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2011 Lent Devotionals

Oklahoma City First Church of the Nazarene

The Lenten Season at OKC First Church

Wednesday, March 9

Ash Wednesday services, Noon and 6:30 pm

Sermon: "So Great is His Steadfast Love"

Scripture: Psalm 103

Sunday, March 13

DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME BEGINS

Sermon: "Cleanse Me From My Sins"

Scripture: Psalm 51:1-13

Sunday, March 20

Sermon: "Our Soul Waits for the Lord"

Scripture: Psalm 33:12-22

Sunday, March 27

Sermon: "We are the People of His Pasture"

Scripture: Psalm 95

Sunday, April 3

Sermon: "My Cup Overflows"

Scripture: Psalm 23

Sunday, April 10

Sermon: "But There Is Forgiveness With You"

Scripture: Psalm 130

Palm Sunday (Liturgy of the Word), April 17

Sermon: "Jesus Sings From the Cross"

Scripture: Psalm 22

Cover art "Forgiven" is an original painting by Kelly Yates. The original artwork is acrylic on wood.

For the first time in my life I had been afraid for my life simply because I was a follower of Christ. Suddenly I prayed much more fervently for the persecuted church. What must it be like to live under constant knowledge of imminent physical danger? How real and deep was my own faith? I kept telling myself I was only afraid for my children's sake, but that was not true. I truly had to come to grips with a fear of persecution and death. On the other side of it, I can say my faith was greatly increased, but I carried the pain of the situation for many, many years.

My biggest pain was that it *seemed* that no one but one family had seemed to care about my safety. My church people had said, "I will pray for you," but only the one family had called to check on me, and no one offered to let me stay at their house while my husband was out of town. Yes, God had brought me through it, but where were his people? Where were the angels He promised?

That was eight years ago. Recently, "Larry" and his wife and children, moved to a town nearby. In the past eight years we had sent Christmas cards and a few emails, but I had not seen them. When I came to their home, Larry's wife, "Jill," and I sat talking about what we had been through together. When I brought up the threat, she remembered and we both started crying. My sobbing only increased when she said, "Larry and I were so worried about you. That entire week, he set his alarm for 2:00 a.m., drove to the church parking lot and watched your house until daylight."

God *had* sent his angel. In my great rejoicing I felt Jesus gently chide me, "Where was your faith? I was there all the time."

-Kelly Yates

my faith was all that was keeping me sane. Psalm 23:4 says, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." I was walking through the valley of the shadow of death but I did not feel any comfort. I trusted God was there even though I could not feel it because all I felt was fear and a sense of being completely alone.

We had evening services, and once again Larry watched the parking lot. I went home, alone, to a dark house without even a pet to keep me company. My husband was still out of town and my kids were still with my parents. I cowered under the covers and begged God to send some angels to protect and comfort me. I had nothing else. I did not sleep a wink, but never had I prayed so fervently. I knew I was being persecuted for no other reason than being a pastor. The man did not even know me. I repeated Psalm 23 and 91 over and over again. Then I remembered Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." I did NOT feel blessed and I wondered why I must endure such persecution. It was America. That was NOT supposed to happen here. It was before the 9/11/01 attack. If it had been after that date, I'm sure the police would have taken a terroristic threat more seriously.

The phone rang the next morning and I answered it, shaking. I did not have caller ID. The Presbyterian pastor informed me the man had been arrested by the sheriff the day before. I got a little angry at him saying, "Why didn't you tell me yesterday? I might have been able to sleep!" The man was jailed and put under the care of a psychiatrist who regulated his medication once again. He never bothered me again, and as far as I know did not harass the other pastors.

Inhale During Lent

(Huffing and puffing and pulling up a chair in front of the computer...)

I just finished my morning run, so I'm short of breath and more than a bit sweaty. Too much information?

I've not been a runner for very long; in fact it's only been a couple of years since I started to take my own health seriously enough to move around and do something about it! I knew I had to do something when a card game left me a little short of breath! (Kidding, mostly....)

I'll tell you this- I'm grateful for all the runners around me who've helped me to avoid unnecessary strains and costly injuries. I didn't know that the right shoes and socks would make such a huge difference; I have now discovered the joy of running with music (and the proper headphones); and the biggest help- I now know how to breathe!

I thought I knew how to breathe! But a couple of folks have helped me to know the power of proper breathing- the mechanics of the INHALE and the EXHALE.

After the run, after setting aside some time to cool down, I take a deep, deep breath.

It's to the point now that I look forward to that deep breath. It's more than just the "end of my exercise"- it's the epitome of a deep, cleansing breath that seems to clear the way for whatever's next. That may not make sense to some of you, but others of you know exactly what I mean.

And even if you're not a runner, even if you're not active, I hope you can appreciate the blessing and power of a deep breath. Take just a couple of seconds for a deep breath right now. Sit back and draw in a breath so big that you feel it in your head, your shoulders, your knees, your toes.

There's something about a deep breath. It centers; it makes ready; it relaxes.

I hope this Lenten season will be a deep, cleansing breath for you.

Maybe that last sentence surprises you a bit. Perhaps you've gotten used to the Lenten season being a dark, reflective, confessional time- a time for sober assessment, a time to acknowledge sin and brokenness, a time to do that painful "look at Jesus- look at yourself and confess the difference" thing. Some people do well to survive Lent, much less enjoy it!

You're not wrong to think or feel those things. Typically during Lent, we wrestle with difficult passages of Scripture written to challenge us to own our sins, our failures and broken places. To be sure, the Lenten season is a time of brutal honesty, and yes in the process of doing that difficult self-reflection, we'll find ourselves in desperate need of Mercy, Grace, Hope, Forgiveness.

This year, the challenge and message remains- stare deeply into the mirror and acknowledge your humanity and need for God's help. But unlike past years, these Lenten Scriptures are a bit different- these Psalms, while acknowledging our fragile, sinful nature, move immediately to the heartbeat of God who isn't willing to wait until Easter to offer Himself to us. Mercy, Grace, Hope,

I was driving my two preschool-aged daughters to daycare the next morning and saw the man in the car behind me, following. Shaking, I made several turns until he stopped following me. It was Friday and my husband left town on business. The Presbyterian pastor and I called the County Sheriff. He immediately dispatched a deputy. The deputy met us in my office and I played the recorded message. The deputy took down our reports and said he would do whatever he could. That was Friday. I took my kids to my parents' house three hours away and stayed over Saturday, hearing nothing from the pastors or the deputy.

Saturday morning I called several friends and asked them to pray. I also called an older pastor friend, wanting support and advice. He told me to pray, yes, but he said I would be better off if I would get a handgun and keep it with me. I had never used a gun and thought I'd be more dangerous with it than the criminal! After the phone call I was even more discouraged. I would have to rely on prayer, law enforcement, brains, and the support of other people.

Some people in my congregation had heard about the situation, but no one had offered to help me. No one called me over the weekend. I felt utterly and completely alone. Finally I reached out to one family who had been the victims of two horrendous crimes. They understood. "Larry" offered to watch the parking lot during the church services. They started calling regularly to check on me. Sunday morning I rose early and called my District Superintendent. He prayed with me, and said that he would continue to check on me.

The lectionary passage for that week was Psalm 23. Never had I needed to hear that Psalm more. I had prepared a message about the protection of the Good Shepherd, and

God Sent An Angel

It was May of 2001 and I was a twenty-something-year-old pastor of a small rural church in a southern state. One day, while in a ministerial alliance meeting, the other pastors asked if I had received any death threats. Five pastors had received multiple voicemails from a certain disturbed Vietnam veteran in town who had threatened to kill them and their families. One pastor said the man confronted him in his church parking lot, right in front of his small children. He had pulled a knife on the pastor and threatened to cut off his fingers.

As a young pastor in her second year of ministry, I was scared and trembling. I went home and checked my voicemail. Nothing. Trying to compose myself, I walked over to the church. I pushed a button and the first voice message said, "This is _____. I'm thinking about killing somebody so why don't you give me a call back?" He even left his number. I did not call him. I called the police.

The police officer laughed at me. "He's harmless," they said. "He's just a Vietnam veteran off his medication. He wouldn't hurt a fly." I called the other pastors and asked them what they had done. The same. The police refused to listen to us. We all met at a church and asked the chief of police to come and listen to us. He came in, refused to sit, and said he did not take the threats seriously. He said the man only wanted attention. He walked out, walked over to the man's house and told him to leave us alone. But the next day the Presbyterian pastor received another phone call. This pastor was seriously concerned because he had spent time as a counselor in a psychiatric ward with people who had committed terroristic acts.

Forgiveness- all are available to those who recognize their need and are willing to be open and vulnerable to the One who understands us best.

Yes, we are broken, but just as certainly, He is aware of our need and ready to step in.

Take a deep breath. INHALE. If you've sensed a lack of wind or breath where your life is concerned, if you know what it means to be deflated, if you can empathize with that old, flat basketball in the corner of the garage, INHALE. God is eager to bring Life back to your Life.

We will together, during the Lenten season in a sermon series entitled INHALE, explore our own sinful nature, but at the very same time, we will listen to the testimony of Scripture as God moves into our stories granting forgiveness and Breath.

You don't have to wait for Easter for the Good News. There's Good News to be had now, during Lent. God knows, God understands, God forgives. Now. Breathe.

Then what will we do with the Easter season? What's left to do? PLENTY! Our Easter season series entitled (you guessed it) EXHALE will demonstrate all that God has in store for us after the hard work of confession and forgiveness is completed. What's left after forgiveness? LIFE- Resurrection Life, bigger and better than we could ask or imagine, because of His power at work in us, unleashed through our companionship with Him.

But first, we INHALE.

This Lenten season- I hope you'll participate with us in every way possible. I hope you'll sense the depth of your

sinfulness as you look into that mirror that we'll hold up in front of you. But at the same time, I hope you'll recognize the other figure standing at your side. He is there to help us, you and me and all of us together, to breathe.

Enjoy Lent. Really.

-Pastor Jon Middendorf

Forgiveness with Him

Psalm 130:3-4

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered.

It was one of those hectic days when everything had to work together perfectly in order to fit the schedule. Being a list-maker and organizer by nature, I knew this day would go well because, after all, I had everything planned out. On this particular Tuesday a series of study groups, appointments and a lunch date went off without a hitch...check. As I drove home I figured I had about two hours before I needed to be back at church for my spiritual direction class. Thinking "I'll stop, get a pedicure and relax a little," I walked into a nail shop close to my house. As I watched the nail tech approach me, warning bells went off: "Wait, I've had her before, I think, and she was too fast and really rough." However, another voice in my brain said, "Well, it WILL be fast, and you NEED fast today." In two minutes I was in the chair and the tech began the pedicure.

Meditation on Psalm 33

Happy is the congregation whose Shepherd is Jesus, the people whom He has chosen to be His Body at 4400 NW Expressway! His image looks down on us from the stained glass window; His Spirit pours God's love into our hearts, and makes us able to live out that love.

He leads us in God's way, not of asserting our power willfully, but of giving up power—
not of selfishly using our status or influence,
but of emptying ourselves
to take a lower place at the end of the parade.

Our Shepherd watches over us, and carries us.
We, His sheep, find all our hope, spiritual and physical, in His unfailing love!

By Your intervening grace, Lord, we have been brought from the inward-turning power of sin and self to share new life with You.

By Your grace we will share in Your bodily resurrection!
In this in-between, already/not yet time we wait for you, Lord Jesus—we wait on You.

With the vision You have given us for the Cole Community Center, for Outposts, for every ministry initiative, we are freshly aware of how much we need You! We rejoice in You, Lord, for we know and rely on Your life-giving love.

Keep pouring Your love on and through us, Lord Jesus, as we lean on You.

-Judy Cox

Wound

“But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace
was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.”
Isaiah 53:5

In dusky silence like a thread wound
Around the finger to remind, “Listen:”
One hears the wind’s clear, ancient sound
Echo, “He is not here; he is risen.”

He has forgiven through the scarring wound.
In humility I approach, alone;
With open hands and broken heart attuned.
Raise an anthem, tree! Cry out, stone!

No eye has seen, no ear has ever heard
This canvas of blinding colors, a coda of praise.
Be like a child heeding the call of a bird
In a dance of abandon and fathomless, fearless grace.

Forgive. Love. By this will all men know.
Receive and tell all nations—rise and go.

-Karla Winslow

I escaped behind the pages of a magazine, and although I still heard that faint warning bell, I tried to ignore it. Suddenly I was aware of a searing pain in my foot and I threw aside the magazine in time to see a stream of blood; the tech was saying, “I’m sorry, you are bleeding.” She stopped the blood flow but I was frightened, thinking about infections and remembering the news media’s horror stories about what could happen in nail shops. The tech worked quickly. However, I was no longer able to relax since the pain was fairly severe by that time. I finally asked her to please just finish up and I would go.

As I waited to leave she approached me and said, “Not 35 dollars today, just 25.” I nodded, still thinking about how much my foot was hurting. The longer I sat there, the angrier I felt. I came to her for a service, she hurt me, and she wanted to CHARGE me? I didn’t think so! As I prepared to leave I debated on how to handle it and finally decided to talk quietly to the manager, telling him I didn’t believe I should have to pay anything. He agreed and I drove home. Thankfully it was one of our “spring” days this winter and I could put on flip-flops, since it was impossible to wear a shoe on that foot.

During the week that followed I talked to at least eight people about the incident, usually asking them, “Do you think I did the right thing, not paying her?” and without exception the answer was something along the lines of “Well, sure!” I tried to console myself with that because it seemed right...and maybe it was technically right...after all, there IS a scripture about an abundance of counselors bringing wisdom, and also after all, I was trying to learn to be more assertive and less of a doormat, etc., etc., etc. By Friday morning I was in misery. Not physical misery, although I could still feel the pain of the cut, but emotional

and spiritual misery. I couldn't even explain why I felt so horrible; I just knew that I did.

It was no accident that my usual Tuesday appointment with my spiritual director fell on Friday that week. As she is so skilled at doing, she listened carefully to the ways I had seen God during the week, the things at which I needed to look more closely, the ways my heart was being touched. Finally I blurted out the pedicure story. She listened and smiled. This is what she said: "If Jesus gave you a parable about this, what would it be?" I told her she really caught me off guard and I would have to think and pray about it.

Leaving her to meet a friend for lunch, I struggled to be "present" for the friend while this question repeated itself in my mind. By the time I reached my car I knew what I had to do.

I drove to the bank, got the \$25 and drove back to the nail shop, having no idea how I would be received or what I would say, just that it was right. When I walked in, the nail tech came quickly to the door. There was a bit of a language barrier so I wasn't sure she would understand me, but I held out my hand with the cash and said, "I am so sorry about what happened earlier in the week. I know you didn't mean to cut my foot. Here is the money for your services; please take it."

What followed was one of the most precious moments I have ever experienced. Tears began streaming down her face. I began to weep as well. She said, "No, no, save for next time. Next time, we treat better." I grabbed her in a bear hug and we stood there for a long moment, while the astonished patrons stared at us. I told her, "No, no, next time I treat better." It was a beautiful time for both of us

What Makes My Heart Sing

"What makes your heart sing?" This question was posed at a webinar recently and it keeps me thinking. I love its implications, not only for work, but for my personal life as well.

Of course, my heart sings when my grandkids run up to me, hug me hard and say they love me. I love it when my adult kids want to spend time with me and simply talk. Sharing my heart with close friends always make me feel blessed. Knowing that my husband and I can still laugh and hug each other hard after a long day makes me feel special. My heart sings at these times and others at well.

But even on those days when I don't feel so loving or loved, my heart is learning to sing a different song. The rhythm or melody may differ from those lighter, blessed moments, but the song is still there. I may sing that song closeted for awhile, but I now possess that song.

I think I may have figured out that what makes my heart sing the most is when I'm reminded that God loves me just the way I am. That truly amazes me every day.

The chorus is old, but these words make my heart sing:

*I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me!
I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves even me!*

My heart sings because I know I've been forgiven and that God loves me unconditionally.

-Paula Meder

I began to assume that this was just the way things worked, that there was a public proclamation that apparently made some eternal difference, but that everyone harbored their own secret prejudices and sin. This assumption affected my understanding of my relationship with God, that the sanctification preached from the pulpit was simply unworkable in the real world, which led me to basically abandon any attempt to become sanctified after several years of the cycle of seeking, claiming, and failure.

But then I started to hear a different story... One in which the saints of the church struggled, sometimes deeply, with the same issues, but in a more open and honest way. Stories of struggles with chemical addictions, prejudice, and many other painful issues. Yet, clinging tenaciously to the hope that God's grace somehow had it all covered and taken care of... These stories gave me hope that living with the sort of disconnect between what my faith professed and what real life was like was not the only way to live, that perhaps seeking was better than arriving at my faith destination, that perfection had something to do with who I was trying to look like (Jesus) rather than a faith state I had to somehow attain.

It's in this context that this Psalm has meant so much to me. I think we need to learn to pray it honestly. The season of Lent is structured so that we may take a break from some things in order to focus on other more important ones. I hope this year that praying this Psalm will shine a light on areas of my life in which I fall short of the image of Christ, and that by the grace of God I can experience his mercy so that I may have a clean heart, and a new and right spirit placed within me.

-Chris Yates

as the walls between us simply crumbled and the peace I had sought all week flooded over me.

The parable? Not, as a witty friend said, "How about 'turn the other foot'?" I'm not even sure I received a clear parable. What I do know I received was a demonstration of God's amazing grace and extravagant forgiveness given by a beautiful woman who didn't have to respond as sweetly to me as she did, a woman who worked tirelessly all day bent over a bowl of water serving women who were stressed and in a hurry and wanted things to be perfect for them...and perfect for their schedules.

I realize some of you who know me are now thinking, "Look at all she might write about, and she is choosing to write about a pedicure gone wrong??" Oh, it was so much more than that.

Definition of the problem at its roots: Once again, my need to control or manipulate situations, time schedules, places, things, people – fill in the blanks. My sin. My iniquity. As we say in the spiritual direction program, these are "our hidden disordered tendencies" – those dark places underneath the surface of the iceberg, those things that in our blindness we might never see. That day, I had a tight schedule. Her error caused me pain and turned my day completely around, thwarting me from accomplishing my carefully planned agenda. Try as I might to suppress that need for control, it rears its ugly head time and time again.

Only God's grace can deliver me from this tendency. But there is truly forgiveness with Him, so that He may be revered. I am leaning hard on Him to help me see the ugliness of my sin, my need to repent of it every time I do see it, and the wisdom to learn what Jesus taught us about the saving power of love.

-Cheryl Hall

What I Know For Sure

What do you know for sure? I know for sure that I'll never know which direction is North... that a piece of cake can heal me ...that I laugh the hardest with my parents and siblings...that my husband Patrick and brother Ryan are the best company during an Oklahoma snowstorm... that babies are born with a song in their heart.

The question "What do you know for sure?" is one of my favorite questions as it gets to the heart of things. It's also the favorite of Oprah Winfrey. (At this point, my husband has rolled his eyes, as maybe you have, but stay with me for a moment.) At the end of each "O" magazine, she answers this question herself, writing from the heart about what she knows for sure. I usually read the magazine backward, starting with this column. When you ask this question, its answer is truth. And don't we all want to know the truth?

You can learn a lot about people when you ask what they know for sure. It's the question I ask when a friend is hurting and lost in their emotions and thoughts. Even the simplest truth can help ground a person. When I'm feeling confused and overwhelmed myself, I'll ask others for their truth to see if it's worth holding onto as well.

I've often wished I could ask Jesus what he knows for sure. And then I realize he spent his 33 years on earth telling us and is still sharing his answer with me through his Word. I can also hear his answer in sermons, movies, music, books, the news, a conversation with a friend. And it grounds me.

Hearing a Different Story

**"For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me."**

I think our tradition has a poor track record of being honest with the concept of sin in the life of the believer. In the interest of preserving the sanctity of the concept of sanctification and Christian perfection, we've done some theological gymnastics in order to allow for failings, shortcomings, and mistakes, without calling them sin - so that we can proudly proclaim receipt of a second blessing, all the while harboring prejudices, thoughts, and actions that are clearly less than the image of Christ.

I grew up in a fairly conservative Nazarene household, and my father was a Nazarene pastor. I learned early on that there was a different set of behavioral rules when the doors of the parsonage were closed and the shades were drawn. Not that there were terrible, dark secrets, but I came to realize that there was a different set of acceptable behaviors when we were at church, around church folks, and at home. This incongruity always nagged at me.

Sometimes the incongruity was a little more pronounced and public. I remember talk around the dinner table with church folk who claimed to have been "saved, sanctified, and on their way to heaven" that was demeaning to several ethnic minority groups in town. The same folks that would whisper in hushed tones about the moral indiscretions of certain other people in town would be less than hushed about their disdain for the folks who lived in the housing projects.

What a comfort that is for me as life changes! Children beginning adult lives, my husband having to work away from Oklahoma City for almost four years now, and parents who are aging and needing more care and help.

“For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.” Psalm 103:11

-Sharon Dikes

Gethsemane

Cool, peaceful night
friends close at hand - asleep
a desperate prayer - cried
a son pleading to his father

Chilled, chaotic night
friend with a kiss - betrays
soldiers and swords - arrest
a son needing His Father

Cold, dark night
friends in panic - scatter
the garden stilled - quiet
the Son - abandoned

-Rob Burgess

David writes in Psalm 103 about what he knows for sure. He repeatedly writes about the “steadfast love” of God. A constant love. A love you can know for sure. A God who forgives and forgets because of this unwavering love. I need this kind of love and forgiveness. I need this truth.

This Lent, ask God what he knows for sure. Listen for his answer all around you. And hold on to what is True.

-Lisa Carr

Amazing Grace

Reid was nervous. She wanted to sing “Amazing Grace” in big church on the day of her baby brother’s dedication. Her big sister Riley would play the piano and her daddy would play his guitar, but Reid would sing by herself. She had never sung in church before! So many people she loved would be there, including her grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles. She wanted to sing her best for them.

At age five, she didn’t yet know how to read, so her daddy recorded three verses of the song for her on a CD so she could learn the lyrics. She listened carefully to the CD and tried to sing along. She had never heard some of those words before! We got out our beat-up karaoke machine and hooked up a microphone for her. The week before the baby dedication, Reid practiced the song dozens of times. Our living room was filled with the sweet sounds of her little voice singing “Amazing Grace” over and over again.

On the big day, I felt nervous for her. She would have to remember all of the lyrics since she couldn't read, and I knew there was at least a fifty percent chance she would sing, "Through many dangers, toils and *snails...*" since that's how it came out many times during her practice!

The time for the offertory came. Riley started to play the piano and Skip accompanied on his guitar. Reid gripped the microphone and turned to look at her daddy. Finding her confidence in his loving gaze, she began to sing. Her eyes never left his face as her sweet voice rang out through the sanctuary. As long as she kept her eyes on him, she could forget her fears, and distractions faded away. She knew her daddy would help her if she needed him. She remembered all of the words and sang the song beautifully. *Amazing grace! How sweet the sound...*

As I watched Reid with her father, I thought of my Heavenly Father. Just like Reid, I must keep my eyes on my Father. When I take my focus off of Him, I am fearful. Distractions creep in. I lose my confidence. I worry about failing Him, forgetting that He promised not to fail me. I despair when my faithfulness falters, forgetting that His never does. He teaches me, prepares me, equips me to fulfill my calling, and watches and guides me with love. All I have to do is keep my gaze fixed on Him.

*We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.
In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name.
May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord,
even as we put our hope in you.
Psalm 33:20-22*

-Christa Rowland

God's Steadfast Love

My journey of faith has been enhanced the last three years with the Disciple bible study series. The first year, we took a whirlwind trip through the entire Bible, the second year we studied Exodus and Luke-Acts in depth. This year's study has included the Old Testament prophets and now the letters of Paul. I began to pick up a theme in these studies—especially the Old Testament readings.

"The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgressions. . . ."
Numbers 14:18.

That is not the first reference to God's steadfast love, but is one phrase that is heard over and over again throughout Israel's history and in the prophets and Psalms. Israel needed to be reminded again and again of God's steadfast love for them. We too need to be reminded over and over.

So what is God's steadfast love? According to Webster's Dictionary, steadfast means firmly fixed in place, immovable, not subject to change. I think that applies very well to God's love. It is firmly fixed in place, immovable, and certainly unchanging. We find that phrase used over 176 times in the Bible and if you listen you will hear it in the hymns and in the contemporary music of today.

Each Sunday, part of the liturgy of The Great Thanksgiving in the Word and Table service reminds us again. . . "You formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. When we turned away, and **our** love failed, **your** love remained steadfast." (emphasis mine)

I shook my head and said, "Oh brother, you don't really want to know!"

He stopped what he was doing, came over and looked me in the eyes and said, "Yes, I do. Tell me."

Never at a loss for words, I started telling him about my day and that I just left my husband at the ICU. By then, his wife came over and joined the conversation.

I don't remember all the conversation, but at some point the man asked for Ron's name and mine, and said he would ask his church to pray for us. Then he asked if he and his wife could pray for me, right there, by the gas station. I eagerly said yes, and all three of us held hands as we bowed our heads.

After the prayer ended, his wife hugged me and they promised to pray for "Mr. Ron and Miss Ellen." The man looked at me and said I should drive safely and get home right away. They smiled and waved as I drove off.

All the loneliness I felt at the hospital parking lot was gone. I really didn't notice that it was still very much past midnight. With tears falling down, my heart was warmed. I had this incredible assurance of God's love that night through two absolute strangers.

Isn't it amazing that in the midst of our brokenness, God reaches down and touches us with His love? Sometimes, like this night, it comes through at the most unlikely place and sometimes, it comes through the most unlikely people.

-Ellen McNeill (as told to Paula Meder)

Bringing Hope to Us

Over the past 2 years, a group of OKC First Church students and adults have embarked on what has become an amazing picture of "friendship for the sake of the world." Along the way, however, we have also come across a not-so-amazing picture of the effects of a hard and rough world. Not willing to settle and give over the streets in which we live, US Student Ministries has seen the work of the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Lent for me is a season in which I come to fully recognize my brokenness and need for forgiveness. Every day as I struggle through my ordinary life, I seem to come face-to-face with how really broken I am. And within my brokenness of sin, fractured relationships, hurts, habits and hang-ups, I fall at the foot of the cross in need of grace and forgiveness.

As it is in my life, it is also apparent in the apartments we serve through Outposts. Weekly we come in contact with people who are dealing with the brokenness of relationships, addictions, crime--and that is only the start. And in the midst of it all, it is easy for all of us to walk through life asking, "Where do we find God and His healing grace and forgiveness?"

I would say we don't find God. God, in spite of our broken and unworthiness, finds US! He comes to us with grace, forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. And in doing so, He brings hope in our brokenness.

This could not be clearer than a story from "Outposts" that still resonates in my mind today. During the first round of

snowstorms that hit Oklahoma City, a single mom and her daughter from Meridian Ridge apartments (one of our Outposts location), made their way to the grocery store to purchase needed food items for our church pantry (we provide a hope basket of food to people in need). What I failed to mention, however, is that they used their own limited resources and traveled on public transportation to buy 10 bags of food.

At first glance this simply seems to be a nice story of people helping out, like many of us do. What I have come to see, however, is a loving, faithful, and forgiving God coming to us and choosing to use the act of giving groceries to reveal Himself and deliver a hope basket *of a different kind*.

Isn't it just like God to use a situation (that the world might call broken) during a difficult time when the city is shutting down, to call a child to express the way in which He comes to us, breathes us in, and offers grace, forgiveness and hope?

My you come to know this Lenten season that amidst all our brokenness, God still chooses to come to you with grace and forgiveness, revealing so clearly the true message that "Hope is in the neighborhood."

-Mike Laughlin

At the Most Unlikely Place

What a day it had been! Unknown to us, what started to be a normal day with usual routines quickly turned into a medical emergency. As I listened to the doctor at the emergency room at Mercy mouth the words, "blood clots in the right lung" and that they were sending Ron into the intensive care unit, I really felt I was stepping into a nightmare.

Well, I knew I had to go home that evening and pick up a few things since it was obvious that Ron would be in the hospital for awhile. By the time I got back to my car in the parking lot and turned on the ignition, I jumped back to reality because my gas tank registered empty. I figured I had enough to get to the convenience store close to home, but hesitated slightly because it was way past midnight and I was alone.

Taking a deep breath, I made it to the store and looked around before jumping out to fill the car. I did notice an incredibly dirty car parked at the next aisle, with a couple inside. As I started pumping gas, the man got out of the car and started cleaning the windows. He looked at me, smiled and started talking.

"Man, my car is so dirty, I forget what color it is!"

I nodded and smiled. He looked at me and a frown crossed his face.

"Why is it you are all alone pumping gas after midnight?"