

2025 Lent Devotional
Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church
Part 1: March 5 – March 29



Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud. –Psalm 27:7

Introduction

Lent comes from the Old English word for “lengthen,” referring to the growing daylight. Lent builds to Easter and the promise of resurrection and new life—glimpses that we might understand in the blooming time of the year. Particularly in the South, the signs of spring and new life are all around us: the singing birds, the frogs with their kazoos, the smiling daffodils, and the redbud trees resembling frozen fireworks.

But Lent also encourages us to consider the journey of Jesus to his death.

I have written this devotional for each day in Lent. I have highlighted a Bible verse, jotted down a very brief reflection, and then offered a breath prayer. After beginning with reflections on Deuteronomy 26, I offer a study of one of the psalms for the remaining weeks. The psalms touch on a wide range of human experiences and emotions, including death, suffering, and anxiety. Perhaps by acknowledging the shadow side of faith, we might fully embrace the light of love.

A final note: Lent covers the forty days except Sundays! Therefore, instead of the usual format, I have left space on Sunday for you to create. You are welcome to write or draw your reflections, either sparked from previous devotions or from what God has placed on your heart that day. Have fun! And I’d love to read or view whatever you decide to create if you care to share with me.

Wherever you are on your journey, I’m grateful for you. I hope that we will travel into Lent together in faith, hope, and love.

Andrew Taylor-Troutman
March 3, 2025

Day 1 (March 5)

When you have gone into the land ... Deuteronomy 26:1

As we will read in the coming days, Deuteronomy 26 holds challenging standards for our behavior. Therefore, I want to underscore the fundamental principles of grace—God promises the ancient Israelites a gift. The inheritance will happen in the future, but in the meantime, they can trust the Promiser.

God's grace is what Kathleen Norris calls primary theology. Especially fitting for a passage about land, Norris writes, "Primary theology (is) the fertile ground out of which our theories and ideas can grow." We are grounded in grace.

David James Duncan adds, "To be born is to begin being alive in a body in a world—an incredible gift if, like me, you're incapable of giving birth to yourself or of creating a world."

We are grounded in grace. We trust the Promiser. Our primary response, then, is to give thanks.

Inhale: Grace.

Exhale: Gratitude.

Day 2 (March 6)

You shall take some of the first fruit ... Deuteronomy 26:2

The Israelites had many offerings given to God on different holy days. This particular “first fruits” gift stands out because it was not a result of their hard work or labor. The fruit was already growing from trees in “the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deuteronomy 26:1).

One way we show gratitude for grace is by giving back. “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17). Our offering includes both our gifts and our giving attitude.

What is the fruit in your life? How can you joyfully share it?

Inhale: I am grateful.

Exhale: I give back.

Day 3 (March 7)

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien ... Deuteronomy 26:5

This “wandering Aramean” is a reference to Abraham, who was called by God away from his homeland so that he would become “father of many nations” (Genesis 12:1). I’m reminded of the phrase “all who wander are not lost,” for Abraham’s journey into the unknown became the story of origin for Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

The fact that our shared story of faith begins with “an alien” or immigrant is striking. The text implies that, as descendants of an alien, we should not wrong or oppress strangers in our country (Exodus 22:21). God mandates us to show compassion and mercy to immigrants in our country. This is true not only in terms of government policy but also as individuals seeking to “do justice and love kindness” (Micah 6:8). Notice the first-person singular in the text: *my* ancestor. Each one of us is charged to help those who happen to wander into our lives; perhaps their presence is no accident: “Some have entertained angels unawares” (Hebrews 13:2).

Inhale: I have compassion.

Exhale: I give mercy.

Day 4 (March 8)
International Women's Day

Let's take a brief interlude from our scripture study to mark International Women's Day. Though created in 1977 by the United Nations, the empowerment of women is part of the Bible itself.

Biblical leaders include Miriam, who helped lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt; Deborah, who ruled as a judge before the kings; and Queen Esther, who saved her people from genocide.

Turning to the New Testament, Jesus was often in the company of wise, brave women. There was a woman who anointed him with expensive perfume shortly before his arrest. The male observers criticized her, a classic example of mansplaining. Yet, Jesus praised her: "Whenever the gospel is shared, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Mark 14:9). This is something we would all do well to remember.

Inhale: Think of women you admire.

Exhale: Pray for justice in the world.

Sunday Sabbath Recreation

Space for you to create! You might write, draw, doodle, pray, journal... it's up to you!

Day 5 (March 10)

Of whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

We begin our study of Psalm 27 with the first verse. In English, it seems repetitive, but there are actually two distinct words in Hebrew that are translated as fear. The first relates to the present, while the second word is about the future. One could capture this latter nuance of fear by translating it as a warning of impending disaster.

When confronted with something scary in the moment, our fight, flight, or freeze instinct is triggered. Fear of the future, however, causes us anxiety.

It is often said that we live in an age of anxiety. In the New Testament Greek, when Jesus teaches “do not be anxious about your life,” the word for anxiety is a compound of the prefix “part of” and the verb “to remember.” To be anxious, then, is to remember only part of the story. David Whyte claims, “Over time, near-constant anxiety is a form of amnesia.”

It is only human to lose track of the larger story: “We see only in part, as through a glass, darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Yet, Psalm 27 encourages us to have faith, if not in the future itself, then in the God of all ages—our light and strength.

Inhale: God, I give you my fears.

Exhale: I receive your strength.

Day 6 (March 11)
One thing I asked of the Lord ... Psalm 27:4

If you had one wish, what would it be? Would you ask for something grand and universal, like world peace? Or something personal for you or a loved one?

When used in reference to God, the Hebrew verb “ask” really means to pray. What is your most fervent prayer? What is your greatest desire of the Lord?

Emily Dickinson wrote, “Beauty is not caused. It is.” Beauty is a divine gift, as understood by the psalmist who prays to “behold the beauty of the Lord.” Pastor and seminary professor Wesley Vander Lugt once wrote, “Beauty takes away our breath in wonder only to give it back again in praise.” He taught me this breath prayer that, by grace, makes wishes come true.

Inhale: Attune my senses.

Exhale: To the beauty of this moment.

Day 7 (March 12)

Now my head is lifted up above my enemies ... Psalm 27:6

“God has unconditional love for everyone, whereas I tend to fall a bit short in that regard.” – Anne Lamott

God lifts up the psalmist in Psalm 27:6 to protect that person, not to exalt them over others. Jesus makes it clear that we are not to look down at people: “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41–42). This is our charge, yet (like Anne Lamott) we all “fall a bit short in that regard.”

The psalmist is lifted up not only for protection but then “sings to the Lord.” When presented with the option of singing in public, some of us might prefer a sharp stick in the eye!

But make a joyful noise. It might just be that, in rejoicing, strangers become friends. Remembering God’s unconditional love, we might even look at our enemies in a different light.

Inhale: Lord, protect me.

Exhale: Place a song of peace in my heart.

Day 8 (March 13)

“Come,” my heart says, “seek God’s face.” Psalm 27:8

I’m fascinated that the psalmist gives voice to their heart. What message might your heart have for you?

I suspect that, deep down, we all want the same things—acceptance, security, and love. Yet, we also struggle with other voices that speak negative messages of worry, judgment, and doubt. Brian Doyle wrote that such “wrestling” in our heart is precisely what makes us human:

“Our hearts are not pure; our hearts are filled with need and greed as much as with love and grace; and we wrestle with our hearts all the time. The wrestling is who we are. How we wrestle is who we are.”

Inhale: I wrestle in my heart.

Exhale: I seek God.

Day 9 (March 14)
They are breathing out violence ... Psalm 27:12

Breath is supposed to give life. Yet, the psalmist's enemies are breathing out violence, which is the very opposite or antithesis.

Eric Garner, a Black man, died by strangulation at the hands of a police officer. Witnesses heard him gasping, "I can't breathe!" The phrase became a rallying cry at Black Lives Matter protests across the country.

Psalm 27 acknowledges the presence of death-dealing forces, but there is also hope—the next verse envisions "goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." I am reminded of a poem by Ross Gay.

A Small Needful Fact

Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,
he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

Inhale: They are breathing out violence.
Exhale: I am breathing out love.

Day 10 (March 15)

I believe goodness of the Lord in the land of the living ...
Psalm 27:14

Rabbi Irwin Keller has an essay about meeting the glory of God in the Art Institute of Chicago. Keller felt brave enough to ask the Lord what brought Her to the museum. God replied, “The world of beauty and balance. The marriage of form and function.”

Keller and God stood before an exhibit of miniatures created by Narcissa Thorne in the 1930s. They were “like the most lavishly detailed dollhouses you could imagine.” God mused, “I believe in you humans so much more than you believe in yourselves. You think all is lost, but don’t give up hope. You are like these miniatures, each of you an interior of me. Everything in creation is a miniature, made with such care and detail.”

Suddenly, Keller found himself seated with God in the café courtyard. He was a boy again, and God had transformed into his Aunt Anne, who used to take him to the same museum in his childhood. They ate rainbow sherbet that was “cold and sticky in my mouth and iridescent on my spoon in the brilliant Chicago sun.”

Inhale: I believe in the goodness of the Lord
Exhale: in the land of the living.

Sabbath Recreation

Space for you to create! You might write, draw, doodle, pray, journal... it's up to you!

Day 11 (March 17)

My soul thirsts for you, my flesh faints for you ... Psalm 63:1

Donald Hall penned an essay about his paternal grandfather, a self-made individual who transformed a family diary into a prosperous milk business despite possessing only a fifth-grade education. Granddaddy Hall's maxim, grunted in his New York accent, was "Woik! Woik! Woik!"

We know that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:17). This is true for woiks as well. I admire our church members who dedicate their time and energy to the larger community, showing their faith as an action verb. These good deeds boost morale as well. As David Orr said, "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up."

Psalm 63, however, begins with human weakness—thirsty souls and fainting flesh. Our confidence is in God's spirit, not our own. Paul had this to say—"I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6).

Inhale: My soul thirst for you.

Exhale: Woik through me.

Day 12 (March 18)

In the shadow of your wings, I sing for joy ... Psalm 63:7

Catherine Newman describes herself as the kind of mother who suffers from the neurosis that causes her to google phrases like “fatal rash.” Her mind jumps to the worst, the craziest, and the most terrifying deaths of her children.

Although searching the internet reflects a modern anxiety, mothers have worried about their children since there were mothers. In Turkey, mothers pin amulets to their children to ward off the evil eye. In China, the Hmong women place colorful hats on their children so that evil spirits flying above will mistake the kids for flowers and pass them by.

Ancient Israel had many metaphors for God, including as a giant raptor mom who sheltered her children in the shadow of her wings. Jesus compared himself to a mother hen: “How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks.” (Matthew 23:37).

Next time you feel anxious, you might avoid the internet and try this breath prayer.

Inhale: In the shadow of your wings.

Exhale: I let go of my worries.

Day 13 (March 19)
My soul clings to you ... Psalm 63:8

The Hebrew verb that means to cling conveys loyalty and steadfastness in the figurative sense. Occasionally, the verb has both figurative and physical meanings.

In the Book of Ruth, Naomi suffers the death of her sons in a foreign land. She must return to her homeland as a widow, meaning that she was not only heartbroken but also vulnerable. As a woman in a patriarchal society, Naomi had little protection or livelihood. She tells her daughters-in-law to let her go, and one of them did. "But Ruth clung to her." (Ruth 1:14). Naomi insisted once again that she leave her alone, but Ruth offers one of the most beautiful expressions of loyalty and steadfastness in the Bible: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." (Ruth 1:16).

Ginny gave this verse as a watchword to her brother and sister-in-law when she officiated their wedding, and I give it to us today.

Inhale: My soul clings to you.
Exhale: You are my God.

Day 14 (March 20)
Mister Rogers Day

We interrupt this study of Psalm 63 to celebrate the birthday of an icon of kindness. On March 20, 1928, Fred Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary with a Master of Divinity in 1962 and was ordained as a minister the following year to pursue television programming for children. How might we honor his memory?

Recently, I happened upon a young child and his mother walking along the neighborhood trail. Every few feet, the kid stooped to pick something up. He handed the rock, acorn, or leaf to his mother, who carried a pink plastic beach bucket.

Mister Rogers said, “One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes.” I realized that, whereas I had seen numerous rocks, acorns, and leaves that day, it took that child and his mom to show me that wonder was right here all around me.

Here’s a breath prayer from Mister Rogers’ words.

Inhale: It’s you I like.

Exhale: I like you just the way you are.

Day 15 (March 21)
They shall be prey for jackals ... Psalm 63:10

From Mister Rogers to ravenous wild beasts!

Obviously, hoping that someone will be food for jackals is not a compliment. Psalm 63 is one of the imprecatory psalms, meaning Bible verses that curse enemies in the name of God.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, jackals are associated with desert ruins. They ate carrion as well as live prey, so they were considered unclean. Jackals symbolized loneliness, desolation, and abandonment.

The psalmist's death wish for enemies contrasts with the verses about praising God. Yet, I suspect we are more like Psalm 63 than we admit.

Maybe Mister Rogers can help us once again: "Forgiveness is a strange thing. It can sometimes be easier to forgive our enemies than our friends. It's the people we love the most who can make us feel the gladdest ... and the maddest! Love and anger are such a puzzle!"

Inhale: Forgive my debts
Exhale: as I forgive my debtors.

Day 16 (March 22)

For the mouths of liars will be stopped ... Psalm 63:11

This psalm frequently mentions speech. The psalmist's lips praise and bless God with joy and by singing praises.

It's notable, then, how the psalm ends with a plea for silence.

Warnings against liars are found throughout the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Proverbs. Writers of the New Testament echo these admonitions (1 Peter 3:10; Colossians 3:9; James 3:1–12). Jesus called the devil “the father of lies” (John 8:44).

“Speak the truth in love” is our goal (Ephesians 4:15). It helps to be “quick to listen and slow to speak” (James 1:19).

There's also something to silence. Take it from (Saint) Paul Simon: “The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls and whispered in the sound of silence.”

Inhale: I am silent.

Exhale: I seek the truth.

Sunday Sabbath Recreation

Space for you to create! You might write, draw, doodle, pray, journal... it's up to you!

Day 17 (March 24)

While I kept silence, my body wasted away ... Psalm 32:3

I begin our new psalm this week by skipping down a few verses. Unlike Psalm 63:11, Psalm 32:3 describes a negative silence. The psalmist claims that remaining mute about sins causes bodily illness. Has this ever happened to you? Has a secret caused you to lose sleep, appetite, or worse?

Gather is a brilliant young adult novel by Kenneth Cadow. (I recommend it for all adults, too.) The teenage protagonist, Ian, comes from a single-parent home that is riddled with poverty and drug addictions. He has a lot to hide.

But there's a teacher at the high school known as The Sharpe, a play on her last name but also her no-nonsense behavior: "All you need to know is how you don't say no to her," says Ian. He tries to keep quiet about his problems, which are impacting his physical and mental health. The Sharpe will have none of it. Ian confesses the truth, and she helps him.

No matter what we've done, how amazing to think that the God of grace is always ready to listen to us.

Inhale: I am seen by God.

Exhale: I am forgiven.

Day 18 (March 25)

Selah

Psalm 32 features a Hebrew word that appears in numerous psalms: selah. This term is left untranslated in every Bible version because no one knows exactly what it means. Since the psalms were originally songs, most scholars believe selah is a form of musical instruction. Selah often occurs at the end of a section (this is true of Psalm 32), so perhaps the word indicates a silent pause. Conversely, it could also signify an increase in the volume of the instruments' playing. We really don't know.

Personally, I read selah as a breath prayer. I love words. Yet, a deep breath can mean more than anything that can be said or written.

Inhale: Selah.

Exhale: Selah.

Day 19 (March 26)
I acknowledged my sin to you ... Psalm 32:5

If remaining silent about our problems is detrimental for our health, it follows that acknowledging or confessing our sins would be restorative. We have this confession and assurance every Sunday at Chapel in the Pines. Certainly, there are some behaviors and attitudes that we wish to avoid.

Yet, at church, we make sure to stress that confession is not about shame. We can also learn from our mistakes.

Amy Leach wrote, "Praise for bad examples! As canned asparagus taught me to appreciate fresh asparagus, so canned ideas taught me to appreciate fresh ideas." The point is that we need not hide from our past or dwell upon it. With our forgiveness assured, we are free to learn and grow. How refreshing!

Inhale: I am forgiven.

Exhale: I am made fresh.

Day 20 (March 27)
You are a hiding place for me ... Psalm 32:7

As mentioned, no one knows the exact translation of selah. However, there is a contemporary Christian band named Selah who wrote and recorded “You Are My Hiding Place” based on Psalm 32:7. Perhaps the Presbyterian String Band should learn it!

When I was in youth group, a college leader strummed this song on the guitar, and we sang along in the fellowship hall. Even now, looking up the song on the internet, feelings of nostalgia wash over me. Youth group was a safe place. I felt comfort and love with those people. It really was a refuge from the pressures of school, like a hiding place.

I think of playing hide and seek when my children were even younger. They were terrible at hiding. They hid in only two or three spots. They would also giggle louder as I got closer. Before I could find them, they would jump up and say, “I’m here!” Maybe they weren’t terrible at hiding but were actually terrific at being found.

Inhale: You are my hiding place.
Exhale: I will trust in you.

Day 21 (March 28)

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go ...
Psalm 32:8

In verses 1–7, the speaker (“I”) is the psalmist, but the speaker changes to the divine in verse 8. God is the instructor and counselor. Psalm 32 suggests that assurance, as well as personal instruction and guidance, follow a prayer of confession.

Yet, it doesn’t always feel that way in our personal prayer lives. W.B. Yeats, in his autobiographical poem, “A Prayer for My Daughter,” confessed, “For an hour, I have walked and prayed because of the great gloom that is in my mind.” The poet looked out on the world of trouble and sorrow and, as he would later write, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Maybe you feel the same.

When I have felt down, when my hope has flagged, the words of one of my mentors, Richard Lischer, have been helpful to me. I offer them to you in the form of breath prayer.

Inhale: God is the Big Ear...
Exhale: To my big hurt.

Day 22 (March 29)
Do not be like a horse or a mule ... Psalm 32:9

I agree! No horsing or mule-ing around! Furthermore, no putting the cart before the horse and no beating dead horses. (The same for dead mules.)

While we're at it, no monkey business and no having a cow. No ants in pants, no elephants in rooms. Let there be no wild goose chases and, just to be safe, no geese chasing either.

No copycats, no cats getting your tongue, no letting the cats out of the bags. No raining cats or dogs—ouch! No dogs eating dogs—yuck! No barking up the wrong trees. (What you do with the right tree is up to you. I suggest sitting under it.)

There should be no henpecking, no chickening out, no playing chicken, no ruffling of feathers, and, just to be safe, no counting of chickens before they hatch.

No frogs in your throat—gross!

For heaven's sake, no bulls in china shops! No crocodile tears and no crying wolf. No wolves in sheep's clothing. No bats in the belfry.

No killing birds with one stone (or two or more). What did that little birdie do to you?!

Do not be like a horse or a mule ... But do have a little fun! We are halfway to Easter morning and the resurrection.

Inhale: God laughs.

Exhale: God plays.

Sabbath Recreation

Space for you to create! You might write, draw, doodle, pray, journal... it's up to you!