

**DEVOTIONS FROM  
MAY 2020**

## **The Feast at the Feeder**

**Vicki Kemper**

*“Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Parent feeds them.” - Matthew 6:26 (CEB)*

Working from home these days, I have more time to watch the birds at my feeder: sweet chickadees, upside-down nuthatches, tufted titmice, tiny goldfinches yellowing up by the day.

But it’s the woodpeckers that humble me. Whatever the species – hairy, downy, or huge and resplendent red-bellied – they approach my tube feeder in precisely the same way: as if it were a tree.

The feeder is not a tree, of course, but trees are what woodpeckers know, and pecking for insects is what they do. And so they stare at the plastic tube encased in metal mesh, as if pecking in the right place will yield yummy grubs or ants. When it does not, they protest. Loudly.

At the base of the feeder, meanwhile, a feast awaits them: peanuts, raisins, dried cherries, almonds, pistachios, and more!

We are accustomed to finding meaning and purpose in doing and busyness, but stay-at-home orders prevent much of that. Unable to prove our worth by working, we’re less sure of who we are and what difference it makes. Without structure, we feel lost. Unable to pay the bills, we feel scared. Separated from our loves, we get angry.

This is not to discount the magnitude of suffering, death, and heroic sacrifices happening every day. It is all too real, and it must motivate us to remake the world.

Meanwhile, the flowers of the field still grow. The birds of the air still eat. And the feast of divine love and grace that carries us through our days never runs out.

### **Prayer**

Holy Feeder, thank you for taking care of us. Even now. Still now. Always.

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Vicki Kemper is the Pastor of First Congregational, UCC, of Amherst, Massachusetts.

## **Previously On...**

**Vince Amlin, May 8, 2020**

*Stephen replied, "...The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran." - Acts 7:2 (NRSV)*

We're catching up on a lot of TV right now, thankful for every new season that drops during quarantine. And thankful, especially, for a good "previously on."

Having watched the entire first season in one lazy weekend a year ago, the recap that starts the next season is essential. If it's well-made, the whole story comes sweeping back. "Oh, that's right! She turned out to be his mother!"

It reminds you of what's come before so that you're right back in the action, ready to know what happens next.

Stephen delivers a massive recap in Acts 7. He makes it through much of the Hebrew bible, reintroducing his audience to Abraham, Joseph, Moses... "Oh, that's right! She turned out to be his mother!"

He's trying to make a point to his audience about what kind of story God has been telling. One of freedom. One of deliverance. One in which God overcomes every obstacle put in their way.

He reminds them. But I suspect he is also reminding himself. Because when he delivers this speech, he is about to be executed.

He pauses in this moment of crisis to remember what's happened to this point. All the oppressed ones God has sided with. All the suffering ones God has delivered. All the times it seemed like the story was over and God somehow found a way to keep it going.

And when he finishes, Stephen is ready to know what happens next.

If you, like me, are having days when you lose the thread, when it feels like the story is coming to an end, remember. Let it come sweeping back. All you have been through to get to this point. All the obstacles overcome. And whose story you are part of.

## **Prayer**

Deliverer, I pause in this crisis to remember. Make me ready for what happens next.

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Vince Amlin is co-pastor of Bethany UCC and co-planter of Gilead Church Chicago, forming now.

## You Tired?, Tony Robinson

May 12, 2020

People tell me that they are dreaming a lot during this time. Last night I dreamed that I couldn't, for the life of me, find where I was on a map.

I kept turning the map one way, then another. I turned it over to the other side, then back. For a moment I would think I had found a location from which I would get my bearings, then I would lose it. Don't need Freud to interpret that one.

A friend who says he has been feeling unusual fatigue during this time sent along an article on [Why We Are Tired During Lockdown](#). It offers some advice for coping. Personally, I'm sick of articles offering advice on how to cope.

It occurs to me that while we may be sleeping more, this time also has the quality of a vigil. That is, some part of us remains awake and watchful, when we should be, even are, sleeping.

Over the years, I've kept vigil with families at the bedside of a loved one. I've done it with my own loved ones. Keeping those vigils is exhausting. Time seems to move so s-l-o-w-l-y, only interrupted by hushed conversations in the hall or trips to a hospital cafeteria.

But I've also noticed this of such vigils. When they are over, usually because death has come, that waiting time, the time of vigil, seems to have been no time at all.

Now, we're keeping vigil. Watching the statistics, the trends, the curves. Checking in with family and friends. Checking the supply of oil for our figurative lamps (see Matthew 25: 1 – 13). Dozing off at odd times.

The thing about the present vigil is that it seems there will be no definitive, startling, end. No miraculous rising or merciful death. No visitor arriving in the depths of night so that the party may begin. That's a tough vigil.

It's hard to get our bearings. To find where we are on the map. To even find the map. And yet, even if not definitive, an end or a change, will come. In the meantime, (I guess this is advice, sorry) go easy on yourself. Go easy on those with whom you share your confinement. And, as the old gospel hymn has it, keep your lamps trimmed and burning as best you are able.

"Keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, for this work's almost done.

"Sisters, don't grow weary, brothers don't grow weary, children don't grow weary, for this work's almost done."

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This is Pastor Brad: You can find a number of versions of this song on YouTube, but here's an amateur video of a black youth choir singing this 4-minute song the way it's supposed to be sung, "Keep your lamps..."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMc5d2Pr0Uk>

## **Belonging**

**Donna Schaper, May 12, 2020**

*Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. - Ruth 1:3-4 (NIV)*

Naomi's sons married a little but not a lot outside their tribe. Then again, maybe her sons' marriages paved the way for Naomi to become a believer to a new tribe, a female one, the gendered kind of tribe that matters a little more than most people think it does.

Consider the tribe of old retired men at the morning diner, 6:30 prompt. Three cups of coffee later, they feel like they can face their days. Think about the last conversation you had with a woman friend about the 2020 primaries, or the tribes of women voters in the 2016 and 2020 presidential election seasons.

Along comes Mother's Day season with a story about Elimelek dying, a woman being left with her two sons who married into the Moabite tribe. Belonging to a tribe is really important – especially when we exhibit the freedom to live outside of one as well as in one. Belonging can be a bear if we overdo it. It can be a joy if we do it. Elimelek's dying made way for a new kind of tribe, for his sons and for his widow.

This Mother's Day, I appreciate the tribe of women. The tribe that challenged swim coaches who tried to harass their daughters. The tribe that took great risks to protect the life of the next generation, like the mother who "stole" eggs at 3 a.m. from a neighbor's chickens so her daughter could grow strong. The tribe of Women's Fellowships (what a funny word now) who bonded woman-to-woman around mission, ministry, and shared miseries and joys. An award should be given to every woman who ever led a Bible study.

## **Prayer**

Mother-Father God, we love you very much. All of you and all your tribes. Amen.

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Donna Schaper is Senior Minister at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Her most recent book is [\*I Heart Francis: Letters to the Pope from an Unlikely Admirer\*](#).

## **Keep Crying**

**Molly Baskette, May 13, 2020**

*Hear my prayer, O Lord, let my cry come to you. Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. - Psalm 102:1-3 (NRSV)*

I don't remember ever having the flu as a child, but I got it 3 times in 6 years as an adult, and it was awful. I suddenly understood how people can just up and die from it.

It isn't just the strain on the body's systems, the secondary pneumonia that can happen, the pressured vital organs. Flu does something to the spirit. It takes the sturdy skein of human will, and – cackling like a villain – stretches it on a grim spinning wheel until it is so fine it threatens to snap. In the worst of my illness (and let me be clear: from a medical point of view, I was nowhere near dying), I felt that I could literally just let go, float away on a gentle breeze and into the arms of God.

The last time I had flu, my bedroom was far away from the hub of our new house. Too weak to move, I cried out to my family for tea, ibuprofen, and attention. It took all the strength I had, and felt like ages until someone heard me. But they came.

The psalmist normalizes crying out, again and again. If we cry out, and God doesn't answer, it doesn't mean we are not worthy of attention. It just means we need to keep crying. Perhaps a little louder.

Cry when you are sick, and cry when you are sad. Cry for yourself, and cry for others. Hold on to that little thread of will, let it anchor you here, even when you feel like it would be easier just to let go. If it seems that God doesn't hear you – someone else might.

### **Prayer**

God, don't be indifferent to my pain. Our pain. Come quickly. Amen.

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Molly Baskette is Senior Minister of First Congregational Church UCC in Berkeley, California, and the author of the best-selling [\*Real Good Church\*](#), [\*Standing Naked Before God\*](#), and her newest baby, [\*Bless This Mess: A Modern Guide to Faith and Parenting in a Chaotic World\*](#).

# Wait...How Long?

John Edgerton, May 15, 2020

*In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. - Genesis 7:11-12 (NIV)*

Forty days is a good, solid, biblical number. It signifies completeness, totality. It is time fulfilled. For it to rain for forty days means it well and truly rained for as long as one could imagine.

But here's the part of the story that I forgot from Sunday School: exactly how long Noah and his family had to stay in the ark. Hint: it's a lot longer than 40 days.

“And the waters swelled on the earth for one hundred fifty days.” (Genesis 7:24, NIV)

Yup, 150 days. That's how long Noah and his family were sequestered in the ark, forced by calamity to withdraw from the world with no human company but one another. If 40 days signifies completeness of time, then 150 days signifies ... way too stinkin' long of a time. No longer symbolic, no longer cute, no longer novel.

Just way ... too ... long.

As those first 40 days and nights came to a close and the rain stopped, Noah and his family must have felt thrilled. With the worst of the danger passed, they must have been itching to end their confinement.

But that's not what happened. It dragged on and on.

The story of humanity's deliverance from global devastation is a story of counting days and losing track of days. It is a story of thinking the worst is over, only to find it's just begun.

It is a story I am holding on to today, because it means I am not the first child of God to feel the way I am feeling.

## Prayer

God of the endless march of days, be with me in these hard times.

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John Edgerton is Lead Pastor at First United Church of Oak Park, Illinois.

Here's a song I heard that fits well with this devotional. – Pastor Brad

“Gotta Be Patient” with Michael Buble:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP-vO6jwnxl>

***The Power of Patience***  
***Marchaé Grair, May 19, 2020***

*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. - James 5:7 (NIV)*

“No mom. I can do it.”

Of course I knew it all at five. After relentlessly telling my mom I didn't need her help brushing my teeth, she finally gave in. It took approximately 2.5 seconds for me to drop a huge glob of toothpaste on my new dress.

It was picture day, and she sent me to school with a smiling face and a huge white stain in the center of my chest.

My first school picture is my favorite school picture because it was my first real lesson in the wisdom of patience.

There are so many times I've looked at God's presence in my life like I looked at my mother's hand that day. I want God to just hand over my problems and let me figure out a solution. So many of us share the kryptonite of the “just let me do it” spirit.

In God's Divine wisdom, perhaps She knows we need reminders to slow down and wait.

James told the early Church that there is reaping in the waiting. He explains farmers must spend just as much time planting as they do waiting – and both are equally important to the process of growth.

Maybe it's time we slow down and let God have our toothbrush.

We might just hear a Word from on high. We might realize we should go left instead of right.

We might just realize how much wisdom can be found in the waiting.

**Prayer**

Dear God, in a world that doesn't stop moving, help me find peace in showing patience.  
Amen.

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Marchaé Grair is a spiritual director, facilitator, and the Director of Public Relations and Outreach at the Unitarian Universalist Association. Follow her work at [marchae.com](http://marchae.com).



## Exactly

Quinn G. Caldwell

*The LORD leads me beside still waters;*

*they restore my soul.*

*They lead me in right paths*

*for their name's sake.*

- Psalm 23:1-3 (NRSV, adapted)

My son and I hike along, looking for the next flash of color. Those who knew the way through this forest have gone ahead of us, painting blue blazes on the trees to lead us in right paths.

I think of the ancestors who set aside this state forest, the ones who blazed the trail. What did they think we'd be using this for? Did they know that one day we'd be out here because we had nowhere else to go except the living room? That we'd be walking their path in search of virus-free air?

What about the ones who built the local library? What would they say if they knew the building was closed, the books inaccessible ... but that the library was going strong, doing a rip-roaring business restoring people's souls with books downloaded from the sky?

How about the founders of your church? What would they say about the still living waters God and your pastors are pouring through your screen each week despite the shuttered sanctuary? Would they recognize you as their church, worshiping there in your jammies in the living room?

Maybe hiking in the woods to escape lockdown isn't what the sylvan ancestors envisioned. Maybe accessing your library on your phone isn't what the bookish ancestors planned for. Maybe church on the computer isn't the kind of thing the charter ancestors would have wanted.

Or maybe it is, exactly.

### Prayer

For the gifts of the ancestors, for the paths they blazed and the institutions they started, and for your Spirit, showing us new ways and purposes for using them, thank you. Amen.

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Quinn G. Caldwell is a father, husband, homesteader and preacher living in rural upstate New York. His most recent book is a series of daily reflections for Advent and Christmas called [All I Really Want: Readings for a Modern Christmas](#). Learn more about it and find him on Facebook at Quinn G. Caldwell.

## Reflection for May 20



By Barbara Certa-Werner, District Superintendent of the North West District

Last Monday had been a long and exhausting day, so I went for a walk with my daughter and our three dogs along the Osaugie (pronounced O-soggy) Trail in Superior, which featured interesting sites of ships at port, businesses, railways, and wooded areas. As we walked and talked, I noticed that there were buds on all the vegetation – as they were not quite yet with foliage. We needed more rain and warmer weather before we would

see leaves and flowers.

My surroundings caused me to take a mental pause and consider our current situation of the “not quite yet” of this pandemic. We are expectant, unsure, excited, anxious, perhaps apathetic, but mostly hopeful as to what will be the next stage.

As we begin making transitions, there is a promise in Habakkuk 2:3 that gives us a framework for our ministry, “For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.” **This is the time** to embrace “what could be, what might be, what is about to bloom” mentality as we vision and plan.

This “not quite yet” time is an invitation to each of us, as Christians, to be intentional about how we live and work in this world. May you fully embrace the “not quite yet” as it blooms and grows.

Prayer: God of Possibility, we ask that You open our eyes, hearts, and souls to the “not quite yet.” Help us to vision “as if” not “as is.” Show us the path. Amen.

Anne Sexton - *The Big Heart*

Too many things are occurring for even a big heart to hold.  
– from an essay by William Butler Yeats

Big heart,  
wide as a watermelon,  
but wise as birth,  
there is so much abundance  
in the people I have:  
Max, Lois, Joe, Louise,  
Joan, Marie, Dawn,  
Arlene, Father Dunne,  
and all in their short lives  
give to me repeatedly,  
in the way the sea  
places its many fingers on the shore,  
again and again  
and they know me,  
they help me unravel,  
they listen with ears made of conch shells,  
they speak back with the wine of the best  
region.  
They are my staff.  
They comfort me.

They hear how  
the artery of my soul has been severed  
and soul is spurting out upon them,  
bleeding on them,  
messing up their clothes,  
dirtying their shoes.  
And God is filling me,  
though there are times of doubt  
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,  
still God is filling me.  
He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,  
the spider in its intricate web,  
the sun  
in all its amazement,  
and a slain ram  
that is the glory,  
the mystery of great cost,  
and my heart,  
which is very big,

I promise it is very large,  
a monster of sorts,  
takes it all in—  
all in comes the fury of love.

Anne Sexton was an American poet known for her highly personal, confessional verse. She won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967 for her book *Live or Die*.

## **Therefore...**

**Martha Spong, May 28, 2020**

*The end of everything has come. Therefore... - 1 Peter 4:7 (CEB)*

In the past few months, blogposts, think pieces, and memes have offered both recommendations and explanations for human behavior during the new abnormal of pandemic response. We list our Netflix favorites, or share our accomplishments, or fuss at people handling things differently, or offer to let ourselves off the hook entirely for the basics of life.

The letter we call 1 Peter went out from Rome, we think, to a young Christian community. As the community grew deeper in their faith, the writer offered a word about how to live alongside the “normal” way of being for first-century people. They were a minority in their beliefs, which included the belief that normal was temporary. The end of the world was coming, they thought, when Christ would return and all the bad things would be over and God's goodness would prevail.

Therefore...

How do we know how to act and what to prioritize when everything we counted on seems to be over? The letter recommends exercising self-control, remaining clear-headed, showing sincere love for others, and serving people in need by using the gifts God has given us.

It's a good word for this season, when we may be spiraling over the news and tempted to deny what's happening and play games on our phones instead. The situation in the world is complicated, and it feels like the end of everything we have counted on for our security.

Take a minute, an hour, a day to do what helps you feel better, but let's not give up on what matters. Let's look around for something, one thing, we can do to help someone else.

### **Prayer**

Holy One, help us to help each other, for your sake. Amen.

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Martha Spong is a UCC pastor, a [clergy coach](#), and editor of [The Words of Her Mouth: Psalms for the Struggle](#), new from The Pilgrim Press.

## **Why Bother?**

**Donna Schaper**

*Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. - Luke 18:1 (NIV)*

One of my students in a chaplaincy course this spring was a 70-year-old psychoanalyst considering transitioning to a chaplaincy role. She said to the class at the height of the Covid-19 crisis, “I woke up this morning and said to myself, ‘Why bother to get out of bed?’”

She did get out of bed, showed up to tele-meet her first patient, and took a kind of counselor’s risk: “I took my first patient and she said to me, ‘How are you doing?’ And I told her I woke up this morning wondering why bother? Then of course I turned the question on her. “Why did you wake up this morning?””

“She said, ‘So I could talk to you.’” That response kept my mature student going.

Sometimes we give up prematurely. Sometimes we hang on too long. Sometimes we over function. Sometimes it is just hard to function.

Sometimes we do too much. Sometimes we do too little. When Covid-19 is all gone and but a faint memory, I wonder what story we will tell about ourselves.

### **Prayer**

O God, help us be the subject of the story we tell about ourselves and not its object. And let us surely receive the gifts others make to our stories. And never to be afraid of our weakness. And never to stop bothering. Amen.

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Donna Schaper is Senior Minister at Judson Memorial Church in New York City. Her most recent book is *I Heart Frances: Letters to the Pope from an Unlikely Admirer*.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How do you answer the question shared from the chaplaincy student, “Why bother to get out of bed?”
2. In what ways do you notice yourself as the subject of the story – as the actor? In what ways do you consider yourself as the object of the story – as the acted upon?
3. Who helps you not give up prematurely? Who helps you recognize when to let go?

# A Response to the Murder of George Floyd

MAY 27, 2020 BY FREDERICK SCHMIDT

The two thugs in uniform who committed murder today do not represent me. They do not represent the people of Minnesota or this nation. They do not represent white people.

They represent what happens when people become their own gods. People who act out of hatred and cruelty. People who lust after dominance and power. People who hide behind and pervert justice.

They are the people who live in every generation, who exploit the defenseless and call cruelty courage. They have no principles. They betray the trust of others. They have no shame.

And – wherever and whenever they surface – I will join others in naming the evil that they do. Just as countless others have resisted them in centuries past, some at enormous cost.

But I will not do this by claiming that they represent my race, my faith or my country. They do not, and battling the obscenity and offense that they have committed begins in disavowing them and their behavior. I will not be helpless before them. I will not own or excuse their behavior. I will not offer them the comfort that they somehow represent me.

I will stand, shoulder to shoulder, with men and women who have acknowledged that all of God's children are made in God's image; who have died in defending them; and who have worked to build a world where they are honored and own their own honor. I will live in a fashion that witnesses to God's calling on my life and to God's insistence that true healing and redemption touches not just our relationship with God, but with one another.

For only in giving ourselves to God's redemptive love, can we live in hope. Only in healing can we witness to the coming of the Kingdom. And only as members of Christ's body, redeemed and restored, can we oppose evil in all its manifestations.

## What Am I to Do with My Anger? Elsa Cook

May 29, 2020

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” - Matthew 5:5 (NRSV)*

Every morning, when I open my eyes, it’s there again. It’s kept me up half the night, but in those few hours of slumber, I hoped that it might disappear. But there it is.

I’m still angry.

I don’t need to hear the news for the day. I’m still furious about yesterday. I can’t believe that this is happening, and I’m livid. It’s anger that makes me act. It spurs my resistance, but it is where my faith falters.

Faith requires meekness, not fury. We are to live by the Spirit, Paul writes, not by those opposing desires of the flesh where anger is lumped together with quarreling, strife, and dissensions. The strife is over. A song of triumph should be sung, but I have no alleluias to give.

Jesus only gets angry once. He flips a few tables and goes right back to being meek and mild in every version of the story I’ve ever heard. So, what am I to do with my anger when the battle is not yet won?

Who will teach me that meekness is not passivity but proactive generosity? Or must I remind myself every morning that this is what it means to live my faith?

It’s not only to give honor to the most persecuted, but to hunger and thirst for change. It’s to be generous with myself and others so that we are blessed to turn this world upside down with our protest. This is my faith and it is full of rage.

### Prayer

Help me, O God, to find the right road to live out this faith that gives honor to your people and your hope. Use the flesh you gave me to change the world.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elsa Cook contributed this devotional to Rise Up! Spirituality for Resistance, a collection of devotionals to keep you bright without burning out. [Order Rise Up! here.](#)