon Peter, standing directly in front of the living embodiment of God’s love, put his weakness aside, got up, and followed. Weakness is where I encounter God.

In the gospels and Acts, Peter can be strong or gentle, decisive or vacillating. Jesus harshly chastises Peter, and Peter outright denies Jesus three times. I used to be confused as to why the latter was not grounds for dismissal. Yet Peter’s personality defects and troubling responses to fear, danger, and grief are not disasters or deal breakers. They are growth points on the way to becoming the rock upon whom Christ’s church is established. Peter is the first disciple to proclaim Jesus’ essential identity, saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Paul wrote the Bible verse I chose for this devotion, but it describes Peter’s and our own imperfect, human journeys toward serving God and each other. We wrestle with our weaknesses, but if we lay them before God, and we understand and forgive the weaknesses we find in each other, we invite Christ Jesus to dwell within us and are made strong.

When in doubt or afraid, I ponder Peter, who despite major character flaws, bad choices, consuming grief, and lack of training, rose above his weaknesses and accomplished great things in Christ Jesus, who rose and saved us all.

**Prayer:**

Holy God, you know all our weaknesses and fears, and despite them, you are forever loving and faithful. Only through your transforming grace can we become strong despite our fears and failures. Guide us so we use our strength to serve you and our neighbors. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.

**About the author:**

Lynn Behnke started attending Grace church in March of 2020 and became a member a year later. She is semi-retired and lives in Centreville with her young adult son. She enjoys books, jewelry-making, crocheting, and looks forward to experiencing all that Grace has to offer.

**Friday April 1, 2022**

**Scripture:** Hebrews 11: 1

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

**Message:**

To be honest, writing a devotional has sometimes been challenging for me. I tend to over-think things, so focusing on the right words takes me awhile to pull it all together. However, this year was very different. When I read the theme of "Divine Encounters," I immediately wrote down several different experiences I could share! I could write about my memories of going to church with my Granny, how my Dad helped baptize me in Pohick Creek on a hot July day, feeding the hungry under a highway during a choir tour in Birmingham, my call to Children's Ministry, and so on. All of those experiences included "divine encounters" in my life. However, I have chosen to share about my Grandma Ruby.

Grandma Ruby was my step-mom's Mom. She came into my life when I was 8 years old and we had a special bond from the beginning. In the winter of 2015, Grandma Ruby's health rapidly declined, and she was admitted to Fairfax Hospital. Over the next 11 days, my step-mom and I took turns staying with her 24-7. The time I spent with her was so very special. She talked and talked and asked me to write down everything she told me about her life. She requested that we bring in framed photos of her family and we set them up next to her bed. She said to me, "It's a sad time, but a happy time because I know where I'm going." She was preparing to leave this life and go home to be with Jesus.

The hospital staff who walked us through this tender time was beyond amazing. Norina, a Geriatric Nurse Practitioner and Amy, a Chaplain, were our angels who held us up.

I am so grateful that I was able to spend Grandma Ruby's last night with her. I held her hand and talked to her, read from the Book of Psalms, played her favorite music over and over - including a recording of my sons Bryan and Steven singing "Amazing Grace, My Chains are Gone". The next day, with my step-mom and me holding her hands, my Grandma Ruby "breathed her last breath on earth, but her first breath in heaven." It was such an honor to be with her in that holy moment.

I experienced so many "divine encounters" during that difficult time, some of which there are no words for. Those holy moments are etched upon my soul and I carry them deep in my heart. How blessed we are as believers to claim Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Grandma Ruby's faith in what she hoped for, but could not see was strong and true, even and especially as she "breathed her last breath on earth, but her first breath in heaven."

**Prayer:**

Father God, Thank you for your faithfulness and goodness. Help us to recognize the divine encounters that you place in our life and praise you for each and every one. In Jesus' Name We Pray, Amen.

**About the author:**

Arleen Field is the Children's Director at Grace. She has a passion for sharing Jesus with children in fun and creative ways, and for working alongside the many dedicated Children's Ministry volunteers. Arleen and her husband Lenny enjoy spending time with their adult children, Jessica and her husband Ryan, Bryan, Steven and his wife Tori. They most especially love being Mimi and Pop Pop to grandchildren Benjamin and Riley Grace.

**Saturday, April 2, 2022**

**Scripture:** Psalm 147:3 3

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."

**Message:**

Young adulthood was a trying time for me. At age 18 my parents sat me down to tell me that my mom's colon cancer returned and that it was serious. I watched her go through so much suffering, and somehow, she did it all with grace. We processed and planned for her passing when it became clear that there were no other treatment options. When I was 20, she died at home with me, my sister, and my dad trying to comfort her as much as we could. I learned that as much as my mom tried to prepare me for a future without her, I was ill-equipped to navigate it and I felt broken.

I struggled to return to the church I'd been attending with my family. Our pastor, who was an amazing human, was available and continued to reach out to me. He met with me for breakfasts and coffee. He encouraged me. He talked about my mom who he made known to the church as "Saint Debra." He was convinced she was busy organizing and getting things done in Heaven.

I continued to struggle, and I just felt lost. When I felt called to return to church but felt too uncertain to go to the traditional Sunday morning service, I found myself sitting in a lonely pew at the 5pm Sunday service. I wanted to get up and leave. I wasn't sure how or why I was there. When the pastor started his sermon, he leaned on the pulpit, made eye contact with me, and it felt like he was peering into my soul when he said, "I look at you, and I see that you're broken." As he continued his sermon on brokenness and God's promises, I realized that he was a vessel for Jesus to tell me that he was there to pick me up and heal me no matter how broken I felt. I couldn't help but cry, and I knew that the Holy Spirit was there with me in that pew wrapping me in the warmest hug. Really it felt more like a snuggle.

When I think of my faith development, I remember the profound feeling of love and comfort that I experienced at church that day. It was a pivotal moment. I am so glad that I followed the nudges from the Holy Spirit and stayed for the sermon.

**Prayer:**

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for your healing and your comfort. I know that you with me during the hard times and the happy times. When I feel discouraged, weary, and broken you restore me and give me hope. May I continue to seek your presence in all the moments of my life. Amen.

**About the author:**

Olivia Sweetnam has been a member of Grace since 2017 and volunteers as a Sunday School teacher for Grace's sweet preschoolers. Olivia is wife to Dale and mother to 3 spunky children (Abbey-18, Kamden-14, and Jordan-10). Olivia also considers herself mother to 2 rescue dogs. Olivia works as a mental health therapist in the local community.

**Monday, April 4, 2022**

**Scripture:** Psalm 71: 1-24, "An Old Man's Prayer"

**Message:**

I was very active in church youth through 10th grade in my small Iowa town. The turbulent 60's carried daily news of racial unrest. They came to light in my church when the parents of a black friend were told by the pastor there was a church across town "for people like them!" Suddenly religion seemed to be hypocritical and a big lie. I quit going to church and struck out to find my own way in life, without God or Jesus. After commissioning in the Navy, my career plan was to get to DC as soon as possible and attach my career to a senior officer/rising star. Didn't happen. I received orders to the armed forces intelligence training command as an instructor in August 1977: in Denver. As I drove across the endless vastness of Nebraska, I wondered who I had offended to have my career cut short with orders to a dead-end assignment. We bought a house just three blocks from a large Presbyterian church and began attending services for the sake of our young daughter, with no intent to become involved. In February 1978, I was doing some special night training at Hurlburt Field, FL. Returning to my quarters at noon for a quick nap, I opened the door and a force came over me, and it literally pushed me to my knees. There is no recollection of the next 30-45 mins. When I became aware of my surroundings again, I was on my knees on the floor, upright, head bowed, hands clasped on my lap, and wringing wet with sweat. I sensed something very special had just happened and was confident that I had been in the presence of the Lord. Back in Denver, Marla and I joined the church; the pastor reorienting us to Christianity was a former Navy aviator. We became Deacons, attended Sunday school, and were active 3-4 evenings a week in church events. As my tour and enlistment was ending, I prayed for guidance: leave the Navy and remain in the church (possible ministerial call?) or stay in the Navy? As I prayed during service, ignoring the order of worship entirely, I suddenly heard the words: "go into all the world, teaching and preaching in my name." The next day I received orders to a career enhancing position in Gaeta, Italy. My life's journey has been a series of divine encounters, reminding me daily of the presence of Jesus Christ guiding my every action and experience. He literally speaks to me through my daily devotions and prayer. I have asked and He has provided, but He had to knock hard on the door of my heart before reluctantly opening it to Him. Psalm 71, "An Old Man's Prayer" speaks to these encounters and to my walk with Him.

**Prayer**

Lord, Jesus, hear my prayer. Thank you for all the blessings you have bestowed upon me and my family. I ask you to forgive my sins. Grant me a good night's rest to rejuvenate my mind, body and soul to do your will. Help me to hear and see the needs of those around me and to your call. Give me the courage to respond to your call and do your will. All things I ask in Your name. Amen.

**About the author:**

Dennis DuBois is a retired Navy Captain, former defense contractor, and born-again Christian. He enjoys oil painting, gardening, hiking, and the outdoors. His works have been shown in several local and regional competitions and has portraits and pieces in collections in eight states. He has been married to Marla for 52 years; they have a daughter, son-in-law, and two grandchildren living in Los Gatos, and John living with Marla and Dennis in Manassas.

**Tuesday, April 5, 2022**

**Scripture:** John 6:37

Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away.

**Message:**

I was raised in the Methodist Church and drifted away after my dad died when I was 13. I always felt lucky things went my way, but I also worked hard. After I married Robin in 1980, we had two girls and started thinking about getting involved again. I had taken several classes given by an improv group for fun and learned to be open to things. "Just say yes" and I transferred that to my daily life. I found that if I had a problem the solution could be the next phone call or person I meet. I felt lucky. I remember, when we started attending services. Communion Sunday rolled around and we went up. It was my first communion in over 20 years. I felt an energy throughout my body, like a light, and realized that I had reconnected with God, he had never left me. I never really left him but now I was accepting him back as a member of my family.

I know that my lucky occurrences were him helping me all along. I have had a few health issues come up these last few years and when I let my choir family know, I landed on the prayer list. I can tell you that I feel the helping energy from so many people praying for me. I know I'll be ok and trust that God is really in control. I had my oldest friend, Bert, call me from Florida to tell me that his wife Buffy went into the hospital to treat a large kidney stone. They sedated her for the procedure, but she would come back around, her breathing was not strong enough to keep her alive. She has pulmonary fibrosis and has weak lungs anyway. They put her back under and put in a breathing tube. We thought that she would die, her system was shutting down. I told my church and the prayers started. Now she is off the machine, only using 4% oxygen, and is going to a rehabilitation hospital. She feels better than she has in years and will be going home soon. The doctors say it's like a miracle, but we know.

**Prayer:**

God thank you for all the ways you help us and guide us to be a better person. Forgive us when we stray, we are truly blessed. Amen.

**About the author:**

Logan Hysmith was born and raised in Fairfax. He has been married for 42 years to Robin and has two girls, Abigail and Jessica. He has been a mechanic for 53 years and has had his own shop for 42 years. He sings in the Chancel Choir and has been at Grace since the early 90s.

**Wednesday, April 6, 2022**

**Scripture:** Acts 2:19

And I will grant wonders in the sky above, And signs on the earth below.

**Message:**

What a joy it was to anticipate January 9, 2022, my thirty-year celebration of ministry at Grace United Methodist Church. I began as Director of Music at Grace on January 1, 1992. During these thirty years, the music ensembles have grown from four to fifteen. Also during this time, the music staff has grown from just me to a total of five directors. God has blessed the Grace Church music program.

Ten years ago, my parents moved to Manassas from South Florida at my request. I learned my love of church and church music from my parents, but especially from my father. My parents took me to church as a baby and church was always my second home. I started singing at age four and have not ever stopped. My mother passed away in 2017. My father then lived alone. Many friends checked in on my dad. I took my father to doctor's appointments, saw him about twice a week, and called him every day.

On Saturday, January 1, thousands of birds flew over my head and gathered in the trees around my house. I thought, "What is God telling me through the birds?" Then hit the snowstorm of January 3. My father did not answer his phone for the first time in 10 years. I sent a neighbor to his house to check on him. He had fallen. I arranged for an ambulance to pick him up in the midst of the snowstorm. He was taken to the hospital but released that same day. A Grace member with a truck brought him home through the storm. This Grace member was an angel, a true person sent by God.

My father fell again that same night and was again in the hospital. I could not visit him because of the COVID-Pandemic. On Thursday, January 6, I texted a Grace Church physician friend and asked him to visit my dad in the hospital since I could not be with him. This physician was with my father as he died. This Grace member was also an angel sent from God.

On the day of my thirty years celebration (three days later), I was still upset about my dad's death. I cried and did not think I could make it through the celebration. I prayed, "God, I need a sign that both my dad and mom are okay." As I prayed, I turned onto Dumfries Road. There was a rainbow over Grace Church. At the same time on my right side was a glorious, majestic sunrise. I stopped in the middle of the road and took pictures, and the peace of God surrounded me. All was right with my parents and I was able to celebrate my thirty years at Grace Church! Thanks be to God. These were true encounters with God.

**Prayer:**

God, Let us be open to your presence. You are with us even in the darkest of days. We want to always be aware of your signs of love towards us. Let us live our lives mindful that you are always with us. Amen

**About the author:**

Rev. Milton Rodgers just celebrated 30 years as Minister of Music and Organist at Grace United Methodist Church. During his tenure at Grace the music program has grown from four musical ensembles to fifteen ensembles (pre-pandemic.) Milton studied church music at Westminster Choir College in Princeton and at two different church music schools in Germany. He loves movies and Broadway!

**Thursday, April 7, 2022**

**Scripture:** Galatians 2:13 (KJV)

For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.

**Message:**

"Retire," they said. "You'll love it," they said. "You'll travel," they said. "You'll have time to do all the things you intended, but never had time to do," they said. I can't help but be reminded of the book title Love in the Time of Cholera. What I and other recent retirees have experienced is Retirement in the Time of Pandemic. In my case, couple the latter with unexpected ongoing health issues and retirement is proving to be anything as planned or expected.

That said, there have been moments of delight, gratitude, joy, and pleasure, usually found serendipitously. A masked pedicure followed by an outdoor lunch with a former work colleague and friend, a ride to and from a local garage to secure an auto inspection that had (whoops!) expired, an emergency room visit that resulted in an unplanned visit, and lunch with my son, and several opportunities to repay the many kindnesses of close friends.

Between the pandemic and taking it easy (doctor's orders), I have had plenty of time, not only to pause, but also to reflect. As many others undoubtedly do, I take many things that I have for granted. In a recent effort to pull myself out of the doldrums, in taking stock, I noted how fortunate I am to have a roof over my head, a retirement income that continues to pay my bills, a cadre of professionals managing my healthcare, a platoon of friends willing to step up at a moment's notice, and a church family that not only prays for me, but also checks in periodically solely to see how I'm doing.

Merriam-Webster defines "divine" as follows: of, relating to, or proceeding directly from God or supremely good. In the midst of the current not-so-great times, I am grateful for the quiet and still moments that enable me to identify both the existence of divine situations and the divine individuals whose actions contribute so meaningfully to my day-to-day journey.

**Prayer:**

Dear Lord: May I recognize and never lose sight of the many gifts You have bestowed upon me, whether deliverance from life's inevitable worries and anxieties or the presence of the many angels you have purposefully stationed in my path. In Your Son's name, Amen.

**About the author:**

Due to multiple risk factors as well as unexpected health concerns, Megan Link retired as of September 1, 2021, following 31 years of service as a high school librarian with Prince William County Public Schools. She continues to serve as the treasurer of Alpha Mu, the local chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma Society for Key Women Educators. Ms. Link enjoys time with her daughter, her son and daughter-in-law, three grandsons, one granddaughter, and new resident furry friend, Tallula. She continues to vacation in the Outer Banks but, in retirement, is always on the prowl for other beaches to visit.

**Friday, April 8, 2022**

**Scripture:** Romans 15: 13

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Message:**

If you scroll through headlines, scan social media, or have a conversation, it is evident that we live in a world consumed by fear. When we are afraid, we often put our trust and security in something or someone other than God – maybe another person, our possessions, money, a job, or our health. If we lose whatever we've put our trust in, our foundation is shaken. Then when we are afraid, there is nothing left to give us hope. It's easy to look around and see how many people are feeling hopeless and acting out of fear.

At the beginning of 2019, I found myself without a job. The loss of the security I'd had in my job and paycheck was scary. However, I submitted to a nudge to "be still" and draw near to God through scripture and prayer. The more I read God's Word, the more I could hear his voice, the more I could see and feel His presence in my life and the more I started to replace trust in myself and things of this world with trust in God. I started hearing a voice telling me to "look up." As I focused on gratitude and the needs of others rather than focusing on me and my situation, my eyes, ears, and heart began to open. As I lifted my eyes and expected to see God, I started to encounter God all around me.

In January of 2020 I had been looking for a new job for a full year. One morning, I went for my daily prayer walk and I asked God for direction and to give me a sign. I finished praying that prayer as I got back to my house. Just then something caught my eye at the bottom of the driveway. It was a piece of paper and I picked it up. On that piece of paper was one word – Hope.

I did not know at that time that a pandemic would shut down the world two months later and that the job market would dry up and I would be without a job for the remainder of 2020. I clung to the hope God gave me and He continued to work on me, making me a new creation, and growing my trust in Him. Everything in and of this world told me to be afraid. But as my trust in God grew, my fear was replaced with a sense of peace – the kind that transcends all understanding. I trusted God's plan and timing in answering my prayer for a new job.

One morning, a year later, in January of 2021, I awoke to a voice leading me to a specific scripture that made me believe that God was about to answer my prayer. Sure enough, later that same day, I received a call out of the blue that ultimately led to a job offer – exactly 777 days after my previous job ended.

Learning to trust God doesn't mean that I'm never afraid. It means that when I'm afraid, I put my trust in God. I know that God is always with me, that He keeps His promises, and that He will fill me with peace and joy as I trust Him. God gives me something this fallen world can't give – Hope.

**Prayer:**

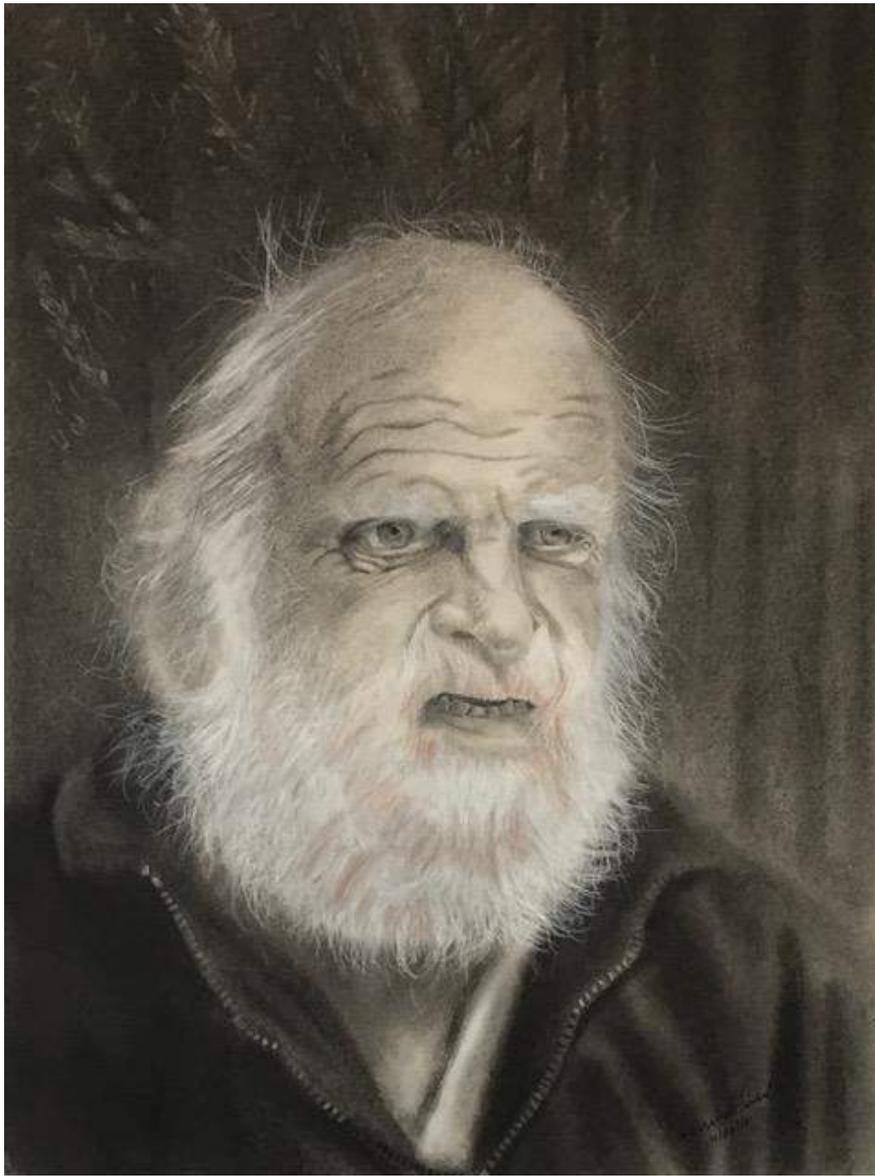
Loving Father, I pray that I will live each day, looking up and expecting to encounter you. Please open my eyes and ears to hear your voice and see what you have put right in front of me. Please help me to always seek you with a grateful heart. When I am afraid, help me to put my trust in you. Thank you for being with me, for helping me, for giving me strength and courage, and for being my refuge. Thank you for filling me with the peace and joy and hope that can only come from you. Amen.

**About the author:**

Shelley Husband is the head of government affairs for the Association of American Publishers where she is proud to be an advocate for book publishers. Shelley has attended Grace United Methodist Church for eighteen years along with her husband, Chris, and their four children, Tyler (17), Ada (15), Christian (12) and Emma (10).

Saturday, April 9, 2022

Another 2 weeks have passed in our Lenten Devotional. Please take time again to catch up on any readings you might have missed. Below is more artwork from Denny DuBois.



“Fisherman” - graphite and pastel on paper. In a Canadian fishing village. He was standing on a corner in the mid-morning light. A face that seemed to speak of a rough life. I struck up a conversation. He was hesitant at first. Then opened up when we discovered our common “nautical” backgrounds and was really quite friendly. Indeed, forty years working on commercial fishing boats; everything from working the catch to engineer. He was amazed I wanted to photograph him and was OK with my sketching and painting him. When I was done, I gave him \$10 and thanked him for our conversation. He was surprised and thanked me and said he would get breakfast and a drink — maybe not in that order. He seemed to be among the least. Craving attention and a little conversation. My time talking with him seemed to be more valuable to him than the money. Among the least, or the One?

**Monday, April 11, 2022**

**Scripture:** Psalm 18: 1-2

I love you, Lord: you are my strength. The Lord is my rock, my shelter, my savior.

**Message:**

I have always loved rocks. As a child, I played on the breakwater beside our dock. One of the large boulders, we called, "the hot rock" because after a swim in the cool lake, we would lay side by side in the sunshine on the boulder to warm up. As a child, I collected rocks from places we visited. I had samples of mica, granite, and quartz. My favorite was a piece of turquoise my grandmother sent me from New Mexico. All these years later, I still love rocks.

In my new neighborhood, throughout COVID and this first year of my retirement, I have been doing a lot of walking. There is an elementary school that I often pass by, and I try to be there when school is letting out so I can see the children and say hello to parents and crossing guards. One day, I noticed a cleared space near the sidewalk with a brick border. There is a stone inside that reads, "Browner Stone Garden. Take one or leave one." After days of walking by, there were never any stones. So, you guessed it, I began painting rocks with hearts and rainbows and special words of encouragement. The first time I dropped off the painted rocks, I was so happy. The next time I walked by the rock garden, my heart was full of joy because all the painted rocks were gone, picked up by someone who needed a good word, something to hold reminding them they are not alone! I have learned that the Browner Stone Garden is a memorial to a man I once knew through the United Methodist Church. He worked at the school and is dearly missed.

We think of rocks as non-living, ancient materials of nature, igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary. The psalmist describes God as a living rock, a protector, a shelter and a life saver. Perhaps, God is like a boulder we can stop, take a breath and rest on. Perhaps God is like a rock that shines with great beauty. Perhaps God is like a rock with a word painted on it, to remind us we are loved, to give us strength.

1 Peter 2:5 says to the church, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." I find it amazing that God's grace can soften and shape and smooth out the rough places in my life, changing my heart so that I can be useful for others. And so it is with each of you. You matter to God and you make a difference for others.

Divine encounters are not always mystical, sometimes divine encounters are as simple as finding a boulder that give us rest restoring our strength, reminding us that God is our rock, our shelter and giver of life.

**Prayer:**

Lord Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone of our lives, we pause to take in the grace you pour out upon us this day. Our hearts are full of gratitude for all the ways you show up, capture our attention and lavish us with your love. Open our hearts to experience that the most ordinary, overlooked and seemingly insignificant 'rocks' are moments, people and places that bring us to you. Amen.

**About the author:**

Janet Salbert is a happy member of Grace UMC and recently joined the Chancel Choir. It is a joy to continue growing, serving and practicing faith with all who are amongst the Grace congregation.

**Tuesday, April 12, 2022**

**Scripture:** Matthew 5: 41

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

**Message:**

He wasn't my first hitch-hiker. He was probably my sixth or seventh. I lived on Route 50 and it was common to find people walking along the road heading to Winchester after trying to make it in DC.

This guy was tired. He had been on the road for a long time and his bike was in rough shape. I wasn't a pastor yet, but I was working for a church and the people in town knew it so I couldn't just pass the guy by.

As we loaded his gear in my truck I remembered the words of Jesus, "if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile," and "as you have done to the least of these you have done it unto to me." So, feeling pretty proud of myself, I didn't just take him to town, I bought him lunch.

It was right after we had ordered that things got more difficult. We had chatted on the way about the weather, sports, our hometowns, the usual hitch-hiker fare. But then he brought up religion, and right after that he brought up politics. His were not my politics. His was not my kind of religion. Not even a little bit.

Within moments I basically hated the guy. I regretted ever picking him up. I almost got up and walked out, but then I remembered that I ordered a catfish sandwich, the first I had had in years. So I stayed, but not for him... for the sandwich.

We ate and kept talking until it was time to part ways. I picked up the check. He thanked me. But then he offered to pay for me. "Why not?" I said, and then this man, who I did not care for, prayed the most beautiful prayer over me. He prayed God's blessings upon my entire life - my work, my home, my future wife and kids, even my truck!

By the time I got back to that truck I was grinning. I had just had a divine encounter (two if you count that sandwich). I had a divine encounter, in the flesh, which reminded me that even my best and most righteous acts can turn out to be (as Isaiah puts it) filthy self-righteous rags; but even those rags can be transformed into grace offered across a table.

True grace is given by God, not earned by do-gooders, nor bestowed on those of the right politics or religion. True grace, the kind of grace which was prayed over me that day in spite of the hate in my heart, that's the kind of grace that has the power to reconcile sinners, and glorify God.

**Prayer:**

Lord God, when we hate our neighbor, we hate you. Soften our hard hearts and visit us with your grace which forgives and transforms all it touches, through Christ our Lord. Amen

**About the author:**

Drew Colby is the senior pastor of Grace UMC and the father of three. Though he rarely sees hitch-hikers in Manassas, he still drives the same truck he mentioned in this devotional. It's due for inspection around Easter time. Pray for a miracle.

**Wednesday, April 13, 2022**

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4: 9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

**Message:**

The symptoms started on a Saturday - the Saturday before Christmas to be precise. Low grade fever. Headache. Cough. Body aches. "Oh no, please say it isn't so," I thought. "I don't have time for this!" I texted Drew to let him know that I would be missing church the next day to be on the safe side and that I planned to be tested as soon as possible. My children were in Richmond visiting their dad for the weekend. My husband, Steven, was in Utah with his children. And then, Sunday afternoon, I got the bad news – my test was positive. I had officially encountered COVID – firsthand...and as you can imagine, I was not happy about it.

The doctor said I would need to isolate for 10 full days. Key word: ISOLATE. I was home alone when I tested positive, and it was about to stay that way for many more days, from December 18th through December 28th. I was supposed to be spending the next several days with many of the people I love most in the world. My church family at the upcoming Grace Christmas Eve services. My children, husband, parents, and brother's family for Christmas dinner. Much of my extended family for a post-Christmas celebration. Then, after leading worship the day after Christmas, I would be flying to Utah to see my bonus kids. Nevertheless, in one solid line on a test strip, all that flew right out the window. Instead, my kids would be staying with their dad. Steven would be staying in Utah. My parents would be staying with my brother. And I would no longer be assisting in any of our Christmas Eve worship services along with missing two Sundays of worship. Suffice it to say, I was beyond bummed. I was devastated.

This encounter with COVID had me in a bad place, feeling not only frustrated and annoyed but deeply saddened and depressed. Well-meaning people encouraged me to "embrace the alone time" but since it was unexpected and thrust upon me against my will, I found this really hard to do. I couldn't get over the fact that I would be away from my children on Christmas morning. For their entire life, I had seen them on Christmas Day. I would like to be able to say that the pity party came and went quickly, that I embraced the opportunity to get things done around the house, to tackle that book I had always wanted to read and to do some genuine self-care. Instead, my mood ebbed and flowed from acceptance to disappointment, from productivity to anger, from positive thinking to lamenting and so on. Up and down the roller coaster of my emotions went and it felt as if I was just along for the ride. It has only been in my ability to look back and reflect on this time that I have been able to ask the question, "What does this make possible?"

As I reflect back on my COVID encounter, though, I can see the many ways in which it truly was a DIVINE encounter. A time when I encountered the presence of God in a very real and tangible way – YOU! You, my friends, were truly the Divine Encounter. God reminded me in and through the love and support of Grace church, my neighbors and my family that I am not alone. I can see more clearly than ever the true value of connection and engagement in community. It is a gift that I have experienced first-hand at Grace church, and it is a gift that we at Grace have the opportunity to extend to a lonely and often isolated world. The scripture above ends with these words of promise, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." We are made for each other. We are made for community. And we are better together. May this season of Lent offer you the opportunity to love others well, to engage in mission and ministry with our community of faith, and to connect with one another in ways that social distancing and quarantining cannot undo. The 10 days I spent in isolation were hard, but they were grace-filled by your love and prayers, cards and support, treats and friendship, phone calls and care. I did not feel alone. I did not feel broken. The "cord" of Grace UMC that all of you are a part of, held me firm. May it be so for us all. Amen.

**Prayer:**

Loving God, We give you thanks for this community of faith and the ways that we encounter you through the love and support shared by the people of Grace church. Help us to extend this love to the world so that no one misses out on your amazing grace. Amen.

**About the author:**

Jessica Lunsford serves as the Associate Pastor at Grace UMC. Jessica loves Grace Church and is happy to be back on staff again after serving as the Youth Pastor for 5 years in the early 2000's.

**Thursday, April 14, 2022**

**Scripture:** Psalm 56: 3

Whenever I'm afraid, I put my trust in you.

**Message:**

I learned at a relatively young driving age that I'm good at driving long distances. It's a talent that has served me well over the years. My oldest son Kamden, who will turn 15 this May, has lived almost his entire life in Illinois. And for the past 14 years, I've lived in the DMV. That means there are approximately 12 driving hours separating the two of us.

For the first few years in the DMV, I drove to see Kamden every other month instead of flying. Driving was generally cheaper than flying, and I didn't mind the time on the road. I was secure in my ability to drive halfway across the country without worry of getting drowsy or losing focus.

On one trip back to Washington, D.C. after visiting Kamden over Christmas, I ran into a bit of snow in Ohio. By the time I hit West Virginia and later Maryland on I-68, it was getting pretty bad. As the snow buried the road, I quickly lost almost all visibility. I struggled to find the lanes of the highway, and the glowing taillights in front me were all I had to guide me through the falling snow. I was worried, and I could feel myself quietly praying.

On the downslope of one of the many hills on that stretch of I-68, I lost control of the car. I must have tapped the breaks a bit too hard. My tires lost their grip, and the back of my vehicle started to slowly spin counterclockwise. A few seconds later, I was sliding sideways down the center of the road. I looked out of my driver's side window, and I could see the headlights of the cars that should have been behind me. I let go of the wheel to avoid overcorrecting, and let the car slide. I was in a lot of trouble.

Then, in what I can only describe as a divine encounter, the car corrected itself. The car shifted softly back into the lane, the tires found their grip, and I was facing forward again. I was safe, and I was back in control of the vehicle.

I think about this moment from time to time. How did the car correct itself? My hands were not guiding the wheel. I was afraid, I was panicked, and I was praying. The only explanation I have for that moment is that God was with me. He heard my prayers. He straightened my path.

Fear is everywhere. It can happen suddenly or it can build slowly over time. When I experienced fear on that road and when I've experienced fear in moments throughout my life, I've put it with God. I know he's with me when I'm afraid, and I can trust him to guide me through moments of uncertainty.

**Prayer:**

Thank you Lord for being there when all hope seems lost. Thank you for helping to clear the obstacles in our paths. And thank you for helping us find peace in fear with your calming presence. Amen.

**About the author:**

Dale Sweetnam and his wife Olivia have been members of Grace Church since 2017. Dale was a Public Affairs Specialist in the U.S. Army from 2004 to 2013. He now works as a Communications Manager in the U.S. Energy Information Administration within the U.S. Department of Energy. Dale and his wife love spending time with their three children (Abbey, Kamden, and Jordan), and running around with their two dogs.

**Friday, April 15, 2022**

**Scripture:** Colossians 1: 15-17

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.

**Message:**

I hunt in Maryland a few times a year with Bruce who is an archery coach like me. He is also a mechanic, and a preacher at a little country church around the bend from his house. During a dinner prayer offered by his oldest son, he thanked God for a time of fellowship, experiencing His creation, and for His son Jesus. It hit me then why I was there with them. It wasn't the big buck I had seen on camera, instead, it was the fellowship and sitting in the middle of God's creation that had called me there.

Today's scripture talks about the invisible God who is the creator of all things. Bear with me and my hunting references on this Good Friday. I will bring it to the cross at the end. I love to hunt. When hunting with Bruce, sometimes we win, and sometimes we learn. I do a lot of learning. Each encounter we have with a wild animal is meaningful and memorable. We treat each hunt with respect and reverence.

When we immerse ourselves in God's outdoor classroom of creation, we see, hear, smell, and feel things that most people don't even know exist. Some days, it's the beauty of a sunrise. On other days, it's hearing the movement of deer through the water in the marsh, or the grunt of a large buck heading your way. No matter the scenario, all of us can be transformed in some way by the time we spend enjoying the outdoors.

For some, seeing is believing. I know there are big deer out there, but I never see them under my stand. There are signs of them in the woods like scrapes, pawings, and tree rubs. If you find the right signs, you can be more confident you will harvest a deer. But believing in things you can't see – such as an invisible God – is much more difficult for some. However, just like scouting for deer, there is evidence that God is there even if you've never laid eyes on Him. Just as a buck rub tells that a buck is nearby, God has also left signpost rubs, ensuring us that even though we can't see Him, He is still close. If you're careful to scout for signs of God's existence you won't have to look very far to see where He's been and what He's been up to.

My time with Bruce in the woods and in his shop is where I have Divine Encounters. Bruce and I talk (quietly of course) while we are in the deer stand. Between the morning and evening hunts, I ask him about his upcoming sermon while working on cars. We have had some good conversations and I am grateful for our time together.

One quick hunting lesson as I wrap this up. A rub is where a buck rubs its head and antlers on a tree to remove the velvet from the antlers, leave behind a scent, and mark its territory. That rubbing will rip the bark right off a small tree and shred it. A buck will return to that same tree every year until it dies or the tree dies.

Hear the good news, a scarred-up tree may be able to tell you that a buck is close, but a scarred-up Savior hanging on a tree guarantees you that God is even closer. I hope you all come back to the tree with me again this year as we receive God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection. The supreme and ultimate hunter is Jesus Christ because He is hunting for all of us...and I've heard His aim is true! Thanks be to God.

**Prayer:**

Almighty God, thank you for all the Divine Encounters in this year's Lenten Devotional. Thank you for enabling the authors to share their words with us. Like a buck finds its way back to a rub, guide us all back to the cross this year. Amen.

**About the author:**

Jonathan Bukva is honored to be your Lay Leader and Chair of the Grace Leadership Board. He is a "practicing" hunter who is excited about the Maryland turkey season starting in a couple of days. The deer will have to wait until the Fall.

**Saturday, April 16, 2022**

I hope you have enjoyed this year's Lenten Devotional. Please take time to catch up on any readings you might have missed and enjoy more artwork from Denny DuBois.

Pastor Drew, Pastor Jessica, and the Grace Leadership Board hope you will join us tomorrow for one of our Easter Sunday services.



"Tired" - oil on canvas. Napping on a piece of cardboard along a street in Santa Fe, NM. People walking by him and he seemed unfazed by their fleeting presence. I took several photos from across the street so as not to disturb the scene, then stepped back around the corner into a shop to check the photos. When I came out he was gone - cardboard and all. Among the least? The One?