

## Lent Devotional 2025

Lent is a season of reflection, a journey through wilderness and wonder, through sorrow and song. It is a time to pause and listen—to the ancient stories of faith, to the whispers of God's presence, and to the unfolding story of our own lives. This Lent, we invite you into a sacred journey: "This Is My Story, This Is My Song." Together, we will explore how our lives are woven into God's greater story—how the stories we carry shape us, how the stories we share connect us, and how the intersections of our lives with others reveal the presence of Christ. From the first words of creation to the voices of those who walked with Jesus, from the cries of the cross to the hope of resurrection, we will ask:

**What is your story? How does your faith shape the song you sing with your life?**

Come with open hearts. Come with your joys and your struggles.

Come ready to listen, to tell, and to be transformed.

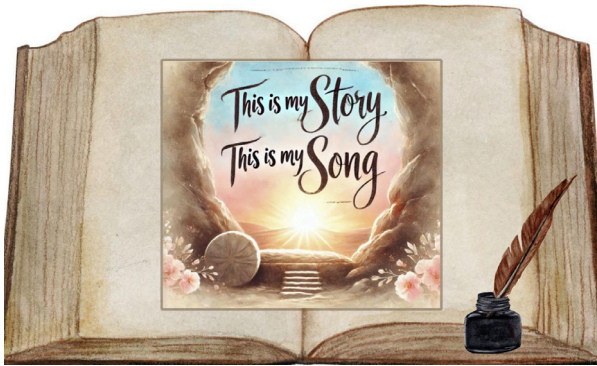
This is your story. This is your song. And it is still being written.

Will you journey with us?

*In place of or in addition to "giving something up for Lent," consider...*

*Fasting from excess television or social media -- Refraining from purchasing items you don't need and giving to...*

*-- The 4C's Food Cupboard -- Kids Weekend Meals -- The Week of Compassion*



## Day 1

### Walk This Way

*Mark 10:21b: "Then come, follow me."*

My Dad died, suddenly, when I was 28. My brother Steve was 34, and Dad died three days before my sister Julie's 15th birthday.

One of the many tasks in that dark void after an early death was going to the Social Security Administration to set up Mom's survivor benefits. The office then was in that large white building on Route 59 between Kent and Ravenna. Steve and I registered and took seats in a row of blue plastic chairs. One by one, the other people waiting got called back, and after a bit, a voice behind us said "Mister Scours?" We looked at each other, and since we were the only people there, we got up and turned toward the voice.

There was a sort of a human snowman, a very large man whose only exercise, it seemed to me, must have been chewing and walking the length of the hall to his office. Down the front of his broad white shirt were parallel trails where bits of breakfast and lunch had slalomed down the slope. Were they all from today's meals, or had he worn the shirt before? Either answer was alarming.

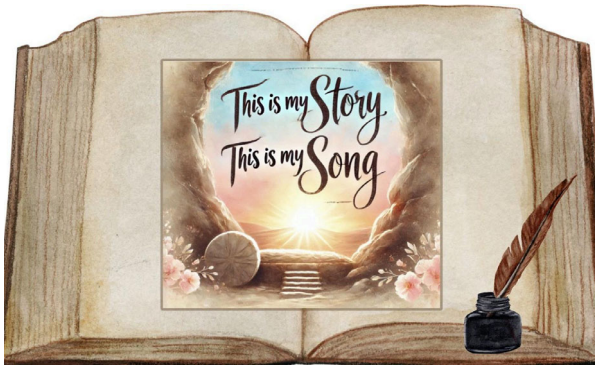
He turned and said, "Walk this way" as he led us to his desk. With every step, he vibrated like a living Jell-o mold. Death has a way of removing inhibitions – and good sense – so I said "I don't know if I can, but I'll try!" I don't think he heard me, but Steve did, and retelling this story helped us through our collective grief.

What he was lacking in hygiene he made up for in ability, and Mom's benefits began promptly and continued for her life. Many in Congress call these entitlements and threaten to take them away, but they are not; they are earnings, repaid, and the fruits of a sacred contract with our national government.

Jesus never asked us to worship him, or praise him, or deify him. He only asked that we follow him. My sincere prayer, one day at a time, is "I don't know if I can, but I'll try."

**Prayer: Loving and living God, help me to follow Jesus in everything I think, say, and do. Amen.**

– Jon Secaur



## Day 2

### God's Creative Power

Job 12:7-10:

*But ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee and the fowls of the air and they shall tell thee. <sup>8</sup> or speak to the earth and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee <sup>9</sup> who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?*

<sup>10</sup> *In whose hand is the soul of every living thing. And the breath of all, mankind.*

I am driving on a quiet country road. Quiet.

The sky is a brilliant blue. The snow is sparkling and the trees are covered with ice crystals. I marvel at the beauty around me on the cold winter day. Suddenly a herd of deer crosses the road in front of me and races across the open field to my right. They are in a perfect row, following one behind another!

Of course I have seen many deer before - but never a herd in perfect sync. I was so startled that I stopped the car to marvel at the vision I had just seen. The next morning, the vision was still with me and I mentioned it to my Sunday School friends. I left the church and started home. Again, it is a beautiful day and I am alone on another quiet country road.

It happened in front of me. Again! Another herd of deer, approximately equal in number, cross the road. How can that happen? Is it a sign? Is there some profound meaning?

As I age and have more time alone, I find myself more aware of my surroundings: the beauty of the seasons, the stars in the sky, the birds and plants in my yard, and the incredible visions that I occasionally have as the one I have just related.

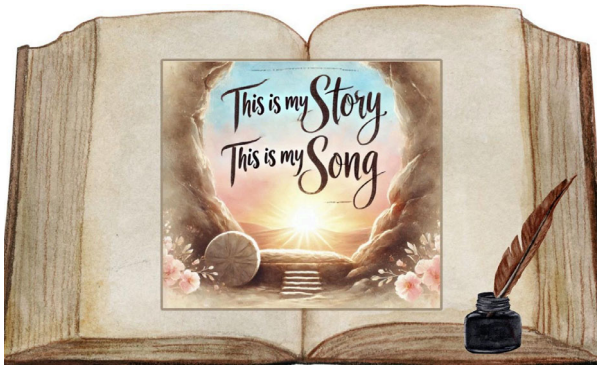
All expressions of God's creative power. I am in awe!

**Dear Lord,**

**Every day we are humbled by your creations and the beauty that surrounds us. Let us "take time to smell the roses". We are in a time of worldwide turmoil, people suffering, inept politicians, greed, dishonesty, despair, but there is beauty & hope around us. Do not let us forget the majesty of your creation and that you are always with us. Amen.**

– Helen Hazlett





## Day 3

### Ever Present

*Matthew 18:20*

*"For when two or three gather in my name,  
there am I with them."*

Marilyn Alger was MCCC's Katie Baird of the prior generation. When Marilyn asked you to do something you did it and if she told you to do something you did it without hesitation. She told me I needed to go to a Serendipity Workshop being held in January at a downtown Cleveland hotel. I was very pregnant with Travis, could barely fit behind the steering wheel of our AMC Hornet and had never driven in the city. But I went alone and was frightened.

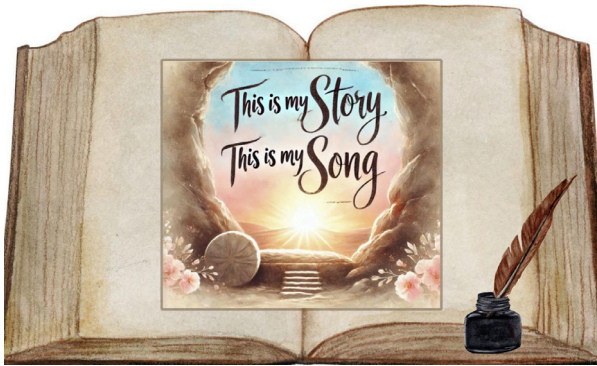
As part of the program, we did an exercise where we line-graphed high and low points in our life. Then we were asked to graph high and low points spiritually in our life. Then we were directed to pick someone in the crowd as totally different from us as we could find. A nun in habit and I, nearly bursting out of my maternity top, locked eyes and knew we were meant for each other.

As we discussed our spiritual journeys, she pointed out to me how at my very lowest points was where I most grew spiritually. In situations she had never or would ever experience such as when we lost our baby, she saw opportunities for drawing closer in relationship with God. This remains a comforting reminder in times of stress and uncertainty that God is with us even when in grief or fear we can't feel his presence.

**Heavenly Father,**

**Thank you for your presence in all times. For holding me up when I feel weak, for encouraging me when I have doubt, for forgiving me when I fail, for walking with me on life's challenging journey. How blessed to be surrounded and uplifted by your love. Amen.**

– Nora Brant



## Day 4

### A Little Help from an Angel

*Psalm 127:3*

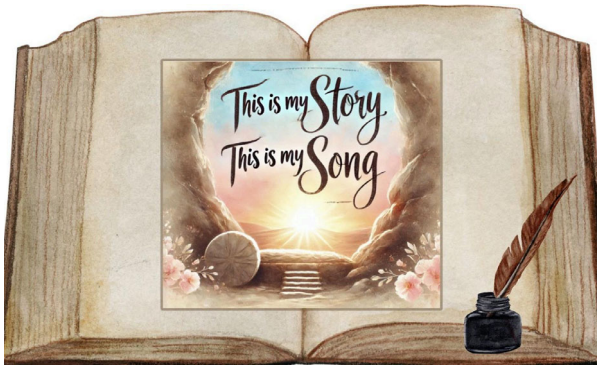
*"Children are the heritage from the lord, the fruit of the womb a reward."*

Occasionally, I get rundown in life. Trying to manage family, work, health, and everything else can seem overwhelming. As a nurse I'm dealing with patients that are usually at their worst and need my best, which can be emotionally and mentally draining. One night while getting ready for work on a long five-day stretch, I was trying to muster the energy with the short hour I had before going to work to give my kids the attention they needed instead of letting them do their tablet. On this particular night my daughter Evie (our emotional support child) was helping me pack my lunch, when I saw her slip an inspirational note into my bag, along with signing her and Calvin's name. That act of kindness & pure love boosted my energy and made me feel surrounded by God's love. That note is still stuck to my closet door and I see it every morning or sometimes evenings as I get dressed for work. It reminds me how truly blessed I am.

#### **Prayer:**

**"Thank God for kids," AMEN**

– Travis Brant



## Day 5

### A Gift of Love

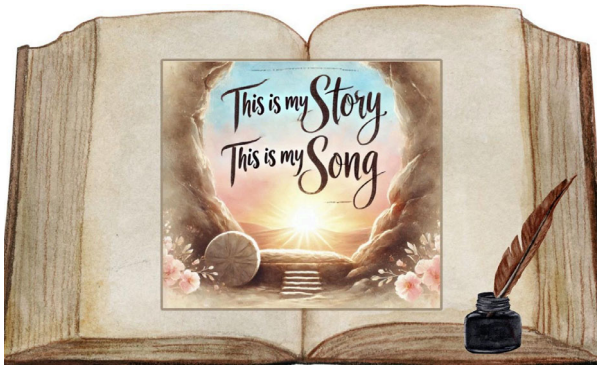
1 John 4:8

*"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."*

There are a lot of emotions that go along with having a baby. Especially when you're in your early twenties and newly married. Many of them aren't the ones you'd find on a Hallmark card. Fear comes to mind. Frustration, apprehension, and – let's be honest – nausea are pretty constant companions. Labor began the evening before while we were watching an Indians' game, and it continued through the night. When I called the doctor in the morning, frightened and anxious, he told me my pains weren't close enough together yet and that I should try to relax for a while. Hmmm. Many potential responses came to mind but, fortunately, I didn't say any of them out loud. Finally, we drove to the hospital. Hours and hours later, I was told that the good news was that the pains WERE close enough now but – the bad news – they weren't yet strong enough. Hmmm. More potential responses that I kept to myself. More hours later, an emergency ultrasound confirmed there was nothing wrong with the baby and our daughter (it was a girl!) would be born soon. And he was. (So much for the value of ultrasounds in 1980!) God entered my room that day in the form of a clipboard. It carried a document I had to sign with my son's name typed onto the top line. I had never seen that name before. It hadn't existed before. He hadn't existed. But, already, looking down at the name of that brand-new person, I knew I loved him with my whole heart and being. That's when it hit me – *God is love*. I finally knew God for the first time. Love. Everything else would come from that.

***Dear God, Help us to know love – both earthly love and the spiritual love that you offer – and help us to share it far and wide.***

– Cathy Ausperk



## Day 6

### In the Garden

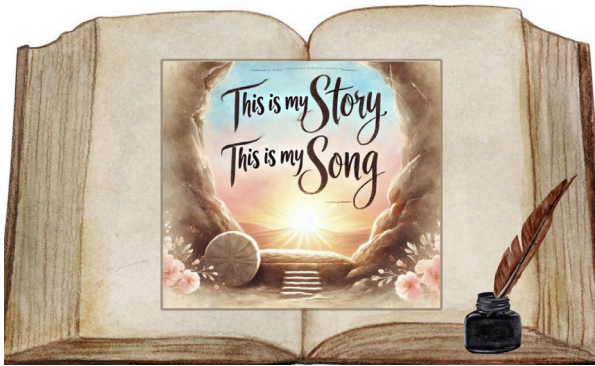
Every spring when the days got brighter earlier and stayed later longer, my dad would start thinking about the summer garden. Our 20'x20' plot right behind the garage in the backyard was a summer treasure trove of delicious food that fed a family of seven - and then some. When the snow started to melt and the weather warmed, it was time to rototill the soil.

"Why do we do this, Dad?" I asked. After all, the plants were strong enough to spread their roots and break through the soil. He told me that the nutrients in the soil would better serve the plants if they were mixed. He also said that it gave the plants a little extra room to grow. He helped me to realize that change, for plants, as well as people, helps them to grow stronger and more fully.

During the summer months, when we'd pick large Beefsteak tomatoes and harvest more zucchinis than we could cook or bake, we would be rewarded for preparing the soil well. And later in the fall when we had filled cans and jars, we would be grateful all over again.

***"Dear God, when you are molding us and forming us, please help us to always remember that change, even when it's hard, can strengthen us. Help us when we realize the fruits of our labors, to show gratitude for your gifts. Amen."***

— Kathleen Leigh Lewarchick



## Day 7

### From Sorrow to Joy

*John 16: 20-22*

*<sup>20</sup> Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. <sup>21</sup> When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has*

*been born into the world. <sup>22</sup> So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*

For all of my childhood, Easter was candy in Easter baskets, new clothes, church (when I went with my Grandmother) and not much else. Not until 1993-1994 did it really hit me in the teeth that it was a lot more!

In 1993, we lost our son, Dan. He fell on a Boy Scout outing. God and I put on the boxing gloves for a bit and we were still taking shots at each other when Easter 1994 rolled around. God does accept that kind of behavior when necessary; He has pretty big, soft shoulders.

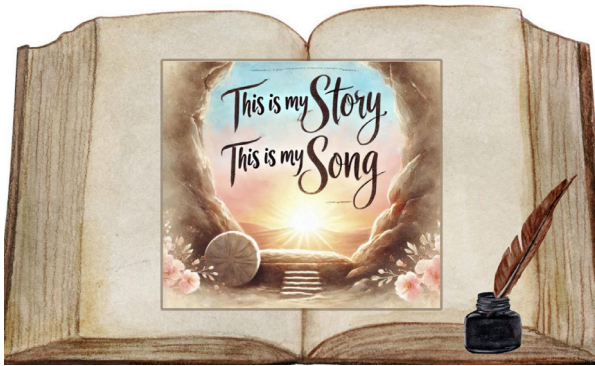
Anyway, back to Easter 1994. I arrived at Hilltop CC at the appointed time. I was not happy and feeling just sorry for myself; but as I sat there, I began to notice the sun coming in the windows, Easter flowers covering the chancel and some of my favorite music being sung. Of course, I began to think of Dan and it dawned on me that today was for him, today was for all those who had gone before us. And yes, there is joy in realizing that this is the real Easter.

This is my Story: I will see our son again. This is my Song: I celebrate Easter and the rest of my life with joy! "Praising my Savior all the day long"!

**God of hope, in our deepest sorrow, you hold us close. When grief clouds our hearts, remind us that joy is not lost—it is promised. Thank you for the Easter truth that love endures, and life in you is everlasting. Amen.**

— Liz Meeker





## Day 8

### Stories of Jesus

*Speak... to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.” – Ephesians 5:19*

*Tell me the stories of Jesus I long to hear – this song brings back such wonderful memories of my Grandma. When I think of a modern woman*

of faith — she comes to mind first. Her faith was so strong. She didn't have much materially, but she was so rich in her faith — she loved God so much and then showered that love on her family. I remember seeing her sitting in her rocking chair by the bay window reading her Bible.

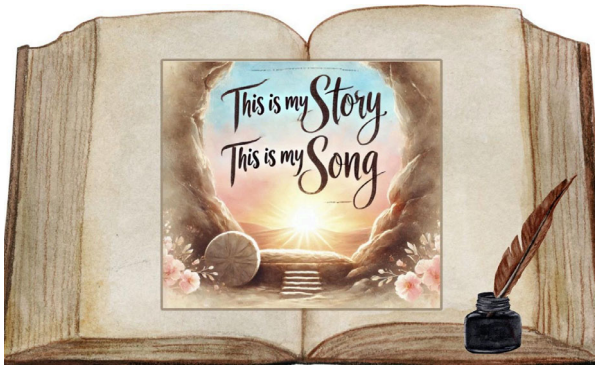
Easter was a big deal for us. We got new dresses, ruffled socks, black patent leather shoes, bonnets and gloves. Dad helped us order a corsage for Grandma — always white; colored ones for Mom and Aunt Ginger.

When I was about 9 or 10, Maundy Thursday was approaching and Grandma told us we would be attending The Last Supper with her. Well, as a kid, the *last supper* really didn't mean much, but they said *supper*, so I arrived at church expecting *supper*. Sitting beside her in the pew, I heard the minister talking about celebrating *The Last Supper* which was a mystery to me. The minister talked about taking and eating the body of Christ and taking and drinking the blood of Christ — well, my young mind thought oh — that's GROSS! And, I knew — just knew, I'd never want any part of that. That was my first experience with communion and *The Last Supper*.

My mind has matured over time as have my understandings and expectations about communion/The Last Supper, Easter and more. Today, it's not about the elements — the bread and wine. It's not even about Jesus dying on a cross for my sins or a resurrected body. As I have learned and studied about Jesus the Jew, the political and religious upheaval during his lifetime, my thoughts and expectations have taken me into a deeper understanding of Jesus. I've learned who Jesus really was, how he lived a life pleasing to God — although not always pleasing to his friends and the religious authorities. I discovered how he delighted in God's word and God's laws and redefined them for all people who would listen so that they too could enjoy the abundant life that God wants for all of God's people. So yes, *tell me the stories of Jesus and tell me your stories of Jesus — I long to hear. Amen.*

**Dear Gracious and Loving Creator – thank you so much for our memories, which can be brought to us in something as simple as a line from a song and can lead us into a deeper relationship with you. Amen.**

– Nancy Humes



## Day 9

### Was God Listening?

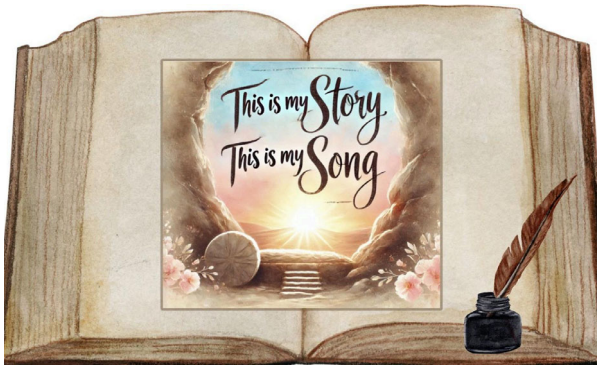
*1 John 5:14 - And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.*

After my divorce, I didn't know how to cope with custody of my two young children. My son has a mental disability, plus he would give me so much grief because he blamed me for the divorce. I worked all hours of the day and night as a tow truck driver. A lot of times it was hard to juggle home life and work. To say I was depressed was an understatement. I was so tired. I lost work hours due to doctor and therapist appointments for my son. I would tell God **Why me. I am doing the right things.** But I heard no answer. **I pray to you and you forgot my prayers. Why? I didn't give up on my marriage or my kids, why am I the one with all these problems? Where are you when I need you?** Consistent calls from my son's school with one problem after another occurred. When will it end? **God, why don't you listen to me?** Years went by and I finally got some help and my son was accepted into a group home. I thought I got some relief. But no, my son got kicked out of the home. **There it goes again, Lord. Thanks God! You must hate me.** Then he was accepted into another group home. He stayed there til he was 18 and ran away. Years went by and no word from him. He was finally recognized by a friend and I knew he was alive and doing ok on the correct medications. I guess God was answering me all that time.

**Prayer..**

**Pray, Because God listens.**

– Vince Meier



## Day 10

### Unanswered/Answered Prayers

*Jeremiah 29:11*

*For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

So, my story begins when I was subbing. It was my eight year subbing and it was getting to the point where I was going to have to go back to school to keep my certificate valid. I prayed to God that I would get a PE job. In November, the PE teacher was leaving the school and I thought my prayers had been answered. Next year I will have a teaching job. I was lucky enough to be the interim substitute for the PE teacher and was covering until the end of the year.

At the time, I was pregnant with my first child. As the months were going by, I realized that the school was posting the PE job and looking for other applicants. I started to believe that God wasn't listening to my prayers at all. As you could imagine my disappointment when I found out that they had hired a teacher from Michigan. I had attended the school my whole life and had sub and coached there for eight years.

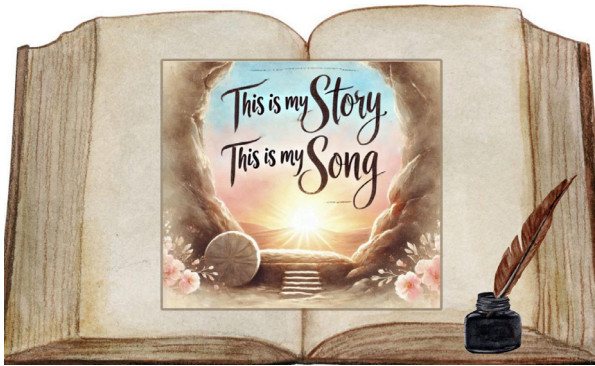
On April 21, 1995, I went in and taught my first period class and later that evening, I gave birth to my daughter, Sally. In the hospital with family and friends around, with my arms around my bundle of joy, and with all the love a new mother experiences, I realized that God was listening and knew what was best for me.

I was thankful to not have my prayers answered the way I thought I wanted. God gave me the biggest blessing that day and the many years to come, because I was fortunate enough to be a stay at home mother and have the joy of raising my four daughters.

**Dear God,**

**Thank you for knowing exactly what path is best for me to serve you. I thank you for all the blessings you have bestowed upon me. Amen**

– Wanda Hoffman



## DAY 11

### Opening the Door

*"Look, I'm standing at the door and knocking. If anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come in and we will eat together."  
Revelation 3:20.*

In the winter of 2000, I moved back to the area after 14 years living in Columbus. Just weeks after we moved into our home in Hiram, we were visited by MCCC Pastor Roger Mize. We were familiar with Pastor Mize since we often attended MCCC on weekends when we visited my parents. Honestly, I was not thinking much about church at that time. We were settling into our new house, starting new jobs, acclimating the kids to a new school, etc.

We had a nice visit, and on the way out the door, Pastor Mize stopped and asked me if I would be interested in helping lead the youth group. This came out of the blue, yet without thinking, I said sure! I never considered working with church youth, and I was not looking for anything extra to take on, but for some reason, the "yes" just came out.

Before I even started, I attended the Maundy Thursday service, led by the CYF. Wow, I was moved by the service! The youth were thoughtful, sincere and inspiring in how they expressed their take on the story. I knew that I needed to be a part of this!

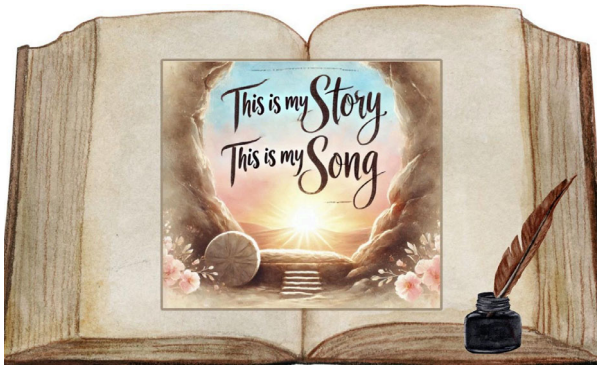
This cemented my "yes", and grew to many extraordinary experiences with the youth. In Sunday school, Maundy Thursdays, Senior Sundays, Peace Sundays, CYF, mission trips, and Camp Christian; I accompanied them on journeys of learning, questions, discerning and growth. Playing games, working hard, serious and silly conversations, difficult and thought-provoking encounters, and figuring out how to express the meaning of it all - these things became the fabric of my/our journeys of faith.

My faith grew in ways I could never have imagined by answering that knock on the door.

**God of possibilities, I give you thanks for providing opportunities to grow in faith. When I pay attention to the tugs, pushes and feelings in my spirit, I can answer the call of your knocking. Even if I don't know why or how, may I trust that these things can open the door to new experiences and pathways on my faith journey. Amen.**

– Brian Hurd





## DAY 12

### Music of Faith

*"O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord,  
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our  
salvation."  
Psalm 95:1*

The foundations of my faith are very strong and music runs all through it. As a child I attended Mogadore Christian Church. Sunday School began with an intergenerational sing along. The adults sang kids songs ("I am the Church") and the kids learned the favorite hymns of the adults ("We are Climbing Jacob's Ladder"). I have such strong memories of these sing-alongs and I remember many of these songs and hymns still today. In fact I will find myself singing both the childrens' songs ("Zaccheus") and the hymns ("Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus") to myself often. Some of this music is still frequently heard in church today and some has fallen into disuse over the years.

When I was diagnosed with depression after my second pregnancy I often sang songs to handle my feelings. I would be driving in the car with the kids singing, "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" and "They'll Know we are Christians". I bought some new cassette tapes that were filled with positive music. I would play them whenever I could.

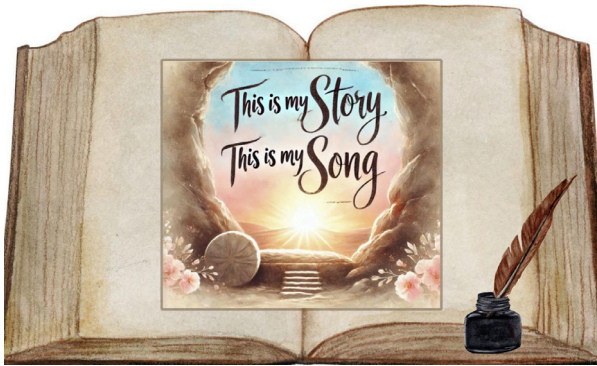
This use of music continued for me when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2017. I got so sick and weak from the chemo that I could not attend church for months. I missed everything about church but especially the music. (We couldn't watch the service on the internet then.) I made a playlist of favorite Christian music and a playlist of encouraging and positive music. I played them frequently throughout that year.

Music is a strong part of my faith. I often can remember songs more than when something is just said to me. I sang in the church choir as a teen. I often sing at home or play music. When I taught Sunday School I tried to teach the kids some of the songs I had learned as a child. The words and the melodies touch me deeply. I can't imagine my life or my faith without music.

**Dear God,**

**Thank you for the gift of music. Thank you for those whose gift it is to write music; for those who play music awesomely; and for those who can sing music beautifully. But God thank you most of all that music is for all of us. We can all sing praises to you and sing joyfully no matter our abilities. Amen**

– Carol Buzbee



## DAY 13

### God of Possibilities

*Psalm 100:2 - Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing."*

I had not been coming to Mantua Center Christian Church for more than a year, when I was asked to become a Deacon. Before I was asked, I hardly noticed what the deacons did. But after I was asked, I watched very carefully, knowing that their duties would soon be mine.

In those days, the elders and the deacons processed into the sanctuary from the back during the first hymn. I felt like I had the process down pretty well, so it was with confidence that I walked up the aisle.

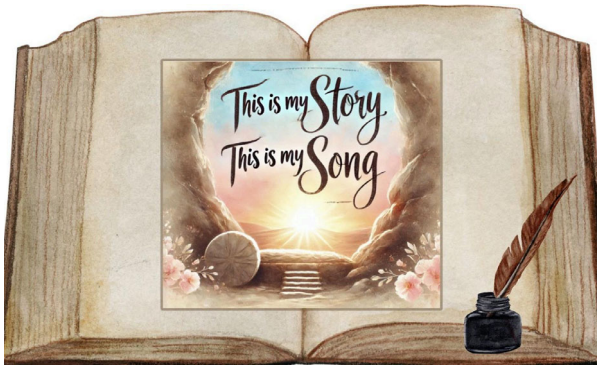
When I reached the front, I was suddenly engulfed by a feeling I didn't recognize. It was a sense of being a part of the worship. Not just a spectator. Not just a member of the audience. But one who, in a very small way, was participating in the glory of God.

I managed to keep my knees steady, and like every transcendent experience, the feeling passed. But I have never forgotten it. To this day, I celebrate the gift that was given to me when I was asked to participate in worship.

And that is why, my friends, I ask you to participate: it is a gift. Not from me, but from God.

**Welcoming God, always offering new possibilities, I thank you for your invitation to Service. And I thank you for leading me to a place where your spirit of service can be offered, learned, and made manifest. Amen**

– Katie Baird



## DAY 14

### God is Already Here

*Acts 2:43-47 "All who believed were together ...the Lord added to their numbers those who were being saved."*

In February Dave and I made two trips to a migrant shelter in Nogales, Mexico called Casa De La Misericordia, House of Mercy, a trip we have been hoping for since last year. With the change in migrant policies set in place by the new administration, we really didn't know what to expect, but we were pretty sure our help would be needed.

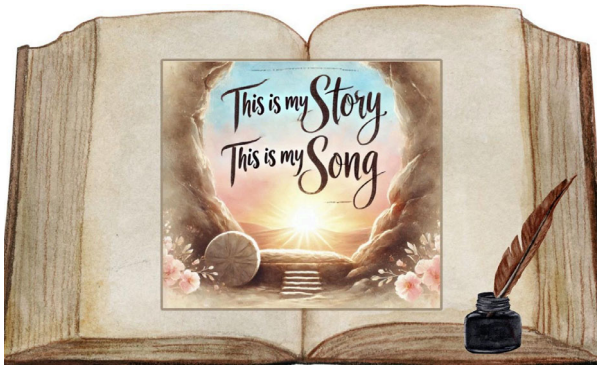
What we found was a thriving community at Casa, one large family really, of humans working hard, caring for each other and creating a safe space for all. They didn't really need us. Of course we came with some building supplies and tools that helped get a few jobs done. We offered ourselves fully for any project, activity or event of the community, severely limited by our inability to speak Spanish. And they did the same for us, offering themselves to us that we might more fully come to know God's family.

I've been angry with God; no actually, God's people, Christians denying the humanity of others. But during our time at Casa, anger was not something I sensed or heard or felt. These people were full of hope, gratitude, joy, compassion and apparently, genuine trust in God's goodness. We played with happy children, eager to learn and laugh. We worked with patient people who never tired. And we spent a day baking bread; men chopping wood and women sharing endless stories and everyone breaking bread with gratitude.

Silly me. Not fully sure what I was thinking, maybe that Dave and I would be some sort of saviors in this community of great need. No, they already know The Savior and they are living their faith. They were just waiting for us to come so they could help us out.

**Gracious God, thank you for being everywhere already. Open our eyes that we may see You. Amen**

– Pam Auble



## DAY 15

### Puzzles

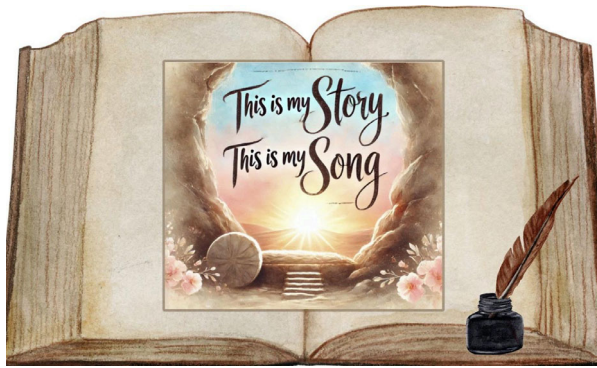
*He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”  
(Phil 1:6)*

Our lives are like puzzles, pieces that are scattered about but as time goes on and we grow, those pieces start to come together. I love doing puzzles and usually do 1,000 piece ones. I believe I got this from my dad who, after he retired and became unable to work outside all day or work down in his work room, he liked to put out a puzzle on the dining room table to work on. Sometimes he worked on them himself but I would join him when I went for a visit and even picked up a few for him to do. One of those puzzles was lighthouses and he ended up completing it and putting it in the stairway going downstairs. I have it now. When my youngest sister, Helen came up for a visit from North Carolina, that is where we would be. We usually started with the edge pieces but sometimes the colors of the puzzle or the scenery inside would draw us toward doing it from the inside to outside. The challenge we did was to look at the puzzle picture and then put the box out-of-sight until done. Although I have done some puzzles where the only way to figure the picture out was to keep the picture in front of me. These times together are remembered with fondness which included lots of talking and laughing as the puzzle came together.

**Dear God, let us remember those times with loved ones and may our lives come together as a puzzle in the way we live and learn about You. Amen**

– Ruth Anne Ruehr





## DAY 16

### You Are Not Alone

*Psalm 34:18 "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit"*

This story begins in 1986, two years after I had been diagnosed with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia. Our family had enjoyed a wonderful Christmas together, and my parents were leaving for their winter hiatus on Marco Island, Florida. My mother, especially, loved to walk along the beach collecting shells. She was in "heaven" on the beach!

While they were gone, life at home was carrying on as usual . . . until it wasn't. I received a call from my dad in early February, saying that mom was in the hospital from a heart attack, and she would be getting a stent put in the next day. My brother, Scott, and I immediately flew down and went with dad to the hospital to see mom. I remember thinking she looked so tiny in that hospital bed, but I felt assured that all would be well once they put the stent in to keep her artery clear.

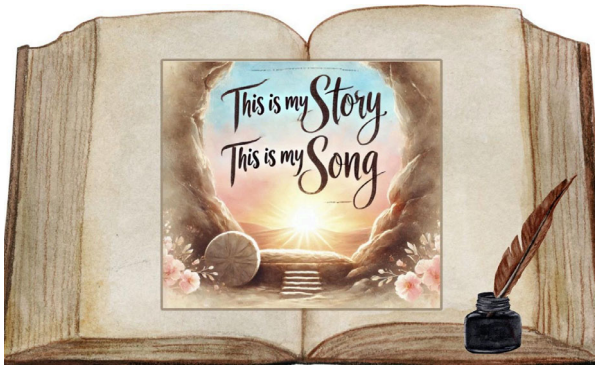
Her procedure was successful, and after a couple of days she convinced the doctor that she would get better rest at the condo, so she was released. Scott and I flew back home and thought all would be well, until it wasn't. Not even a week later, she had another heart attack (the stent didn't hold) and this time, it took her life. I was in NO way ready for that outcome. Between my own health issues, and then the death of my mom, to put it mildly, I was having a break-down. I simply couldn't cope.

I cried harder and longer during that time than ever before in my life, or ever since. Despite my constant prayers, I felt like God had abandoned me, that he was not listening to my cries for help. Then, with the encouragement of my husband and my doctor, I sought the help of a counselor, who literally helped put the pieces of my life back together one bit at a time. Was that divine intervention? As Psalm 34:18 states, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit". I now know, His presence is not distant – He is right beside us especially in our pain.

**Gracious and Loving God,**

**We know you are beside us when times are good, and it is easy to be grateful for your abundance. May we ever be reminded that in the most crushing of times you are also right by our side. Help each of us to embrace our feelings and invite your healing presence into our hearts. Amen.**

– Sandi Kossick



## DAY 17

### Is Anyone Listening

*Psalm 119:105 "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."*

When I was volun-told by Katie Baird that I should write a Lenten devotional, and I saw the prompts, I thought immediately that I would be avoiding the topic "a time I felt God wasn't listening." This is something I currently am going through, following the very recent loss of my Mom to a quick and cruel battle with pancreatic cancer. The loss happened so quickly that I didn't even have time to process the fact that she had cancer. And then she was gone.

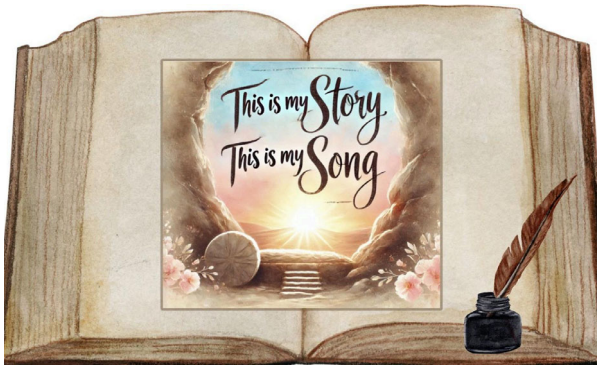
However, the more I sat and thought about it, even though this is very raw and fresh, I'm choosing to be vulnerable. I can't say my feelings are resolved, or that I feel like I forgive God for everything that happened, but maybe writing it down will help me get to that point. For a long time, before she passed, I was in the bargaining stage of grief. Maybe if I cried hard enough, or prayed hard enough, that it would make the situation all a bad dream. But it didn't work, so the only conclusion is that there was nobody listening to me.

No higher power cared that I was losing my Mom, the kindest and gentlest soul. Someone I still don't know how to live without. I wish this story had a satisfying ending, that I had an epiphany through prayer and realized that there is a greater purpose behind this. I'm not there, and I don't know when or if I will be. It certainly feels impossible right now.

However, one thing I do know is that I was-- and am-- surrounded by love as I move through this difficult time. Between church friends, family, my sorority sisters, my coworkers, my students, and even strangers, there hasn't been one moment that I felt unsupported or alone. And maybe that's where the whole "answered prayers" thing comes from-- the people God sends to support you in times of struggle. On the days I feel the most down, and I feel like I'm walking a tightrope of grief and am so close to tipping over the edge, I remind myself of the people around me, who made meals, cleaned my house, gave a hug, sent a card, or checked in. I may not ever know how or why this happened, or why God allowed me to go through this struggle, but I do know that I am never alone.

**Creator God, I give my thanks for friendship and love. Help us all to understand your will, hear your voice, and feel your presence in the dark and difficult times in our lives. Amen.**

- Ally Bozeka



## DAY 18

### The Stories We Carry

*Philippians 3:13-14 - "...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."*

The summer of 1997, I was a high school junior standing on the pool house porch at Camp Christian, caught between the sounds of splashing and ping pong balls. Tensions ran high as campers buzzed about next year's senior officers. Then I saw her—the girl running against my friend. My chance to put her in her place. I marched up, met her eyes, and fired off: "Just because you think you're so great doesn't mean people are gonna vote for you." Victory? Satisfaction? No. Her wide, tear-filled eyes and retreat to a counselor left me with a hollow ache. By nightfall, regret settled in, but I never had the courage to say anything.

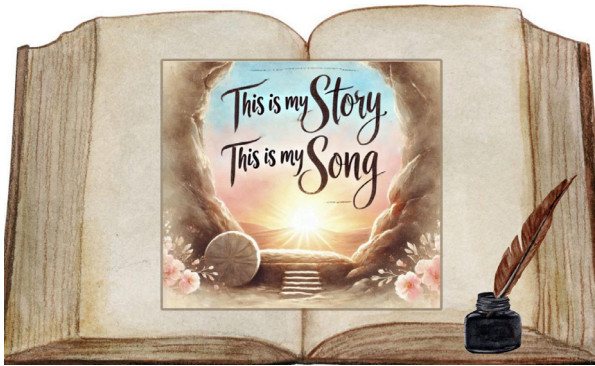
Fifteen years later, I was back at Camp Christian—this time as a dad, husband, and pastor—when I saw her again. Would she remember me? I avoided her at first, but something pulled me back. Outside the craft cabin, I introduced myself, confessed, apologized. I meant it. She was gracious, brushing it off saying we were all "young and dumb back then." But it meant something to me and I think she appreciated it.

Walking away, I felt lighter. I had carried that moment for years, wishing I could forget the version of myself who let insecurity and loyalty twist into cruelty. But forgetting wouldn't change what happened. Instead, remembering taught me. Words can wound or heal. Regret can grow compassion. Owning my failings can shape me into a better person--more like Christ.

If I could go back and rewrite that moment in the pool house, I would. But I can't. Instead, I can press forward seeking to better follow the way of Christ. Strength isn't found in tearing someone down but in building others up. Grace isn't just something we receive—it's also something we extend. And the stories we carry—both the ones we cherish and the ones we'd rather forget—become part of who we are, shaping us into who we are still becoming.

**God of grace, thank you for the lessons that shape us — even the ones we'd rather forget. Help us to live with kindness, seek forgiveness, and extend the same grace we have received. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.**

-- Rev. Chad Delaney



## DAY 19

### I Wish I Would Forget...But Do I?

*Isaiah 43:19 (NRSV) – "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."*

Memory is a mixed bag. The further back I dig, the less happiness I find after the age of 6. The

story of my upbringing is a story of destruction, increasing mental illness, psychological violence and eventually disaster.

When I was 6, my mom was a popular French singer across western Europe and the Middle East. She even had a little tour in Japan. When I turned 20, we had lost everything: money, their friends, our home — twice. Our family was ruled by my father's unchecked paranoia and I had had enough of it. I was starting my own life away from my parents, so I did not see them very often. But one day, my father told me over the phone to never come back. I was 24 and I never did. When asked about my parents, I often said that they had passed away in a car accident.

I was loyal to my parents, to their madness, to their denial of reality, to their attempt to fight the entire world all at once. I used to feel that we must be special if the world was so hard bent on destroying us. But one day I started to ask questions, and this automatically turned me into a traitor — an enemy of my people. I could see my father digging our own grave with so much fury. He didn't want my help, not even my thoughts. Just my loyalty.

My father ended up serving time in prison. When released, he survived two more miserable years with cancer, cared for by his older sister he had spent decades hating and belittling. He passed away in 2008. The hospital contacted me to ask if I wanted to come and say goodbye. I told them I already said goodbye, many years ago. I was told that he died happy learning that I was divorcing my then wife he couldn't stand.

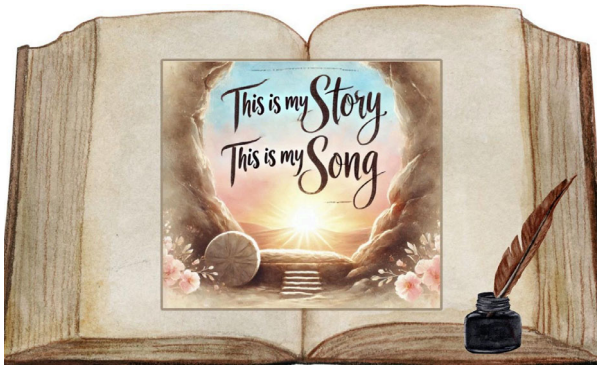
I wish I could forget and luckily I did forget some of it. But most of all I forgave. When my father was no longer here, other layers of memories began to come to the surface. He loved me. He was extremely fun and insightful. He was smart and insanely gifted. His sense of humor was to another level, even if there always was some cruelty.

Becoming a father myself makes me think about him. He is my frame of reference. I owe him the person I have become, for better or worse. This is bone memory, soul memory. These memories never go away.

**Lord help us to carry the burden of our memories. These are building blocks of who we are as people, they inform our lives and yet they do not define us. Help us to remember and feel, but not to be disabled by these memories. Liberate us and show us the path forward as we continue our journey.**

Frederic Vigne





## DAY 20

### **She Never Stopped Smiling**

*Job 8:21: He will yet fill your mouth with laughter and your lips with shouts of joy.*

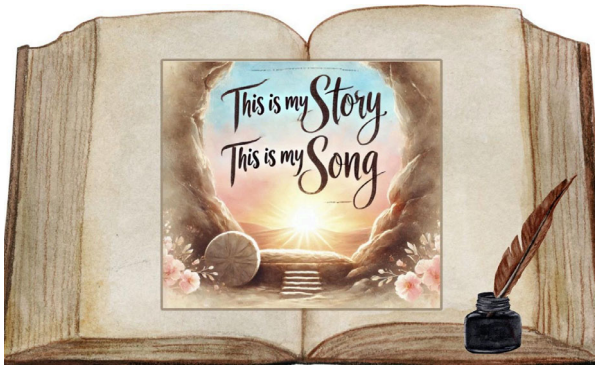
Many of you knew my sweet, humble little mother, Frances Secaur. She admitted that she had lived a little life, often hindered by unnamed fears. As she was turning 90, Linda and I, along with my brother Steve and his wife Nancy, decided to give her a treat that would expand her world. A lot. Mom was always proud of her Scottish heritage, but we knew little about it. Her mother was Lola McLain, and her uncle, Raymond McLain, was a Disciple minister who founded Lexington Theological Seminary. A little research traced the family name to the Isle of Mull, in the Inner Hebrides just off the west coast of Scotland. The branch of her family was from an inlet off the North Sea called Lochbuie, where a modest castle fort, Castle Moy, still stands.

Mom had never seen the ocean, or even New York City, so Linda and I took her there for two days of easy sightseeing – a carriage ride in Central Park, a boat ride around Manhattan, and a Broadway show, followed by a pedicab ride down Broadway to our hotel, with her sitting on our laps and giving a royal wave to pedestrians along the busy route. Then we met Steve and Nancy at the airport and flew to Edinburgh and a series of Bed and Breakfasts, north to Perth, and then west across the country. Along the way we bought her a Scottish tam and she posed with it at the entrance to Loch Lomond in the western highlands. We keep the framed photo and Mom's tam on our coffee table. She wore that same joyful grin the entire trip – she never stopped smiling.

Mull is a rocky, shrubby island, somewhat, I think, like the Holy Land, with many more sheep than people. We stayed at an inn on the island after seeing the castle, and she was just beaming when she came to breakfast! She saw a figure like Jesus, an actual shepherd with his flock on a rocky slope outside her room. With great joy she recounted how he rapped his staff on a rock to get the flock's attention, and they followed him up and over the hill. Of all that she saw on the trip, that scene of a gentle shepherd and his obedient sheep thrilled her the most. She had always wanted to visit the Holy Land but never did. For her, this little scene came close.

**Loving and living God, help us to always appreciate every new experience and see wonder in them all. Amen**

– Jon Secaur



## DAY 21

### Not Just Rock 'N Roll

*Colossians 3:2: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."*

When you think of the 60's most images that come to mind are hippies, bell-bottom pants, platform shoes, Rock 'n Roll, and in 1969 Woodstock! And yes, all those things come to

my mind also – that was, after all, MY generation! However, among all those great memories, there was also a great memory that involved Camp Christian. It perhaps seems a little odd that a church camp would rank right up there with Rock 'n Roll, but it does! I remember the first time I attended and got the whole "camp experience." Several of us from Mantua Center Church attended together and along with these "old" friends, we quickly made new ones.

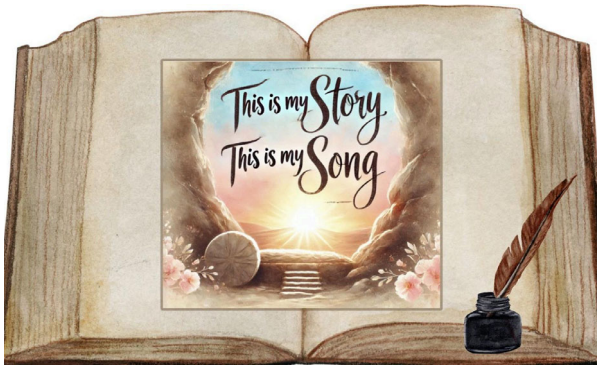
After a couple of days getting acclimated, I felt the presence of God through every person, every tree, every building, and through every activity I participated in. It felt like "Heaven"!

The best part of camp for me was Vespers, which is an evening prayer service. It is a time set aside to slow down, talk about values, appreciate each other, pray for the needs of the world and, of course, sing songs before retiring for the day. Back in the 60's, the camp counselors would gather all the campers together and we would walk through the woods to the vespers site. There would be rows of wooden benches for everyone to sit on and a cross at the front of this beautiful outdoor space. My first impression of this service was that I had never felt closer to God than at that spot and at that moment. And I think that experience was a catalyst for expanding my faith in general. As is written in Colossians 3:2 it was a time for me to "Set my mind on things above, not on earthly things."

Ally Bozeka recently shared with me a picture of the current Vespers spot. Amazingly, even though it is not the same location, the picture takes me right back to that feeling of God's presence - EVERYWHERE. The benches are there, and the cross is there, along with the overwhelming feeling of serenity and the peacefulness in nature of this Holy space. I am thankful for the Camp Christian experience and feel it really helped ground me in my faith. It was an opportunity I really wish every child could experience!

**Dear Lord, I give thanks for those individuals who had the vision to create a space called Camp Christian, to help spread the Gospel in Jesus' name! May it be a place of solace, refuge, and expanded faith for many generations to come. Amen.**

– Sandi Kossick



## DAY 22

### Joy Finally Comes

*Psalm 30:5 For his anger is but for a moment; his favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning,*

I never thought I would feel Joy again after my son Jeff died in a car accident.

Life went on. Sometimes it was just putting one foot in front of the other. I tried to go on for my other children. I didn't feel like it was fair to them to give up.

My husband Bob and I were struggling when our Grandson Alex was born.

I believe God sent Alex to us to help us learn how to live again.

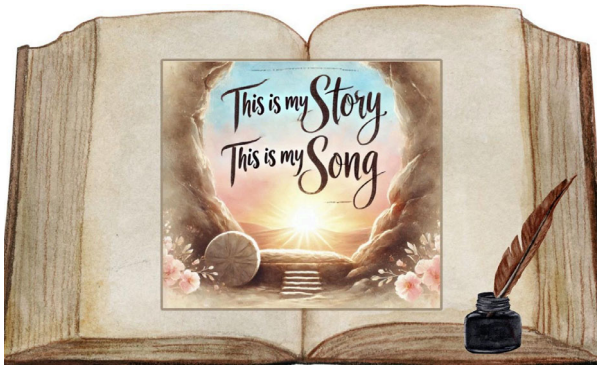
It felt like Alex was an Angel.

Bob and Alex would go out and look at birds.

Today when I see Alex he always hugs me and tells me he loves me. God is Love and Alex is our Angel.

**Dear God, thank you for the Angels in our Lives that you send to lift us up! Amen**

– Sue Wright



## DAY 23

### The Lenten Rose

*Psalm 62: 5 - "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him."*

Do you know about the Lenten Rose?

I wait in hope for them every year until they

emerge from the barrenness of late winter—one of the first signs of coming spring.

There are so many metaphors that can be associated with the Lenten Rose.

A Lenten Rose is not what we claim it to be. It's not a rose, but comes from the buttercup family. The only reason it's called "Lenten," is because that's the time that it blooms. But aren't some people—even you or I-- like that? We might call ourselves one thing, or appear to be a certain thing, but our deepest and most true identity might be something else. And to the flower, it's not important at all what we've named it. Any person, regardless of name or appearance, is a beloved child of God—a blooming surprise like a flower.



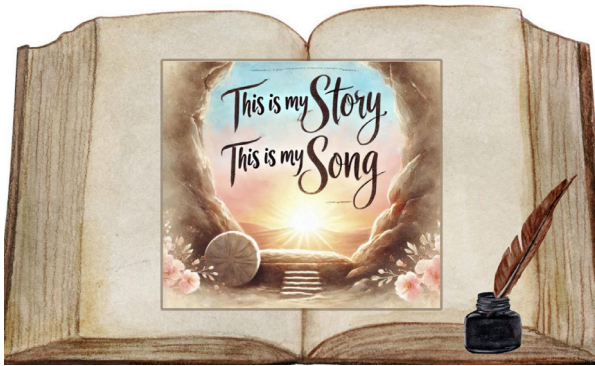
I love the fact that the Lenten Rose loves the shade and almost hides among the dry leaves of late winter. There are always people, too, who love being quiet and sometimes living in a kind of shade. The Lenten Rose comes through the dark time of winter and then....blooms! I'm told that it takes extra effort to get the Lenten Rose to grow from seed. But then it tends to bloom year after year with very little special attention or care. Might this be a reminder that sometimes it's best not to interfere with what God can do without our interference?

A Lenten Rose is nourished by its deep roots. We, too, can have deep roots of faith—through prayer, meditation, scripture, worship, and community—even (dare I say?) by simply paying attention and being astonished at the wonders of God's world.

**Precious God, we thank you for your gift of the Lenten Rose—quietly and faithfully blooming, even during or after dark times. May we be deeply rooted in the rich soil of our faith—that we may joyfully and lovingly serve you by serving others. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

– Ann Patella





## DAY 24

### Making Noise

*Psalm 98:5. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises.*

I have been involved in music for my entire life. We sang in the car when we went on vacations (no radio) and my sisters and I were always singing about something. I also sang in the church choir when I got older. I started in the bell choir at First Christian Church of Stow when I was in high school and I have been ringing bells with the same group ever since. When we had our children they also sang in the children's choir and they played in the bell choir all through high school. Music is a joy to me and is a big part of my life. I love it because it involves so many different emotions.

But what do we do when we don't feel like making a "joyful noise"? What if we want to make a sad noise or an angry noise or a hopeless noise? What if we can't even think about a joyful noise. Not only that, what if our noises are not perfect? What if we can't sing or play bells or we just can't bring ourselves to make any noise at all?

Fred and I watch the news most nights and it really feels hard right now to make any kind of "joyful noise". My heart aches for peace but right now peace feels so far away. How do we find the energy to make any noise, when the only thing you want to do is scream or cry. The news can do that to you!

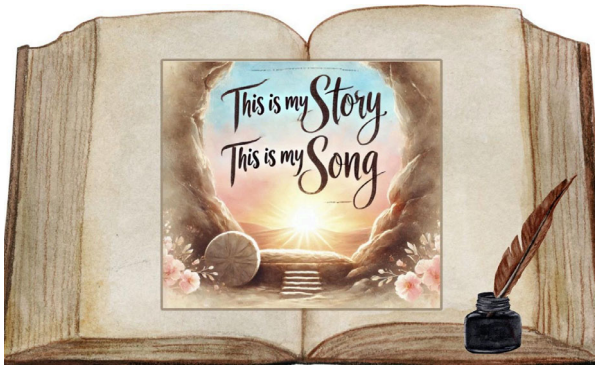
What a blessing it has been for me to lead our bell choir (Center Ringers) for the past two years! These wonderful people are so eager to learn and get better! One of our pieces brings out many emotions. It starts out angry with loud clashing bells that don't seem to make any sense. But then it flows into a beautiful melody that you all may recognize. At the end we go back to the angry bells and they are loud and fierce until the very last note of the song. The song ends with a beautiful chord coming from the depths of anger. When you hear it, your body says "Ahh, **there** it is"! There is the hope we are waiting for! There is the peace. There is the Joyful noise!. We can all breathe again.

I believe that God does ask us to make a "Joyful Noise". But, I also believe that God hears our sad noises and our angry noises. I believe that God is in those noises, until we can again make our noises joyful. We aren't perfect when we sing, play bells or any other instrument. But God is not looking for perfection, God is looking for our faithfulness.

May we all make a joyful noise to God even if it's not perfect or beautiful, because just like our bell piece, God makes all things beautiful in the end.

**God of Joyful Noises, we thank you for voices and instruments of your peace. May we continue to use whatever we have to glorify your name. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen**

– Cheryl Delaney



## DAY 25

### Love Like Jesus

*Romans 15:7 - Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.*

Between growing up at Mantua Center Christian Church and going to Camp Christian

every summer, I have had an extremely healthy experience with religion in my life. With love, acceptance, and community being at the core of MCCC and camp, both are very special places.

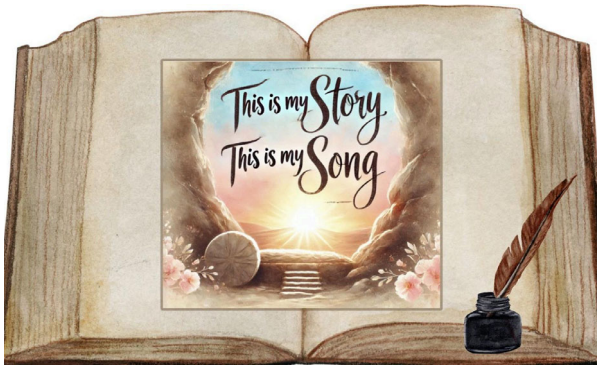
Throughout over 10 years of being a camper I met people with various religious backgrounds. Some came from big churches, others from churches even smaller than ours, and some who didn't go to church at all. Having conversations with fellow campers about their faith journeys made me feel extremely lucky that MCCC has been part of mine. While some have a church somewhat comparable to Mantua Center, numerous people experience judgement and dysfunction at their place of worship, finding themselves without a real home. I have been at MCCC since I was two years old and it is the only church I can remember calling home. I also grew up under the assumption that all religious institutions functioned like this one, which is sadly far from true.

While every church can always seek to be more welcoming, some have a very long way to go. Talking to my friends and fellow campers, some have felt unwelcome in their churches because of who they are, how much money they are able to give, or even because of personal disputes and drama. For many, Camp Christian is the church where they feel most safe, accepted, and loved. My faith grows with every summer at camp as I see my friends experience love like I have at Mantua Center: love like Jesus.

Unconditional and unquenchable, this type of love gives me faith despite a world that so often feels overrun by hate. Lost in the political and social turmoil of today is the fact that we are all God's children and deserve to be loved and to love as Jesus did. I knew people who came to Camp Christian year after year despite the fact that they did not believe in God, because the beloved community had touched them so profoundly. That unconditional love and acceptance, whether one calls it God or by any other name, inspires and comforts people more than anything else. Again and again in my young life I have witnessed that loving like Jesus is infinitely more moving than simply talking about him.

**Loving God, may we as a congregation continue to strive to live and love like Jesus. Amen**

— Josh Delaney



## DAY 26

### FAITH

*Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*

Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings while the dawn is still dark. This fortune has been stuck to my work monitor for at least 10 years. I don't always acknowledge it's there but it seems to make itself known when I need it. In the past few years, I've seen it quite a bit.

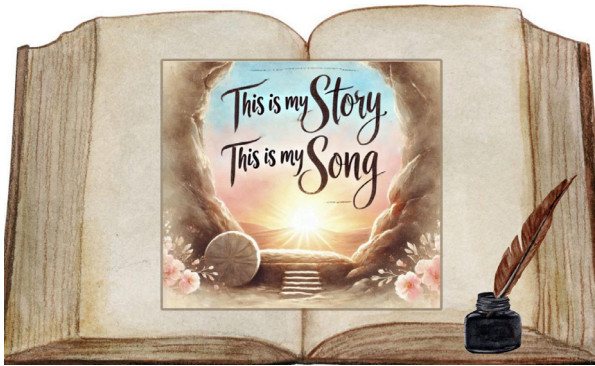
In general, I am an optimistic person. I don't like to see the bad in the world and truly believe things will work out the way they are supposed to. Some say I live in a bubble because I don't watch the news to keep up with world affairs. It was a choice I made around 30 years ago when I stopped watching news. It just made me so sad and hurt my heart to see the negativity.

The one thing that has really strengthened and helped my faith grow is spending time with our youth. When Aspen asked me in 2023 to go on the mission trip, I never imagined it would lead to volunteering with CYF and planning a week in June for “vacation.” Spending time with the youth has shown me there is hope in the future. These youth come to CYF with joy in their hearts and their laughter is the light I look for in the dark. Their willingness to take a week to work on projects they may never do at home shows there is good in our world. These youth don't even know the impact they have had on me and my faith.

I know there are always dark days but just like the bird at dawn, I will continue to sing knowing the light in our youth will bring the dawn.

**Dear Lord, Please continue with the amazing plans you have for all the youth in our world. Don't let them be discouraged with the way things are and give them the faith in themselves to make the changes that are needed for a better world. Amen.**

– by Larisa Catcott



## DAY 27

### SKATES AND A SKATE KEY

*Deuteronomy 4:9 - "Only be on your guard and diligently watch yourselves, so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen, and so that they do not slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and grandchildren."*

Have you ever had someone say the most innocent thing to you and suddenly you are transported back to your childhood? I don't remember much of my childhood but, it happened to me the other day. I was talking to a friend and she began remembering about when she was a child and how they would roller skate in their basement – in winter – at night – whenever they couldn't skate outside. I was immediately transported back to sitting on the next to the bottom stair, putting on my roller skates, tightening them with the skate key, and seeing what seemed to be an endless basement (probably about 40 x 60 feet) to skate in. I would race from one end to the other and grab the support pole to swing around so I didn't have to stop. What an amazing, fun-filled memory! And this memory began my journey through time back to some other childhood memories.

My memories led me to when my sister and I used to walk to Sunday school, church and then Summer Bible School. We'd hop-scootch, and do the "don't step on the crack or you'll break your mother's back" on the sidewalk all the way there and back. At Church, we had wonderful times being with friends. But, the best times were Bible School. We gathered with our Methodist friends, from down the street, so there were more friends, lots of Bible stories, and crafts and **THE SNACK** — the proverbial sugar cookies and red kool-aid in the wax Dixie cups – which actually tasted more like wax than cherry!

Another memory followed — the Jesus pictures that were hanging on the walls in the Sunday School rooms – my favorite – Jesus with the children gathered around him. I always felt comforted and loved by that one.

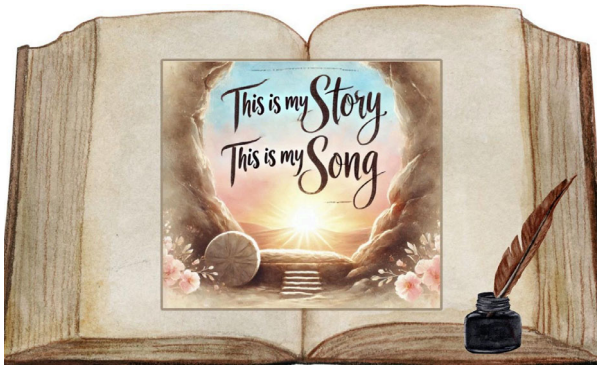
I guess it doesn't really matter why my memories came — the simple skates and skate key, cherry kool-aid and sugar cookie snack, or a picture, our minds give us special gifts all of the time. Teaching us.

I hope that this time of reflection provides me with some additional memories – perhaps instigated by smells or tastes or just a simple picture. I hope that your time of reflection brings you happy memories too.

**Gracious and loving God – we thank you for our memories – whether they be happy or sad, they are a special gift connecting us to you and to each other. Help us to enjoy whatever gifts of memories we are given. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

– Nancy Humes





## DAY 28

### TURNPIKE TOLL

*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "the one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "go and do likewise." - Luke 10: 36 & 37*

A few years ago, we got stuck behind another motorist at the Rte. 44 Turnpike exit toll booth. From what we could tell, this young guy was scrambling to pay the toll – we could see him talking and gesturing with the booth attendant and frantically looking around for his wallet or some spare change.

I began to mutter and calculate how long before I laid on the horn in anger at being delayed for a few more seconds.

Then I noticed that Sue was opening her wallet so she could jump out of the car and pay this guy's toll. I remember very clearly what she said - "I guess we should help him out."

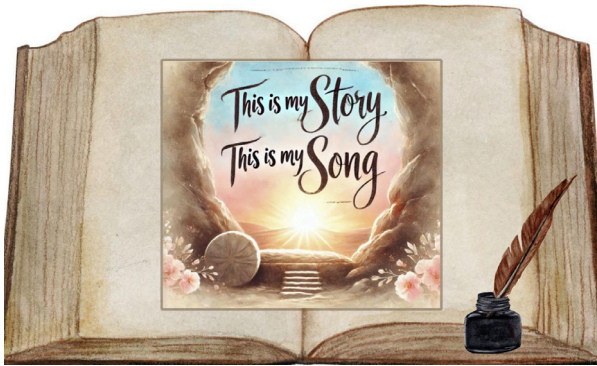
My first response was to be annoyed – Sue's first response was to help.

His need was not great, and didn't require any big sacrifice on our part. It was a simple and small act of kindness in a moment of frustrating inconvenience – and Sue did not hesitate to help.

I wonder if the young man that Sue helped that day would remember that small act and pass it along to other strangers in need. Was his life graced by the compassion shown to him by the nameless woman in the Honda minivan?

**Gracious and loving God – if we keep you in our hearts, we find your presence in all that we do, everywhere we look, and in all people – even at turnpike toll booths. Help us find the generosity in our hearts that we readily share with all your children, whatever their needs. Amen**

– Steve Hurd



## DAY 29

### My Story

*Psalm 133:1 - How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.*

My story... for the last 30 years has been tied to Mantua center Christian Church. You have shown me over and over who you are – and I want myself entwined with you.

Who makes me joyful? - you!

Who do I want to be with when I grow up? - you!

Who inspires me to be the best I can be? - you!

Who do I want to be surrounded by when I am struggling? - you!

Who can I count on? - you!

Who shows me what Jesus would do (WWJD)? - you!

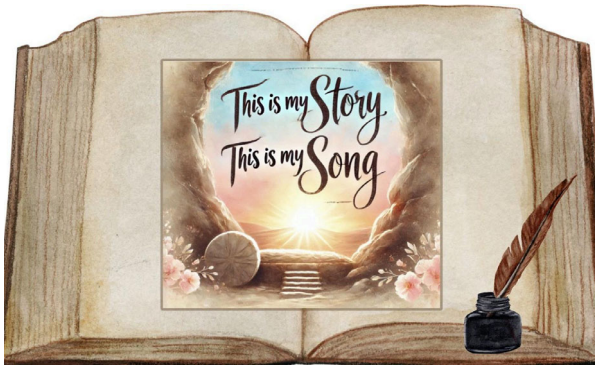
Whose face mirrors that of God? - you.

My story is you. I'm grateful for all I've learned from MCCC. I am so blessed to be a part of your community. I hope that when folks meet me they walk away saying “ Ah, yes. She must be a part of Mantua center Church.”

I love you all so dearly!

**God of all creation, how blessed we are to have a community of friends to walk this Earth and this life with, together. We strive to take care of one another as we are taught, and to love all of creation. We will spread our kindness and love beyond our walls and we will do it together. Thank you for your love for us. Amen.**

– Beth Schabel



## DAY 30

### Kind Angels

*Psalm 37: "Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand"*

I'd just been to Chad's Dwelling in the Word Bible discussion. I didn't have my car so I got a ride home with Ron. When I arrived home, I realized I didn't have my phone. So I got in my van and I drove back

to the church. And as I was getting out of my car to go look, Nora came out of the church. She had been at the Bible session with us. I told her "I believe I left my phone here." She said "I'll go look.". She came back and said the phone wasn't there. I thought."Oh, Great!"

It's funny, when you lose your phone, your first thought is," who can I call to help me out?"

I thought, well, if the phone isn't here, I must've left it in Ron's car. So on the way home I was thinking how I could get a hold of him and ask him if he could help me find it. When I got into my house, there was my phone, sitting on the arm of my couch. I started to have a meltdown. Within seconds, my phone signaled a text message. Here's how it went:

**Chad:** Hi, Katie! Did you get your phone?

**Me:** yes. Thank you. How did you hear? I really don't want everybody to know how stupidly absent minded I am that I would put my phone down in my house and then desperately start looking for it. Cone of silence. 😊

**Chad:** No, that's what I wanted to tell you! You left it at the church. Kathleen found it and then met me at the restaurant at the Corners and then I got it and then put it inside your house. I put it on the sofa arm, so I would know you would find it. I meant to message you because I was sure you would have been very confused about how it got there. LOL

**Me:** OMG! I am so relieved to hear that. I really thought I was losing it.

**Chad:** I'm so sorry. I got home and had to scramble around to get on a zoom call. You're not losing it.

**Me:** Are you sure?

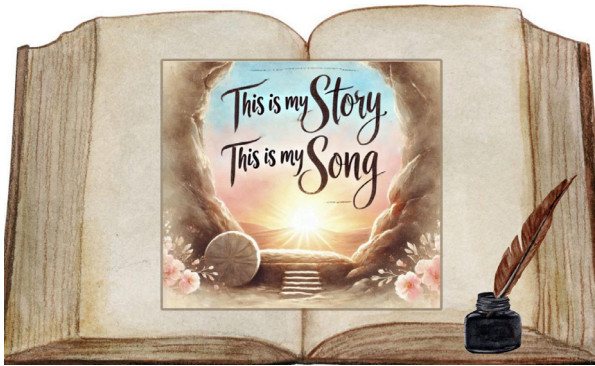
**Chad:** Positive! 😊

To say I was shaken is to put it lightly. But then I began thinking that the common denominator in all this was my fear that I'm getting forgetful. And then I began to look at this story in a different way. I saw that I am surrounded by angels: Ron, Nora, Kathleen, Chad. I am so fortunate to be able to know that, no matter what happens, there are people who have my back.

My conclusion? Even though I have managed to go from young and foolish to ancient and absent minded without passing through old and wise, I am blessed by the presence of kind people.

**Dear God, remind me daily that I am a creature of your creation, and therefore worthy. And I thank you for the angels all around. Amen.**

– Katie Baird



## DAY 31

### In God's Hands

*Psalm 56:3-4*

*"When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?"*

Two is better than one, right?

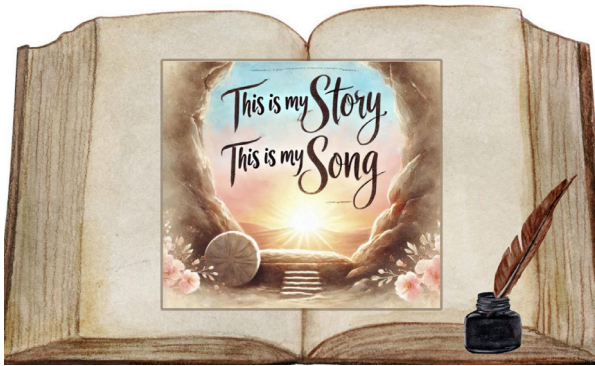
Of course it is when you are talking about a piece of pie or ice cream treats. But what about 2 babies at the same time? Brandon and I were speechless on a very blizzard-like day in January of 2008. We knew we were expecting a second child, but we didn't know that God was also giving us a 3rd. We make plans and God laughs.

Immediately we (or maybe just me) began to get nervous about all the "what if's", what if I go on bed rest, what if they have to stay in the hospital, what if this, and what if that. I was so afraid of becoming a Mom of 3 that I had a hard time seeing the blessing. I was truly worrying about things out of our control. It was around Easter when I was reading about Jesus feeding the 5000. "Fishes and Loaves". God would not have given me two blessings at once if he wasn't going to help see me through. My faith grew a lot that day and from that day forward. The blessing became easier to see once I knew God had me, as he always does. It is now 16 years later and while 3 children was never part of our plan I can't imagine our family any other way.

**Dear Heavenly Father, May we never forget that you are beside us at all times. May we remember that we are afraid you have us in your hands and in your heart. May our fears always be calmed when we welcome you into our hearts and our lives. May we never be too afraid to see all the blessings you provide us throughout a lifetime. Amen.**

– Pam Baynes





## DAY 32

### Kindness

*Zephaniah 3:17 For the LORD your God is living among you. He is a mighty savior. He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.*

During my early years at Kent State, I made a mistake that I often reflect on with a mix of embarrassment and gratitude. It was the day of my final exam for a class I had worked diligently in all semester. I had always taken my studies seriously and was usually the first one to arrive for class, sitting right at the front. But on this day, I somehow forgot the change in schedule.

Normally, our class met later in the afternoon, but the exam was scheduled two hours earlier. As I sat at my job in the Kent State Library, I came to the realization of my horrible mistake. Panic set in as I realized I was late — very late. I raced across campus and finally reached the disturbingly sparsely filled classroom.

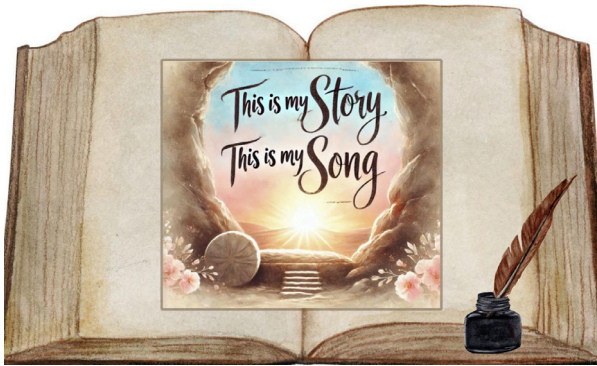
The instructor of the class, a graduate assistant, saw my distress and offered me a profound act of grace. She, with a kindness that felt divinely inspired, allowed me to take the exam in her office after the session had ended. I felt a sense of relief wash over me; her mercy gave me the opportunity to maintain my strong grade in the class rather than being dragged down by an automatic “F” on the final exam.

That moment became a reminder to me of God’s grace, not just in grand gestures, but in the little moments where we are offered second chances. It taught me that even in our mistakes, there is a chance for redemption, and we can find compassion when we need it most.

### Loving God,

**In this season of reflection, we give thanks for Your boundless grace. You offer us second chances when we falter, extending mercy even in our mistakes. May we be mindful of the opportunities to grow, learn, and show compassion to others. Help us to remember that Your love always brings us back, no matter where we’ve been. Guide our hearts to live with humility, kindness, and forgiveness, that we may reflect Your grace in all we do. Amen.**

– Sally Hoffman



## DAY 33

### Ode to Purple

*That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe you that you have sent me. John 17:21*

When I think of Lent, I think purple.

Crocuses, morning light, the shadow of a deer disappearing into the brush.

Passion plus wisdom. The color of kings, sacred divinity, wealth and wine and holy sacrifice.

Mockingly draped over Jesus by the Romans during his crucifixion, purple is paradoxical, representing Christ's suffering and ultimately, His glory.

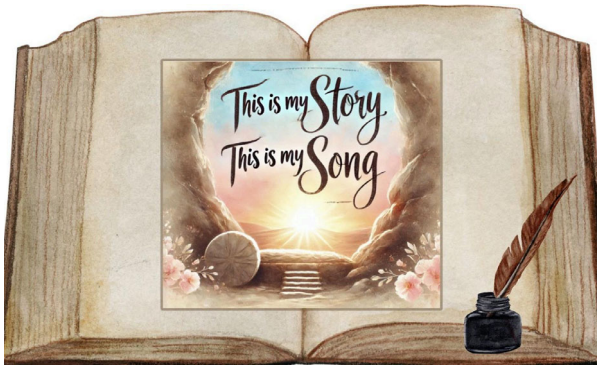
Purple is the color of transformation and repentance, newness and deep contemplation. It's a symbol of the unknown while being a reminder that God is always with us because he is in us.

It is what's contained in the darkness of the sealed tomb before Jesus' body was ever laid there.

Lent is a time for grappling with the mystery of the intersection of flesh and spirit.

Holy Father, let us wander with open hearts through this season, gathering nearer to each other and ourselves in faith and love. Amen.

— Karly Lind



## DAY 34

### Living Our Story

*Matthew 13:34-35 MSG: "All Jesus did that day was tell stories—a long storytelling afternoon. His storytelling fulfilled the prophecy: I will open my mouth and tell stories; I will bring out into the open things hidden since the world's first day."*

According to good journalism - or your high school literature teacher - every story has a beginning, middle and end. So, applying that to our Lenten theme – ‘This is Our Story’, We can safely say we all have a beginning, a middle, and - some day - an end to our story. BUT, and this is Ann important BUT . . . stories often have a prologue. I equate that with the preparations for the arrival of a child. We gather up everything we think we’ll need and get the nursery ready for that bundle of joy.

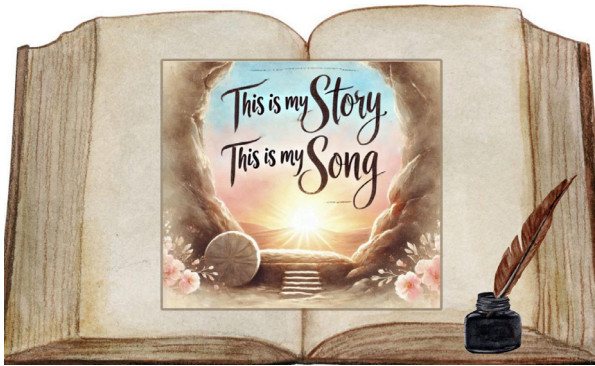
Then there is the beginning – that’s your birthday – the anticipated event. Then comes all of those life events — the first smile, the first coo, the first steps, first day of school, first day of college, first day at the new job — you know — all those firsts — that’s the middle – your life. And yes, there will be an end someday.

But that is not all there is! There’s an epilogue — the after death. For some, it’s that heavenly reward. For others it’s the “what will I be remembered for”. And for most — it’s both. Jesus is remembered for more than just a heavenly reward – although that is important. He is remembered most for what he taught us about living – how to live, how to treat others, how to be in a relationship with each other and most of all – how to be in a relationship with God and all of God’s creation.

So whether you are expecting, you’ve been born, you’ve managed a lot of those life’s “firsts” or you are reaching “the end” — it’s really not the end. There is an epilogue! It’s your whole life — it’s your prologue, beginning, middle, end and epilogue. You and God decide.

**Most gracious and loving Creator, we thank you for our lives and life stories, our ability to tell them. For as we tell them, may our relationship with You and others be revealed. May the telling bless you, bless others and bless ourselves. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

– Nancy Humes



## DAY 35

### The Bending Tree

*Isaiah 41:10 – "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."*

As I walked along the trail of Babb's Run Park, I went down, down, down the ravines and found my way to the mighty Cuyahoga River. Today the river had a strong current due to the melting snow and overflowing streams. At one spot on the trail, I found this tree - a 35 foot bending tree - that was anchored to the riverbed, but stretched way out over the roaring river.

How odd, I thought. At one point early in this tree's life, it started bending to the river when all the other trees sought to grow upward to the sky. What happened in this tree's life cycle that turned it toward the raging waters and away from the safety and comfort of the stable earth? What was holding it up (for years!) that allowed it to bend and not break? I saw there was movement in the tree. The wind would gently lift it up as the river flowed by. The air coming off of the current was a natural, built-in support system for the wayward and headstrong tree.

I felt a kinship to this living being, and smiled. Even when I grow in a direction that is completely different than what is expected of me, God is there. God's wind acts like arms to embrace me so that I may not fall, and other people (like other animals on this tree) can experience the life-giving value of water (God's living water) through me.

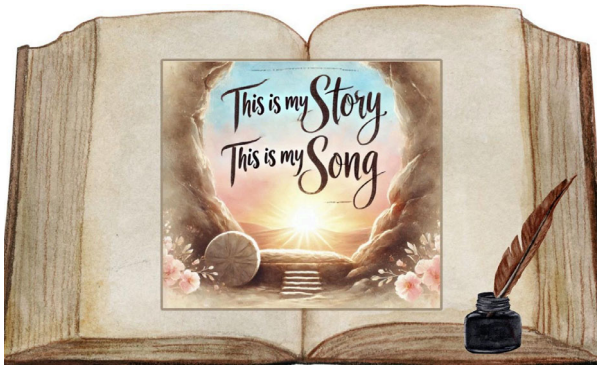
#### The Bending Tree.

I did not ask to be this way I only stretched my weight  
One foot upon the rocky shore The other tempting fate  
Or rather reaching out for God And finding in my search  
God held me up, and molded me A bended tree of birch  
The other trees may laugh at me And say, "You foolish tree  
You're likely to fall sooner than The straightened ones, like we"  
I'll smile then and tell them that "I'll have a lighter fall,  
and God's water then will carry me to Heaven's port of call."

**God help me to be strong like a bended tree and rely on your support. Amen.**

– Kathleen Leigh Lewarchick





## DAY 36

### Anticipating Joy

*Scripture: John 9:3 – "Neither this man nor his parents sinned...but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."*

When I saw the name pop up on my phone, I braced myself. The person calling was someone I had pastored for years and they always seemed to be in some kind of crisis. Every conversation carried the weight of deep struggles, and I had grown accustomed to expecting bad news. I took a breath. A pause to strengthen myself, brace myself, and get ready to listen deeply. But this time, the voice on the other end was different. Lighter. Hopeful.

"Pastor, I just had to call and tell you some good news..."

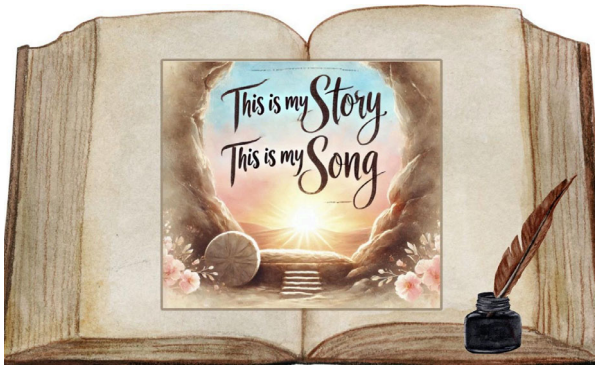
I listened as they shared about a shift in their life. A long season of darkness had begun to lift. They weren't sure what exactly happened, but their relationships, prayer life, even just waking up in the morning felt different. They told me, "It's not just that I *know* God is there, I can *feel* him there for the first time."

It was a powerful conversation. I am ashamed to say that at first, I was a little skeptical. Were they really happy? Really changed? But I'm so grateful that something quickly pushed away those thoughts (the Holy Spirit?) and I joined them in their joy and excitement. I think we both knew this wouldn't be the end of the struggles in their life, but it felt good to share a ray of light in that moment and to soak it in.

In John 9, the man born blind surely must have felt the weight of being defined by struggle. People questioned his worth, his past, his suffering. But when Jesus saw him, he saw more than his pain. Jesus saw the possibility of transformation. Jesus always operates from the perspective of hope, not fear. What was sad though is that when healing came, not everyone was ready to see it. The Pharisees couldn't see it. Even the man's own parents hesitated. They paused—but not to celebrate. They doubted, resisted, and questioned. They anticipated the struggle. Jesus anticipated the joy and transformation.

Sometimes, we grow so used to expecting struggle that we forget to make space for transformation and to be surprised by joy. To really let ourselves *feel* it! For God is always working, even in lives where change seems impossible. And when joy arrives—when healing breaks through—we are invited to embrace it, to believe in the miracle unfolding before us.

– Pastor Chad



## DAY 37

### A Chance to Help

*Joshua 1-9: Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; Do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.*

It was 2:00 AM. I was driving alone on a thirty mile stretch where the road is six feet above the sea,

resting on a manmade elevated plateau. I was passing an area of mangrove swamps that lay in complete seclusion and silence. I approached a long right hand curve suspended above the deepest section of the mangroves.

I saw the taillights of a car about a quarter mile ahead, approaching the curve. Suddenly, the car increased in speed. Its taillights quickly disappeared into the blackness. A sudden burst of speed! Did something frighten the driver?

Another car's headlights was coming toward me now. When it reached the curve it also increased its speed and roared past me. What was going on?

I entered this curve, looking carefully at the side of the road. There! There it is! Oh my God, a bloody human hand was reaching out of the swamp slowly waving back and forth. I quickly stopped my car, grabbed a flashlight, and ran toward the bloody hand. I found a woman desperately clinging to the mangrove roots below the roadway. She was half submerged in the water.

The road was above her. She was trying to get help by waving her hand above the road surface. She had lost control of her car on the curve and drove off the road into the swamp. She had managed to get out of her car and crawl to the base of the road.

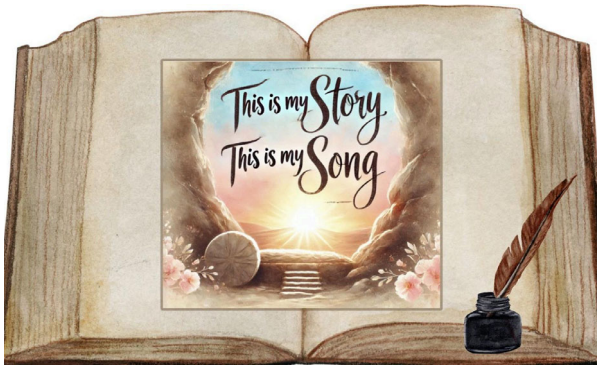
This was a special occasion. God had given me a chance to help someone in dire need. He trusted and selected me to rescue this woman – what an honor! He gave the same opportunity to the two other drivers – they declined. We will always have free choice.

I bandaged her wounds, called the Florida State Highway Patrol, and waited for their arrival. Her injuries were not serious. She was going to be fine.

Serving and loving God's people is not always easy. Helping others frequently involves personal risk, some danger, uncomfortable decisions, and often fear. Do you want to be a little courageous? Then you must first be a little afraid.

**Dear Lord, You have placed us on this earth to continue your work by loving our fellow man. As we represent your goodness to others, we thank you for so many opportunities to show them your love and continue your work. Please keep us safe and alert as we venture into the unknown, ready to serve mankind in your name. Amen.**

– Roger Cram



## DAY 38

**From Steve Stork**

*Proverbs 3:13 - Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding,*

On my way to lunch along the fifth-grade hallway I heard a chirpy “Excuuuse ME!” A gaggle of girls giggled guardedly, averting their

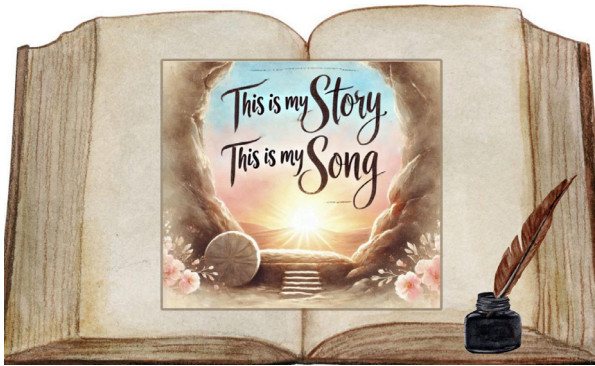
eyes but delighting in the dig at me. “Excuse me” was my wildly overused teacherly admonition to settle down and pay attention. Returning to teaching after nearly a decade in the YMCA, I was under the misapprehension that ‘discipline’ was a key element in public school physical education. But it was evident that attempts to impose my will was making gym class a drudge for both students and myself.

The formal definition of physical education is “Guiding children toward becoming physically active for a lifetime.” My interpretation...children need experiences that make them feel competent; since they will eventually need to make reasoned choices contributing to their own health and well-being. That hallway jibe caused me to turn my teaching upside-down.

Rather than standing across from a partner on the volleyball court lines, throwing back and forth on command; my new instructions were “Get a ball and a partner. Find a place and distance that is comfortable for you to throw back and forth without losing control of the ball.” I presented challenges that could be adapted to individual abilities rather than directives with a single ‘correct’ outcome. As I gave more control to students, I became the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage. I no longer needed to excuse myself; students quieted themselves quickly in anticipation of each new challenge they knew would prove their abilities better than they thought possible.

**Dear God, You created a world of possibilities, populated by people of varying interests and abilities. Your kingdom is open to all who believe; even those who believe in their own unique ways. Therefore, help us look past barriers toward new opportunities. And allow us to accept a constant state of ‘becoming’. We may never achieve perfection, but we can do better day by day. Amen**

– Steve Stork



## DAY 39

### Walking by Faith

*2 Corinthians 5:7 We walk by faith, not by sight.*

More than twenty years ago, I was on top of my career as department chair at a prominent university in Texas. It took me years of hard work and challenges to get there. After a semester of work in a new environment, I realized I had climbed the wrong mountain. I loved teaching and conducting research. As Department Chair, I spent most

of my time in meetings and doing work that did not feed my soul.

One day, while observing from my tenth-floor window and then looking at a set of paintings on the wall, I noticed the nine water-colored women appear to separate from their hangings. I looked again, no, they were still there. Nothing had moved, and yet everything changed in me. I felt a clarity and peace I had never experienced. I got a message. "Leave this place now."

It made no sense at all! Yet it made perfect sense. I went to my computer, typed a letter of resignation, and went to see the Dean. I informed the Dean of my decision to leave. She said, "Oh, it's only 2 pm; but you are chair and you don't need my permission to go home early!" I told her I was resigning my position as chair. She sat me down to talk and, assuming it was about money, started to negotiate. I said, "No, Ma'am (it's Texas), I did not get another offer and, No, money has nothing to do with it." I handed her my letter of resignation and went home to tell Steve.

Steve said, "I am sure you will come up with something! You always have better ideas!" I felt that I should be scared, but I wasn't. In a short time, we will be down to one income instead of two! What was I thinking?! All my colleagues and friends thought I had gone mad, No one gives up such a position with no plan!

Strangely, I felt no fear. Instead, I never felt more peaceful. I felt that God would show me the way. I just had to stop what I was doing so I could make room for God's plan.

A month later, as I was paying the mortgage, I said to God, "God, please tell me I have done the right thing. It would be nice if we did not have a mortgage since we will be down to one income soon and I have no idea what I am going to do."

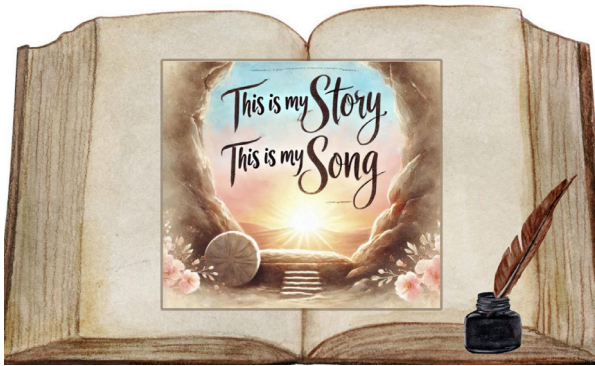
God must have heard. A week later, the stock market rallied out of the blue. I watched the financial news as my investment values went up. Hmmm, if it keeps going up I can sell my shares and pay off our mortgage. Steve suggested waiting a few more days. We waited. On Friday the market turned, but now we had to wait until Monday. I said to God, "Ok, I get it. I will not be greedy!" First thing Monday morning, I called my mutual fund company and issued a sell order on every share I owned. The Vanguard lady asked, "Ma'am, why do you want to sell? The market is doing great." I told her, "I am investing in me!" So, I sold and then waited till the closing bell on Wall Street. The market peaked that day. The next day it went backwards! I closed with just enough funds to pay off our mortgage! Thank you God!

Thus began my active journey in faith. I changed career (many stories of faith to tell) and spent the next two decades helping clients return to God and live amazing lives in Faith and Trust.

**Dear God, who dwells in all of us, help us understand what faith is and open our hearts to trusting that you are waiting for us to accept your Love. Help us to live by Faith and accept that Faith is not knowing what the future holds but knowing that You hold our future. We appreciate your patience and your abundant Love. Amen**

— Kweethai Neill, PhD





## DAY 40

### Live Fully and Love Wastefully

*Isaiah 43:2: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you".*

Years ago, not long after moving into our current home, I was cleaning up the yard. There were some stumps in the front yard that I wanted to remove. They were too big to chop out by hand and I was too cheap to hire someone. As I gathered more and more sticks from around my yard, I had a “brilliant” thought: I’ll pile all these sticks on top of the stumps and burn them. I’ll get rid of the sticks and remove the stumps at the same time. Well, I did get rid of the sticks, but, as for the stumps, I was only successful at charring their outside.

Most of the stumps in my yard have been thoroughly penetrated by insects. In turn the opossums and woodpeckers tear apart the stumps in search of the insects. All this helps the stumps decay much more quickly. However, the stumps I tried to burn are as strong as ever; maybe even stronger. By burning the stumps I burned away the cellulose, the soft layer of the wood insects like to munch on. Left in its place is the charred, carbon-rich lignin which the insects will avoid. This hardened and much less nutritious lignin protects the wood.

I was reminded of my pyro-error after listening to Kathleen Lewarchik’s inspiring sermon. The trials and tribulations I have experienced in my life are like the charring of the wood. As I walk through life’s flames, and experience the love and compassion of the people around me, I come out a little more resilient on the other side. There’s an old saying that God only gives you what you can handle. I don’t believe that. I do believe that God is love and love is the most powerful and resilient force gifted to us.

**God of wonder, I am grateful for the difficult times in my life. It is then that I experience the love of my friends and family given wastefully. Amen.**

– Rick Painley