

GOD'S GARDEN

*how does
your soul
grow?*



LENTEN

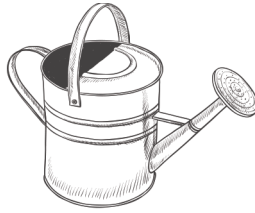
2019

DEVOTIONALS

VOLUME VII



PSALM 92:13



A NOTE FROM PASTOR JENN

Dear Lenten Gardeners,

We come to this season of Lent using the metaphor of a garden to dig deep into the work of God in our souls. In John 15, right before his arrest and trial, Jesus walks with the disciples and offers this as a part of his last words to them:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. 2 He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. 3 You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything. 6 If you don’t remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.”

These six weeks leading to Easter we will focus on different work of the Gardener or Vineyard Keeper God in our souls. As we make our way with Jesus to the cross and Resurrection, we want to dig in and get our hands dirty into the garden of our faith journey to ensure we are cultivating a spiritual life which bears the fruit of God’s Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. Each week there will be a spiritual discipline to take up as another tool for us to be connected and present with the work of the Great Gardener. We invite you to use this devotional as a starting point for your work of getting your hands dirty so God can grow something glorious on Easter Sunday.

Here’s to the work of growing beauty,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jennifer Stiles Williams".

The Rev. Jennifer Stiles Williams
Lead Pastor



APRIL 14 PALM SUNDAY

overgrowth

Consider a broken old fence that holds back a garden full of mystery plants: overgrown, wild, and untamed. Hope might not be the first feeling that comes to mind.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus was faced with throngs of people whose love of God was wild, unshaped, and unformed. People, who by the end of the week, would forget the hope they felt of being near the Messiah. But still, there was hope.

An overgrown garden holds hope, even though there are weeds and wildness running free. In the hands of a master, who is loving, tending, and shaping the beauty of the garden, the possibilities are endless. Are you ready to break free from a life of overgrowth into the master's hands?

“Have patience with all things, but first of all with yourself.”

--St. Francis de Sales

Read: Luke 19:28-48. Jesus enters Jerusalem, and his disciples rejoice. This brings to mind Malachi's prophecy: “Suddenly the Lord whom you are seeking will come to his temple.” (Malachi 3:1) **Reflect:** Luke says that Jesus has a “throng” of disciples who celebrate his entry into Jerusalem. **Pray:** Dear Jesus, let me welcome you with the joy with which the disciples welcomed you as you entered the holy city. **Act:** Consider what effort you could make to ease the entry of Jesus into the life of someone close to you.

Silence: Don't let anything distract you from devoting yourself regularly to times of seeking God in silence and solitude. Entrust each of your current concerns specifically to God in prayer so you can be free to be fully present with Him during solitude and silence. If you're anxious or afraid when you think about spending time in solitude and silence, admit it to God and ask Him to comfort you.

Confession: Awesome God, I to come to You in a moment of confession. I imagine Jesus entering our presence just as he entered Jerusalem some 2,000 years ago. I envision the palm branches, the donkey, the shouts of “hosanna.” Understanding who he is and knowing who we are, Lord I pray, O God, you know us well. We are quick to speak of faith, but slow to live it fully. We shout “hosanna” as Jesus approaches, as did the people of Jerusalem many years ago; but we do not want him to come too close -- not close enough to really see. Help us to draw closer, Amen.



APRIL 15

It's here, Holy Week, the most solemn week of the liturgical year. I don't know about you, but there is a tenseness in my heart. I remember what I said I was going to do this Lent (*'I'm going to fast', 'I'm going to devote myself to my spiritual disciplines'*) and where I have failed. I know the Resurrection is coming but I know the suffering that took place in the days leading up to it. I know the joyful anticipation we have not only for Easter, but also the return of Jesus; but I also know the fear that creeps into this anticipation.

Consider the words of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 50, verses 4-7:

“What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I haven't done for it?

When I expected it to grow good grapes,
why did it grow rotten grapes?

Now let me tell you what I'm doing to my vineyard.

I'm removing its hedge,
so it will be destroyed.

I'm breaking down its walls,
so it will be trampled.

I'll turn it into a ruin;
it won't be pruned or hoed,
and thorns and thistles will grow up.

I will command the clouds not to rain on it.

The vineyard of the Lord of heavenly forces is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are the plantings in which God delighted.’

In the inevitable moments of doubt, continue to remind yourself:

“The Lord God opened my ear;

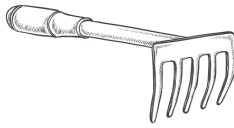
I didn't rebel; I didn't turn my back.” --Isaiah 50:5

Read: Luke 18:15-34. Jesus teaches more about the coming of God's kingdom, and he predicts his death and resurrection. **Reflect:** What does it mean to “welcome God's kingdom like a child”? **Pray:** My God grant me strength to be weak and humble. **Act:** Resolve to move through life with the conviction that what is possible for humans is possible for God.

Silence:

Don't let anything distract you from devoting yourself regularly to times of seeking God in silence and solitude. Entrust each of your current concerns specifically to God in prayer so you can be free to be fully present with Him during solitude and silence. If you're anxious or afraid when you think about spending time in solitude and silence, admit it to God and ask Him to comfort you.

Confession: O God, you know us well. We are quick to claim faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior; but, like the throng who greeted his entry into Jerusalem, we are fickle, slow to live fully and everywhere as faithful disciples. We know where we fail. Be with us as we rise. Amen.



APRIL 16

The selfless sacrifice of Jesus is an amazing thing. Most humans who are told that they will soon die make every effort to cross some things off their bucket-lists. Jesus was thinking about everyone but himself.

Jesus taught several parables that Tuesday morning and all of them focused on repentance. The parables are aimed at those who have not yet turned to Jesus in faith. They are parables of warning: either you are a friend of Jesus or you are his enemy and you don't want to be the enemy of God.

Next on Jesus' plate was a debate. He was challenged by the Pharisees and Sadducees (the spiritual leaders of the Jews) on four different points. These men were trying to trap Jesus, to get him to say something that would reveal him as the hoax they were convinced he was.

What selfless, wondrous love is this, that Jesus would spend his last hours offering his loving forgiveness to those who were in the process of orchestrating his murder!

Read: Luke 9:18-36. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Then he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter acknowledges Jesus' messiahship. Jesus warns his disciples that following him will be arduous. Peter, James, and John are taken up to the mountain to pray. Out of an overshadowing cloud a voice is heard to say of Jesus: "This is my Son, my chosen one. Listen to him" **Reflect:** Who do you say Jesus is? **Pray:** Dear Jesus, help me to see you as you want to be seen. **Act:** Go up on a high place or to some other place where you feel close to God.

Silence:

Don't let anything distract you from devoting yourself regularly to times of seeking God in silence and solitude. Entrust each of your current concerns specifically to God in prayer so you can be free to be fully present with Him during solitude and silence. If you're anxious or afraid when you think about spending time in solitude and silence, admit it to God and ask Him to comfort you.

Confession: O God, you know us well. We are quick to want the blessings of faithfulness; but, like the Twelve who spent the last week with him, we are slow to accept the pain and suffering of authentic Christ-like living. Forgive our weakness and fear. Amen.



APRIL 17

Mind and body. Reason and miracle. Jesus' ministry included both, this final week as always. In the clean-swept Temple He taught and He also healed. He asked people to understand, and He performed what surpasses understanding.

As the blind saw and the lame walked, cries of wonder echoed along the marble porticoes, and the crowd swelled till Temple authorities took fresh alarm.

Even more than brilliant teaching, miracles will always draw throngs. Wednesday's healing miracles kept the city in a fever of excitement.

This fourth day in Holy Week represents those times when our natural lives touch the supernatural. When here on earth we are caught up in the divine mystery.

But still we are not at the best. We stand wonderstruck but short of Easter. How strange it is, this journey on which we embark. On Wednesday we seem to have arrived at the very throne room of God—and yet the road leads on, out into the dark.

Silence: Don't let anything distract you from devoting yourself regularly to times of seeking God in silence and solitude. Entrust each of your current concerns specifically to God in prayer so you can be free to be fully present with Him during solitude and silence. If you're anxious or afraid when you think about spending time in solitude and silence, admit it to God and ask Him to comfort you.

Read: Luke 22:1-13. Judas proceeds to betray Jesus. In the meantime, Jesus makes plans for a proper celebration of Passover. **Reflect:** Luke says that Satan entered Judas and “he” betrayed Jesus. Who is “he”? **Pray:** Deliver us from the evil one, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory. **Act:** Review the way you normally celebrate religious feasts. Could your observance of them be enhanced?



APRIL 18 HOLY THURSDAY

pruning

In our yards, when we allow overgrowth, it prevents the light from getting to all the plants and grass. It also deprives other plants from nutrition-water and food. When we don't tend to this overgrowth, then our yard suffers. In our lives, when we allow overgrowth, it prevents the light of God from getting to all areas of our lives. For instance, if I spend all my time working and don't take time to study the Bible, go to worship, serve others, etc., worldly overgrowth in my life occurs. As this overgrowth occurs, I become more and more deprived of the nutrition that only Jesus can offer. After all, Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." (John 7.37-38). If I allow worldly overgrowth in my life, it not only deprives me of the living water, but also deprives others because my life will not be fruitful for the Kingdom of God. The pruning that I did last Saturday, will allow greater growth for all the other plants. The pruning that is necessary in our lives, will allow for our spiritual growth which will in turn impact those around us. Do you have worldly overgrowth in your life? Is it so preoccupied with worldly things that the spiritual things are dying? If so, it's time to prune and see how your spiritual life will come back alive as you drink from the river of living water.

Read: Luke 22:14-23. As the bread has to be broken in order to be shared, so the body of Jesus is to be broken so that his spirit might be given to his disciples. As his disciples share the cup, so will they share with Christ in his suffering. **Reflect:** It is through the suffering and death of Jesus that every blessing comes into our lives. **Pray:** God, give me the strength to endure suffering for your greater honor and glory.

Confession:

Merciful God,
we confess that so often our discipleship has been weak ...
when we have failed to serve as Jesus served;
forgive us.

When we have failed to love one another as Jesus loves us;
forgive us.

When we have been happy to proclaim our devotion to Jesus with
our lips and then denied him by our actions;
forgive us.

Merciful God, empower us by your Spirit to be steady and true
to you in every time of trial; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen



APRIL 19
GOOD FRIDAY
dying

There is something satisfying about pruning and trimming away the dead limbs and branches of a bush or tree. By pruning the plant, the old unproductive limbs are removed making room for new growth, and then the desired shape can be formed. When our family grew Christmas trees, we would start when the tree was very young shaping and pruning the branches so the tree would produce thick growth. The goal would be to produce a tree so thick that when it was old enough to sell, you could not see through the tree. This would not happen without pruning.

Many of you have pruned grape vines, which need to be trimmed correctly and at the right time in order to produce grapes. Fruit trees are the same way. If left to grow on their own, shoots, sprouts and suckers would begin growing wildly in many directions. Soon the tree or vine would be all foliage and no fruit.

Looking at a grapevine, I can hear Jesus saying, “I am the true vine. There are other vines, but I am the true one. You, my disciples, my church, the ones who call yourselves Christians, are the branches on my vine. God, my Father, is the one who looks after my vine and prunes the branches. Because you are connected to me, we are in relationship to each other. I want that relationship to be permanent, based on love. Just as the Father and I love each other, I want our relationship to be one of mutual love. If we do not stay connected, branch to vine, you will begin to die and stop bearing fruit. If that happens, my Father will prune you from my vine and throw you into the fire.”

In one sense, the pruning that Jesus teaches here involves getting rid of the things in our lives that cause us not to be in the kind of relationship with God that he wants. We are on the vine, but if we want to stay, we must allow God to cut away and prune our habits and behaviors. If Jesus is abiding in our lives, he will tell us from time to time, through the voice of his Holy Spirit, about those things that we do, think and feel that are not pleasing to him. God will want to “prune away” those things that are incompatible with walking closely with him.

Read: Luke 23:32-43. Jesus is crucified in the company of thieves and a jeering mob. **Reflect:** This story is full of people who are not what they seem to be. **Pray:** Christ Jesus, grant me the courage to see beyond preconceptions and prejudice. **Act:** Speak out clearly and forcefully for what you believe although you may be denigrated in public—or even in the church.

Confession:

We confess to You, our Lord and Savior, that we have betrayed and denied You, forgotten and doubted You. When our faith is tested, we wonder where You are.

When we see injustice in the world, we often stand by, we turn our backs, we ignore the cries of others.

We confess that again and again we deny You and betray You with our silence when we fail to proclaim Your Good News, when we fail to live out Your teachings and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Forgive us, O God, and help us to truly repent.

Help us to remember Your sacrifice, Your love, and to know Your forgiveness.

In the name of the One who lived, who was crucified, and who lives again, Jesus the Messiah, we pray.

Amen.



APRIL 20

Can you imagine the thoughts of Jesus' disciples the day after He was crucified? Certainly, their minds were filled with questions. Their hearts must have been anxious. They were a hunted people. They felt alone, facing the hostility of the Jewish leadership.

Much of the difficulty of pruning, isn't in the cutting--it's the waiting that comes next.

Before the beautiful fruit and blooms of our garden grow, there is a time of grief, wondering if you have killed the potential of your garden.

On Holy Saturday, our hearts wait and mourn with the disciples. Thankfully, we have the benefit of knowing what comes next. We know the beautiful garden waiting to bloom under the darkness that Christ's death brings.

"We might think we are nurturing our garden, but of course it's our garden that is really nurturing us." --Jenny Uglow

Read: Luke 23:44-56. The centurion who said, "It's really true; this man was righteous," undoubtedly spoke for many who witnessed the death of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea summoned up the courage to see to a decent burial for Jesus. **Reflect:** Criminals were to be buried on the same day they were executed so Joseph probably wants to keep the commandments. **Pray:** Lord, grant me insight and courage to help however I can. **Act:** Today, resolve to do some good to make the world a little better.

Confession:

Holy God, Creator of all that is, Donor of Grace, and Giver of Life:

Hear our prayer.

There are chasms in our lives, deep valleys that separate us
From one another and from You.

We confess that we have allowed those rifts to grow,

For fear of admitting our part in the separation,

For fear of being rejected when we reach out.

You call us to a reconciled life, to healed relationships,

To a wholeness with each other and with You.

Mend us, we pray, and make us new creations

Through the power and love of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

PRAYER LABYRINTH

All Are Welcome

Open in the Building C Attic April 14 to April 21

Daily from 7:30 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Special hours Sunday, April 21 (Easter Sunday):

7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

The Labyrinth is an ancient tool used for prayer and meditation. It is not a maze or a puzzle to be solved. You do not get lost in it. It is an intentional prayer walk along a canvas path on the floor. There will be stations around the labyrinth guiding you through the journey. Instructions will be provided to guide you through the walk. Silence and reverence is appreciated. The Labyrinth walk is for people of all ages and parents are encouraged to accompany children. St. Luke's Prayer Labyrinth is free so come and find the quiet center in the crowded lives we live.





EASTER FEST

SUNDAY, APRIL 14

3:00 P.M. - 5:30 P.M.
ON THE ST. LUKE'S CAMPUS

Families will enjoy inflatables, pony rides, a petting zoo, an Easter Egg Carnival, crafts for all ages, food available for purchase, handmade gifts for purchase to support children in Rwanda, and a sensory friendly area for children with special needs.

Pre-register and sign up to volunteer at
st.lukes.org/easterfest.

JOIN US FOR HOLY WEEK

HOLY THURSDAY, APRIL 18

A combined service in Founder's Hall at 7:00 p.m.

GOOD FRIDAY, APRIL 19

A combined service in the Sanctuary at 6:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

EASTER, APRIL 21

Traditional Services in the Sanctuary at 7:30 a.m., 8:45 a.m., 10:00 a.m., and 11:15 a.m.
Contemporary Services in Founder's Hall at 9:00 a.m., 10:15 a.m., and 11:30 a.m.

ST LUKE'S
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

4851 S. Apopka-Vineland Road
Orlando, Florida 32819
407.876.4991
www.st.lukes.org