**Daily Devotions**

**April 2022**

*04-01*

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.”

— John 17:20-21a

Jesus is praying for you here. Yes, you. In his final (long) prayer to God before the crucifixion, he asks God to be with his disciples at the time, but also with those who will follow after. And that’s you!

Yes, Jesus continues to pray for each of us always, but there’s something so cool about finding ourselves right there in scripture. It’s a reminder that the Bible isn’t some collection of old stories. It’s living and vibrant, and it’s our story right now, today.

And you know what else is cool? Jesus is praying for anyone who might yet come to believe through us, now and way into the future. We’re all part of a human chain throughout generations over thousands of years. Ooh. Goosebumps. May you be aware, today, that Jesus is praying for you!

Who brought me to the faith? Who brought them? Can I trace a kind of faith tree?

*04-02*

“Jesus said to Peter, ‘Put your sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink the cup that the Father has given me?’”

— John 18:11

We’re not gonna win this one by force, Peter. And when Jesus told you to go out and buy a sword earlier in the gospels, I’m pretty sure he was talking in the spiritual sense. But Peter did have a habit of being overenthusiastic without completely understanding what was going on. Maybe he did buy an actual sword. But…wouldn’t Jesus have said something when he noticed his most avid disciple sporting a deadly weapon on his belt?

Okay, enough pointing out the ridiculousness of Peter having a sword. That’s not what this is about. The point is that Jesus’ victory is not of a military nature. It’s not going to be won with weapons. It is going to be won through the total self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Like, the opposite of warfare.

And what can we learn from this? Even now, God calls us to fight our battles with active nonviolence. That’s what gets results that are healing for all involved. We need to sheath our swords and let God be in charge.

*Where has my desire to fight actually gotten in the way of my cause?*

*04-03*

“Pilate therefore said to him, ‘Do you refuse to speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ Jesus answered him, ‘You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin.’”

— John 19:10-11

Main Idea: Sometimes surrender is the best way to victory.

Jesus neither admitted nor denied the accusations against him. How could he? They were human accusations about human-made doctrines. Jesus was God being held to human standards.

Though Jesus had enough wisdom to talk his way out of this, he didn’t try. He had enough followers to fight his way out of this, but he didn’t ask them to. Jesus knew that surrendering to the unstoppable wave of hatred and spite would have far more lasting effects than fighting. He came to bring God’s peace to this world. Fighting would be contrary to his entire message. He spoke with wisdom whenever the situation called for wisdom. Here, his refusal to beg for his life was wisdom.

Surrender is not in our nature. We have an instinct for fight or flight. Surrender requires an internal strength and self-confidence. Especially when surrender ends in the way Jesus’ did. But sometimes surrender is the best way to victory. We can surrender our self-interest in favor of the interests of others. We can surrender control in favor of healing (think addiction). We can surrender over-achieving and impossible standards in favor of a healthy work-life balance. There are many ways we can surrender so that God can take over. In the end, Jesus’ surrender conquered sin and death, and we are blessed by it forever.

*04-04*

“Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.”

— Psalm 146:3-4

In yesterday’s text, the chief priests told Pilate, “We have no king but the emperor**.”** They completely sold out their integrity by conveniently overlooking the Jewish understanding that God was their king (or at least a Jew and preferably of the line of David) out of fear of Jesus’ threat to their power and influence—the lifestyle to which they had become accustomed.

Today, we read in Psalm 146 just one more reason their brash statement of loyalty to Rome was eye-opening at the least. The scripture warns us not to put our trust in earthly authorities, who will ultimately fail us. Only God can be fully relied upon to rule with justice and mercy, to give us what it is we truly need.

Yet so often I find I am still putting my trust in myself or in other people, rather than God. It seems to my mortal mind like it’s a safer bet. And it’s odd, because I have experienced time and again the reality that when I put myself in God’s hands, my needs are met. Let Psalm 146 be a reminder to me today and every day.

*When do I find myself relying on other people rather than God? What are the outcomes?*

*04-05*

“And one called to another and said:
‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.’”

— Isaiah 6:3

God reigns. The Bible is full of imagery of the rulership of God over all creation, such as in this passage from Isaiah. It’s appropriate to reflect upon the sovereignty of God in the midst of these Sunday readings from John about Jesus’ betrayal and arrest, in which Pilate names Jesus “King of the Jews” and the Jewish authorities promptly deny it.

What’s in play here is the human understanding of rulership vs. the divine rulership that is God’s alone. The Jewish people were waiting for a promised king—a male ruler—from the line of David, and many hoped Jesus would be their guy. He would sweep in, rally the people, and overthrow the oppressive rule of Rome. Those opposed to Jesus were in fear that the people were actually right—that Jesus was the messiah—because Jesus spoke against the status quo. If he was the promised king, things were gonna change around here, and that wasn’t cool with them. The people eventually turned against Jesus because he failed to live up to the strictly human understanding of what a king ought to do for them.

God’s rule isn’t like human rule. Human rule, while ostensibly being in the service of maintaining an ordered society, is almost universally about hoarding power and wealth within a small group. God’s reign—and I use reign instead of kingdom because “king” is a strictly male term and God is not male—is about complete equity and justice for all people. This is the ruler of whom the seraphim proclaim “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts!” This is Jesus.

What does it mean to me that God rules over all creation? What are my images of rulership?

*04-06*

“On that day the Lord of hosts will be a garland of glory,
and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people;
and a spirit of justice to the one who sits in judgement,
and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate.”

— Isaiah 28:5-6

“On that day” is big with the prophets. Many speak of “the day of the Lord” when God will come in glory to restore the fortunes of Israel and rule the whole earth in peace and justice. Often the day of the Lord is synonymous with apocalyptic imagery—falling stars, earthquakes, the end of all things—at which point God will sweep in and create all things new. It’s another way of looking at God’s divine rulership, as we have been exploring. Again, the focus is on justice and protection and restoration of an oppressed people. Interestingly, this two-verse passage is dropped seemingly randomly amidst a diatribe against all those Israelites who are living in self-serving ways directly opposed to justice for the oppressed. So this promise of God’s divine rulership isn’t a declaration of the superiority of Israel as a “chosen people” who God will unilaterally restore. It’s a statement of hope for those who are poor and downtrodden by their self-serving countrymen/women.

This text from Isaiah is a beacon of hope for those in my country who live lives diminished by systemic racism, enforced poverty, homophobia, environmental destruction, and a whole host of other oppressions by the status quo. May we all work to make “on that day” today.

*Where do I see God’s reign already at work in the world?*

*04-07*

“For fools speak folly,
and their minds plot iniquity:
to practice ungodliness,
to utter error concerning the Lord,
to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied,
and to deprive the thirsty of drink.”

— Isaiah 32:6

God’s reign is a reign of justice for those living in poverty. It’s *all over* scripture. All the prophets. Hannah. Mary’s Magnificat. Jesus. So what does that tell us?

One, poverty is the result of injustice. Period. It’s not because someone is lazy or doesn’t want to work or isn’t willing to do what is necessary to lift themselves up by their bootstraps. The U.S. system is rigged against large numbers of people—actually designed to perpetuate poverty through unjust laws and practices. It’s nothing new, people. Denying it is denying a fact as old as time.

Two, Isaiah calls a spade a spade here: the injustice of poverty is against God. It’s wrong. It’s “ungodliness.” In God’s righteous rule, there is justice, ergo there is no poverty. If the system is unjust, it is incumbent upon those who seek the inbreaking of God’s reign in the world to speak out for a just system. There are lots of folks doing this—and folks have been doing this for generations. Sometimes there seems to be forward movement toward justice, and other times we take enormous steps backward. I guess the work is never done, but that being said, we can never stop doing the work.

*What does justice look like to me in my own country or community?*

*04-08*

“A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.”

— Isaiah 42:3

And now for something completely different. The past couple passages have been about God’s rulership being one of glory—seraphim singing “Holy Holy Holy” and God being a “garland of glory” and a “diadem of beauty” and turning back battle at the gate. Big, showy, ruler-y things, indeed, and we can all get behind a delivering God who sweeps in and creates justice for all.

But here we have this image of a divinely-appointed ruler as a “suffering servant,” gentle to those in need of justice. So gentle that a reed bruised and hurting from oppressive systems will not be broken under the weight of the servant’s rule. That a candle that has been nearly extinguished by adversity and injustice will not accidentally be snuffed by the ruler’s decrees.

True justice—that of the divine suffering servant, who is Jesus—is gentle on the oppressed. It brings relief. So here is a ruler who is not bombastic and glorious, but nurturing, like a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings, or a mother eagle bearing its young. And like the glorious diadem ruler, I can really get behind this idea, too.

Aren’t you just blown away by the beautiful and diverse imagery of our ruler God? I certainly am.

*What are the most compelling images for me of God as divine ruler?*

*04-09*

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

— Jeremiah 23:5

Now we’re naming names. We’re directly connecting the rulership of Jesus to the kingship of David, his ancestor and the oft-cited proof that Jesus was/is God’s promised messiah—the fulfillment of this prophecy of Jeremiah’s. David was a beloved king, and God promised that his line would always rule Israel. That only lasted a few generations, of course, but God kept God’s promise (as God always does) in setting David’s descendant, Jesus, not on an earthly throne, but on high, as ruler of the whole earth.

This passage makes me think of Jesus’ humanness—his connection to flesh-and-blood people from history, the embodied-ness of God in the person of Jesus, which is way cool. But it also bears a striking contrast to the humanness of David.

David raped Bathsheba, had her husband, Uriah, assassinated, then married her. He had who-knows-how-many wives and sexual slaves, a slew of offspring, and a son, Ammon, who followed in his footsteps by raping a woman—Ammon’s sister, Tamar. David’s mishandling of his dysfunctional family led to a civil war. His disobedience to God (about a census, of all things) resulted in a pestilence that killed 70,000 innocent people. I could go on. David, a very, very human king, abused his power to the detriment of others.

This is something Jesus does not, would not, could not do. Jesus as the messiah is in many ways not only the fulfillment of God’s promise to David, but a resounding “no” to all the ways David screwed up. Jesus’ humanness showed us that being human doesn’t mean succumbing to our basest instincts, including abuse of power.

*Do I believe in the concept of “human nature?” Why or why not?*

*04-10*

“Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, ‘Do not write, “The King of the Jews”, but, “This man said, I am King of the Jews.” ’ Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’”

— John 19:21-22

Main Idea: King Jesus was a leader for the people.

There’s no question we are living through a period of history where political ideologies are polarized. As the US in particular continues to swing wildly from left to right to left, we are forced to grapple with what it means to be a leader.

People long for a voice—someone to speak for them in a world loathe to listen. People long for change—someone who can see not only where we have been, but also a path toward a better future. People long for a leader—someone who respects the responsibility entrusted to them and puts their very lives on the line for them.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as a leader for the people—a long oppressed people, weary and frustrated. Jesus became the voice of people without a voice—the poor, disabled, working class, marginalized, women, children, men, sick, imprisoned. Jesus said hard words that other leaders did not want to hear, but they were words of truth and action.

Jesus flipped the entire world on its head—lifting up the oppressed and bringing down the lofty. Jesus challenged the system and stuck a wrench into it so that change became necessary and unstoppable.

Jesus held the responsibility of leadership close to his heart. He never stopped fighting for the people, even when the fight threatened—and took—his very life.

Rarely have we seen leaders willing to give their lives for what they believe. Never have we seen leaders in our world as committed as Jesus to turn the tide toward real, lasting change. The people were right to claim Jesus as king, even if they had no idea what kind of king Jesus truly was. At this point in Jesus’ story, before his death and resurrection, the kingship of Jesus was everything the people wanted and needed for it to be—a voice, a change, and a leader willing to give everything to gain everything.

*04-11*

“Who is this King of glory?
The Lord of hosts,
he is the King of glory.”

— Psalm 24:10

God reigns. Before the Israelites demanded a divinely appointed king, God was their only sovereign authority. The judges were local tribal leaders who had some authority, but it was directly given by God to carry out God’s purposes. (And a lot of those folks were seriously messed up. Come to think of it, so were most of Israel’s mortal kings…)

Lots of people are looking for a single leader or group of leaders to fix all the world’s problems. We put our support behind this or that individual who we perceive will advance our own personal agendas in one way or another, and then we sit back and wait for them to do the work. But here’s the thing. Human leaders will always fail us one way or another. Even Abraham Lincoln, whose Emancipation Proclamation ended the enslavement of African Americans, approved the death sentences of 39 Dakota people in the largest one-day mass execution in American history (something I was never taught in school).

There is only one ruler who does not fail. Who is this Ruler of glory? The God of hosts. God is the Ruler of glory.

*Who are the leaders I most admire? Does it matter that they’re not perfect?*

*04-12*

“In my distress I called upon the Lord;
to my God I called.
From his temple he heard my voice,
and my cry came to his ears.”

— 2 Samuel 22:7

This has me remembering an old camp song. We sang it at Camp Koinonia in the Catskill Mountains of New York. The words were:

I will call upon the Lord,

 who is worthy to be praised;

 So shall I be saved from my enemies.

 The Lord liveth, and blessed be the rock

 And may the God of my salvation be exalted.

We sang it with great enthusiasm (it had hand motions) over and over again, and it was way fun.

It’s only now, as an adult, that I can look back and see how this beloved song kind of misses the depth of the original text. For one thing, a good chunk of it is missing—the waves of death that encompassed, the torrents of perdition that assailed, the enemies who did violence. Without that kind of context, the praising of God is shallow. And how could a bunch of suburban, middle-class, white teenagers grasp that kind of adversity anyway? So it wound up just being a song of empty praise—a feel-good anthem without understanding.

I’m not just trying to rag on my teenaged self or this super-fun praise ditty. It was what it was. I’m just grateful, having experienced a fair amount of adversity in my life since then, to know that God hears me in my distress, and responds in grace and mercy. That is worthy of praise.

What are my favorite camp songs and why? Has my understanding of them changed with my age?

*04-13*

“I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior.”

— Isaiah 43:11

Again we are told that earthly authorities aren’t going to do it for us. If we want things to change for the better, we need to rely on God to deliver.

That being said, God expects each of us to do our part. God works directly through people who strive to do God’s will in the world. That means holding our earthly authorities accountable when their actions cause harm to people. It means speaking truth to power, organizing, protesting, campaigning, working tirelessly for justice and equity for all people.

And then, as I’ve learned in my recovery circles, it’s up to God. “I’m responsible for the footwork, God is responsible for the outcome.” Because I’m not God any more than any other earthly authority. And even if I’m acting in faith that I’m following what God calls me to do, ultimately, God, God is God, and besides God there is no savior.

What does it mean to me that besides God there is no savior?

*04-14*

“When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

— John 19:26-27

Main Idea: Tonight, we sit uncomfortably in the grief and despair of losing Jesus.

Even as he died, Jesus clung to his identity to the very last breath. Hanging on a cross, tortured and despairing, his thoughts were for his mother who was losing her son, and his disciples who were losing their rabbi, teacher, and friend. “Woman, here is your son.” To his disciple, “Here is your mother.” Jesus knew the work was not finished, and he entrusted his loved ones into the care of one another so that they could console each other, find strength in one another, and continue his work after his departure.

Today marks the first of the most desolate three days we recognize each year. The time when we remember and feel the absence of Jesus, the loss, the grief, and the gravity of the things Jesus bore for us. While it is tempting to rush toward relief from that grief, let us sit with the discomfort. This time of reflection can be cathartic and healing.

*04-15*

“And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.”

— John 19:42

Main Idea: Today, we can pause to give Jesus the respect a king deserves.

This story in John shows much more action between Jesus’ death and resurrection than in the other gospels. It mirrors the theme woven throughout the gospel of John, that Jesus was not the only person acting to make change in the world. Jesus gathered, taught, and equipped his disciples to carry on his work—work that we continue to do today.

Here we see the tenderness of his followers who have loved him so dearly. They could not stand to see Jesus left on the cross or discarded as garbage, despite the horrific and humiliating nature of his death. They took his body, prepared it according to custom, and placed him in a tomb where no one else had ever been laid. To them, Jesus was still their king, and they treated him with the respect a king deserves. While we wait for the turning of this story, we can pause to give Jesus the respect a king deserves

*04-16*

“After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body.”

— John 19:38

Joseph’s actions were born out of love. It would be easy to condemn him as a coward for keeping his discipleship secret in order to protect himself—silence is violence, after all—and, yes, he was as complicit in Jesus’ murder by state violence as everyone else involved. But like Peter, who denied Jesus, and the other disciples who scattered, Joseph was achingly human in his instinct for self-preservation. Like those others who were complicit in Jesus’ death, he could share in the incomprehensible mercy and forgiveness of God.

And when Jesus was dead and would have been thrown to the dogs, Joseph spoke up. He asked Pilate for the body—I can only assume there would have been some risk to this. Would he give himself away to the Jewish authorities by his actions? Apparently he didn’t care. He only wanted to take his beloved friend’s body and make sure it was properly prepared for a dignified burial according to his community’s customs. It was an act of love and courage, and it reminds me that no matter how flawed we are, we are all redeemable.

Do I believe that I am wholly acceptable to God, worthy of redemption?

*04-17*

“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.”

— John 20:18

Main Idea: There is an excitement and urgency to the work that the risen Jesus has set out for us to do.

With love, tenderness, and respect, Jesus’ followers had placed his body in a tomb and had wrapped it with spices in linens to preserve it and honor him as their king. What a terrible shock it must have been for his followers—Mary, Peter, John—to discover that his body had been removed from the tomb!

Without the body, there is no closure, and healing from grief is drawn out—there is no end when the loss is unknown.

As if they hadn’t been through enough, the disciples now had to face this final insult. How would they move on? But then, a glimmer of hope—witnesses (angels) who might know what happened. And then the gardener—surely he would know what had happened. And then the greatest surprise ever to occur on this earth—the gardener was Jesus himself!

What a whirlwind of emotions Mary must have felt! From the lowest low to the highest high in an instant! But there was no time to linger—Jesus had work for Mary and the other disciples. Mary returned immediately to share the good news. He is risen!

There is an immediacy, anticipation, and excitement about this event. It seems there is no time to revel in the miracle; there is work to be done and it is pressing. Mary is already sent—the others soon will be.

Sometimes I think many of us have become too complacent in heeding God’s call. We have lost our sense of urgency. Maybe this Easter we can revel in the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection—for a moment—and then get to work! Whether the work is small or big, the urgency and excitement we bring can effect change in the world.

*04-18*

“Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’ Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.”

— John 21:12-13

Bread and fish. It’s like the feeding of the 5,000 all over again. Probably this was intention by the writer of John. But here it’s the feeding of the seven. A few hungry folks out for an early morning fishing expedition. And here’s this guy by the fire cooking for them. “Sit down. Eat something.” And the response?

No one dared to ask this random dude if he was Jesus (can’t you just see them looking nervously at each other and shuffling their feet?). They didn’t dare to ask, but they knew. He broke the bread and the fish and gave it to them and it just hit them like a ton of bricks. I assume Jesus must have looked different to the disciples for them to even wonder for a moment—several post-resurrection encounters mention that his friends didn’t recognize him physically, but in his actions his identity was revealed.

I have moments in my life where something random or oddball happens and I know—I know—God is acting in my life. I may not recognize Jesus in the face of another person (because, let’s be fair, I’ve never physically seen the guy) but something they do—some action—gives Jesus away. I also recognize there are moments when Jesus acts through me—something I do, some action, makes an impact on another person that I might not even be aware of. Whether I’m the disciple standing on the beach or the dude making fish, I can connect with this story.

When have I been absolutely certain of Jesus’ action in my life?

*04-19*

“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

— John 21:15

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Direct instructions from Jesus to Peter and, by extension, all those who follow Jesus. Feed and tend. Yes, of course, the meaning is spiritual. Peter will go on to bring thousands into the Way of Jesus and, with lots of help, nurture their faith.

But, and this is a big but, that’s not sufficient in and of itself. Maslow’s hierarchy is clear that higher functions like spiritual growth absolutely cannot happen for someone who is concerned about where their next meal is coming from. The early Christians got this. They lived a communal lifestyle. Everyone coming in contributed what the had and the money was shared so that everyone—everyone!—had enough. I simply do not think you can conveniently forget this basic reality and say that Jesus only meant Peter to preach and convert people to the faith. As Christians who are called to carry out this threefold directive from Jesus, it is incumbent upon us to work for justice for every single human being no matter what.

What does Jesus’ directive to Peter and us mean to me in my day to day life?

*04-20*

“But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

— John 21:25

Somehow this just strikes me as so powerfully beautiful. Maybe it’s because I’m a writer, but the idea of such a vast collection of knowledge written down in books just makes me wistfully happy.

Of course, if you were to write down what Jesus’ did every second of his human existence, it would hardly fill a library, much less the world. He was only in his early thirties when he died, after all.

But this isn’t about what Jesus had for breakfast on his birthday in the year 23CE. It’s about what all of it meant. His humanness, his divine nature, his miracles or signs, his favoring of the poor, the sick, the outcast, the non-Jew, his parables, his betrayal, execution, resurrection. It’s far more than the Bible can hold. It’s more than all the theological libraries in the world can hold. It’s more than we can possible imagine because it is absolutely everything in all of creation. Whoa. Just think about that.

Do I ever think about the things Jesus did that didn’t get written down?

*04-21*

“‘Ananias,’ Peter asked, ‘why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!’”

— Acts 5:3-4

Whoo this is a tough story. It’s so judge-y and punitive and completely lacking in grace and forgiveness. Ananias and Sapphira sell a field and instead of giving all the money to the fledgling commune of people following the Way, they keep some back for themselves. Peter confronts them one at a time and both are struck dead for their deceit.

I mean, come on. This is completely extreme for a bunch of folks who are going around preaching divine forgiveness. So there’s obviously a point to the story that’s more than what the surface action presents. I will attempt to unpack it a little.

What it comes down to, I think, is that Ananias and Sapphira didn’t trust God. They believed in Jesus and wanted to follow the Way, but they had to hang onto their own means in case things didn’t go the way they hoped. They were normal human beings. They were just like most of us.

Does that mean we deserve to drop dead where we stand? Of course not. But it does mean that we’re diminishing our own lives in some way by our failure to trust. When we rely on money and on self instead of God, we put up a barrier between us and God. It’s not a literal death, but over time it can become a spiritual death, a disconnect from the source of all light and life. In my mind, that’s worse. God wants us to hold nothing back from God, to trust in all things, and God promises to hold nothing back from us, whether we deserve it or not.

What things do I keep back from God out of fear or lack of trust?

*04-22*

“A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

— Acts 5:16

Healing comes in lots of forms. From the sounds of this passage in Acts, the disciples were able to carry out miraculous cures in the same way Jesus did. And maybe that was the case, but I think that then—and now—healing was about way more than taking away leprosy or casting out evil spirits.

Everyone needs healing in one way or another, whether from generational trauma, a history of abuse, addiction, mental health challenges, physical health challenges, loneliness and isolation, poverty, injustice, and more. Healing is about more than traveling to a famed person or persons and having all your problems vanish. I wonder how much of the disciples ability to heal stemmed from the nature of their community—the mutual love and support, the shared resources. For me, community is extremely healing. I belong to a couple recovery fellowships and a church community and those groups of amazing human beings (as in need of healing as I am) do wonders for what ails me.

I’m not saying people don’t need professional help—they absolutely do and it needs to be accessible/affordable (I have a therapist and a psychiatrist, among others). But as I said, healing comes in lots of forms, and loving and supportive communities area huge one.

How do I receive healing from the communities I am a part of?

*04-23*

“So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”

— Acts 5:38-39

Good ol’ Gamaliel. I love this guy’s wisdom. I especially love that in the end, his wisdom proves the validity of the Way of Jesus. The Jewish authorities say the disciples must be stopped at all costs. Gamaliel stands up and says, “Look, there have been countless other prophets and would-be messiahs running around recently. They’ve amassed followers. Then they’ve been killed and all their followers have scattered. This is probably just another case like that, so if we ignore them, most likely they’ll go away. On the other hand, if they don’t go way then…um…this is legit and if we persecute them we’re persecuting God.”

Gamaliel spoke truth. There had been lots of other would-be messiahs in Jesus’ time, and none of those movements panned out. But Jesus was murdered by the state and not only did his disciples not scatter, but they surged and the movement grew. A couple centuries later, before Constantine converted and Christendom (with all its attendant corruption) was born, the Romans simply could not figure out how this religion was still around. It persisted in spite of all their attempts to squash it, like dandelions in a lawn.

Long after this wise Pharisee counseled his buddies to leave well enough alone, the group they had been trying to stamp out was still going strong. And here we are a couple thousand years later. Good ol’ Gamaliel.

Why do I think the Way flourished despite persecution? Is my faith persecution-proof?

*04-24*

“Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.’”

— John 20:29

Main Idea: We can be witnesses of where and how we see and hear Jesus.

The spreading of the good news of the risen Christ depended wholly on one thing—witnesses. Most of the story following Jesus’ resurrection in the gospel of John is about the witnesses and what they saw and heard.

First, Mary was sent to proclaim that she had seen Jesus in the garden outside the tomb. Here, Jesus appears to the disciples and sends them into the world to do God’s work. Thomas was not with them, and the first thing they did, of course, was to become witnesses of what they had seen and heard to their friend.

It’s no surprise Thomas was hesitant to believe. Nothing of the sort had ever happened before. But they persisted in their story, and Thomas continued to work, walk, and live with them despite his doubting.

But Thomas wouldn’t wait forever to see Jesus. One short week later Thomas himself had the opportunity to see Jesus with his own eyes. Jesus once again sent them all to be witnesses in the world. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Jesus blesses all who are recipients of the witness of the disciples.

This story wraps up with John’s explanation that these stories were written down for all the people who would not have the opportunity to see Jesus face to face. With the benefit of time, we can look back and see that the witness was wildly successful—how few have not yet heard the good news of the risen Christ?

We can continue to be witnesses of what we see and hear—Jesus is all around us, ready to be seen and heard by whomever is open to see and hear.

*04-25*

“And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables.’”

— Acts 6:2

With respect, I completely disagree, dear disciples. In fact, I think that failing to “wait tables,” as they disdainfully labeled the caring for the widows, in order to preach is actually neglecting the word of God. Yes, it’s important to share God’s word with others, especially in this fledgling time for the church, but—cliché as it is—actions speak louder than words. Peter has taken the whole “feed my sheep” as purely spiritual, forgetting that no sheep can be fed spiritually if they’re hungry physically.

We are called to share God’s word with all those in our lives, but that doesn’t mean preaching to everyone around us. It means putting God’s love into specific action through service. Making a meal at a homeless shelter—waiting at tables—is exactly the word of God.

What do I see as the most important aspects of sharing God’s word on a practical level?

*04-26*

“They set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.’”

— Acts 6:13-14

Does this sound eerily familiar to anyone? Anyone who tries to hold the system accountable for its injustices—who wants to change things for the better—is immediately decried as a destructive force. Change is so uncomfortable for most people that we are willing to do anything not to have to do it. People fear change more than they fear death, so when confronted by someone suggesting it’s necessary, it’s far easier to try to slander and discredit those calling for change than to even consider they might be right. It was true when the early Christians were advocating the Way, and it’s true now. In the end, the false witnesses and those who found them were able to stir up the crowd enough to publicly murder Stephen. Today we see all kinds of false witnesses saying the 2020 election was fraudulent (which it has been proven not to have been) and stirred people up enough to actually storm the Capitol in an attempt to stage a coup.

The question is how to lovingly reach out to those who are afraid of change, to listen to their concerns, and respect them when it becomes so easy to equate them with the people who stoned Stephen. A complicated thing indeed.

Am I afraid of change? How do I navigate the inevitable changes in my life?

*04-27*

“Stephen replied, ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.”’”

— Acts 7:2-3

Speaking of change (yesterday’s devotion)… Can you imagine God telling you to pick up and leave everything you know and then just doing it? Stephen’s point in his sermon probably wasn’t to point this particular aspect of Jewish history, but rather to lay out the whole context of their faith. Still, I can’t help but think about the start contrast between the willingness of Abraham to trust God and embrace change and the unwillingness of the Jewish authorities to accept the changes Jesus’ community of disciples hoped to bring to the world. I think it comes down to power. Abraham didn’t have much. He was just a nomadic herder. He didn’t have any land of his own. He had very little to lose in picking up and following where God led. By the time of Jesus, there was a firmly established status quo among Abraham’s descendants, and it allowed a lot of people to enjoy a certain amount of privilege. The teachings of Jesus went counter to that. How things change when what starts as something radical and new becomes entrenched.

When have I had to completely trust God because of a change in my life?

*04-28*

“It was this Moses whom they rejected when they said, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ and whom God now sent as both ruler and liberator through the angel who appeared to him in the bush.”

— Acts 7:35

Who made you boss? Again Stephen recounts a story of change—this time how God can change a person and equip them to do things they didn’t think they were capable of.

In his youth, Moses murdered an Egyptian in defense of one of his fellow Hebrews. Instead of being grateful, the Hebrews in question told Moses to go jump in a lake. Who did he think he was? Even though he was technically Hebrew, Moses had been raised as an Egyptian prince, so it was sort of like someone with extreme privilege trying to “save” an oppressed community to which they don’t belong through a single, direct action instead of working to actually change the system. Moses was so taken aback at being questioned (and the threat of being prosecuted for murder) he took off running.

God found him a couple decades later and said, “Suck it up, buttercup. You’re going to make good on an entire systemic change.” Moses didn’t want to go. He literally asked God to send someone else. God wasn’t having it. Moses would have to change—give up his comfortable and safe herding life, leave his wife and family, and go put himself in harms way for the sake of an entire people. And eventually, like Abraham, Moses went. Moses was fundamentally changed by God through his experience freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Change is necessary to do God’s work in the world.

How have I been changed by my faith over the course of my life?

*04-29*

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are for ever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do.”

— Acts 7:51

Here’s where Stephen gets feisty. He’s laid out the history of the Jewish people in order to demonstrate how, over and over, God’s people have refused to listen to God’s words. Now he goes for the jugular, flat out telling them they’re hypocrites. Circumcised in body, maybe, but that means nothing if their hearts and ears reject the true teachings of the Holy Spirit. And, of course, this is also the point when the people get so enraged they decide to murder Stephen. And…they do.

So I wonder if it’s ever really wise to be this blunt. And then I immediately think of all the white moderates who told the Black community to be polite and patient and wait for the system to change back in the 50s and 60s. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “Nope.” No more waiting. The truth needs to be stated for all to hear. Action needs to be taken. They murdered Dr. King as they murdered Stephen. But the people fought on, and changes happened.

Still today, the system hasn’t changed enough. Lots of work has been done to roll back the protections for Black folks in the U.S., and it is just wrong. Wrong. Period. Full stop. Are we willing to get feisty for the sake of the truth even at the risk of our lives?

What do I think is the role of blunt honesty in sharing the gospel truth?

*04-30*

“When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen…Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him.”

— Acts 7:54, 58a

Someone once called me conceited to my face. I was ten years old and my arch nemesis called me out on my big ego. I was humiliated and enraged (because she was right) and all I could think of to do was hit her. As a rule-following teacher’s pet who was terrified of authority, violence was never something I would have even considered in the classroom. But hearing such a painful truth so directly delivered elicited an involuntary response.

People, the Jewish authorities weren’t ten years old. They were educated adults with societal responsibilities. They were the elites. Yet when confronted with the painful truth of their failure to follow God’s word, they reverted to adolescence and murdered a man en masse.

Maybe we never outgrow this need for security in our rightness. Painful truth is far more difficult to swallow than vindictive falsehood. In order to protect our fragile egos, we often revert to verbal violence like nasty retorts or return accusations, emotional violence like the silent treatment, and sometimes physical violence. Perhaps we could all be working on ways to pause and self-search before reacting to others.

How do I react when others speak uncomfortable truth to me?