**Daily Devotions**

**March 2022**

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“At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.’”

— Matthew 11:25

Kids are amazing theologians. I used to sit down with a group of kids as young as first graders and write skits with them. We’d read a text together, I’d unpack it a bit for them, and then I’d ask them if there was any place or time in their own lives it relates to. Sometimes it was like pulling teeth. Other times, they stunned me with their insight about where they saw Jesus and could enter into the story. Probably the most profound was the time we were looking at Jesus’ crucifixion between the two thieves. I asked the kids if they’d ever experienced or witnessed bullying or humiliation and almost in unison, a group of about seven kids said: “On the school bus.” Whoa. (No wonder my kids hated the bus.) And here it was a way for the kids to relate in some small way to what Jesus endured, and recognize the lengths he went to out of profound love for us.

If you ever want a fresh theological perspective about something, ask a kid. Sometimes they just “get” things we adults bury under layers of over-intellectualization, preconception, ego, and the need to control. And sometimes the answer really is as simple as “Jesus loves you.”

What’s the most insightful thing I’ve ever learned from a kid?

*03-02*

“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

— John 10:16

**Main Idea: We know Jesus’ voice when we listen.**

Is Jesus confused? “I am the gate…I am the good shepherd.” So—is he the gate or is he the shepherd? Jesus’ definitive answer is, “Yes!” The question isn’t really: “Who is Jesus?” The question here is: “Is Jesus the one?” Again, the answer is “Yes!”

It really doesn’t matter that Jesus uses a mixed metaphor to describe who he is. What matters is that Jesus is proclaiming loudly that his voice is the one we are invited to follow. We, and others in his other flocks (Samaritans, perhaps? Muslims? Maybe).

In a world (his and ours) where there are so many loud and competing voices, it can be hard to discern Jesus’ voice. But maybe it’s not as hard as we think. I heard a Kids’ Storytime once where the pastor invited several kids to close their eyes, one at a time. When each child’s eyes were closed, he pointed to individuals in the congregation, who then called the child by name. The child was asked to identify which voice was their own parent. Every child correctly identified their own parent 100% of the time. They didn’t need to be taught. They didn’t need to study. They knew their parent’s voice because they lived with their parents day in and day out.

When we live with Jesus day in and day out, we don’t need to be taught which voice is his. We don’t need to study to recognize Jesus’ voice. When we reside with Jesus, we know. Sometimes we doubt ourselves. But when we give ourselves a moment to filter out all the shouting and screaming of the other voices we are inundated with, we know. Jesus’ voice is clear and powerful. “I am.”

*03-03*

“Jesus said to them, ‘If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’”

— John 10:37-38

I don’t think it’s my job to convince anyone to become a Christian. Maybe that’s controversial. I don’t know. What I do know is that it is, without question, my job to proclaim my faith through my actions in the world. What actions? Those that demonstrate love of God with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love for neighbor as myself. Work for justice for the marginalized and oppressed, work for the restoration and preservation of God’s creation, unconditional love for everyone I come into contact with (none of which I do perfectly, of course).

Even if others don’t believe what I believe, they will perhaps recognize that my Christianity is what informs these actions. And those actions are far more persuasive than anything I would ever have to say about Jesus. At that point, what they believe is between them and God.

Do I think it’s my job to bring people to Jesus? Why or why not?

*03-04*

“Their land is filled with idols;

they bow down to the work of their hands,

to what their own fingers have made.”

— Isaiah 2:8

I like to make things. I sew. I craft. I draw. I write. I’m grateful for “the work of my hands.” But it can (and has at times) become an idol. Not that I worship the clothes I make or the beautiful lake-stones-and-beach glass picture frames I put together. But once upon a time, I would compulsively spend on craft supplies, which was actually about the powerful desire to escape my life and create time I would never have to do all these projects I was buying supplies for. The supplies, by the by, sat in bags and boxes in my closet, collateral damage in the struggle to fill an emptiness in my life that could only be filled by God.

I am grateful, in more recent years, to have put my priorities in their proper order. I nurture my relationship with God and take appropriate self-care, both of which give rise to actual time in which to create things with my hands. Such things are not to replace God as idols to worship, but expressions of gratitude for God’s invitation to me to be a co-creator of beauty.

What things have I tried to use to fill the emptiness that only God can fill?

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“His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace

for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it

with justice and with righteousness

from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

— Isaiah 9:7

I’ll be honest. I don’t see it. Russia just invaded the Ukraine (it’s February 24th as I write this). And it’s not like this is some rude awakening, as if there aren’t any other wars being fought right now (there are more than 70 ongoing armed conflicts according to Wikipedia, not to mention the countless incidents of violence within nations, regions, and among various populations). If we are to believe that Isaiah’s prophecy was about Jesus, then where is this endless peace? Where is the justice and righteousness? Where is the zeal of the Lord of hosts?

And here we are again in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” Jesus has already come, already saved, and already reigns. And at the same time, we do not yet experience the fullness of Jesus’ reign. We catch glimpses of it. It breaks into our temporal experience whenever we work for justice, whenever we seek to know and do God’s will in the care for neighbor, in the care for creation. Those are beautiful, beautiful moments. But sometimes it just doesn’t feel like enough, and I’m sad. And I guess that’s okay, too.

Where have I seen the reign of God breaking into the world?

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“Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’”

— John 11:25-26a

Main Idea: The raising of Lazarus was a pivotal moment in Jesus’ ministry as he moved toward the cross. For now, we wait.

Unlike the Jesus portrayed in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, who consistently asked people not to make a big deal of his healings and miracles, John’s Jesus went out of his way to make a show of this story. When he learned about Lazarus’ death, he stayed two more days, so when he arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead four days. The Jews believed a dead person’s spirit hung around the dead body for three days. When Jesus arrived, there would be no question Lazarus was dead. Truly and unmistakably dead.

When he went to Martha and Mary, who were clearly already believers, both scolded Jesus for not being present—they knew that he could have and would have saved Lazarus from death if he had been there. What more did Jesus have to prove to them?

Jesus also made quite a show of the raising itself. He prayed to God aloud, even though he knew God was already listening. He did it for the sake of the bystanders who would become witnesses of the incredible event.

And this was an incredible event. Resurrections like this one were not unheard of, but they certainly weren’t commonplace. At just four days out, there would have been quite a few mourners to witness the event. Clearly, Jesus wanted people to know just how powerful God was.

Undoubtedly, word would spread about the raising of Lazarus. Religious leaders immediately set out to kill Lazarus so that the event could not be verified. But by this time, news of Jesus was uncontainable. This would be one of the pivotal events that caused religious leaders to begin contemplating killing Jesus himself. The line was drawn in the sand. The rest of Jesus’ time would be spent outmaneuvering the religious leaders and preparing the disciples to continue his work after his departure. There would only be one event that could top the event of Lazarus’ resurrection. And for that we wait.

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“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.”

— John 13:14

Main Idea: Jesus handed off the mission and ministry to his disciples in an intimate and vulnerable way.

By now the disciples were getting used to Jesus’ puzzling words and unusual actions. Even so, this one took them by surprise once again. For as often as Jesus spoke of justice and equality, their social structure was just too well ingrained to conquer quickly. They had been following Jesus for three years, learning from him and emulating him—he, their rabbi, and they, his disciples.

But on this Passover, Jesus turned the tables once again. He put on a towel and washed their feet—traditionally the job of the lowest servant in the household. How jarring it must have been, in a culture where class is everything, to have their rabbi demean himself in such a manner!

Peter’s response is priceless. All puffed up, he refused to be part of Jesus’ demeaning himself—until Jesus made it clear that the foot washing was necessary for them to have a share with Jesus. How quickly Peter turned! Well, if foot washing produces a share, then Peter wants to be washed head, shoulders, knees, and toes—a lion’s share of the blessing! I picture Jesus chuckling at this as he points out that isn’t necessary—the feet will be enough.

It might be hard for us to truly understand how incredibly moving and meaningful this act would have been. We are not bound by quite as stringent manners and rules of class as they were. But if you have ever washed another person’s feet, you will know how intimate and vulnerable an experience that can be. For Jesus, who has been at the top of the food chain for 3 years, the vulnerability shown here was just the tip of the iceberg. This vulnerability was tender and intimate—the next would be humiliating and disgraceful.

But it was more than just a preparation for the events to come. It was a handing on of the mission and ministry God had given him, and would continue through his disciples. It was a painfully tangible goodbye—a show of kinship for the suffering they would all endure as a result of carrying the torch. This moment is the calm before the storm—a sweet breath before the turmoil that is to come.

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“Now Simon Peter was standing and warming himself. They asked him, ‘You are not also one of his disciples, are you?’ He denied it and said, ‘I am not.’”

— John 18:25

Main Idea: Jesus experienced Peter’s betrayal deeply—Jesus knows exactly what it is to be human.

Jesus would be humiliated in every way on this night. He would be accused, tried, beaten, mocked, and hung on a cross. And the salt in the wound would be Peter’s denial. At a time when Jesus could have leaned upon the strength of his disciples, they betrayed him. Peter’s denial was an outward expression of the utter isolation Jesus would experience as he endured the events of the night. It’s truly heartbreaking.

I have long believed that Jesus experienced every single human emotion, so that God would forever know exactly what it is like to be human. This gut-wrenching betrayal demonstrates one of the most heinous experiences people will ever go through. For a beloved someone to turn their back on us, to leave us exposed and alone, highlights all the more why we will never live in a perfect world, why Jesus had to become human, and why God had to renew God’s covenant with people in the way that God did. Jesus did what we could never do. He endured more than any of us will ever endure. He survived the emotional roller coaster and came out loving us that much more. It’s perplexing and astonishing, and we are very fortunate to have a God that loves as deeply as this.

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“Pilate asked him, ‘What is truth?’”

— John 18:38

Main Idea: We can work together despite our differing interpretations of what may be truth.

Pilate asks the most profound question in this encounter, “What is truth?” Is truth the same as facts? Is truth our interpretation of the facts? Is truth the conclusions drawn from our interpretations? Or are our conclusions, interpretations, and observations of the facts simply an imperfect pursuit of a singular truth?

Pilate believed his perspective was truth. He wondered if Jesus could see what he saw, or if Jesus was blinded by the power and influence afforded him by his fame. The religious leaders believed the truth was that Jesus was a blasphemer and a dangerous criminal. Pilate could find no grounds for execution, but he also knew he was in a precarious position. He needed to appease the high priests to keep the peace and prove that he was an effective ruler, lest he be removed from his post. Pilate believed the truth of Jesus’ innocence conflicted with his desire for self-preservation and the fact that his subjects could and would turn on him if he didn’t comply with their demands. Jesus’ truth included knowledge of things that we will never know. All of these facts and realities clashed and crashed into one another, so that the only outcome was the death of Jesus.

It is human nature to believe that our own interpretations of facts are truth, and that everyone else is wrong. There is great maturity in acknowledging that my interpretation of facts might be different from yours, and that both can live in the same space, even as they disagree.

I will not likely change your mind. You will not likely change mine. But we can find shared common ground despite our competing interpretation of facts. We can build upon our common ground to work together to do God’s work in this world—the work of justice, equality, and peace.

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