

# THE HARDEST PART

*hurt we carry,  
hope we find*

THE EVERYTHING  
HAPPENS PROJECT



## *Life is this strange, tender mix, isn't it?*

Joy and sorrow. Love and loss. Big wins and even bigger failures. We cling tightly to the beautiful moments, but then the phone rings, a diagnosis drops, or some creeping ache reminds us that everything—*everything*—is so much more fragile than we'd like to admit. Life can be too much. And Lent is the season where we sit in that heaviness. For 40 days, we stop pretending things will suddenly get better and face the truth: life is fragile, and so are we.

Lent begins with Ash Wednesday, when we hear the words no one really wants to say out loud: *you are dust, and to dust you shall return*. It's not exactly the kind of thing you'd embroider on a pillow, but it's a truth we need. Lent invites us to stop pretending we can hold it all together and instead sit with the weight of what we carry—the grief, the regrets, the messes we can't untangle, no matter how much we try.

Here's the hardest part: to be human is to carry the weight of our own mortality. We love the joy and triumph of Easter morning, but first, we have to sit with Good Friday, when God is on the losing team. Jesus, who we look to for hope and healing, suffers and dies. His pain is real, just like ours. We can't rush past it. We can't skip to the good part, because it's through the deepest hurt that we begin to understand what it means to be fully human, fully broken.

In *The Hardest Part: Hurt We Carry, Hope We Find*, we'll walk through these paradoxes together. Each day, we'll look at the hardest parts of being human—heartbreak, emptiness, shame, and longing—and acknowledge the weight of it. You'll find Scripture, a reflection, a response prompt, and a blessing to remind you that grace has a way of sneaking in, even when life feels impossible (kind of like finding your phone after you've torn the house apart for the fifth time).

So, let's do *this* hard part together. Let's sit with the ache and the fragile parts we'd rather avoid, and trust that hope is somewhere nearby, waiting for us to notice. Because when we stay with the hard part, something else happens: the good part begins to unfold, slowly but surely.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO GET STARTED:

20 minutes each day of Lent—in 2025, Lent begins on March 5 and ends on April 19

Sundays Off: Sundays during Lent are feast days, so you won't find any entries.

## HOW TO USE THIS DAILY DEVOTIONAL:

**Go Solo:** We've designed each day to take around 15 minutes. This includes reading the scripture and short reflection, responding thoughtfully, and closing with a blessing. Zero pressure to complete everything. Just pick the option that suits whatever day you're having.

**With a Group:** We've created a corresponding **Group Guide** that can be used for weekly gatherings like book clubs, small groups, or Sunday School classes. Download it for free at [katebowler.com/lent](https://katebowler.com/lent).



**With a Church:** If you would like to explore Lent as a church, we have created a **Sermon Guide** that follows the Lectionary Text (Year C) and includes theme ideas for your sermon, additional areas to research, and corporate blessings to use in worship. Download it for free at [katebowler.com/lent](https://katebowler.com/lent).



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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# BEING HUMAN!

Day 01

Ash Wednesday

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*“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”*

—GENESIS 3:19 (NIV)

## Reflect

It's such a relief to be able to say it: there is no cure for being human. We squish all the meaning and delight a day can hold into the jumble of our to-do lists and daily frustrations, yet so much remains beyond our control. Our lives are not a series of choices and endless options; sometimes, we come undone. On Ash Wednesday, we receive the symbol of our very fragility on our foreheads: the sign of the cross in ashes, gently traced on our foreheads. From dust we were made; to dust we will return. Within this is also the symbol of the love of God who sees us, knows us, and embraces us, in all our beloved, imperfectible humanity.

# Respond

Even if you've never attended one before, maybe find an Ash Wednesday service near you. It's so low-stress, I promise. As the ashes are traced on your head, take a moment to reflect on what it means to be human today—even in all you cannot do or complete or perfect.

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## Blessing for Ash Wednesday

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*These days of dust,  
These days of despair.  
Reality speaks to us clearly,  
So we approach—carefully, hesitantly,  
barely ready to hear the hard truths  
we long to be told  
about the beauty and terror of mortality.*

*How strange it feels,  
so right and so good,  
to move forward together,  
wearing our finitude like a badge—  
a mess of ash,  
a reminder:  
you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return.*

*How strange it feels,  
so right and so good,  
to stand at the edge of awareness—*

*the balance point  
between being and non-being.  
I catch my breath as I look  
and see shining faces.*

*I see it all in an instant:  
how precious,  
how holy,  
how fleeting and infinite  
each imperfect life.  
How beautiful,  
how stubborn,  
how unfinishable  
each single existence.*

*We wear this truth,  
moving forward together,  
our dust shining like radiant hope<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Bowler. "A Blessing for Ash Wednesday" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 99.

Thursday, March 6, 2025

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# SAY NO!

## Day 02

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*“Jesus returned from the Jordan full of the Holy Spirit and he was led by the Spirit to spend forty days in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil.”*

—LUKE 4:1-2 (PHILLIPS)

## Reflect

It’s hard to resist the pull towards something we know isn’t our best choice. There are those small pleasures we reach for when we need a little boost, like the bedtime doom scrolling or perfecting a Pinterest board that whispers, *Escape is possible*. Then there are those moments when we feel the urge to do or say something that doesn’t quite line up with our values. Those times when everything within us may rise up to say “Go ahead, it’ll feel amazing!” And maybe it does—for about five seconds. But those choices tend to over-promise and under-deliver. Sometimes, restraint, while annoyingly difficult, can be like a gift—not to the person who maybe *did* deserve your snappy comeback—but to your future self. The you who will be glad you held back, stayed true, and made space for grace to do its quiet work.

# Respond

What is the hard thing you want to say no to, and what is the yes behind it that you want to carry forward?

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## Blessing to see clearly

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*Yes, we will grieve,  
but not as those in denial.  
We will suffer,  
but not as those entombed  
in loneliness.*

*We will join the ranks of afflicted,  
the weak, and the vulnerable.*

*We do it willingly. (Okay, not always.)  
But we are being shown  
what is plastic and what is gold.*

*We are drawn forward by glimpses*

*of something better—  
a world where cruelty and injustice  
cannot sustain themselves,  
where the cycles of harm  
finally collapse  
under their own weight.*

*Once you've seen it,  
you can't unsee it.*

*Blessed are we  
who now know the value  
of what must be let go  
and what must be held tightly.*

*May we carry forward  
only what is true,  
what is good,  
what is beautiful  
trusting this:  
love never fails.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Kate Bowler. "To See Clearly" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 147.



# GIVE YOURSELF SOME GRACE!

Day 03

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*“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.”*

—EPHESIANS 2:8-10 (NRSVUE)

## *Reflect*

We often have no idea how to deal with the things we’ve done—or the things done to us. Enter grace. But what even is grace? And more importantly, how do we get some?

John Wesley, a guy who started a church tradition called Methodism, called grace “free, undeserved favor.” In other words, it’s like getting something good you didn’t earn, but hey, no one’s complaining. My friend Professor Willie Jennings says, “Grace is the ability to see through God's eyes for a moment.” When we give or receive grace, it is a chance for renewal. Grace is so full of love and kindness that when it touches our hearts, we can never be the same. We may not deserve it, but we get it anyway.

## *Respond*

Are you really good at beating yourself up? Congrats, but maybe today, we could try something else. Mistakes happen—they’re just part of being human. Maybe learn what you can, and then—here’s the hard part—try to let the rest go. You deserve a little grace. Love is ready to fill the cracks, even the ones you made. Let it.

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## *Blessing for finding grace for others (and ourselves)*

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*Blessed are we, the graced.  
We who don't deserve it.  
Whose failures haunt us.  
The things we said.  
The things we left unsaid.  
The decisions, addictions  
and broken relationships  
that have ripple effects we still feel.  
Somehow, we receive this mysterious gift.*

*Grace doesn't erase pain we've caused.  
But grace, still.  
For us, the redeemable.*

*And if we are...that means they are too.  
Yes—even them:  
The rude neighbor.  
The estranged father.*

*The unforgiving ex.  
The boss who screwed you over.  
The doctor who messed up.  
The selfish pastor.  
The family member who did the unthinkable.*

*Despite our mistakes we are graced.*

*Blessed are we who wrestle with unforgiveness.  
You who make amends.  
You who reach for forgiveness.  
You who say you're sorry even  
if it's not enough.  
You who find the bridge  
to forgive.  
Even when you cannot forget.*

*Or can't go back.*

*Or they aren't nearly sorry enough.  
Blessed are we who live here*

*In this mystery, this scandal, of grace.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Finding Grace for Others (and Ourselves)" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 114-115.

# SORRY!

## Day 04

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*“I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me.”*

—JOHN 10:14 (NRSVUE)

## Reflect

When I was a teenager my mother picked up on something she thought I should apologize for, something that seemed to cause a fight between my sisters. (Notice my emphasis on “seemed to” because I’m still not convinced she was right and one of those joys of aging is re-telling these stories *however I want, Mom!*) I hemmed and hawed and finally said, “Okay, I’m zzorry.” Mom couldn’t suppress her giggles, and soon we were all laughing and repeating, “I’m zzorry.” Problem solved, to a degree. Certainly a bridge was needed between sisters at odds with each other, and an apology could possibly be that bridge, but rarely does a mandated one work. The best kind of apology is open-faced, concerned, and honest, offered freely and willing to hear how the other was affected. Apologies are hard. Maybe we need to start with a little “zzorry.”

## Respond

Is there someone you've been thinking about reaching out to? Or someone you might want to offer an apology to? Maybe you could find a small gesture, it doesn't have to be perfect—just a little nudge or a quick “zzorry,” and go from there.

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### *Blessing for that unsettled feeling*

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*Blessed are you,  
who remember what contentment felt like—  
if only for a minute or two.*

*When every lovely feeling is smoke,  
and peace seems impossible to be caught.*

*Blessed are you  
who long for a version where  
every good memory stacks up like bricks,  
built to wall out every pain,  
every remorse, every stinging fear.*

*But that's not how it works.  
No matter what you do  
to build up your reserves*

*you find yourself at the mercy  
of every new negative feeling.  
Contentedness feels elusive.  
Fulfillment feels inaccessible.*

*But here's the truth:  
You are not feelings alone.  
Sometimes you'll feel  
the weight of your purpose,  
the glow of love,  
the deep certainty that you belong.  
And other times?  
You'll just have to shrug  
and wait for contentment to return.*

*Blessed are you,  
who trust that when your emotions waver,  
there is a love that doesn't.  
A hope that stays.  
A peace that rests in your hands.  
May you find calm in your unsteadiness.  
May you be reminded that  
this ache will pass.  
And the in the meantime  
you are not alone.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from “A Blessing for That Unsettled Feeling” in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 105.

SUNDAY. MARCH 9

*May you go into  
this day of rest*

*with a lot of loud  
feelings about naps.*

*Then take one.*

*And text at least one  
person to boast.*

*Amen.*

# WE'RE NOT OKAY!

Day 05

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*“Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also.”*

—PSALM 31:9 (NRSV)

## *Reflect*

Our bodies have a way of letting us know when something’s weighing on us. Maybe it’s a fluttery stomach, a foggy brain, or just feeling completely wiped out. When those signals show up, it might help to pause and gently check in: What’s been bothering you lately? What’s been sitting in the background, waiting for a little more care and attention?

It doesn’t have to be all at once—just bit by bit. And as you listen, even a little, you might find that truth has two close cousins: hope and peace, which are ready to meet you where you are.

## Respond

Palliative care physician Kathryn Mannix once told a story about exploring emotions, one layer at a time. She would gently ask, “What’s underneath that sadness?” And let the answer reveal itself.

If you’re feeling off, maybe just take a moment to check in with yourself. You don’t have to have all the answers—sometimes just noticing what’s there is enough. Be curious, not critical, and let things unfold at their own pace.

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## *Blessing for truth-telling—however bitter or sweet*

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*Blessed are you,  
refusing to re-frame.  
You who are tired of silver linings.*

*Blessed are you the sincere,  
especially when the world around you  
craves a bright side.  
You who speak honestly about  
what is right in front of you:  
This is hard.  
Things might not get better.  
This really has gone horribly.  
There may not be a different way.*

*Bless your gratitude  
and your pain,  
your pleasures and your limitations.*

*Blessed are you, the truth-teller.  
And what a miracle it is when  
your candor finds a chorus  
that echoes back:  
“Same.”*

*The friend who will hear it.  
The parent who will stomach it.  
The partner who doesn’t roll their eyes.*

*They hear you.  
And it feels like a revelation.  
Every. Time.*

*May you feel your truths answered  
by this language of love,  
changing where you can and  
confirming where you can’t.*

*But loved, loved, loved all the same.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. “For Truth-Telling — However Bitter or Sweet” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 28-29.



# LEAD ME!

## Day 06

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*“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me.’”*

—MATTHEW 16:24 (NLT)

### *Reflect*

If you’ve ever been around a toddler, you know they love to say, “I can do it myself.” (Or, more likely, “NO!” or “I do.” Vocabulary will come.) When Jesus invites us to follow him, he is saying, “Watch and learn. Do as I do.” But sometimes I still want to say, “No thanks!” or “Actually, I can think of a better way.” And honestly, sometimes we are not sure if Jesus really had it all right (can I say that out loud?). When faced with tougher choices, it’s tempting to think, “Not today. Maybe later.” But here’s the thing about life: it almost always asks more of us than feels comfortable.

It asks us to love that person we’d rather not. To listen longer than we’d like. To advocate for those on the margins. It means forgiving again, and then wondering, “Seriously, is there a punch card for this?”

When we see people living like this—with joy, generosity, and stubborn kindness—it makes us want to lean in, not pull back. Because even though it’s harder, that path is the one that makes me feel most alive. It’s messy and humbling, but so worth it.

# Respond

Where do you see compassion, kindness, love, joy, or belonging? How can you join in?

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## Blessing for moving forward anyway

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*Blessed are you  
who feel so stuck*

*all you can see is the mud  
caking around your feet.*

*Let grace go first.  
Let it carve a path, however small,  
and show that  
even the tiniest efforts  
can multiply in love.*

*We've seen the sun rise  
over an empty tomb  
and life spring up from dust,  
so, all things considered,  
Maybe we could finally believe  
that something good  
could come from this day,  
this life, these weary limbs of yours.*

*Blessed are you,  
learning to follow where grace leads,  
stumbling forward,  
uncertain but held.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "God, Lead Me" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 119.

# HAVE FAITH!

## Day 07

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*"So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."*

—MATTHEW 23:3 (NIV)

## Reflect

Many of us were raised in faith traditions that have shaped us, whether we like it or not. We cannot easily forget those sensory memories—scratchy Easter outfits, the smell of incense, vacation bible school games, the taste of that one lady's casserole, or the liturgy you can still recite from memory. But faith is a living thing. Sometimes it grows with us, and sometimes there comes a time in our lives where our faith does not. We might outgrow it, or sometimes it might leave us behind. Our bodies or families or problems seem to get in the way of belonging in our faith traditions for one reason or another. We might find ourselves longing to find a safe space where our faith can grow, and we find belonging. Finding a more honest expression of faith in a community which cares for us and we care for is so hard. So bless you today, as you keep learning and searching. I hope you find a place of belonging that feels genuine and true (even if it isn't perfect).

## Respond

When it comes to faith, we can't solve it all, or understand it all, but we can focus on what we do know that rings true, and follow through with action that matches. What loving action can you take as an act of faith today?

If you have been deeply hurt by the church, we are so sorry that you found pain where you should have found hope. We have created a [Church Hurt Support Guide](#) with resources that may help.



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## Blessing for honest faith

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*Blessed are you  
who feel disappointed, even embarrassed,  
by what people did in religion's name.*

*Your heart longs for something trustworthy,  
something real.  
You see through the cultural scripts  
that turn faith into a game  
of winners and losers—  
where faith smells of hustle,  
and someone is always selling something.*

*But somewhere in my mind's recesses,  
you carry the trace of something truer.  
Some moment when you brushed up against  
a goodness so pure,  
it settled into your heart.  
A trustworthiness so vast,*

*that thereafter you couldn't accept  
any counterfeits*

*Blessed are you  
who keep searching for that again,  
who dare to hope for faith  
that is lived out so genuinely,  
with gentleness,  
with honesty so bright  
it lets something beautiful shine through.*

*If you can't get the theology right,  
may you not worry too long.  
Maybe it's better to live honestly  
by the light of what you know to do*

*That looks most like you,  
and let it remain a holy mystery.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "Honest Faith" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 89.

# HEARTBREAK!

Day 08

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*“The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”*

—PSALM 34:18 (NIV)

## Reflect

Here’s something you might have noticed: once people start talking about their lives, the stories start flowing. Before you realize it, the group has turned into an impromptu support club, and no one even voted on a name.

There’s something truly wonderful about sharing your story. When opening up about your struggles, it gives others the courage to share their own. Stories of incurable cancer, of struggles with mental health, of a death or a fractured relationship, of complicated or embarrassing grief, of a medical crisis that should never have happened. People are hungry to open up their pain to the sunlight of someone else’s listening heart. And, somehow, in the telling and in the listening, we may glimpse a bit of healing. So, here’s the thing: your story matters. Yes, yours. Even the parts you’re convinced no one wants to hear. Someone does. Write it down, tell a friend, or just let it out somehow.

## Respond

If it feels right, consider sharing a piece of your story with someone. You never know—it might give them the courage to share theirs too.

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### *Blessing for life after a loss*

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*Blessed are you,  
who feel the wound of fresh loss.  
Or of a loss...no matter how fresh...*

*that still makes your voice crack all  
these years later.*

*Still struck by its impossibility.  
Frozen in disbelief.  
How can this be?*

*It wasn't supposed to be this way.*

*Blessed are you, fumbling around  
for easy answers or quick truths  
to try to make this go down easier.  
You who are dissatisfied  
with the shallow theology and trite platitudes.*

*Blessed are those who  
demand a blessing.  
We are, wrestling with God.  
Wounded. Broken. Changed.*

*Blessed are we,  
who keep parenting,  
who keep our keep our lives afloat,  
and who stock the pantry...*

*because...what choice do we have  
but move forward  
with an unchosen life  
we thought  
we couldn't endure?  
One small step.*

*One act of hope at a time.<sup>8</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Life After Loss" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 86-87.

# STAY SOFT!

## Day 09

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*“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh.”*

—EZEKIEL 36:26 (ASV)

## Reflect

Life has a way of hardening our hearts. It isn't a terrible instinct either. Sometimes it is all you can do to heal from pain or suffering or lessons we have learned the hard way. Like when the people you trusted let you down. Or when she said she would love you forever, but she left. But a heart of stone misses out on a lot too. “Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning,” Louise Erdrich writes in her novel *The Painted Drum*. “You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart.”<sup>9</sup> So we live here in the messy middle between the beautiful and the terrible, with all the courage and love we can muster, keeping our hearts soft.

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<sup>9</sup> Louise Erdrich. *The Painted Drum*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). 274.

# Respond

You've been working so hard to keep your heart safe—it's okay to take a break. Speak to yourself with some kindness (maybe even thank your heart for putting up with so much). And maybe reach out to a friend—you both might need a good laugh or a little distraction.

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## *Blessing for when you see things as they al- ways were*

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*Blessed are you who see it all.  
The terrible, beautiful truth that our world,  
our lives seem irreparably broken.*

*And you can't unsee it.  
The hungry kid.  
The exhausted mom.  
The woman wondering it's worth it.  
The loneliness and despair.*

*Blessed are you who glimpse reality  
and don't turn away.  
This seeing comes at a steep cost,  
a cost paid not intentionally,  
but here you are.*

*Seeing things clearly.*

*Blessed are you who have  
worked hard to keep your heart soft.  
You who live with courage,  
fixing what is in your reach,  
praying about what is not,  
and loving, still.*

*May you experience deeper capacity  
and glimpses of hope,  
as you continue  
to see the world as it is.*

*Terrible.  
Beautiful.  
Fragile.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "A Blessing for When You See Things as They Always Were" in *Good Enough: 40ish Devotionals for a Life of Imperfection*. (New York: Convergent, 2022). 208.



# REST!

## Day 10

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*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”*

—MATTHEW 11:28 (NIV)

### *Reflect*

Sometimes our bodies, minds, and schedules are just doing too much. And honestly, who can blame us? There’s a lot you can’t simply pause—work deadlines, people depending on you, and that endless list of chores (seriously, when will the dishwasher fairy show up?).

You might not be able to set it all down, and certainly not all at once, but is there something you can let go of for a night? Or maybe for the next 10 minutes?

And those unsolvable problems you’ve been trying to carry—like single-handedly reversing climate change, curing cancer, or acting as someone’s unpaid therapist—the things that keep you circling, like a buffering icon that never loads.

Could you set those down, even for a little? Maybe tonight you could give yourself a little permission to not have to do it all. Sink into what rest you can, little by little. You deserve it.

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## *Blessing for deep tiredness*

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*May rest open itself to you,  
a little pocket of quiet,  
because your strength is running on empty.*

*May you be sheltered from every fear,  
whether it's creeping up behind you  
or what your imagination keeps inventing.*

*May your hummingbird heart slow—  
just enough to catch its breath.*

*May any storm be turned aside,  
leaving this quiet place untouched—*

*In a quiet so impossibly soft,  
may you feel held—  
not by perfection,  
not by productivity,  
but simply that you are enough,  
just as you are.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Kate Bowler. "For Feelings God's Love" in *Have a Beautiful Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 157.

SUNDAY, MARCH 16

*Since today is your  
well-earned break  
from the hard things in  
this wilderness we call Lent.*

*Why not try a little spiritual  
glamping (yes, I made that up!).*

*For real—grab some replenishment.*

*Breathe deep. Take it easy.*

*Look up at the stars and maybe even  
treat yourself to a s'more. Amen.*

# EMPTINESS!

## Day 11

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*“O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water.”*

—PSALM 63:1 (NKJV)

## Reflect

There’s a long tradition of gospel blues songs dedicated to acknowledging our deep sadnesses. The ones too hard to name directly. Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sings “Troubles of the World” in a way that made one anonymous commentator say, “Sing this at my funeral, or I ain’t comin’!” When we find ourselves in the unwelcome place of sadness, suffering, or drought, it might be time to sing the blues. Somehow, the combination of the words, chords, and rhythms becomes like water for our parched souls, allowing space for honesty and hope to co-exist.

## Respond

Play the blues—or whatever style feels right for you. You might start with soulful classics or heartfelt tunes like “Just as I Am,” “Amazing Grace,” “Riverside,” or “Give Me Jesus.” Or maybe you’re drawn to contemplative music like the meditative songs from the Taizé community, or artists like Wendell Kimbrough, who has beautifully set many Psalms to music.

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## *Blessing for when you need a little hope*

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*These days feel heavy and dark,  
like hope packed up and left,  
and forgot to send a postcard.  
We cry: Where are the good things?  
And honestly, where are the good people—  
the sensible ones  
fighting for what matters?*

*Why does it feel like bad stuff  
always elbows its way  
to the front,  
pushing everything good to the sidelines?*

*We're tired. Exhausted, really.  
Desperation is knocking,  
and it's tempting to surrender.*

*Blessed are you,  
who see the world as it is:  
the sickness and loneliness,  
the injustice that never seems to end,  
the greed and misuse of power,  
the violence and intimidation,  
the mockery of truth,  
and disdain for weakness,*

*and worse—  
the seeming powerlessness  
of anyone trying to stop it.  
Blessed are you,  
worn down by  
hard-earned cynicism,  
running on fumes,  
with no promise of a destination.*

*Maybe hope isn't so distant.  
Maybe it's there—small, persistent,  
and stubborn.*

*May you grasp something  
in the heaviness.  
A glimmer of what could be,  
and walk, step by step,  
toward the possibility  
that goodness exists.  
Hope is an anchor dropped into the future  
pulling you forward,  
toward something better—  
even if it doesn't feel like it right now.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>12</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For When You Need a Little Hope" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 40-41.

# LONGING!

## Day 12

---



*“As a deer longs for a stream of cool water, so I long for you, O God.”*

—PSALM 42:1 (GNT)

### *Reflect*

What do you long for? That question may feel like shining a light on our heart’s unspoken desires. Longing is not linear; it is not held by the boundaries of time. We long for the beauty of the past. Someone who once held you in his arms. Someone who once really made you laugh. That time back before you were sick or achy. We wish we could just skip ahead to the possibilities of the future—when I finally find them, when I have enough money, enough time or agency, or when they finally listen. We long for what could have been—when we had great plans for a future together...until he died, until the diagnosis, until the divorce. Longing is an ache inside our souls that starts from the seed of love. So maybe our longings aren’t bad, but tell us of something truer still.

### *Respond*

What is your heart longing for today? Are you longing for something in the future, in the past, or for what might have been?

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## *Blessing for everyday funerals*

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*When archaeologists dig down deep  
in the hard-packed sediment  
of civilizations  
come and gone  
they find flowers, dried flowers,  
strewn among the bones.  
Someone was laid down  
among their people  
and the first thought,  
the best thought,  
was to pull flowers from the dirt  
to accompany them.*

*We know an ending when we see one.*

*We attend funerals every day.  
Big and small,  
we see our endings.*

*Last day of school,  
last hope in that friend,  
end of this love or  
that bit of youth.  
Last touch of their warm,  
paper-skinned hand  
before they are stolen away  
to braid grass into crowns  
with the King of Heaven.*

*And if we are lucky,  
we pause once a day.  
We feel a kindling in our heart  
which reminds us:  
there it is and there it goes.  
We tilt our heads, then glance back,  
fast enough to see it fade.  
And we feel the magnitude  
of such a miracle—  
that anything, anyone, began at all.  
And we find ourselves,  
hearts weighed down by too much love,  
pulling at the grass,  
searching for flowers.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Kate Bowler. "A Blessing for Everyday Funerals" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 42-43.

# BE HAPPY!

## Day 13

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*“Early in the morning, as Jesus was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again!’ Immediately the tree withered.”*

—MATTHEW 21:18-19 (NIV)

## Reflect

It’s hard not to feel a little skeptical of all those perfectly happy pictures on social media. Life is so much more complicated than sunsets and whatever the “TSA tray aesthetic” is supposed to be. And yet, there’s this odd pressure to share only the shiny moments, like, “Look at me! I’m thriving! Definitely not crying in the car over something completely trivial!”

Honestly, the realest post would probably be something like, “This is my life, and it’s an absolute dumpster fire right now,” and then resisting the urge to slap a filter on it.

There is so much pressure to “just be happy,” but life’s messy. And that’s okay—because maybe, just maybe, everyone else’s mess isn’t as polished as it looks either.



## Respond

Sometimes I just like to yell, “NOT TODAY, BARBARA!” Don’t give into the pressure of happiness if you are really not feeling it. Because some days, the truth is I only have the capacity to be sad or mad or frustrated because my life is already enough on its own. Try yelling it (at non-human objects) next time you feel the pressure to perform and be happy (and then put your phone down and go get a snack).

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## *Blessing for when this pain doesn't make sense*

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*You're fumbling around for answers,  
reasons, meaning.  
And so far? Nothing.*

*Why you?  
Why them?  
Why now?*

*Will this get better?  
Is relief on the horizon?*

*So maybe you're wondering:  
if this pain can't make sense,  
can it at least matter?*

*Blessed are you, fragile as you feel,  
too weary to reach for hope,  
but still quietly whispering, "Help."*

*Blessed are you who know:  
some things can be fixed,  
and some things just...can't.*

*Blessed are you who admit:  
life isn't always getting better.  
Sometimes it's just hard.*

*Here in the pain and uncertainty,  
may we search for beauty, meaning...together.  
Not to solve or erase the pain  
(because wouldn't that be lovely),*

*but to remember beauty  
and sorrow coexist.  
And that doesn't mean you're broken  
or that you've been forgotten.*

*No, you are seen—right here,  
where hope and disappointment,  
joy and pain  
all co-exist.*

*You are not alone. Not now. Not ever.  
May mercy find you here.*

*In this. Again and again.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from “For When This Pain Doesn’t Make Sense” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 122-123.

# SHAME!

## Day 14

---



*“Steady my steps with your Word of promise, so nothing malign gets the better of me.”*

—PSALM 119:133 (THE MESSAGE)

## Reflect

You’re a master juggler—like Cirque du Soleil level, but with fewer sequins and more existential dread. You’ve got every ball in the air, all the time, balancing on a high wire like it’s no big deal. Until, of course, it is.

And when it does, that inner critic of yours might get chatty, muttering things like, “Why can’t you keep it all together?”

But here’s the deal: the problem isn’t the dropped ball. It’s the heavy weight of guilt that follows, making you forget just how much you’ve been carrying.

Dropping something now and then doesn’t make you less capable; it makes you gloriously, wonderfully human. And honestly, who needs a flawless juggling act anyway? Let’s leave that to the circus.

## Respond

Are there places where shame hides in the shadows? Using your own words, pray it into the light. Embrace your own goodness today. You are human and make mistakes, but those mistakes are not who you are or make you any more or less worthy of love.

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### *Blessing for the (rare) times that you're not all that great*

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*If someone asks you to confess something,  
maybe you'd answer like a job interview:*

*"I'm a perfectionist. I try too hard.  
Honestly, I spend too much time  
compensating for other people's faults.  
I'm exhausted."  
Sure, fine, that's true.  
You do try too hard, too long,  
and yes, your loving heart  
has been broken by others  
too many times to count.*

*But maybe deep down  
you feel the world shouldn't cost this much.  
Maybe you nurse grudges  
and nurture entitlement.*

*And let's be real:  
you might want to questionable—  
so long as you still look fabulous.*

*Generosity? Sure, sounds great in theory.  
But pouring out your gifts openly?  
Let's just say you're working on that.*

*And when you do manage to give,  
maybe it's hard not to share it.*

*There might be things you should regret,*

*you've re-branded those moments  
as "growth opportunities."  
So, blessed are you,  
who can stand in the mirror  
cringing only slightly,  
admitting these truths  
without falling  
into a tar pit of shame.*

*Because here's the deal:  
The light of truth burns—  
but also disinfects.*

*Confession isn't a slap on the wrist;  
it's letting go of heavy baggage  
of your finest spin tactics  
and let honesty work its magic.*

*So here you are.  
This moment is yours.  
Let the light in—and if it stings,  
maybe that's proof it's doing its job.<sup>15</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "Well, I'm Not All That Great Sometimes" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 129.

# STAY ANGRY!

Day 15

---



*“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”*

—EPHESIANS 4:26 (NRSVUE)

## *Reflect*

I keep a sign on my desk that says, “stay angry,” which I find both hilarious and very helpful. However, the suggestion that we “stay angry” might feel alarming given our culture’s desire to name anger as “bad.” But anger has saved my life when hospitals or insurance agencies kept ignoring me. It has kept me from giving into unfair expectations of me (hello sexism!). Anger lets us know when a boundary has been crossed. Anger responds to injustice and to grief, telling us the world is not as it should be. Perhaps anger isn’t negative, it’s just information that tells us that something is not right and maybe it is time to act. So, if you’re like me and you need a little anger, then how about this for encouragement: stay angry, my friends.

## Respond

I have started a spiritual practice of rage. Wanna join? Grab an egg or two you wouldn't mind wasting (I keep the expired ones on hand for this very moment). Throw it as hard as you can into your sink. How does it feel?

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### *Blessing for feeling it all*

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*Blessed are you who feel things big.  
You who might feel embarrassment  
because of how overwhelming things can be.*

*Blessed are you who need reminders  
that emotions are not bad or good.  
They are just...information.  
You feel angry because this is unjust.  
You feel sad because this is awful.  
You feel tired because this is exhausting.*

*Your emotions are not wrong or bad  
or lying to you  
or telling the full truth.  
They are giving you a bit of data  
that you shouldn't ignore.*

*We love,  
and lose,  
and fall,  
and get back up,  
and fail,  
and try again.*

*Your humanity is not an affront.  
We are reminding ourselves that  
this is how we're made:  
to feel pain, grief, stress,  
risk, fear, and heartbreak.*

*So, you beautiful creature,  
here is your permission to feel big.  
To feel joy and delight and excitement.  
And sorrow and fear and despair.*

*All the yellows and pinks,  
and violets and grays.  
Because you are the whole damn sky.<sup>16</sup>*

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<sup>16</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Feeling It All" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 4-5.

# WAIT!

## Day 16

---



*“Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.”*

—PSALM 27:14 (NIV)

### *Reflect*

It’s quite appropriate, I think, that the psalmist says it twice: “Wait for the Lord.” Some of us need to be told more than once. Because honestly, waiting is so hard, but what else can we do? We wait for that surgery date, for graduation to finally roll around, for that job opportunity or for the first check to come in. For that baby to come, or for when you can finally get a full night’s sleep. For the phone call you long for, or the one you dread. But what do we do in the meantime? Maybe waiting isn’t passive. I once saw a video of a duck floating on a pond. From the surface it looked quite chill, *until you saw it from below*. The duck’s webbed feet were wildly moving. *Perhaps that’s what waiting is like*. It is a practice of strengthening our hope muscles. To laugh when we can, and pray when we can, and act when we can, trusting that God is up to something good.

## Respond

Today, you have full permission to do something ridiculous or absurd with the only justification being to make yourself smile or laugh—dance like nobody's watching or make a joke that nobody else would understand.

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*Blessing for  
when you're tired  
of waiting for the  
world to get better*

---

*Blessed are we waiting with bated breath,  
waiting for something new to be born  
—for new hope, new joy, new life.*

*Blessed are we whose patience  
grows thinner by the day.*

*We, tired of the world as it is  
—in all of its heartache and loss  
and hopelessness.  
We who want more.  
More hope. More joy. More life.*

*Blessed are we who sit here,  
waiting  
between desire  
and expectation.  
We who are making room*

*for more this Lent.  
May we be surprised with joy*

*in the midst of sorrow,  
abundance in the midst of pain,  
peace and presence in the chaos.  
As we hope it gets better.<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from “For the Third Sunday of Advent – Joy” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 218-219.

SUNDAY, MARCH 23

*Repeat after me:*

*Not today, Barbara. Not. To. Day.'*

*Now, put down the phone.*

*Put down the to-do list.*

*And let go of all those  
heavy expectations.*

*Take the day off—  
whatever that looks like for you—  
and let it be enough. Amen.*



# LOVE YOUR YOUNGER SELF!

Day 17

---



*“And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.”*

—MARK 10:16 (NIV)

## *Reflect*

Imagine yourself when you were 6 years old. Do you remember what you were going through when you turned 10? Remember how you felt at 16? Do you remember your dreams at 21? All those versions of who you used to be are still inside of you. Your 7-year-old self still gets excited when you remember the joy of that day. Your 35-year-old self still wants to cry when remembering the pain of that year. Like a nesting doll, every version of you has been a part of you becoming who you are today. Some versions of you went through some terrible and painful experiences and some felt great joy. But all versions of you were held by God.

## Respond

Draw a nesting doll or stick figures of you growing from young to old (or from smaller to taller if you don't like growing old). Who have you become? Who do you carry with you?

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### Blessing for stretching your heart

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*For when life is too many things.  
Awful. Lovely. Full. Shockingly incomplete.*

*May you live with it's absurdity,  
a life that's working out just fine,  
AND gone to hell in every hand basket.*

*Let today be an exercise of yes...and.*

*Yes, you have so much to be thankful for,  
and this is not what you imagined.  
Yes, there are moments of joy,  
and, you've lost more than  
you thought possible.  
Yes, you want to make the most of today,  
and your body keeps breaking.  
Yes, you are hopeful,*

*and this is daunting.  
Yes, you are trying to be brave,  
and you are also quietly terrified.*

*So, blessed are you,  
living awkwardly between yes...and.*

*May you see this as life's work.  
Where it takes courage to live,  
where grief strips you to the studs  
and love can remake you again.  
Where your heart can be shattered  
and still beating.  
Never sorry to break at all.*

*Yes...and.*

*May you be capable of absurd joy,  
ridiculous love,  
audacious risk,  
and even fear,  
as your heart stretches to hold  
this gloriously messy yes...and today.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For Stretching Your Heart" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 18-19.

# TERRIBLE & BEAUTIFUL?!

Day 18

---



*“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.”*

—EPHESIANS 1:5 (NRSVUE)

## Reflect

I was wildly unpopular as a child. It was mostly because of the absolute inability to hide my feelings or play it cool, so there was zero cool to be found. But I’ll never forget my first forever friend, Chelsea. We met in Judo class in grade 5 with Sensei Bob in that unforgettably yellow room doing hip-throws on mats just as yellow. Somehow there was an unspoken understanding between us—we are both freaking out and we plan on never hiding that because we’re basically incapable of it. She is still the person I call to debrief my day, even though we live 1500 miles apart. We just know we don’t have to hide our actual feelings, which has become one of the loveliest kinds of intimacy I’ve ever known. And that’s the kind of belonging God extends to us too. It’s the knowing-it-all kind.

## Respond

Try an experiment. Think back through the day. Run the film of your hours and catch yourself doing something loving. Let that be the picture that is most real about you. That's the family resemblance.

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### *Blessing for learning to love yourself*

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*When you don't feel worth loving,  
may you remember  
that you were made on purpose.*

*May you see yourself through gentler eyes—  
how someone who loves you sees you,  
with pride and tenderness,  
deep joy and care.*

*Every freckle put in place.  
Every split end, noticed.  
Every tear, bottled,  
Every bad joke, humored.*

*All your limits and mistakes,  
all your wild hopes (and sometimes sass)  
everything that makes you you,*

*is a masterpiece—  
at least in the eyes of love.  
Blessed are you,  
who sometimes feel unlovable,  
who constantly replay that one horrible moment  
never mind, it's been several years  
and they definitely don't remember it.  
Blessed are you,  
as you shake off the embarrassment  
of being human again today—  
in all your cringe-worthy moments,  
your old school photos with crooked smiles,  
and the outsidersness you once felt  
(or still feel).*

*Blessed are you,  
as you try to feel at home,  
remembering with growing compassion  
that this is you,  
in all your beautiful, unwieldy humanity.  
Maybe humility is something like this:  
compassion for yourself,  
because being loved requires no preconditions.<sup>19</sup>*

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<sup>19</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For Learning to Love Yourself" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 62-63.

# COMPLAIN!

## Day 19

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*“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?”*

—PSALM 13:1-2 (NRSVUE)

## Reflect

I'd like to make a strong case for complaint as a spiritual virtue. There is something cathartic when you don't have to eat it. When, instead, you can say, "This did not go well. I am decidedly not pleased. Everyone needs to do better." Complaining allows us to see that the world is not as it should be. Complaining to God allows us to locate ourselves and God in a situation. When we say to God, "I am tired of being sick, I am tired of people not listening to me, I am angry that this is happening. Where are you?" Then, we might find that God shows up in surprising ways—when a friend knows a friend, when someone brings you dinner, when the doctor finally understands. Your complaints might help you figure out the next right step or just help you get it all out. Either way, God can handle your complaints. God will listen.

# Respond

Let. It. Out. Pull out a piece of paper and vent every complaint on your mind. I know the people around you may not be able to hear it right now. That's okay. See how you feel after you lay it all on the page. Better? Worse? Notice any patterns?

---

## Blessing for when you feel forgotten

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*For when you may not know how else to say this:  
This is too much.*

*You have a body that needs healing,  
in relationships that need restoring,  
in a whole world  
that needs mending.*

*You are in over your head.  
And maybe you feel jealous when others  
seem to have it all together,  
when their lives seem to work out.  
What about you?*

*So may it start now:  
the healing, the restoration,  
the renewal.*

*We can't wait much longer.  
Blessed are we, wanting to feel better.  
May you find relief from pain  
and see good days again.*

*May capable hands—skilled professionals,  
whose training has prepared them,  
and whose disposition propels them  
to seek out the answers to make  
A difference for you and for others.*

*May the brokenness between you  
and the people you struggle to love  
begin to mend:*

*When caring for others feels overwhelming,  
when family frustrates,  
colleagues challenge,  
kids test every last nerve,  
or friends let you down.*

*When mentors disappoint,  
when loneliness sets in,  
and you find yourself wishing  
you had what others do.  
May the whole world be restored,  
and may you help in it's redemption:  
the old and the young,  
the sorry and sad,  
the angry, the vengeful, the snide,  
the mindless, the innocent, the misguided,  
the cruel and powerful,  
the weak and frail,  
the prisoners and the protesters,  
the politicians and the police,  
the scientists and the engineers,  
the nurses and the doctors,  
the workers and the unemployed,  
the sick, the hungry, the poor,*

*Those experiencing homelessness,  
the lonely, and the dying—  
every soul in all creation.  
May goodness prevail.  
Blessed are you when you're drowning,  
doing what you can:  
lamenting honestly,  
celebrating others' relief when it comes—  
when relationships are restored,  
when they find a measure of peace.  
We are not less from their good fortune.  
But rather, emboldened to say:  
"Me too!"*

*Receive this blessing. It is for you.  
And then offer it to someone else too.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "A Blessing for When You Feel Forgotten" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 106-107.

# HELP!

## Day 20

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*“Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.”*

—PSALM 25:4-5 (NIV)

## Reflect

It is not easy to admit that I can't do it all and that I may need help. The cultural narrative we are told is that we should be able to handle it all on our own or “pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.” But let this historian tell you what this really means. \*Sounds of a historian rolling up her sleeves.\* In the early 19th century, bootstrapping originally meant trying to do something ridiculous, like lifting yourself up by your own hair.<sup>21</sup> It's impossible. So maybe we should simmer down imagining that our individual selves can carry the world on our shoulders. It takes a village to raise a child, and a community of faith to sustain being human.

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Zimmer. “Figurative Bootstraps (1834)” in *Diacritiques: American Dialect Society* (online newsletter). August 2005.

## Respond

When was the last time you attempted to do the impossible like picking yourself off the ground by your own hair? Or moving something ridiculously heavy without help? Share with a friend some of the absurd things you have attempted to do on your own, so you can both have a good laugh today. God knows we all need help asking for help.

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## Blessing for when you need a second to think it over

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*Blessed are you who don't have  
all the right answers.  
You who say "I don't know" because  
it's the best response for now.*

*You who lean in, unafraid to learn, change, be  
wrong along the way.*

*Blessed are you,  
stretched and pressed and pulled  
by the uncertainty,  
deciding to not stay the same,  
we are not who we were.*

*We have been pulled into the unknown  
without our permission.*

*But the challenge is the same:  
reveal truth with love amid the chaos  
Blessed are you who realize that  
community can help see truth more fully.*

*Being fragile amid a world of hammers  
takes courage  
to be wrong,  
to learn something new,  
to choose humility and kindness  
over being right.*

*May we be people who don't  
have it all together  
(and who are done posturing).  
Curious, hopeful, courageous.<sup>22</sup>*

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<sup>22</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For When You Need a Second to Think It Over" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 94-95.



# NOT EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE!

Day 21

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*“My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, melting within me.”*

—PSALM 22:14 (NLT)

## Reflect

I like to describe agency (our ability to act in our lives) as something limited. We are not superhuman (and if you are, I have some requests). This goes against our culture’s imagination that EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE IF YOU JUST BELIEVE. Sorry, Deborah. *Everything* is certainly not possible. You alone cannot cure terminal illnesses. You alone cannot solve world hunger. We can barely make it through our regular days without facing impossible odds. So what if, instead, we start imagining our agency in smaller and smaller pieces. What small decision can you make today? How will you spend your precious energy? Who do you need to reach out to this afternoon? What chore can you leave for tomorrow? We all

face very real limitations—limited time, limited energy, limited resources, limited emotional bandwidth, and (if we're being really honest) limited days. How will you live within all of that beautiful, limited humanity?

## Respond

Even if we don't realize it, our whole lives are made up of small decisions in the face of our limitations. We may not be able to do everything, but we can make small decisions about what is important to us. What small decision can you make today that feels realistic?

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## *Blessing for the courage to try... and the wisdom to know when to stop*

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*Blessed are you, faced with the impossible.  
You who do not look away  
from what threatens to swallow you whole.  
You who stare down reality,  
though your heart quickens.  
You for whom action comes swiftly,  
as you chart the next step  
or bulldoze a new path for yourself.  
You know to turn hope into action.  
And bless you for it.  
Blessed are you who, when you've come*

*to the end of what's possible,  
find the courage to live there too.  
Accepting what cannot be changed.  
And finding that beauty and meaning  
and love live there too.*

*You know how it feels to be  
held together by so many loves...  
by so much to lose.*

*Blessed are we who are learning to hope.  
And how to let go.  
When to act.  
And when to stop.  
Holding together two irreconcilable truths:  
that our lives are so valuable  
precisely because we have much to fear  
with much to love.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>23</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For the Courage to Try.. and the Wisdom to Know When to Stop" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 72-73.

# FIND YOUR WEIRD THING!

Day 22

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*“There is a time to cry, and a time to laugh;  
a time to have sorrow, and a time to dance.”*

-ECCLESIASTES 3:4 (NLV)

## Reflect

I’ve found that during the hardest, heaviest seasons, I need a release valve. For me, that usually involves visiting a world’s largest or world’s tiniest. Like seeing the Giant Mosquito in Komarno, Manitoba. Sometimes we see the wild, beautiful things of life to remind us that absurdity can live here too. We are not all one thing. We can experience pain and fear and loss AND joy and laughter and courage too.

## Respond

What quirky or weird thing can you do today to seek out and remind yourself of what else can live here too? Might I suggest finding absurd landmarks, roaming the garden department smelling the flowers, singing Christmas carols in March (or your favorite 90's hip hop, another great choice)?

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## *Blessing for waking up to life again*

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*Blessed are we, beginning to unclasp  
from the crippling fear we've grown  
far too accustomed to,  
from the season of nervous vigilance,  
from the boredom and frustration of  
plans deferred.*

*Winter's long frost is over.  
New ground has appeared,  
and paths too we didn't see before.*

*Blessed are we needing help waking up  
to the music, the movement,  
and the color of living,  
who need help trying on joy instead.  
The wonder of the daffodil,  
the power of the tiniest seed,  
cracked open and sprouting new life,  
reaching, at its own pace, toward light.*

*Blooming.  
Blessed are we who long to awake.  
May we find the places where  
beauty and love can reach us.*

*We're ready for something new.<sup>24</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Waking Up to Life Again" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 52-53.

SUNDAY, MARCH 30

*In case you need a reminder today:*

*somewhere in your house, there's  
probably some chocolate  
(or whatever treat you love most).*

*And if you really let yourself relax,  
you might just  
hear it calling your name.*

*Can't hear it yet?  
Well, you know what to do.  
Amen.*

# HOPE!

## Day 23

---



*“Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.”*

—ISAIAH 40:30-31 (NIV)

## Reflect

I met an honest-to-goodness Tigger recently. (You know Winnie-the-Pooh’s irrepressibly springy and bouncy tiger friend named Tigger). Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Nicholas Kristof is someone who has boundless, hard-won optimism, despite all the tragedy, devastation, and genocide he has born witness to. “Any one of us has the capacity to make a difference,” he told me. “It doesn’t solve the global problem, but it’s transformative for some people, somewhere.”<sup>25</sup> So start with one small act of kindness, and then two or three more. It all adds up.

## Respond

What small hope is rising in you about the one small difference you can make?

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<sup>25</sup> Nicholas Kristof in “Hope is a Muscle,” September 3, 2024 in *Everything Happens*, presented and produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 43:42, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/hope-is-a-muscle/>.

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## *Blessing for the ones who bear witness*

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*Blessed are the noticers.  
The ones who see the full story.  
Blessed are the attenders.  
The witness-bearers.  
The story-holders.  
The ones who tiptoe to the edge with us,  
knowing that it will break their heart, too.  
Choosing us anyway.*

*Blessed are those who are amazed  
by a life lived in its fragility,  
in its brevity, in its beauty.*

*Blessed are those who say: "BEHOLD."  
Behold, this is their love.  
Behold, this is their annoying habit.  
Behold, these are the people they loved  
and know so much about  
they could clear or implicate in a crime.  
Behold, these are their exes,  
their favorite karaoke songs,  
their fast-food orders.  
Behold, they're not a problem to be solved.  
This is a person to be loved.  
This is a miracle with a name.*

*And how lucky are we?  
These people.  
These loves.  
These precious, precious, precious days.<sup>26</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For the Ones Who Bear Witness" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 160-161.

# HARD-WON WISDOM!

Day 24

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*“Cry out for insight, and ask for understanding. Search for them as you would for silver; seek them like hidden treasures.”*

—PROVERBS 2:3-4 (NLT)

## *Reflect*

We will never be able to make total sense of the pain and suffering we endure. But, somehow, we may find little bits of hard-won wisdom in the midst. These precious gems do not erase the pain or justify its presence. People have had many ways of describing these unlikely (unasked for) takeaways. Like Abraham Lincoln, who tried to make sense of the death of his son and live with courage in the light of what he knew. This kind of wisdom was the “delicate fruit of a lifetime of pain,”<sup>27</sup> his biographer noted. Sometimes we can only mine a couple of true things, and

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27 Joshua Wolf Shenk. *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled his Greatness*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005.) 192.



the rest of it is still garbage. We get to choose if we sift through the garbage to find the gems. As Rabbi Steve Leder says, “If you’re going through hell, don’t come out empty handed.”<sup>28</sup>

## Respond

If you were to name a delicate fruit that you gleaned after a season of terrible, what would you say? What is the wisdom you have gained out of the terrible? Reminder: these “lessons” do not erase or justify what you went through. No need to play mathematician on this one.

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## Blessing for the life you didn’t choose

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*Blessed are you when the shock subsides,  
when vaguely, you see a line appear  
that divides before and after.  
You didn’t draw it,  
and can barely even make it out,  
But here you are,  
forced into a story you wouldn’t write.*

*Blessed are you in the tender place  
of awe and dread,  
wondering how to be whole  
when dreams have disappeared  
and part of you with them,  
where mastery, control, determination,  
bootstrapping, and grit  
are consigned to the realm of Before  
(where most of the world lives),*

*in the dream promising infinite choices,  
unlimited progress, best life now.*

*Blessed are we in the After zone,  
loudly shouting:  
Is there anybody here?  
We hear the echo, the shuffle of feet,  
the murmur of others  
asking the same question,  
together in knowledge  
that we are beyond what we know.  
May you see a glimmer of possibility  
in this new constraint,  
that small truths will be given back to  
us.*

*We are held.  
We are safe.  
We are loved.  
We are loved.  
We are loved.<sup>29</sup>*

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<sup>29</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. “For the Life You Didn’t Choose” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 188-189.

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<sup>28</sup> Steve Leder in “Don’t Come Out Empty Handed.,” April 4, 2023 in *Happens*, presented and produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 53:03, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/dont-come-out-empty-handed/>.

# EMBRACE WONDER!

Day 25

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*“What a wildly wonderful world, God! You made it all, with Wisdom at your side, made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.”*

—PSALM 104:24 (THE MESSAGE)

## *Reflect*

Adulthood has a way of robbing us of the feeling of wonder, doesn't it? Is there poetry in taxes? Is there amazement in doing the dishes? *Not really.* Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement....Get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.” I don't know how Rabbi Heschel had the energy to greet each new day with amazement. And yet, part of me thinks that would be *wonderful*—to be surprised by what the day holds or in awe of those around me. Perhaps we can start today. Look around you. What ordinary wonder have you missed?

## Respond

Maybe we need a random list of things to wonder about. Like why does that cloud look like a dinosaur? Why do crickets chirp at night? What random things do you wonder about? Write them down as a reminder to wake-up each day looking for awe and wonder in the world around you.

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## Blessing to feel wonder again

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*You stand, stone still,  
at the edge of disheartenment.  
You hold this heavy certainty:  
nothing changes, nothing lasts.  
You feel hollow.  
And yet, this world is full.*

*Warm earth pushing up new seedlings,  
unfathomable oceans  
teeming with mystery,  
and the miracle of your very body—  
fragile as it may feel—  
carries the possibility of creating something new.  
We are all swimming in wonder.*

*So why can't we always feel it?  
Your blood feels cold with each tiring loss.  
Good things, beautiful loves,  
pried from your fingers,  
leaving them to feel empty now.  
But still.*

*Even if, today, hope does not come,  
may the lights at a neighbor's house  
glow like a jack-o'-lantern.*

*May the sounds wafting through your window—  
a barking dog, kids running amok,  
the buzz of a television  
rehearsing the day's calamities—  
remind you that we persist somehow,  
under a distant shadow,  
But joyful anyway.*

*May the sun shine down  
and touch you.  
And may you bask in it,  
feeling the low murmur of the ground  
steady beneath your feet.  
And as the earth makes turns creakily  
toward night,  
let the day fall in behind us.  
"What next?" We will say to the night sky,  
before we close the door  
and consider its answer tomorrow.<sup>30</sup>*

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<sup>30</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "To Feel Wonder Again" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 25.

# LET GO!

## Day 26

---



*“Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?”*

—ISAIAH 43:18-19 (NRSVUE)

### *Reflect*

There are some things that we can't let go of—like care-taking responsibilities, illness, or paying bills (wouldn't that be nice?). But there are some things we can work on letting go of—like past hurts or grudges or that one thing we said that one time but cannot forget. Bruno Lanteri, an early 19th century priest (who was possibly the kindest of his age), advises us to “turn the page and begin again.”<sup>31</sup> Well doesn't that sound a little like grace! So maybe today is the day to take Lanteri's advice. Whatever it is we carry—from the heaviness of the things we cannot set down to all we could (but probably won't). In this way, I don't carve out those parts of my life—I simply turn the page and let the previous pages go.

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31 Adapted from Fr. Timothy M. Gallagher, O.M.V. *Begin Again: The Life and Legacy of Bruno Lanteri*. (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2013). xiii.

# Respond

If you catch yourself going to the list of things your brain is scared to let go of—don't sweat it, you're just being human again. Thank your brain for reminding you of the old chapters and gently turn the page.

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## Blessing for when you need to hold on or let go

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*Sometimes it feels like a better person  
wouldn't be like this:*

*tethered to so many hopes,  
and fears, and expectations.*

*Blessed are you, pulled between letting go—  
sometimes needing to let go—  
and needing to hold on.*

*Blessed are you, who yearn  
for connection, for love, for touch.  
You who hunger  
for the beauty of life itself  
and the people who fill it.*

*Blessed are you, who can't yet say,*

*"I'm letting it go,"  
because it feels as if you'll wash  
away into an ocean of nothingness.  
May you cling to what feels good,  
loosening your grip on the painful untruths:  
like the one that says you're alone,  
or unlovable,  
or that desire is the enemy.*

*May you hunger for what is good,  
and be filled.  
There will be no easy math.  
You will lose, and you will gain,  
and almost none of it will make sense.*

*It will force your hands open.  
In the ebb and flow of wins and losses,  
may you notice the mystery of it all—  
the stubbornness of flowers  
and the need for endless small reminders  
that the pain and comedy of it,  
will point you back to love.<sup>32</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For When You Need to Hold On or Let Go" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 178-179.

# WORRY!

## Day 27

---



*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

—PHILIPPIANS 4:6 (NIV)

### *Reflect*

*Heart races. Palms get sweaty. The ever-familiar feeling of dread.* What are your worry symptoms? I have never really understood why people tell you: “don’t worry” or “calm down.” Has it ever worked? I guess people love to get bossy when someone is up to their hairline in worry. But maybe there is a different way to respond to worry—a way that makes room for our greatest fears to live alongside our greatest loves. So the next time you feel worry rising in your chest or body or mind, start by naming what it is you’re worried about. What does it tell you about what you love? What you’re afraid to lose or live without?

### *Respond*

Start a worry book (or note on your phone) and write down your worries once a week. Every once in a while, scroll through those worries and see what has changed or not changed. Tell God what you need help with on this list.

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*Blessing for  
having a  
beautiful,  
terrible day*

*Blessed are we, the worried,  
with eyes open to it all.  
Blessed are we, the aware,  
knowing that the only sane thing is  
admit to the fear in our peripherals.*

*Blessed are we, the hopeful,  
eyes searching for the horizon,  
ready to meet the next miracle.  
Yes, blessed are we, the grateful,  
awake to this beautiful, terrible day.<sup>33</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup> Kate Bowler. "For a Beautiful, Terrible Day" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). XXVII.

# CHANGE!

## Day 28

---



*“Listen, daughter, and pay careful attention: Forget your people and your father’s house. Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honor him, for he is your lord.”*

—PSALM 45:10-11 (NIV)

### *Reflect*

When did you realize that the family you grew up in was...different from other families? Maybe it was a worldview you were given. Or the rules you lived under. The dynamics between your parents or extended family or siblings might not look like that of your friends'. At some point, we may realize our family is odd. And simultaneously, so much of that strangeness is also familiar—it's what made you, you. How do we discover compassion for our families of origin though we might not fit in anymore? That is the ever-evolving question as we navigate growing and changing and loving, but never forgetting.



## Respond

Take a blank sheet of paper, and turn it sideways (panoramic view). On the top left, write 'sticky,' and on the top right, write 'stuck.' The rest of the page is yours to fill, with words or drawings—no matter how rudimentary—to illustrate the you that is now. What small problems are sticky? What are the big problems in which you feel stuck? Talk to God about what little changes you are ready to make to get unstuck.

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## Blessing for when you feel stuck

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*You may feel like you're cemented still.  
Unable to see a way out.*

*Blessed are you who admit:  
"I have no idea how I got here,  
or how to escape this  
but I am ready—  
ready for more light, truth, grace."*

*May today's moments move you  
to where love can reach you.  
May a deep truth remind you  
with each step.*

*May you grow where you are,  
sending down roots into trusted truths,  
to where love lives,  
and beauty is wide awake.*

*Let your heart seek the one good step.  
And then the next.  
Movement.*

*That is the way.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For When You Feel Stuck" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 148-149.

SUNDAY, APRIL 6

*Oh lovey, life can be so  
wonderfully weird.*

*Embrace the absurdity  
and find the joy in the  
ridiculous moments.*

*Rest in the delight  
of the unexpected.*

*Amen.*

# SHARE THE LOAD!

Day 29

---



*“On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus.”*

—LUKE 5:17-19 (ESV)

## Reflect

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber describes how she understood the truth of our interdependence most fully when she began practicing the uncomfortable honesty demanded by Alcoholics Anonymous. “Recovery is hard to do on your own,” she observed. “You have to do it with a group of other people who are messed up in the same way but have found some light in their darkness.”<sup>35</sup> They nicknamed this

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<sup>35</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber in “The Insight of Outsiders,” February 6, 2018, in *Everything Happens*, presented and produced by Kate Bowler, podcast, 35:36, <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/nadia-bolz-weber-the-insight-of-outsiders-s1e1/>.

sort of community “The Rowing Club.” They were all in the same boat. And they would have to take turns pulling on the oar. At times, each person would have to be willing to be carried.

## *Respond*

Some days we can be the one who gives, and other days we need to receive. Which is it for you today?

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## *Blessing for friends who hold us up*

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You are called to love,  
but people are inherently risky.  
Telling your story, being known,  
asking for help,  
even voicing the same worry again  
for fear it might sound cliché.  
(Shouldn't you be over it already?)

*But something beautiful happens  
when you're known.  
You are become stronger somehow.*

*Think of the pillars holding up cathedrals.  
Flying buttresses, designed to support  
walls that might otherwise crumble.  
They allow the structures to rise taller,  
more intricate, adorned with ornaments,  
or filled with stained glass  
that scatters colorful light in every direction.*

*When you don't feel tall or strong,  
may you find those who hold you up,  
who remind you how loved you are.*

*Yes, you'll get back up again today.  
You'll get those kids cereal,  
help parents with an errand,  
go to work or come up with something  
better to do with retirement hours.*

*You will try again.  
Because someone else's absurd faith in you  
fortifies you.*

*So, blessed are the flying buttresses—  
those who hold us up when  
everything feels ready to fall apart.*

*They let us face the day,  
not because we're doing it alone,  
but precisely because we aren't.<sup>36</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. “For Friends Who Hold Us Up” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 60-61.

# BELOVED!

## Day 30

---



*“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.”*

—PSALM 139:14-15 (NIV)

### Reflect

Aging, I think, is a grand lesson in realizing you are certain about less and less. Instead of more answers, I end up with more questions. God, why did you make mosquitoes? Mirror mirror on the wall, how did that happen? Why do the years seem short and the minutes long? When do I start taking my own good advice—sooner? When will I ever heal? But what is becoming clearer and clearer is God’s absurd, wonderful love. God’s face is turned toward me in particular—and to you in particular—with a tenderness that melts hearts. It is a love that never ceases. It isn’t tied to us having all the right answers or right behaviors or right life. It is just a love overflowing for us all.

# Respond

Make a list of everyone you love today. Take time to write a few people on that list, and mail them a letter telling them how much you love them. It can never be too soon to remind your beloveds of your love, but it can be too late.

---

## Blessing for feeling love

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*It can take a while to see it,  
clouded as these days often are  
with a vague sense of unease,  
a gradual dawning to the awareness  
that what is needed most is love.*

*Love for the specific, particular person  
you are right here, right now.  
(And though it might feel vulnerable  
to admit it,  
aren't we all at the center  
of our own stories?  
As heroes, villains, winners, losers,  
or whatever fits the plot of the day?)  
Let the story rewind,  
back to the beginning,  
to the moment eyes first opened  
and, newborn, you came into this world  
wholly loved.*

*Loved not for anything you had done,  
but simply because.  
Even now, when the world feels blurry,  
love remains.*

*And that is life itself.  
May you be reminded again:  
how the world spins, the winds change,  
the oceans churn,  
and not a single fact  
tells a different story than this:  
you are loved.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "For Feelings God's Love" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 157.

# *COSTLY LOVE!*

## *Day 31*

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*“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”*

—JOHN 13:34-35 (NIV)

### *Reflect*

The thing about love is the cost. I met someone really special over the pandemic who taught me about love’s cost. She is a professor of nursing named Christie Watson, and she risked her life every single day during the height of illness for the sake of others. She wasn’t planning on having her schedule upended, her courage tested, and a flurry of fears about bringing disease back into the home with her worried teenagers. Costly love goes beyond what we think we can afford. But it was the love between Christie and her patients that sustained her. Because that’s the other thing about costly love—at its core is *love*. In it we see the reflection of God.

### *Respond*

Where are you in the seasons of costly love—springtime (eager), summer (energized), fall (running on empty), or winter (you might need a rest)? Ask a friend to help you figure out how to balance the cost and the love.

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## Blessing for caregivers

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*Bless you whose love is service,  
whose every urge is to keep going,  
and not to count the cost.*

*And yet blessed are you,  
beginning to notice that you are  
slowing down, inexplicably,  
or just pausing, staring for no reason,  
or starting something,  
but then quickly turning to another demand.  
You who realize that you are beginning  
to lose the thread.*

*Blessed are you who say,  
I really can't keep going like this,  
at this pace, under this weight.*

*May there be steady hands  
to sit you down  
and keep you there long enough  
for you to really feel what you feel,  
and know what you know.*

*May there be wisdom  
to trust that the community is  
wide enough, kind enough,  
effective enough to meet the needs  
that are here—both yours and theirs.*

*May there be peace  
that frees you to let your hands  
lie gently open awhile,  
the grace to just receive.*

*Seek the rest you need,  
and a little bit more.  
And breathe.<sup>38</sup>*

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<sup>38</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For Caregivers" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 96-97.



# SAY YES!

## Day 32

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*“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”*

—PSALM 16:11(NIV)

### *Reflect*

“Things happen when you leave the house.” That’s my friend Kelly Corrigan’s motto. Pain or chronic illness or caregiving or the loads of adulting we juggle might tempt us to keep our world small. To say ‘no’ to an opportunity or invitation or new friendship that comes our way. So if you are wondering if you should stay in bed or get outside, pick the latter. When we say ‘yes’ whatever the day holds, we might be surprised by what will meet us.

### *Respond*

Take time today to reflect on your adventures and different seasons of your life. What is some of the hard-won wisdom you can find? If possible, get out of the house today and see what is waiting for you.

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## *Blessing for finding your way as you go*

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*Blessed are you, imperfect, gorgeous you,  
with nothing more than this moment's honesty,  
offering what you have—your incomplete self,  
your half-formed thoughts,  
your unsteady hope.*

*May you release the “perfect plan”,  
the comforting myth that everything works out.*

*Instead, may you find grace in trying—  
knitting together days as they unravel,*

*stepping forward even when the path is unclear.  
Blessed are you who ask for help—  
not for certainty or fixes,  
but steadiness to take the next step.  
May your courage rise,  
Fortifying you to try and try again.*

*Moving forward,  
not because you know everything,  
but from knowing that love  
will carry you forward.*

*This life is uncertain,  
but you are not alone in it.*

*May you find strength in the mystery,  
and peace in the unfolding of today.<sup>39</sup>*

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39 Kate Bowler. Adapted from “For Living Without Control” in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 103.

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# LOVE UP CLOSE!

Day 33

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*“Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you.”*

—ROMANS 15:7 (NIV)

## *Reflect*

Loving someone from a distance is much easier than loving up close. When you get close up, you can see all of their bad opinions, all of their wrongness, all of their hard-to-ignore habits. Francis Collins, a world-renowned geneticist and physician, understands how difficult it is to love people who are so unlike us. He led the National Institutes of Health during the pandemic, which meant he endured and witnessed vitriol on all fronts. What we need, he said, is to get out of our silos and really listen to one another. And that means accepting that the other person might have something valuable to say (as hard as that is for us to admit). Perhaps we might not be as far off as we first imagined.

## *Respond*

What might we reconsider? And what would it take? Maybe start by reading the ‘wrong’ news source and considering another’s point of view. Maybe learning something new about ourselves and “them.”

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## *Blessing for loving someone when differences divide us*

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This is a hard one.  
How do I begin to connect  
with someone so different from me?  
How do I bridge this gap?  
It feels wrong, like the beliefs I abhor.

*Blessed are we who want included  
in the wild and beautiful experiment  
to find a common humanity.*

*Who desire to come into the gap  
that separates human from human,  
to love the stranger—  
especially the one we really don't understand  
and secretly want to set straight.*

*Blessed are those standing in the gap,  
In what can't be understood.  
To actively work on disproving  
our own intuitions about another,  
to begin to see what they see.*

*Blessed are we, swimming upstream  
against the current of human frailty,  
fears and emotions,  
and willing to be wrong.*

*To reconsider.  
And hold to our integrity  
with kindness.  
Desiring to map it out  
and play the course,  
instead of the one we made up.  
And to discover that humility  
is what makes change possible.*

*Grace is never neutral.  
It works backwards and forwards in time,  
conspiring to make wrong right.<sup>40</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. "For Loving When Differences Divide Us" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 166-167.

# DO LESS!

## Day 34

---



*“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”*

—LUKE 12:27 (ESV)

### *Reflect*

In a culture of *more*, what if we try doing *less*? Do you feel your shoulders letting go a little when you read this? Me too. Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission to turn down the volume of our lives. To care *smaller*. Whenever I have big, unsolvable problems, it’s especially hard to give myself permission to care about the small things instead. Most days, the really big concerns are too heavy to hold in these two human hands of mine and far too massive to solve on my own. Set it down, that’s what I tell myself. And start to care smaller. You don’t have to save the entire forest, but maybe try planting one tree. (House plants are fine. I can never keep mine alive.) Or you don’t have to solve world hunger, but maybe feed one person you know who is in need. You don’t have to save the entire ocean, remembering to take your reusable grocery bags to the store is hard enough. But also feel free to boast about that to friends because, hey. Trying is hard and three cheers for you for getting in the game.

## Respond

What small thing do you want to give yourself permission to care about today?

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### *Blessing for small steps when you feel overwhelmed*

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Life has unraveled.  
All my plans, wrecked.  
My hopes, impractical.  
And it's daunting imagining  
what comes next.

*The bills that need paying,  
The texts that need responding to,  
The loneliness that seeps in every night,  
Blessed are you who need reminding that,  
lots of things aren't tackle-able right now,  
but there's something you might try instead.  
Taking that tiny step that might  
make today a smidgen lighter.  
Maybe not easier or better—but lighter.*

*Being extra generous to a stranger  
or hopping in bed a little earlier.*

*Asking a friend to grab coffee  
or listening for the birds  
instead of doom-scrolling.*

*Setting down our to-do lists  
and picking up a paintbrush  
for no reason at all except joy.  
May we anchor ourselves to the now.  
Not allowing our minds skip to what-ifs  
or what-will-happen-whens.  
Blessed are you trying to put aside  
the “everything is possible” mentality.  
You who know that sheer effort  
will not put these pieces back together.*

*You who have lost perfection,  
and found rest in “good enough” instead.  
One small step,  
one deep breath,  
at a time.<sup>41</sup>*

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41 Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. “For Small Steps When You Feel Overwhelmed” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 16-17.

PALM SUNDAY, APRIL 13

*Alright, friends,  
this is the week  
we've been waiting for.*

*Hold onto your hats—  
it's going to be a doozy.*

*This will be the hardest part.*

*In the end, we'll make  
it to the good part,  
and we'll get there together.*

*Amen.*

# ANTICIPATORY GRIEF

Day 35

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*“When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, ‘As you know, the Passover is two days away—and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.’”*

—MATTHEW 26:1-2 (NIV)

## *Reflect*

Jesus had said all the things he could to prepare his closest friends for the momentous events about to unfold. He was giving them all the information he could, but it was as if they couldn't take it in. As he spoke, the disciples were living a split-screen experience, in two timelines all at once: the now that was his real presence with them, and the unreality of the future when Jesus would be really gone. The disciples were living in a state of anticipatory grief. It's a form of shock to be there in that kind of grief, because it carries so many unanswerable questions. How much is this going to hurt? What will I do? Who will I be in the aftermath of what is coming toward us? And what will it all mean, considering that Jesus was supposed to be the answer to all our griefs, not the cause.



## Respond

Holy Week compresses into just a few days all that human hearts can bear, and more. Are you able to let yourself begin this slow movement through loss and hope with Jesus and his friends?

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### Blessing for Palm Sunday

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*Blessed are we, interrupted by eternity.  
Our hearts are startled,  
our hands unsure of what to hold,  
our feet barely keeping pace.*

*Time slips from our grasp,  
here is the rhythm of Palm Sunday:  
One small donkey  
carrying the weight of the world.*

*One with a face set like flint  
moves not in the power of warhorses  
but in the fragile, plodding toward redemption.*

*Blessed are we,  
who feel the smallness of our steps  
toward a great mystery:*

*where through suffering, healing comes;  
where through shame, dignity is restored;  
where the cross disarms the powers  
and death is undone forever.*

*Blessed are we  
joining this procession:  
In hospitals, homes, grocery stores,  
the quiet champions of ordinary grace.  
May you find your work enfolded  
in the great, humble movement of love.*

*And blessed are we,  
waving palm branches and shouting our hoarse  
hosannas:  
“Hosanna! Save us!  
Save this tender, broken world.”<sup>42</sup>*

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<sup>42</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from “For Palm Sunday” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 202-203.

# RESET!

## Day 36

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*“Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’”*

—JOHN 3:3-5 (NRSVUE)

## Reflect

When my son turned two, I had just been diagnosed with cancer, and I thought that was the last birthday I would get to spend with him. So I decided to throw him an absolutely absurd farm party. So recently, when he turned nine, I decided to celebrate again with another huge farm themed birthday because I couldn’t believe that I was still here with him. I went all out. We couldn’t just sit on chairs, we had to sit on bales of hay. We couldn't just have desserts, we had rice crispy cake that looked like—more hay. I invited anyone who I have ever known and so there were herds of children running around like wild things. At one point I looked around and I could see my kid delirious with joy, and he ran up to me and asked, “Is this the day that I’m born again?” I thought yes, that is exactly how I feel about

it. Being born again is like this reset button. God loves to make us new. We can be in the muck of all kinds of things—health, bad things we’ve done, bad things done to us, anything—and suddenly be free to start again. Or move on. Or feel the wild joy of zooming around hay bales for no reason except the calendar has declared that you are suddenly new.

## Respond

Splash some water on your face or at least let some drops of water hit your palm. Remember today you can be born again—you can hit the reset button on at least one small thing. Maybe you need grace and forgiveness, maybe you need rest and to let go of perfection, maybe you need healing from all the wounds. Let the water refresh you and try again today (that is being human).

---

## Blessing for a little boost in the morning

The hardest work is already done.  
Resurrection has come, light covered  
everything—  
the sleepy and the waking,  
the trees that brush the windows.

It whispers, "Begin again."  
May you embrace the obstacle course ahead:  
the tangled messes and hard conversations,  
the kindness you muster when it's too much,  
the fight you picked because you could.

And when your best efforts unravel—

*when memory falters or irritations boil over—  
may gratitude lift your eyes  
and settle your soul.*

*Because this is where the work begins,  
more love, more trust,  
more faith in the unseen grace  
that meets us anew each day.*

*And when you pause, may you know—  
the sun has risen,  
and so has Love,  
carried in the shape of a cross,  
proclaiming, "It is finished."  
May your day be blessed,  
as you walk in the light  
of what is already done.<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For Maundy Thursday" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 48-49.

# JOY!

## Day 37

---



*“But humans are born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.”*

—JOB 5:7 (CSB)

### *Reflect*

“Choose joy,” we’re told, and when I talk about this, that’s when I can feel my most terrifying smile start to form on my lips—the smile that says that this kind of advice is a misguided form of the com-modification of one of the most amazing things that can happen to us. But that’s the thing, because it happens...to us. We don’t get to will our way into all the positive feelings of this world. Joy comes to us, to be sure, and we drink it in because it is such a gift in the midst of lives that are truly hard. And that’s just true.

This is Holy Week, where we feel the tilt of the earth shift toward a spiritual night. Jesus is preparing for his great sacrifice. And if you are in the midst of suffering, this is the time to remember that God is with you in *this*. We feel the deep unfairness that life is hard. In fact, terrible sometimes. Maybe more than sometimes. These are things we hide from our kids. This is the truth we rise above for their sakes, in our actions that speak love and make good things happen even in the face of really hard things. And sometimes we even get to do that in a way powered by that other truest thing—joy, that does come. This week as we prepare for the deep night, we will see everything: pain, but even joy. Look for it. Wait for it. We can’t manufacture it, but we can trust it when it comes.

## Respond

What would it look like to take a responsibility break? (Even if that's a 10 minute walk or just sitting down and looking out the window).

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### *Blessing for when good news is hard to find*

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*Bless you, witnessing the crumbling world—  
the disasters too fresh to mend,  
the losses that will not be restored,  
the cracks that will never be filled.*

*Blessed are we, searching for hope:  
for peace breaking through like dawn,  
for the hungry to be fed,  
for pain to be relieved.*

*Blessed are we, who dare to dream:  
parents might not fear for their children,  
leaders might guard their people,*

*someday relief will come—  
a world where death is swallowed whole  
and tears dry forever.*

*Here, in this unfinishable life,  
we bring our burdens (so heavy)  
to hands strong enough to carry them.*

*Blessed are you, walking the path of courage:  
finding improbable ways to love,  
offering creative acts of mercy,  
and practicing irreverent defiance of despair.*

*Blessed are you, who create  
beauty in this world.  
May you carry this quiet revolution into  
a world aching for signs of hope.*

*Blessed are we, trusting that somehow,  
even now, today could be a sign  
of good things to come.<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>44</sup> Kate Bowler. "For When Good News is Hard to Find" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 169.

# BETRAYAL!

Day 38

Maundy Thursday

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*“But Jesus said to him, ‘Judas, is it with a kiss that you are betraying the Son of Man?’”*

—LUKE 22:48 (NRSV)

## Reflect

Judas had been with Jesus almost from the beginning. They had walked those dusty roads together, felt the press of crowds all needing help and healing, and that night they just finished supper together. Judas was a disciple of Jesus, who called him friend. There is no sharper sting than the hurt from a friend’s betrayal. And Judas had used that most human expression of intimacy, a kiss, to make sure the Roman soldiers knew Jesus was the one they should arrest. He did not resist, pausing only to express to Judas the painful truth. Jesus referred to himself as “The Son of Man,” the one about to give himself for all of humanity, and there is so much poignancy in this phrase. Jesus was one who knew human suffering from the inside out. The one who gave his disciples the new mandate that very night, to love one another like he loved them and showed them what that meant, by the intimate gesture of washing their feet. And he was the one betrayed by the intimate gesture of a kiss.

## Respond

Pick one word that stands out to you in this reflection. Let it lead you, asking God what it means for you today.

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### *Blessing for Maundy Thursday*

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Blessed are you, standing at night's edge,  
the festival of grief and somehow triumph.  
The end draws near,  
and yet, something new is beginning.

*Grace doesn't add up  
it sits with betrayers,  
washes the feet of backstabbers,  
breaks bread with the disloyal,  
and shares a cup with double-dealers*

*Blessed are you when guarantees slip,  
as love shows becomes costly,  
asking for everything and promising nothing.*

*May you see beauty in this sacrifice,  
love that begs us to keep loving,  
even as hearts are broken.*

*Blessed are you, remembering,  
when forgetting feels easier,  
that in this undoing,  
the world is being remade.<sup>45</sup>*

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<sup>45</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For Maundy Thursday" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 204-205.

# DEATH!

Day 39

Good Friday

---



*“He said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’ They cried out, ‘Away with him, away with him, crucify him!’ Pilate said to them, ‘Shall I crucify your King?’ The chief priests answered, ‘We have no king but Caesar.’ So he delivered him over to them to be crucified.*

*So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them.”*

—JOHN 19:14B-18 (ESV)

## Reflect

There is a solemnity that comes upon us in the face of death, any death. But this is different. Someone alive beyond all telling has died. His body is still. And now there are witnesses who confirm it. They were there with him during his life and his dying, and the strong were with him to the end. They did not turn away. And neither do we. With all that we are, all that we know, we come.



## Respond

Solidarity in life and in death. That is the movement of God toward us in the life and death of Jesus. That we may be one with God. How do you approach this mystery? What words make sense to you?

---

### Blessing for Good Friday

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*Bless you, following where love has led—  
to the foot of the cross,  
to stand with Mary and John,  
a mother and a close friend,  
overwhelmed that it should come to this:  
powerlessness and utter loss.*

*Bless you, witnessing how hope and healing,  
laughter and feasting,  
miracles and promises  
have come to this:  
untold suffering, a cruel death.  
It is finished.*

*Blessed are you, as the darkness deepens,  
and a figure moves cautiously,  
hands reaching to ease His body down.*

*Blessed are you with the women,  
spices and linens in hand,  
doing what's possible with grief so large,  
Laying Him in a tomb.*

*Blessed are you, in the shadow's power,  
Roman soldiers sealing the entrance,  
the finality pressing down.*

*And blessed are we,  
who remain here in wonder,  
in the heavy silence of death,  
asking again:  
"Is this how love wins?"<sup>46</sup>*

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<sup>46</sup> Kate Bowler. Adapted from "For a Good Friday" in *Have a Beautiful, Terrible Day: Daily Meditations for the Ups, Downs, and In-Betweens*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2024). 173.

# SILENCE!

Day 40

Holy Saturday

---



*“When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who also was himself a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.”*

—MATTHEW 27:57-61(NRSVUE)

## Reflect

While sitting in the pew, my tiny human turns to me and says (not so quietly), “The pastor keeps saying we are here to hear from God, so then why do they keep talking?!” As the women sit opposite of the tomb, they feel the silence of God. Can you imagine how it must have felt to be in the presence of Jesus—to feel the tenderness, love, and healing spirit he brought to the world. And then to sit in shock at the absence of that spirit. This is the day we reflect what the world looks like if we had no God. We are allowed to say: our God died. We can even say: the utter absence of God is more real to me sometimes than God’s presence. We

never get to say these kinds of things out loud, but Holy Saturday shows us that we are still faithful. This Holy Saturday, take a moment to sit in silence. Because the good news is that God came back to those very women, the very next day. But if you have ever felt God's absence, today's silence is your truth.

## Respond

Sit in silence for 5 minutes. Listen.

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### *Blessing for when you are too tired to cry*

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*Blessed are you, who feel undone,  
too tired even for tears,  
longing to be spoken back into being.*

*Blessed are you, who ache to remember  
the bonds of love that formed you,  
that hold you still, even now.*

*May they be as iron  
that strengthen your soul.*

*Blessed are you,  
who glimpse, however faintly,  
that this present darkness  
is not all there is.*

*And blessed are we who dare to say:  
I am known.  
I am loved.  
I can love again.  
Even—especially—here,  
in this very moment.<sup>47</sup>*

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<sup>47</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from "For When You're Too Tired To Cry" in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 34-35.

# RESURRECTION!

## Easter Sunday

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*“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week  
...Jesus came and stood among them and said to them,  
Peace be with you.”*

—JOHN 20:19 (ESV)

### Reflect

“Every time we both keep living, there’s a kind of glorious surprise.” That’s what I said to my friend and colleague Richard Hays, and for me the sentence sums up the intensity of hope—its sweetness and its pain. We were talking about the early Easter morning sunrise service, held outdoors. Both of us remember this moment vividly, because at the time we were both deep into cancer treatments. Richard was preaching about the resurrection, when Jesus rose from the dead, and just at that moment, the sunrise behind him spilled over the rooftop, and there it was. The glorious surprise. The moment we are grateful for another day of being alive when we both knew there was an alternative. We’re just mortal human beings, but there’s a truth we both hold, and as Richard said later, the truth we hold is

this: “The mystery of our faith, that life conquers death.” And as he spoke, both of us got a little misty-eyed.

## Respond

Easter eggs, baby chicks, babies, bunnies, warm fresh yeast bread or spring flowers—all these speak of life springing up anew. Pick the Easter symbol that speaks the most to you of the aroma, the color, the shape of life conquering death. Savor it, enjoy it today.

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## Blessing for Easter Sunday

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*Bless you, stretching out your hands  
in the early Easter darkness,  
weak and tired, longing to be lifted,  
to stand again on trembling feet.*

*Blessed are you, who remember her—  
the woman who walked to the tomb,  
to do what could still be done  
though all hope seemed drained away.*

*Blessed are you, who carry her story:  
the two bright angels, the impossible news,  
the Christ, alive beyond belief.  
Blessed are we, stretching out our hands  
in doubt and grief,  
in sickness of body, mind, or spirit,  
our prayers unfinished,  
and yet rejoicing . . . anyway.*

*This is what makes us Easter people:  
carrying the hope of the Resurrected One,  
singing alleluias great and small,  
while it is still dark.*

*Christ Has Died. Christ is risen.  
Christ will come again.<sup>48</sup>*

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<sup>48</sup> Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie. Adapted from “For Easter Sunday” in *The Lives We Actually Have: 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. (New York: Convergent Books, 2023). 210-211.



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