**Daily Devotionals**

*12-01*

“Have you not just now called to me,
‘My Father, you are the friend of my youth—
will he be angry for ever,
will he be indignant to the end?’
This is how you have spoken,
but you have done all the evil that you could.”

— Jeremiah 3:4-5

We judge ourselves by our intentions, but the world judges us by our actions. That’s a cool concept I’ve learned in recovery circles. And it’s spot on here as Jeremiah rails against Israel for being hypocrites. They call God father and friend and put forth songs of lament on one hand, but on the other hand, they are acting as if God doesn’t exist.

While Jeremiah’s harsh words make it seem as though Israel is deliberately being straight-up evil, and while some people, particularly those in authority, might have been doing just that, I have a feeling the everyday Jew really did have good intentions. But it’s super easy to slip into complacency about your everyday decisions. I know I do things every day simply by virtue of the culture and economy that I live in that harm other people. For example, while I try to shop sustainably and equitably, there are times it’s just easier to buy what’s cheap online without any thought about the lives I might be harming in the process.

God loves us anyway, of course, and thank goodness, because my intentions are often a far cry from my actions. But perhaps it would be fruitful to look honestly at my actions, and ask God’s help in moving them toward God’s justice in the world.

Do I see a disconnect between my intentions and my actions?

*12-02*

“For the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people.”

— Jeremiah 30:3a

This is a powerful Advent word of hope. And, really, we could use a little hope right now, as the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is a still-largely-unknown threat, as we head toward yet another Christmas where we have to be exceedingly cautious around our elderly and health-compromised family and friends, as our nation continues to struggle against very real threats to our democracy, and as it remains to be seen whether the commitments made at the COP26 climate conference will be followed through and whether, even if they are, it will be enough and in time.

In the midst of defeat and exile, at the rock bottom of Israel’s fortunes, God speaks a word of hope through Jeremiah. They days are surely coming when I will restore the fortunes of my people. Not just coming. But the promise is sure. May God’s word of hope sustain is in our turbulent times.

What do I need to hear a word of hope about today?

*12-03*

“When Israel sought for rest,

the Lord appeared to him from far away.

I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.”

— Jeremiah 31:2b-3

This makes me think of the story of the prodigal son. I love the image of trudging home, exhausted and needing nurturing, and seeing God still far off with arms extended wide. And I love that God’s faithfulness to us has nothing to do with our faithfulness to God. God’s faithfulness is simply because God has loved us with an everlasting love. How beautiful is that?

How do I lean into God’s love when I need rest?

*12-04*

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

— Jeremiah 31:33

I got a tattoo for my 50th birthday a few weeks back. It’s a Celtic-inspired, stylized sunflower, frog, and dragonfly. The sunflower represents my daughter, the frog myself, and the dragonfly my son. Aside from just thinking tatts are cool (it was my second), I wanted the art as a reminder that my kids are always with me, a deeply important part of who I am.

God’s covenant with us is that God will tattoo God’s grace, mercy, and love on our hearts, so that we will always remember who we are and whose we are. I’d like to think that divine ink is already there on every heart in creation. It’s up to us to look at it (just as I need a mirror to see the full scope of the art on my arm) and respond in deep gratitude.

What things remind me of God’s presence in my life?

*12-05*

“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’”

— Ezekiel 37:14

Main Idea: When God breathes new life into us, it may be through healing and restoration, or it may be through acceptance of the things lost.

Physical illnesses like cancer, diabetes, MS, Parkinson’s disease; mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia, dementia; addiction; broken relationships; financial stresses—these and so many more can feel like death. They feel like our bodies and souls are not more than a pile of dry bones. Everyone has the experience of despair and suffering at one time or another. It’s one of the hardest things I’ll ever do as a parent—watch my children suffer, knowing there is nothing I can do about it.

God nailed it when God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. As a parent, God would have been grieved to watch the children of Israel suffer in exile. But God could, and did do something about it. God promised Ezekiel and the Israelites in a vivid vision that the children of Israel would one day be restored. Bones came together, then sinews, and then flesh, and skin, but no breath. Anyone who has experienced suffering knows that the ending of suffering can be a long, slow, painful process. It can seem as though there will never be any breath that can restore us to new life.

But God does promise breath and God delivers the breath of life. For the Israelites, new life came in the form of restoration from exile back to their land and their culture. For us, new life might come in the form of healing of body, mind, or spirit. New life might come through recovery from addiction. New life might mean the restoration of relationships or finances. It might also mean an acceptance of things lost and a new way of looking at the past, present, and future.

My hopes for my children when they were born were not surprising—good health, education, jobs, marriages, retirements, and long life. Before my first baby was two, we lost the dream of good health to T1D (diabetes). By the time my second child was in first grade, we lost the dream of a seamless education as long days of sitting still in classrooms for the next twelve years became a daunting task for an active, creative, distractible little boy. By the time my oldest turned nineteen we had potentially lost the possibility of job, marriage, retirement, and long life with a diagnosis of MS. (Would he be able to work? To have a family? To retire and do as he dreams?)

For us, acceptance of what is lost has become our saving breath. And with the letting go of the “perfect” lives we envisioned for our kids came a tremendous freedom to dream about the many alternative ways our kids can live out their lives. Happy. Loved. At peace. As healthy as possible.

And always in the hands of a loving God who continues to breathe God’s breath of everlasting life into us.

*12-06*

“In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.”

— Ezekiel 1:1

Ezekiel’s visions are way trippy. Honestly, I don’t get much out of them. I imagine the imagery would have been potent for his contemporaries but to me they sound bizarre and unbelievable.

That being said, God does speak to us in different ways. I’ve had incredibly powerful dreams at various points in my life which were absolutely messages from God. I’ve also had nudges from God directly or through other people, and felt the very real presence of God in communities and relationships. And I’m sure when I’ve shared some of these things with others, they’ve thought, “Yeah, that’s kind of trippy and not believable.” So who am I to judge good ol’ Ezekiel?

How have I experienced God speaking to me?

*12-07*

“Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord.”

— Ezekiel 1:28a

Rainbows are cool. Beautiful. Luminous. Arresting. What better appearance of the likeness of the glory of God? We know how actual rainbows work, and we’ve seen so many pictures of them, we probably don’t think they’re all that cool. But then when we see on in person…well, I can speak for myself, I guess. When I see one in person, I’m fixated, stunned by the ethereal beauty. I’ll stand there and stare as long as I can, snap pictures even though I know they’ll never do the real thing justice.

What a great reminder to me about the likeness of the glory of God in my own life? I write about God all the time, I’m active in my worship community, I talk theology for fun. In fact, I’m so immersed in it, it’s easy to overintellectualize and even become desensitized to it. But then there are those moments, breathtaking, moving, like seeing a rainbow in person, when God’s presence in my life overwhelms and inspires me, and I am grateful all over again for all that God is and does in my life.

How would I describe the likeness of the glory of God?

*12-08*

“He said to me: Mortal, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart and hear with your ears; then go to the exiles, to your people, and speak to them. Say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord God’; whether they hear or refuse to hear.”

— Ezekiel 3:10-11

When they were growing up, my kids didn’t always listen to me. Big shock, I know. But I knew I had important things to say to them. Practical things. Pieces of genuine wisdom. And I continued to speak them whether my kids heard or refused to hear (or, more likely, were too distracted by other things to hear).

I don’t always listen to God, either. I, too, am often distracted, even though I know there is important wisdom to be had. God doesn’t give up. God continues to speak through prophetic voices all around me, hoping that I will come back around to what really matters, and hear what God has to say.

Am I too distracted to hear God’s word to me?

*12-09*

“The man said to me, ‘Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you see to the house of Israel.’”

— Ezekiel 40:4

Look and listen, God says. Pay attention to what I am showing you. Not just dramatic visions of heavenly creatures and chariots and now the temple, but to the simple and mundane. Because God is not just in the extraordinary, but in the ordinary stuff of life. And there is much to learn from paying attention to the little things. In my experience, that’s where God shows up more often than not. God brought us here—into this life at this time in this place—in order that God might show us the beauty and wonder of all God is and does, and so that we can, in turn, declare it to others. Such is the most basic and beautiful kind of faith.

What Godly things so I notice that I can share with others?

*12-10*

“Then he measured the gate of the outer court that faced north—its depth and width.”

— Ezekiel 40:20

Blah blah blah dimensions of the new temple in great detail… I guess the point is that the temple was really, really important to God’s people. It was, after all, God’s dwelling place on earth, and a powerful sign of God’s presence with them.

But what about us? The specific dimensions of this or that gate matter far less than the promise of God making God’s home with us. Of course, God already makes God’s home within and among us today and always. But there is a certain amount of excitement that comes with the anticipation of a time when God’s presence will be far more obvious—in that second home at the end of time.

What does the temple symbolize for me? How do I envision God’s presence?

*12-11*

“And in the vestibule of the gate were two tables on either side, on which the burnt-offering and the sin-offering and the guilt-offering were to be slaughtered.”

— Ezekiel 40:39

Yes, the temple was a place of ritual slaughter. That was a huge part of the Jewish faith—making things right with God by offering God a sacrifice. We may not kill animals in our worship practices anymore, but truly communing with God still requires sacrifice. At a bare minimum we give up time for worship. And we are encouraged to contribute our talents and our financial resources to God’s work in the world.

On a more emotional/spiritual level, I have found the need to sacrifice my ego. Not my sense of self, but my need to be the one calling the shots. I need to leave on the altar my desire for control of people, places, and situations. I need to offer to God my best self, and open myself for God to work in and through me. When I make these sacrifices, I truly do connect more closely to God.

What things do I sacrifice—or need to sacrifice—to feel connected to God?

*12-12*

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,

and do not return there until they have watered the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,

and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ”

— Isaiah 55:10-11

Main Idea: God’s words go into the world and return full as they are spoken to accomplish God’s purpose.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” So, goes the adage. Not true. There is no doubt words can be incredibly hurtful.

Some words have the power to transform the world for the worse. “I believe today that my conduct is in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator.” ~Adolf Hitler.

Some words have the power to transform the world for the better. “I have a dream…” ~Martin Luther King, Jr. “Four score, and seven years ago…” ~Abraham Lincoln. “Be the change you want to see in the world…” ~Ghandi.

God’s words have the power to transform the world eternally. God promises milk and wine without price—a restoration of the people of Israel from exile. The promises held in God’s words were hope for a broken and hopeless people. God acknowledges that people may not have the capacity to understand God’s ways, but that God’s ways are good and in them there is life.

Most importantly, God’s words are never empty. God’s words go out into the world, where they are nourished and grow; they return to God full, having accomplished God’s purposes.

We are charged with a tremendous responsibility concerning God’s words. We cannot use God’s words or God’s Word to beat people down, to justify war, to prove a position, or to keep people in poverty. God’s words and God’s Word must be spoken with tenderness and love, with power and justice, with thought and meaning. We can use God’s words to change the world for the better. For acceptance, for justice, for tolerance, for communicating, for peace, for the uplifting of humanity, for love.

*12-13*

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms,

and carry them in his bosom,

and gently lead the mother sheep.”

— Isaiah 40:11

Such beautiful, tender, mothering images of God. God nurtures us—feeding, gathering, carrying, and leading. It makes me feel like a child, snuggling into my mother’s arms. This was a message of hope to a people in exile, and it is a message of hope to us in the midst of whatever hardship we are facing. It doesn’t matter what it is, how big or how small, no one is without difficulties. And God holds us through them, our loving mother, seeing to our needs.

What is God carrying me through right now?

*12-14*

“By a perversion of justice he was taken away.

Who could have imagined his future?

For he was cut off from the land of the living,

stricken for the transgression of my people.”

— Isaiah 53:8

We like to think our justice system has come a long way since the Roman empire. But for large groups of people in the United States, justice is still perverted. Not for me—I’m white, middle-class, cisgender, and past child-bearing years. Our justice system is stacked in my favor. And I sometimes think that makes it harder for me to grasp the state violence that sent Jesus to his death.

I don’t hold with the notion that Jesus had to endure suffering to make God happy with us again, so I cringe a little at a lot of the language in this full passage. I do, however, believe that Jesus suffered the absolute worst that could be suffered and that, because of it, we can say that Jesus knows our suffering, no matter how horrible. So those who are still daily victims of state violence and perversions of justice in my country can maybe—just maybe—take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows what they are going through, and is right there in the midst of it with them.

How do I relate to the suffering of Jesus on the cross?

*12-15*

“I have seen their ways, but I will heal them;

I will lead them and repay them with comfort,

creating for their mourners the fruit of the lips.

Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord;

and I will heal them. Isaiah”

— 57:18-19

So many of us are in need of healing. Whether it’s COVID or cancer, diabetes or depression, anxiety or addiction. For some of us, healing will come—we will make a full recovery, or our disease will be in good control or go into remission. Some will succumb to the great sorrow of those around them. Yet God promises us help and healing. It might not look exactly as we think it should, but however we are coping (or not) with our suffering or grief, God is there in the midst of us, holding and comforting. Some may not see it, might feel abandoned, and that’s understandable. May God’s words of hope and healing comfort all of us wherever we are.

Where am I in need of God’s help and healing? What does that look like for me?

*12-16*

“Rather, your iniquities have been barriers

between you and your God,

and your sins have hidden his face from you

so that he does not hear.”

— Isaiah 59:2

I don’t believe God ever hides God’s face from us. But I’ll tell you that I have a long history of hiding mine. I’ve thrown up all kinds of barriers between myself and God. And God doesn’t have to punish me for it—I do a perfectly fine job of punishing myself, thank-you-very-much. In fact, the very act of putting up those barriers and turning away from God, that self-created separation, is its own punishment. I have never found much happiness in life trying to barrel through on self-will, acting as if God was busy off doing other things so it was up to me to control everything.

The truth is God is never busy off doing other things. God is right here, right now, fully present in even the minutiae of my—and your—life.

What barriers do I place between myself and God?

*12-17*

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners;

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

— Isaiah 61:1-2a

As we continue our journey through Advent, we continue to hear the prophets proclaiming words of hope. God’s people never seemed to catch a break, and yet they remained faithful to God (in an on-again, off-again kind of way) through generations. Now, again, they are a conquered people, many of them living in exile. They need a proclamation of God’s favor. And how blessed is the messenger that brings this good news! When Jesus began his ministry, he read this passage (more or less) to a rapt synagogue and told them that he was the fulfilment of it. Surely he did come to bring good news to the hurting, the down-trodden, the victims of injustice. And we await his coming again at Christmas and at the end of time, proclaim it again.

What good news do I need to hear today?

*12-18*

“For I am about to create new heavens

and a new earth;

the former things shall not be remembered

or come to mind.”

— Isaiah 65:17

But what if I want to remember? I mean, at least the good things. I imagine here God is saying that all the terrible things of the world will pass away. That individual, collective, and generational trauma will be completely healed and we shall all be free of it.

In the mean time, we need to remember. Remember our past history and our present climate and all the evil that we have done. Otherwise, we will continue to repeat them.

How do I imagine a new heaven and a new earth?

*12-19*

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

— John 1:14

Main Idea: In the beginning, a triune God brought light to a dark nothingness. Christ renewed that light.

“In the beginning…”

“…when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,”

“…was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

“…while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

“All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

“Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.”

“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

“God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.”

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

John 1:1-5

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning was God’s Word, and God’s first word was “light.” The wind (Hebrew: ruah, breath, spirit – the Holy Spirit, perhaps?) swept over the waters (chaos, formless, void, emptiness). God spoke and there was light, which has the power to illuminate the darkness, to make sense of chaos, and to create order out of disorder.

At the time of John, the people were living in a dark world. They were occupied by Rome and their living conditions were difficult. John’s words offered the hope that there would be light in the midst of their darkness. If light marked the beginning of creation, then the light of Christ marked the beginning of a new creation—one in which humanity could truly know the triune God.

*12-20*

“Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”

— Matthew 2:1b-2

Jesus is for everyone. Yes, he would be born of and raised by devout Jews. But from the very beginning, people from other nations recognized that he was special—the subject of prophecies and astrological texts. As Jesus ministry unfolded and he sometimes struggled with whether his message was for non-Jews, he continued to cross boundaries, extending God’s love to gentiles—a Syrophoenician woman, a Samaritan woman, a Roman centurion. Maybe his parents told him the story of how the wise men visited when he was a toddler. Maybe, being precocious, he actually remembered it, even if he had no understanding of it at the time. Perhaps he knew that he was always destined to carry God’s message well beyond the small community that had held it for so long. In God’s eyes, no one is an outsider. Period. The wise men remind us of that.

Do I ever feel like an outsider in my faith circles?

*12-21*

“‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,

according to your word;

for my eyes have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.’”

— Luke 2:29-32

It used to be, in the church I grew up in, that we sang a variation of this text at the end of every church service. It was a proclamation that we had heard the gospel of Jesus revealed and that we were now ready to go in peace into the world. Simeon, of course, wasn’t just talking about leaving the temple. He was basically saying, “I’ve seen Jesus. Now I can die happy.” As macabre as it may sound, we might as well have been singing the same at the end of worship. We never know what will happen at any given moment. And we might not ever make it back to church to hear the word preached again. But we live in the hope of Jesus’ redeeming love, so that no matter what happens, we can know we will ultimately be okay.

Do I trust that Jesus has me, no matter what?

*12-22*

“There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.

At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

— Luke 2:36a, 38

I love Anna. I love that Luke names her, calls her a prophetess, and sends her out happily proclaiming that Jesus has arrived. One of my childhood Sunday school teachers was an Anna to me (though she was hardly elderly at the time, I was a kid and she was my parents’ age—that made her old!) She had such faith, and witnessed so beautifully. I credit her with so much of my faith formation. We all need Annas in our lives, speaking God’s word to us and calling us to do the same for others.

Who are the Annas in my life?

*12-23*

“He said to them, ‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’”

— Luke 2:49

My little brother got lost once as a kid. We were probably in Sears. My mom panicked when she couldn’t find him. She searched everywhere among the big, round clothing racks. She went to the courtesy desk to find out if anyone had seen him. Finally, she found him. Where? In the toy section, poring over all the Star Wars toys. I mean, duh. Where else would he be? Sure he’d had to know where the toys were, and he had to ride an escalator to the lower level to get there. And he was only four. But he knew where he wanted to be and he went.

Jesus, too, knew where he wanted to be. He knew how to get there, and he wandered off on his own through a crowded city without thought of the rest of his family. And when they found him and confronted him, he seemed as surprised as my brother had. “Duh, where else would I be?”

We are called to wonder whether, left to our own devices, we would choose to be in God’s presence above all else. Or would other distractions or obligations pull us off track?

If I were to wander off from the demands of life, where would I most want to go?

*12-24*

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

— Luke 2:7

Main Idea: God’s gift was peace.

“Peace on earth!” It is a Christmas blessing so common it is easy to let the words gloss over us as nothing more than a cheesy saying on an old Christmas card.

But peace on earth is not cheesy and it is not wimpy. Peace is an incredibly difficult thing to achieve. Ironically, peace often cannot be achieved without conflict or war. And this earth is rarely, if ever, completely void of conflict.

For the people of Israel, conflict was upon them. Rome occupied Jewish lands and a foreign government controlled God’s people. Peace would have meant regaining control over their own land and governing themselves. For the Israelites, that peace never came. The land has been in conflict ever since.

For us, peace might mean freedom from war – indeed, many of our sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers, and daughters and sons are fighting overseas. The promise of peace might also mean freedom from more personal conflicts—physical ailments, mental illness, addiction, broken relationships, lost jobs. The turmoil that surrounds any of these indeed begs for peace.

So, is the angels’ proclamation of peace for us? Can Jesus bring peace into a broken world (globally or locally)? For some, peace is already upon them. For others, they may still be waiting. But the promise is solid. Christ brings hope for the possibility of peace on this earth and the certainty of peace in the life to come.

*12-25*

“When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

— Luke 2:17-18

Main Idea: In the midst of the ordinary, the Christ child brings the extraordinary into existence.

What a strange little story! A group of ordinary shepherds were tending to their sheep, as they had every night before, and would every night after. But this night angels (!) disrupted their monotony with a proclamation of a savior born in the town below.

What a strange little story! A young woman gives birth to a baby boy, as women have done for generations, and would do for generations to come. But on this night, shepherds (!) disrupted the ordinary event with an extraordinary proclamation that angels had announced his birth.

What a strange little story! A small gathering of worshipers meet together in a sanctuary as they have done every Sunday before and would do every Sunday after. But on this Saturday (!) angels and shepherds (!!) disrupt the ordinary gathering with a proclamation that a child born 2000 years ago continues to disrupt lives even today.

Despite the story’s familiarity to those who have heard it before, there is nothing ordinary about this child. The reason we continue to gather for worship is that this child is still alive and active in this world. This child brings healing where hope for healing has been lost. This child brings peace to war-torn lands when peace seems impossible. This child brings restoration to individuals, families, communities, countries, and even the entire earth.

We have been given a gift. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of the holiday season, we can spend one quiet moment gathered together in a familiar space with familiar faces and familiar carols to look and see the face, the words, the effect of an extraordinary child born 2000 years ago, and still alive today.

*12-26*

“He said,

‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,

“Make straight the way of the Lord” ’,

as the prophet Isaiah said.”

— John 1:23

Main Idea: Voices of truth can be hard to hear.

At this point in John, we haven’t yet met Jesus face to face. We have only learned of him through the prophet, John. This prophet proclaiming the coming of Jesus was no ordinary Joe. Although there were other prophets roaming the countryside, it was not an ordinary occurrence. Nor was baptism an ordinary ritual. John certainly called attention to himself with his clothing and food (cf. Mark 1:6), his sharp words, and his baptizing. It is no surprise that the Pharisees were drawn to him, worried about what he might say and how he might rile the crowds.

People who speak truth, especially truth that is hard to hear, are often met with suspicion. We are living in a time when the truth is hard to find. There are so many voices, so much shouting, so much fighting, how are we to discern truth? Shall we listen for the voices of those who are unorthodox? Shall we listen only for the voices who speak what we want to hear? Shall we risk opening ourselves to truths we don’t want to hear?

John was very clear in pointing to the truth. “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” One of the reasons we know John is speaking truth is that John was not calling attention to himself. He was pointing toward someone else. He was paving the way for Jesus. We also have the benefit of time – we can look backwards in time to see that what John spoke was the truth. The things he prophesied came to pass.

We might use similar measures to determine truth even today. Are the ones speaking—or shouting—pointing toward themselves or something that benefits only them? Or are they speaking of a greater good that benefits humanity? Are their words consistent with the words of Jesus? Does their agenda proclaim exclusivity, hatred, and inequity, or does it proclaim peace, justice, and love? Truth is hard to discern among the too many voices we are inundated with, but it is still there. Often a small sound, but a powerful one. “This is the Son of God.”

*12-27*

“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,

whose sin is covered.

Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,

and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”

— Psalm 32:1-2

What a gift forgiveness is! To know that God holds no resentment toward us when we mess up, that we can be free of the burden of guilt and shame. And how hard it is to accept that gift! I want to continue to beat myself up for my imperfections and indiscretions long after everyone else has moved on. It is helpful to remember that God’s forgiveness is unconditional and doesn’t need to be earned. God cleans the slate and holds our hands as we work to do better next time. Forgiveness really does bring joy.

Is there something I need to forgive myself for?

*12-28*

“While I kept silence, my body wasted away

through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;

my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.”

— Psalm 32:3-4

Life is hard, but not because God’s “hand is heavy upon” us. It’s hard because we make it hard. Hard for ourselves, hard for others. Sometimes it’s hard because of random occurrences no one could have expected. It’s just hard sometimes.

The psalmist has made their own life hard by refusing to acknowledge their mistakes. They’ve tried to keep it from God, and maybe even themselves. No wonder they feel so lousy. I can relate. When I’m miserable, a closer look at myself quickly reveals that I’m not being honest in myself in some way, whether about something that’s happening in my life, something I’m feeling, or something I’ve done. Hopefully I figure out that I need to get whatever it is off my chest asap if I hope to feel any better.

What things make me feel stressed or sad?

*12-29*

“Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’,

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

— Psalm 32:5

It feels so good to come clean. Well, not always. Sometimes the other person isn’t too nice about it. But in my recovery journey I’ve had to make lots of amends to people—own up to the past and see if there’s any way to make things right. And almost without exception, people are incredibly gracious, often expressing that they didn’t even remember whatever incident was weighing so heavily on me.

It’s no different when we come before God with our failing, except that we’re guaranteed grace and forgiveness, no matter how awful the thing we’ve done.

How does it feel to have to ask someone for forgiveness?

*12-30*

“You are a hiding-place for me;

you preserve me from trouble;

you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

— Psalm 32:7

Sometimes you just need a refuge. I’m not saying you should hide away from your problems. But there are just moments when the weight of everything going on is too much, and some serious self-care is called for. God preserves us in our struggles, holds us and inspires us. It can be great relief to take things to God and let them go, so we can get on with whatever is next.

When do I find myself most in need of good self-care?

*12-31*

“I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;

I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

— Psalm 32:8

I’m a figure-it-out kinda gal. Here’s a hint. It doesn’t serve me all the time. Sometimes I need to just admit I don’t know what to do and ask for help. God is happy to oblige. God promises to instruct and teach us the way we should go, to provide us counsel. And I have to say that when I reach out to people and admit I need help, I almost always hear just the things I need from trusted advisors in my life, through which God speaks. God’s got our backs.

Where can I let go a little and ask God to help?