

A Wing and a Prayer
A Reflection and Study Guide for Groups and Individuals
By the Rev. Lisa Belcher Hamilton

Based on *A Wing and a Prayer: A Message of Faith and Hope*
By the Most Reverend Katharine Jefferts Schori

Introduction: Keeping a Holy Lent

Many years ago, I was attending a meeting when a particularly stern woman helped herself to a croissant. “Might as well enjoy it now,” she said. “There won’t be any butter crossing these lips when Lent comes.” What are you giving up for Lent? That’s often the automatic response a lot of Christians have when it gets to be this time of year. But that woman with the croissant got me thinking about Lent in a healthier way. How on earth, I began to wonder, would forgoing butter, or chocolate, or coffee, bring me closer to Christ?

Of course I believe in the power of Lenten rituals – as a priest who works outside the parish, I deeply miss not conducting Ash Wednesday and Holy Week services, and reminding parishioners that I’m available to lead them through the Reconciliation of a Penitent. And I am grateful for this season’s focus on the stories surrounding the betrayal of Jesus, his suffering and death. In fact, I believe that the Lenten lessons and liturgies are necessary for our spiritual health.

But I think at least a healthy a question as “What are you giving up for Lent?” is “What are you taking on?” The tradition of Lenten reading, for instance, goes back at least as far as the Middle Ages. *A Wing and a Prayer* gives us the chance to “read, mark and inwardly digest,” as we Episcopalians are fond of saying, forty essays – one for each day of Lent -- taken from sermons by our presiding bishop, the Most Reverend Katharine

Jefferts Schori. It also gives us a chance to get to know our new presiding bishop. I've been struck by the way in which Bishop Katharine's essays are accessible and profound at the same time, and it has been a privilege to reflect on them. As you read one of Bishop Katharine's essays each day, I hope you'll find my daily reflections and suggestions for prayer a helpful augmentation in this solemn season as you prepare yourself for the joyous miracle that is Easter.

A note for readers: Lent, of course, begins on Ash Wednesday—this year, that falls on February 25. Lent lasts for 40 days, not counting Sundays – Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection, is always a day for celebration, no matter what time of year. The forty "official" days of Lent are followed by Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, when we walk with Jesus remembering the events leading up to his crucifixion and resurrection.

Day One: One Part, Many Members
Ash Wednesday

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine writes that she spends a good deal of time on airplanes. Where do you spend a good deal of *your* time? At home? On a train? In your cubicle at the office?

How does *the place where* you spend your time influence who you feel connected to – or not? If you spend a lot of time at your kitchen window, do you feel connected in any way to the people who walk by on the sidewalk outside? If you're a commuter, do

you feel isolated from the people riding with you on the bus or train? Do you feel linked to co-workers in their cubicles performing their tasks?

So much in today's society conspires to disconnect us – from the cubicles that separate us from our co-workers to the polite distance that keeps us from chatting with fellow shoppers on line at the supermarket. Sometimes it feels as if we're nothing more than familiar strangers to one another.

Give some thought to how you can better see Christ in people from whom you feel disconnected. For instance, among all the annoying things you've heard coming from someone else's cubicle, have you also heard the voice of compassion? Some people will force you to listen harder than others, but it may well be that *their* voices teach you the most. Does the person who walks her dog every morning as you do the breakfast dishes have a gait like the special aunt who was such a gifted listener? Could it be that the person who regularly sits across from you on the bus spends some of her commute in prayer?

Perhaps praying for the familiar strangers in your life could be a good start to feeling more connected to them – and to God.

A Suggestion for Prayer: Make a point to offer a silent prayer on behalf of strangers for one day. Ask for God's blessings on a fellow driver stopped at a stoplight, for the elderly man behind you in the checkout line, for the person who calls your number by mistake--you get the idea. Do you feel any more connected to the world we share by the end of the day? Do you feel more aware of God's presence in your life?

Thursday After Ash Wednesday

Day Two: Tending the Wounded Body of Christ

For Reflection: Do you agree with Bishop Katharine that “hopelessness seems to be the leprosy of the day”? Do you think there’s more cynicism in our society than there used to be? Do you think we lack optimism?

Bishop Katharine’s view that when we feel valued, we gain hope is intriguing. What makes *you* feel valued? A simple “thank you”? A lunch invitation from a friend? A colleague’s acknowledgement –to the boss—that you’ve accomplished something noteworthy? And how do you make yourself feel valued? Making it to my exercise class does it for me. Maybe keeping your kitchen cabinets organized does it for you. For others, it might be driving a brand-new car or watching a nest-egg steadily grow.

The problem with some strategies for feeling valued is that we human beings have so little control. We don’t have the power to make someone else appreciate the good things we do. Our beautiful new cars inevitably get old—and sometimes even get wrecked. And our tidy kitchen cabinets are sure to get messy again –sooner rather than later. And jobs – even prestigious ones – don’t always last.

But there’s a simple strategy that can give us the sense of being valued that all of us crave. Simply give to others. Listen, deeply listen to others, like the hosts in Bishop Katharine’s essay who welcomed her students into their congregations. And look for ways to give honest compliments. Don’t wait to let people know you value them. If it’s a grocery clerk whose sunny mood lifts your own, tell her. You may never be in her line again. If it’s somebody you love, say so. Nobody lives forever. Giving to others,

whatever way you figure out, can help them feel valued, and you may well feel the same. And that's hopeful, even in the most cynical of times.

A suggestion for prayer: Offer to God your hopes. Tell God what you hope for in your life, what you hope for in the lives of those you love, what you hope for in the future. After each hope you name, be silent for a moment. And hope that in the silent spots, you discern God's hopes for you.

Friday After Ash Wednesday

Day Three: Collective Memory

For Reflection: In today's essay, Bishop Katharine links together two words that I don't usually connect: discovery and remembering. I tend to put discovery in the category of exploring the unknown--a territory filled with ideas I can't quite understand. Remembering is replete with images of dusty scrapbooks and smells I can't quite place. The way I see it, discovery is for future astronauts and remembering is for grannies.

Yet, as Bishop Katharine reminds us, for us Christians, discovery and remembering intersect at communion. I grew up in a Christian tradition – the Disciples of Christ – in which communion is all about remembering. (One reason I became an Episcopalian is that I was attracted to the layers of meaning in our Eucharistic theology.) In my childhood church, we took communion every week—a rare custom among Protestants—but we stayed in our pews as trays filled with pieces of unleavened bread were passed, followed by large trays with little glass cups of grape juice. I still miss the way this custom -- I think of it as “family style” versus the “drive through” method

avored by Episcopalians. I like the way the entire congregation – the minister, the organist, the choir, the Sunday School teachers, we kids – had communion at the same time. I was taught that communion was about remembering Jesus’ ministry – and remembering that he was with us still. Jesus was sitting beside the little boy in my Sunday School class who always wet himself. Jesus was there with his arm around the shoulder of my white-haired second-grade teacher, who was crying because her husband had just died. And Jesus was listening to the lady who drove all the other church ladies (my mother included) crazy because she just couldn’t stop chattering.

Every week, in this simple church, in an otherwise unremarkable town in southern Indiana, I got to be part of something simple and profound. In the middle of remembering Jesus through communion, I could look around and discover Him in the face of everyone around me, whether or not I knew them, whether or not we had anything in common, whether or not I liked them. It’s still that way, really— and there’s no need to wait for Sunday to remember Jesus, and to discover Him in those around us.

A Suggestion for Prayer: *Recall with Jesus your earliest knowledge of Him.*

What were you taught? What can you remember about your early experiences of Him?

What do you discover in your remembering? Do you discover that your relationship with Jesus has gone flat? That your relationship with Jesus has changed very little, or a great deal, since your early life? Spend some time in quiet conversation with Jesus about remembering and discovering him in the fabric of your life.

Saturday After Ash Wednesday

Day Four: You Can't Always Get What You Want

For Reflection: I couldn't get Bishop Katharine's opening reference to The Rolling Stones' *You Can't Always Get What You Want* out of my head as I read this essay. Remember the rest of the lyrics? "But if you try sometime, you just might find . . . you get what you need." And that's one of Bishop Katharine's points. Even though what we ask for isn't always granted – and isn't that a good thing! – the more attention we pay, the more we find that we're given exactly what we need.

At least this is true for me. As a freelance writer, I'm always looking for work. Job hunting is part of my job, because all of my assignments end. I've begged for jobs I didn't get, only to realize that they would have distracted me from work, either paid or unpaid, that God has deemed more important. For instance, being turned down for an assignment that I really longed for made it possible for me to visit colleges with my son. And looking back, there have been times when being rejected opened up new and unexpected possibilities: projects that turned out to be more interesting, challenging – or even better-paying—than the ones I wanted in the first place.

And yet there are those in our world who *don't* get what they need. They lack clean water, a basic education, even food and clothing. It's up to us—who not only have everything we need, but most of what we want—to make sure all our brothers and sisters get what they need. To paraphrase the Stones' lyrics, we must try sometime. And the time is now, before anyone else goes hungry or doesn't learn to read or dies from a disease that could be prevented with something as simple as a mosquito net. Give people what they need, and you may find that your deepest wants are deeply satisfied.

A Suggestion for Prayer: When you're all alone in the car or in your house, sing a song for God. It can be the pop song you heard on the radio that made you cry yesterday. Or a Broadway show tune. Or even a song you make up to a tune you already have in your head. It really doesn't matter what you sing; the point is to expand the ways you pray. And praying seems to be something God wants—and maybe even needs.

Monday of the First Week of Lent

Day Five: Total Ministry

For Reflection: Of all the points Bishop Katharine makes in this essay about ministry, the one that pops out at me is her observation that “fear and resistance” are common roadblocks to our spiritual growth. Although Bishop Katharine is talking about total ministry –the cooperative effort of all Christians to accomplish God’s purpose in their lives as best they understand it– fear and resistance delay and diminish just about everything that brings new growth into just about every facet of our lives.

What possible blessings are you delaying, diminishing, or preventing with your fear and resistance to God? It’s impossible to know unless you manage to get yourself out of God’s way. A young man I know had his heart set on getting into the perfect college, refusing to even consider alternatives. But the perfect college turned him down. When he got over his initial heartbreak, he found a school that was lower in the college rankings but offered a more nurturing environment. A couple of years after graduation,

he's thriving in his career – and engaged to a wonderful girl he met at his second-choice school. All because he got out of God's way, and let God work wonders in his life.

So move over. It's never as easy as it sounds. But Jesus is always waiting to help.

A Suggestion for Prayer: Picture Jesus. Maybe he's swinging his feet off the bridge over a beautiful creek, or perhaps he's waiting for you in a church pew. Where you envision Jesus doesn't matter; what counts is that you visualize Him in your daily life. Give to Jesus your fears and resistance. If you're afraid of your boss, tell Jesus. If you're resisting a tug from someplace deep in your heart to reach out to a newcomer or volunteer for a new ministry, tell Jesus about that, too. And remind yourself that you've given your fears and resistance to Jesus as a gift; you can't take them back. Now your job is to watch and wonder at how Jesus transforms your gifts to Him into gifts for you.

Tuesday of the First Week of Lent

Day 6: Saints in Our Midst

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine's essay about prophets made me wonder about the different ways we describe prophets, so I did a little research. The Hebrew word for prophet comes from a word meaning "proclaimer." In Deuteronomy 18:18, God says "I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him." So one way to understand a prophet is as the mouth of God.

The Koran, the holy book of Islam, suggests that prophets are people with gifts for leadership chosen by God to lead humanity. Individual prophets possess specific gifts for leadership.

The New Testament talks about prophets, too. In Matthew 7, Jesus warns against false prophets (see Matthew 7 for example), encouraging us to discern carefully which people and which ideas we ought to follow.

Even secular writers talk about prophets. Sociologist Max Weber classifies prophets into two types, *emissary* and *exemplary*. Emissary prophets have an important message to communicate. Exemplary prophets set an example based on their own experience.

All of which gives us a lot to ponder when it comes to prophets. Mouths of God, leaders, communicators, examples. Think about it—you've probably known people who are indeed prophets. And maybe you're a prophet yourself. Think about the prophets you've known, and the ways you've lived a prophetic life. How is God calling you – and other prophets in your midst – to leadership and holiness?

***A Suggestion for Prayer:** Read Romans 12.6-8, in which Paul lists several gifts of God's grace: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, compassion. As you read Paul's list, who comes to your mind? As each person comes to mind – Mrs. Davis, my fifth-grade teacher floats forth as an excellent teacher – ask for God's blessings on him or her. And then thank God for your own gifts.*

Wednesday of the First Week of Lent

Day Seven: Who's Got a Hold on You?

For Reflection: Of all the folks Bishop Katharine writes about, the one who has a hold on *me* is the migrant worker who doesn't have the English words to ask for water. What is it like to have no language? Babies can't speak, of course, and neither can Alzheimer's patients, but they usually have caregivers who meet their needs anyway.

But the migrant worker's story makes me realize that it isn't always easy to figure out what someone needs. We have to take the time to listen, to hear one another even if we don't speak the same language or have different ways of looking at the world. Maybe that's why so many well-intended efforts fail. We have a tendency to throw money at a problem without considering the people who feel the effects of the problem. We assume that we know what others need, perhaps based on our own very different experiences. It's not far from insisting our children put on a sweater because *we're* cold, even though they insist they're perfectly comfortable just the way they are.

It's important to listen. If you want to truly help others, listening is always the first step.

Suggestion for Prayer: *Sit in silence for three minutes. Next time, try five. Build up to ten minutes of silence. Push all thoughts other than listening to God out of your mind. Using the mantra "I am listening to God" can help. In your deep, focused, prayerful listening, what do you hear God saying to you? In the days to come, think about the ways that prayerful listening to God helps you listen better to other people.*

Thursday of the First Week of Lent
Day 8: City of God

For Reflection: When you read Bishop Katharine’s words, “When you think about your gifts, consider what you’re good at, what gets you up in the morning, where your passion is, what you love about writing,” what came to your mind? Is it sports, the passion Bishop Katharine mentions? Or Broadway musicals? Or maybe you really love food.

Your passion is an important part of your faith, because what you love is part of who you are, and who you are is what God has to work with. And when you bring your passion to your faith, you can be a gift to others. If you love to play basketball, why not coach kids who don’t have anyone to teach them the game you love? If it’s Broadway musicals, you can organize a theatre outing for area seniors. And if you’re a foodie, you have a chance at least three times a day to give others great pleasure.

Consider this: Maybe God has given you your loves not only to give you pleasure, but so you can give others pleasure as well. Maybe doing the thing you love best is your best way of loving God.

***Suggestion for Prayer:** Give some thought to what you love about living. Kicking leaves during a walk on a glorious fall day? Sharing a cup of tea and a long talk with a friend? Golfing with your buddies? Give God thanks for what you enjoy. And then ask God how you can share your zest for life with others. And then do it!*

Friday of the First Week of Lent
Day Nine: How Can We Keep From Singing?

For Reflection: Bishop Katharine challenges us in this essay to be vulnerable to those who frighten us, just as Jesus challenges his disciples. It's a tall order, this radical vulnerability, and Bishop Katharine spells out by asking, "What would this world look like if Palestinians were sent off to find hospitality in Israel, and Israelis in Lebanon, and Shiites in Sunni territory? Or Americans in Iraq or Afghanistan?"

Who would you be frightened to seek hospitality from? Could be estranged in-laws. Could be a former boss. Could be the people of different color a couple of blocks over. If you find yourself protesting that you're not afraid, ask yourself what's stopping you. Chances are very high that you'll get back to fear.

Jesus never denies that his disciples may be afraid, especially without, as Bishop Katharine points out, a credit card or carry-on luggage, or even a change of clothes or a supply of bottled water. But Jesus confronts us with the fact that much of our baggage is fear. Jesus knows the burden is too heavy for us, so He stands by like a willing porter. He doesn't even expect a tip – He only asks that we hand Him our fear.

Suggestion for Prayer: Pray for the courage to reach out to one who frightens you a little because he or she is different from you. And then do it. Today.

Saturday of the First Week of Lent
Day Ten: Shalom Around the World

For Reflection: In this essay, Bishop Katharine writes about our insistence on holding on to fear. And that made me think about the image of a tightly closed fist.

Do you remember catching lightning bugs when you were a little kid? I have vivid memories of summer nights spent scooping them up and holding on to them so tightly that I squeezed the life out of them. Occasionally, a few lightning bugs would live long enough for me to fall asleep lulled by their on-and-off glowing green or orange, but they'd always be dead by the morning. I couldn't understand this. I'd punched holes in the lid—too small for the bugs to escape, but big enough to give them plenty of fresh air—and loaded the jar with blades of grass and a damp cotton ball for food and water. Yet that mayonnaise jar just wasn't big enough to sustain the unfortunate bugs I'd captured.

As an adult, I'm learning over and over again that holding on to something too tightly means destroying it. If I'm so afraid of letting my teenage son grow into adulthood that I insist on mothering him as if he were still a little boy, our relationship will end. At work, if I so fear the visions of others that I stubbornly insist on my own ideas only, I'll soon isolate myself. Yet it *is* scary to let your children grow up and to open yourself to others' ideas – so I'm comforted by Bishop Katharine's acknowledgement that we never completely manage to let go of our fears. I'm also encouraged by her belief that we can manage to let go of our fears, and open ourselves to God's surprises for longer and longer periods of time. So I'll keep on practicing.

Suggestion for Prayer: Try praying with your hands in different positions and see if it makes any difference. Pray with your hands in tight fists. Pray with your palms up. Pray with your hands linked together. Pray in all kinds of different postures. Which posture makes you feel closest to God?