

# Balancing Acts: Teens, Tweens, and the Church

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 [delaware.church/balancing-acts-teens-tweens-and-the-church/](https://delaware.church/balancing-acts-teens-tweens-and-the-church/)

by Kristin Sausville

Today's teens and tweens are at a unique inflection point. The eldest are at the tail end of Generation Z, and the youngest begin what is currently referred to as Generation Alpha. Often the line between generations can blur somewhat — the micro generation born between the late 1970s and early 1980s, being referred to by multiple names including Xennials and the Oregon Trail generation — but a clearer line of demarcation emerges in this case as the Gen Z cohort was in middle school and high school during the height of the COVID pandemic, while the Gen Alphas were in elementary school. Both generations, however, have one thing in common: they both attended school via Zoom during the pandemic.

What effect did this have on these children, and how does that relate to their experience of The Episcopal Church? What can we learn about their experiences and perspectives to help make our churches more welcoming to and inclusive of them?

The day-to-day secular life of today's teens and tweens poses many challenges for Episcopal churches that want to reach them. Their parents were younger Gen X or Millennials who were less likely than their own Boomer parents to attend church, so they don't have a family tradition of parents taking their children to church. Weekend events and activities continue to grow in popularity. The younger ones are expected to start participating in activities outside of school, and by the high school level, many school-related activities have begun to spill over to the weekends as well.

Screens are omnipresent, and while many teens and tweens crave in-person interactions, especially as we emerge from the COVID pandemic, online interactions even with their friends can feel more secure. Their generations are also increasingly diverse in terms of religion; their friend groups may include Christians, Muslims, Hindus, "nones," and atheists. They are more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than previous generations, which can conflict with a growing perception of Christianity as being unwelcome to them. The popular perception of Christianity is also associated with everything from sexual abuse scandal to the embrace of nationalism.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is that changes in day-to-day secular life have had an enormous impact on how people spend their weekends. One consequence with the rise in families having both parents in the workforce, is that it has pushed sports and other recreational activities to the weekends. Travel sports in particular play an outsized role here. Youth do need these outlets in their lives, and it would be foolish and counterproductive to pretend otherwise, but it is hard to find solutions for the issue of getting teens and tweens to

come to church when they have other activities at the same time. It is hard to convince youth and their parents to prioritize church when they have concerns about their children being at a disadvantage for future opportunities in sports, music, dance, theater, and other extracurricular activities in high school and college without building foundational skills as youth. This may be a place where options like live-streaming or services at non-traditional times can be a way to show youth that we are willing to meet them where they are.

Another way to meet teens and tweens where they are is social media engagement. These generations are rarely on Facebook with their parents and grandparents, but are very active on services like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok. Instagram and Facebook are both owned by Meta, and so parishes that are engaging people on Facebook can easily cross-post to Instagram, reaching a wider audience that is more likely to include teens and tweens. One discussion point at the Parish Communications Workshop in the fall was that Reels — short video clips — on Instagram had a higher rate of engagement with people who weren't already following their accounts. The same video used for a Reel can easily be uploaded from someone's phone separately to TikTok, growing its reach even more.

One of the most beautiful aspects of The Episcopal Church is its embrace of the marginalized, specifically welcoming members of the LGBTQ+ community. We seek to truly live out the commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. A challenge is that it is not widely known in the wider unchurched population that The Episcopal Church differentiates itself in this way. What they see in the news and media are people professing Christianity while embracing homophobia, censorship, and nationalism. This can make our teens and tweens hesitant about public professions of faith. Is it okay to wear a cross necklace to school or on a college tour, or will that cause people to make assumptions about their beliefs that aren't true?

Young people can be too intimidated to invite unchurched friends to a service. Our churches can help them by providing ways to invite their friends to church activities other than services. Events like overnight lock-ins and movie nights are low-pressure ways for our youth to invite their friends to attend a church event. These children may not end up joining a congregation themselves, but they will be aware that Episcopal churches exist and welcome them. Youth should also be encouraged to invite their friends to Confirmation; while a religious service, it is an important moment in a teen's life that their friends may be willing to attend in support.

Camp Arrowhead is another wonderful way for our youth to include their friends. Many families are looking for sleep-away camp opportunities for their children, and an invitation from a friend goes a long way to vouching for both fun and safety. We are blessed to have such a beautiful facility in an ideal location, and in my own family's experience, many of the friends my teens have invited over the years became repeat campers themselves.

We can also help our teens and tweens frame their care for the marginalized by showing them that Jesus is the framework for our love and action. Generations Z and Alpha want to see what people are doing with their faith; they believe that actions demonstrate sincerity. Today's youth value community service and want to participate in it; we can teach them that these actions are our expression of our faith.

There are other opportunities to get youth outside of the church involved, where they can learn about our faith and liturgy. For example, St. Thomas's Parish in Newark has developed a live-streaming internship program, in which a local high school student learns how to use our equipment and then assists with the live-streaming of our services. Through this, we welcome youth and show them that we care about providing them skills they can use in their future.

Another aspect of these generations that separates them from their elders is their different sensory needs. Neurodiversity (i.e., conditions like autism and ADHD) is both on the rise and better understood than they were in the past. Sitting on hard pews for long periods is hard for these youth, which can make going to church an uncomfortable experience. One way that churches can show these youth that they are welcome and cared for is to acknowledge this need by creating soft spaces. One parish in our diocese has done this by turning its underutilized balcony into a sensory-friendly loft. There are soft chairs, couches that can be configured into different shapes, stuffed animals large and small, and rugs — all of which accommodate different seating needs. Children under twelve are required to be accompanied by an adult.


On a positive note, the Episcopal Church in Delaware has made progress in offering ways of reaching out and engaging its youth. Parishes are encouraged to send young adult delegates as young as sixteen to the Annual Convention, where they have equal voice and vote to the adult delegates. This demonstrates that our youth are considered not just the future of the Church, but that their voices and perspectives are needed and valued now. There is also an effort underway to create more diocesan-wide events for youth.

Engaging today's teens and tweens in church can be daunting, but is not impossible. Like anyone else, youth want their perspectives and needs to be seen and valued. Episcopal churches can build on what they are already doing by acknowledging and working with specific challenges, focusing on showing them how our shared love and actions for the marginalized come from following Jesus, and giving them opportunities to include their unchurched friends in ways that are welcoming to them.

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# A Child's Quest for Answers

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 [delaware.church/a-childs-quest-for-answers/](https://delaware.church/a-childs-quest-for-answers/)

*by the Rev. Canon Brad Hinton*

I vividly remember a day when my theological training was put to the test in a decidedly unexpected way. The church doorbell rang several times impatiently. I walked toward the entrance with no expectancy; after all, church offices are not particularly exciting places on a typical weekday afternoon. I guessed that our visitor would be delivering a package, trying to sell us office equipment, or looking for financial or food assistance.

Through the glass I saw a woman holding the hand of a small child. Opening the door, I was nearly knocked over as the youngster sped past me and into the nave. Children often exhibit raw energy on playgrounds and near ice cream trucks, but I had never seen such liveliness to get inside a church. Whatever could be motivating such enthusiasm?

As his mother was apologizing for his abrupt entrance, I heard him running up and down the aisle, between rows, peeking behind the organ console, and galloping into the pulpit, all the while calling at the top of his lungs, “God, I’m here! I’m here to meet you, like I said I would God, you can come out now! Where are you?” All of this was happening faster than I could process. His mother was trying to explain and while she did, the boy’s excitement morphed from anticipation into confusion, and then to full-blown sadness. In a matter of minutes, he sat on the chancel steps and began to cry. “I don’t understand, if this is God’s house, why isn’t God here?” As we moved to console him, his mother told me the astonishing story.

The two of them traveled past the church nearly every day, going to and from school. Strapped into his carseat in the back of the car, he took a keen interest in the church with its high, angled roof and soaring belltower. When he asked his mother about the building, she told him, “That is God’s house.” She thought her answer would satiate his curiosity. Just the opposite happened. Rather than satisfying his interest, her response filled his young mind with the possibilities of an encounter with the living God. “That’s where God lives?” he asked. He became quite animated and told his mom that he wanted to meet God. Several times she attempted to redirect him, but his idea became determined. He was so persistent that his mom started driving a different route to school. She hoped that the old adage ‘out of sight, out of mind’ would apply and that he would forget and move on. Wishful thinking! Her son informed her that he had spoken with God about all this and had promised God that he would come for a visit. At some point in this process, she gave into his demands and detoured into the church parking lot. I wish she had given me some advanced notice!

So, there we sat on the chancel steps, mere feet away from the altar where the presence of the incarnate deity is celebrated and made real each week — two adults in a quandary and a child whose first religious pilgrimage was not at all what he expected. I attempted to console

him and assure him that although God could not be seen, God was still present. My impromptu treatise on the omnipresence of God was little consolation to a tyke who was looking for something localized, manifest, and personal. And as I sat and considered his desire, I realized that I had heard similar versions of the same confusion on the lips of hundreds of adults who wanted to know where God was during their personal struggles or in the struggles of others. “Where does God live?” is merely the children’s version of a nearly universal quest.

Children occupy a unique place in the community of believers. Unencumbered by years of education and experience, the directness of their inquiries can be a source of laughter and wonder. One youngster was trying to understand what his parents had told him about the death of his grandfather. They told him that Pop-Pop had gone to heaven to live with Jesus. When he asked where heaven is, they pointed upward to the sky. Weeks later he asked to see me. When I sat down with him, he was concerned about the well-being of his grandfather and wanted to know if his Pop-Pop was safe with Jesus. “Yes, of course he is!” I exclaimed. “So, he won’t fall through the holes in the clouds?” he asked. His concern was so real and beautiful that I easily suppressed any inclination to chuckle. God being “up there”, “in heaven”, and “beyond the sky” are all popular in the vocabulary of children and adults. But there are some kids whose insights about where God lives are remarkable and telling. There have even been a few times when their words gave me goosebumps.

One discerning four-year-old told me that, “I used to know where God lives but that was when I was young; now I can’t remember.” Indeed. Forgetfulness of the presence of God in our lives is a sort of spiritual amnesia that afflicts us all. Perhaps that is why *anamnesis* (remembrance) is key to our Eucharistic worship. One young upstart told me, rather plainly, “We don’t know where God is, but God knows where we are.” Perhaps that was what the biblical passage means, “we walk by faith and not by sight.”

Another child shared with me what I wish I had been able to articulate to the earnest youngster from years ago, “God lives wherever there is love.” When I asked her how we know where love is, she said, “That’s silly — love is everywhere because God is everywhere; all we have to do is love too.” Perhaps children could become our resident theologians.

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# Youth Engagement - The Episcopal Church in Delaware

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*“... Sometimes irreverent, sometimes curious, sometimes opinionated, sometimes insightful — our conversations remind me that when we listen to one another, we gain more from a wider perspective than any one generation can provide.” — The Rev. Ruth Beresford*

*by the Rev. Ruth Beresford*

Early in my ministry as a priest in the Episcopal Church in Delaware, my minister for children and youth came to me to advocate for our youth. She understood her role as a leader for our younger members, but also as their defender and advocate. She shared an observation — every committee and ministry wanted the youth to participate as laborers rather than collaborators. She knew that as baptized members of the parish, our teens (and children) had gifts to share that far exceeded manual labor. We welcome them to the table in worship, but not the tables of governance.

The youth minister’s advocacy for them voiced the challenge to our parish that still rings in my heart. The following year we amended our by-laws, and the youth selected one of their own to fill the new position of youth representative on the vestry. Because they were at least 16 years old, they were voting members of the parish, and now also on the vestry.

What does it mean for youth to be collaborators? As with every other lay minister, they are called to “represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.” (*The Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 855.)

With each search for a new associate rector, a member of the team was a teen. When the youth minister retired, teens participated in the interview process for the next minister for church and youth, and their input was persuasive. We ask that youth bring their perspective to parish matters and voice their opinions.

This past year, while we’ve been searching for our next minister for church and youth, I’ve had the privilege of joining our youth on Sunday evenings. Sometimes irreverent, sometimes curious, sometimes opinionated, sometimes insightful — our conversations remind me that when we listen to one another, we gain more from a wider perspective than any one generation can provide.

I know there are congregations that are missing younger generations, and that all search committees are looking for leaders who can attract children and youth to the church. Let our youth minister's wisdom guide your approach when one comes through the church's doors. Listen to them. Invite them to engage their knowledge and talents, remembering they are empowered by the Holy Spirit for their ministry, which is more than moving tables.

*Ruth is the rector at Christ Church Christiana Hundred in Wilmington, and has been in ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church for more than 30 years. She loves gathering with the children at the church preschool, journeying with their youth as they seek God, leading worship, praying, teaching, and sharing the faith in Christ Jesus that sustains and strengthens the church for its ministry with people of all ages.*

# Discipline: Body and Soul

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 [delaware.church/discipline-body-and-soul/](https://delaware.church/discipline-body-and-soul/)

*Jesus said, “And whenever you fast, do not look somber, like the hypocrites, for they mark their faces to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.”*

— Mt. 6:16 (NRSV)

*by Michael Redmond*

This year I headed into Lent by getting into a peaceable argument with an old friend — a faithful Episcopalian of Anglo-Catholic persuasion. The argument was about fasting. It’s a subject about which I have considerable ambivalence.

Episcopalians rarely talk about fasting, even though we live in a society obsessed with diet, weight loss, and health. In April, *The Wall Street Journal* estimated that Americans spent \$75 billion on weight loss pharmaceuticals in 2023. Various business sources estimate that the U.S. weight loss “industry,” if we may call it that — all products, services, etc., medical and non-medical — topped \$160 billion in 2023. According to the World Bank, that’s approximately the annual Gross Domestic Product of Hungary.

Then I discover my rector had a question for vestry members: “What is your Lenten discipline going to be?” Once again, this Lent, I’m pondering how to respond. My difficulty is not with the idea that I should choose a *discipline*. Being a disciple means to live under a discipline (a rule, code or method having to do with training or educating, derived from *discipulus*, the Latin word for pupil). My problem is not with Lent as the time for choosing a particular discipline, because the church has observed Lent as a special season for heightened focus on repentance and spiritual renewal since the fourth century at least. And, fasting has always been a Lenten practice, specifically as preparation for a reverent and heartfelt celebration of Holy Week.

At this point I have to acknowledge that my learned friend, in a spirited defense of fasting, has both scripture and tradition on his side. Fasting is all over scripture. Our prime example is the Lord Jesus, of course, who fasted for 40 days in the desert before he began his public ministry (Luke 4:1–2), echoing the fast of Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:28). Old Testament examples are too numerous to cite. In Jesus’s day, John the Baptist’s disciples and the Pharisees fasted regularly, and Jesus was challenged to explain why his disciples did not (Mark 2:18–20). In the Book of Acts, we find the early church fasting and praying as they sought guidance from God (Acts 13:2; 14:23).



But did Jesus command his followers to fast? No, it appears that he did not. I've heard people interpret Mt. 6:16, as a command to fast, but a close examination of the context does not support that interpretation. "Whenever you fast" (Ὅταν δὲ νηστεύητε) simply recognizes that fasting was a built-in tradition of Jewish religious culture in first century Judea — and we find that Jesus was more concerned that people fast for the right reasons than he was concerned about any rules and regulations of pious practice. Does he command fasting? No. Does he forbid fasting? No.

The concern Jesus expresses is an echo of the prophet Isaiah's ardent narrative (in full, Is. 6:1–12) of God's *rejection* of fasting, but fasting for the wrong reasons:

(The people speak:) "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" (The Lord answers:) "Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high ... Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Although Jesus did not command fasting, it didn't take long for the church to do so. Largely inspired by monastic ascetics, elaborate dietary rules governing the entire year became mandatory in both the Eastern and Western churches once Christianity became the official religion. The willful flouting of these stringent regulations was considered to be sinful. Let's be clear, however: There were always exceptions. Young children, the pregnant, the sick, the aged and infirm, in some cases, those engaged in heavy physical labor. Otherwise, fasting was the rule.

The Protestant Reformers dissented, sometimes fiercely, but it's a mistake to think of fasting as somehow "a Catholic thing." Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and Knox endorsed fasting as a private voluntary practice, and fasted themselves, as did, later on, such mainstream Protestant leaders as John Wesley and Charles Finney. They did not follow the example of Zwingli, who launched the Swiss Reformation with a public display of sausage-eating during Lent.

What troubled the Reformers was fasting's association with a "works" theology, i.e., we can earn God's love and our souls' salvation by doing good works. We find strong language about this in the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles of Religion (1571):

XIV. Of Works of Supererogation. Voluntary Works besides, over and above, God's Commandments, which (Roman Catholics) call Works of Supererogation, cannot be taught without arrogancy and impiety: for by them men do declare, that they not only render unto

God as much as they are bound to, but that they do more for his sake, than of bounden duty is required: whereas Christ saith plainly, “When ye have done all that are commanded to you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants’” (Luke 17:10).

“Cranmer knew that Lent was a time that we tend to turn in upon ourselves, to look at *our* work, *our* fasting, *our* effort for God,” writes Zac Hicks on doxologyandtheology.com. “Cranmer believed that a gaze fixed on ourselves actually lacked the power to accomplish the very works it desired. Only a gaze fixed on Christ — *his* merit, *his* works, *his* life, *his* death — possessed the power to actually fuel the Lenten fast. The only way we can live for God is for God to ‘give us grace’ to do so.”

“Fasting prepared the mind for prayer, Calvin acknowledged; it enabled Christians to break the tyranny of the flesh and at least temporarily to get the better of their basest desires,” writes Peter Iver Kaufman (Fasting in England in the 1560s: ‘A Thing of Nought’?). “Fasts also prompted humility, self-deprecation, the sincerest confessions of guilt, and gratitude for God’s grace,” in Calvin’s view.

There are many different ways to fast, and there’s also abstinence. They’re not the same thing. Abstinence is what I mean when I say I’m simply mad for chocolate, so I’m “giving up” chocolate for Lent — my diet otherwise unaffected. We just got through a “Dry January” fad. No consumption of alcohol throughout the month of January — a corrective, one wonders, for over-indulgence during the holidays?

Fasting, however, has to do with what we eat and drink, how much we consume, when we consume it, and how long we practice the discipline. It’s a “total diet” discipline, often including abstinence from meat. We are not meant to starve ourselves when we do a biblical fast, but to resist “the god of the belly” (Phil. 3:19) and other sensual cravings. The discipline of saying “no” to self and enduring some physical discomfort is believed to strengthen our ability to say “no” to sinful desires, also to empower our spiritual vitality. A companion tradition is to give the food one isn’t eating to the poor, or to donate its monetary value to hunger relief.

Those who choose to fast should do so mindfully, i.e., be well informed, start moderately, and consult with clergy and health care providers, as appropriate. A basic tradition is a diet of one full meal a day, supplemented with two light meals (like appetizer portions), with the goal of eating just short of feeling satisfied, in all instances. And plain fare, not rich or luxurious fare.

My fast-defending friend raises an interesting point, that we tend to *over-spiritualize* our religious practice, neglecting the body as an essential constituent of the human nature that was divinized in Christ.

The body, too, partakes in our sanctification by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is the very body we speak of when the Creed proclaims one of the most mysterious of Christian doctrines, the resurrection of the body. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the

Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body,” St. Paul teaches (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

How do we do that? We so often think of the body as either irrelevant to our spiritual growth or as an obstacle to it. For health or esthetics, we are willing to whip the body into shape by diet, jogging, body-building, gymnasiums, athletics, etc., with no thought given to what the body means in our spiritual life. One question I’m pondering this Lent: How can I glorify God with my body? A few answers: Sing those hymns, bow and kneel, make the sign of the cross — and now, maybe, fast?


Whether we choose to fast or not, let’s keep a holy Lent in the spirit of these words by the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston, retired bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Alaska:

“If you want to stay in shape, you need to exercise. That is as true for the spirit as the body. Here are a few spiritual exercises to use: Bend to help someone else up. Stretch to give generously. Run away from temptation. Climb to a higher level of learning. Jump on the chance to be loving. Lift up your heart. Hang on to your values. Push back against injustice. Those are some of the ones I remember from childhood. They stayed with me because they each speak so simply to a part of what it means to live an active spiritual life. You may be able to think of more. They are part of what it means to walk with God.”

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# Bishop's Message: Lenten Blessings

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 [delaware.church/bishops-message-lenten-blessings-2024/](https://delaware.church/bishops-message-lenten-blessings-2024/)

Dear Beloved Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

As we continue in the holy season of Lent, I hope you are discovering a deepening connection with Jesus Christ through moments of prayer, repentance, and self-reflection. At the same time, I extend an invitation for you to give thanks for a profound aspect often overlooked — the unity we share as members of the statewide Episcopal Church. Beyond mere association, it is through our various parishes, committees, organizations, and schools, with all the diversity that is represented, that we collectively make up the Episcopal Church in Delaware. We are stronger together — we are one Church.

The season of Lent has historically been a time for Christians to simplify their lives, with the stated intent of drawing closer to God. The irony, however, lies in realizing that God is already as close to us as our next breath. What we must do is take down the obstacles that prevent us from embracing this reality. The Ash Wednesday call to observe “a holy Lent” beckons us to self-examination, repentance, prayer, fasting, self-denial, and meditation on God’s Word (Book of Common Prayer, pg. 265). These spiritual practices are incremental steps leading us to more fully accept the grace that God is always extending to us. I encourage you, dear friends in Christ, to observe a holy Lent intentionally. Embrace repentance, prayer, fasting, and self-denial with purpose. Consider abandoning a habit taken for granted or adopting a new practice that challenges you.

If you find yourself grappling with a discipline, have faltered in your efforts, or have yet to embark on this journey, do not despair. Lent is not about perfect observance of disciplines but about acknowledging our dependence on a perfectly loving God. Confess where necessary and endeavor to restart or reshape your disciplines.

Our Lenten observance is not complete until we journey with Christ through the events of Holy Week and Easter, and I encourage us all to take this opportunity to immerse ourselves in the mysteries central to our faith. Be sure to check the schedule of your worshipping community for complete details and times, but below is a simple guide to the services you might expect.

- **March 24 (Palm Sunday): The Sunday of the Passion**

Sunday before Easter. A celebration of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, followed by his betrayal and crucifixion. This day is observed with palm branches and a reading of the Passion Gospel.

- **March 28: Maundy Thursday**

Thursday before Easter. Commemorates the Last Supper and is often observed with foot washing, stripping of the altar, and overnight prayer vigil to keep watch with Jesus in the garden.

- **March 29: Good Friday**

Friday before Easter. The most solemn day of the church year, observing the day Jesus was crucified. Often observed by praying the Stations of the Cross and a special liturgy, including the reading of the Passion and praying of solemn collects.

- **March 30: Holy Saturday**

Saturday before Easter. A day of somber reflection, remembering the day Jesus laid in the tomb.

- **March 31: Easter Sunday**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! This day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. We sing alleluias and celebrate with an abundance of joy!

Remember, perfection is not the goal; God is, both in Lent and always.

Blessings,

The Rt. Rev. Kevin S. Brown