**Daily Devotions**

**November 2022**

*11-01*

“Then Solomon said, ‘The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever.’”

— 1 Kings 8:12-13

I suppose God has to dwell in darkness because God is too awesome and terrible to look at. But as I read this today, in the midst of some personal struggles, it struck me as something completely different. We often speak of how we are God’s temple, God’s dwelling place. God live in each and every one of us, thus we are exhorted to take care of our embodied selves in honor of God (and ourselves as God’s beloved creations).

And isn’t there, sometimes, whether we like to think about it or not, some darkness in us—a dense cloud that obscures our best selves? Or maybe a self-created cloud that we use to cover up our worst selves so we don’t have to look at them? I’m not certain, except that in the moment, I feel like there is something negative hovering over my thoughts and feelings.

But here’s the promise—God still lives in me. God dwells in the thick smoke at the center of my being because and in spite of me. God loves this home God created and longs to fill it with light, with clarity, with joy, love, and peace. And God’s presence, whether or not I’m aware of it, is balm.

What does it mean to me that I am a dwelling place for God?

*11-02*

“The Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he not leave us or abandon us, but incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways, and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his ordinances, which he commanded our ancestors.”

— 1 Kings 8:57-58

We need God’s help to do God’s will. This little snippet from Solomon’s long dedication of the temple and blessing of the assembly contains this one little phrase that I find delightful, helpful, and reassuring. He is calling on God to be present with us no matter what, and says, “Instead of abandoning us—because, after all, we hardly deserve God’s favor—God please incline our hearts to you.” Teach us, God, to walk in your ways, live in the way you have called us, work the work you have ordained: to love you with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.” God, you need to incline our hearts to you because we can’t do it ourselves. No matter how much striving. No matter how many Bible studies or worship services or devotions or protests or how much prayer or meditation or community service. All of these things certainly help us by putting us in a place where we are more open to hear God’s call, by inviting God into our lives in myriad ways. But we don’t get to control the outcome.

I mean, let’s face it, I get wrapped up in my own ego plenty of times. I can do something that I think is one hundred percent altruistic, only to find out, upon reflection, I was hoping to gain something from it—usually approval and status. And I’m a champion at justifying my actions or, far more often, my inaction by falling back on a little bit of privilege-driven self-pity. It’s not my default by any means, but it show up when I least expect it.

I need God’s help to do God’s will. And that means I need to keep asking for God’s help and listening for God’s help, which means listening to all the people around me in my various communities (sometimes which, admittedly, I can struggle with). I just appreciate Solomon’s putting it out there. It just grounded me a bit this morning.

How does God guide me to do God’s will in my day-to-day life?

*11-03*

“When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon, (fame due to the name of the Lord), she came to test him with hard questions.”

— 1 Kings 10:1

We should expect hard questions. I’ve gotten them from my kids, from Sunday school and confirmation kids, from all kinds of adults in my life. Why? Because I’m open about my beliefs. With appropriate humility (I think) I’m confident in my beliefs. I’m not famous like Solomon, but I’m known within my own little circles as someone who is more than willing to talk about faith and God and the church and so forth, so people come to me with hard questions. Not so much to test me, as the Queen of Sheba supposedly did, but with real curiosity, honest skepticism, and their own experience. And maybe that’s what the Queen of Sheba was really doing. She really just wanted to know what it was that Solomon believed, how it was that his wisdom was so renowned.

I’m honest with anyone I talk to. I don’t know all the answers. I don’t even know most of them. I’m just a seeker, an explorer, a wonderer, like they are. My seminary degree hardly qualifies me to speak on behalf of God. But my willingness to engage, to answer what factual questions I can, and to be vulnerable about my own doubts and questions makes for fruitful discussions that in some cases might address the other person’s wondering, but in almost all cases helps clarify and strengthen my own faith. So I welcome all the Queen of Sheba’s in my life, young and old, and am grateful for their hard questions.

When has someone had hard questions for me about my faith? How did I respond?

*11-04*

“The whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.”

— 1 Kings 10:24

Solomon’s wisdom was not his own. It’s clear from the beginning that everything good he had to say, every good decision he made, every dispute he arbitrated well, came directly from God. This isn’t to say that Solomon, on his own, was dumb as rocks. I’m getting the guy was pretty intelligent, savvy, shrewd even. As one of who-knows-how-many kids King David sired, he was chosen as the King of Israel for a reason, and he definitely performed. But there’s one ingredient of true wisdom that Solomon seemed to personify, at least as the biblical writer suggests: humility.--the knowledge that as awesome as he was, the credit for his successes went to God.

In the U.S. we live in a relentlessly achievement-driven society, in which we are indoctrinated from a young age to excel in order to beat out our competition and come out on top of the heap. We are told to toot our own horns, get people’s attention, make it clear to everyone that we are the best. Humility is seldom rewarded. Now and then someone really famous gets lots of credit for their humility about their fame and success, but that’s after the fact (and it’s not the norm). On the whole, those who are humble, who are content to work diligently on the sidelines, in the spirit of cooperation, and on behalf of others rather than themselves, are actually looked down on. And it's most likely because those clawing their way to the top see the humble and have this little nagging voice in their head that says “Humility is what you should actually be striving for. You’re doing this all wrong.” and they just can’t deal with that reality. Or not. Just my musing.

Anyway, Solomon’s wisdom was so famous that “the whole earth” wanted a piece of it. But Solomon knew, as the biblical writer tells us, that this wisdom came from God and not Solomon. Which, I am certain, made Solomon’s wisdom all that much more appealing.

When have I practiced humility in my life? Do I find it more satisfying than getting credit for things?

*11-05*

“So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done.”

— 1 Kings 11:6

And there it is, folks. Solomon, whose reign was completely the polar opposite of David’s chaotic, war-torn, sin-filled years on the throne, turns out to be just as human as his dad. Solomon, whose kingdom was peaceful, who built the temple, and whose wisdom was known throughout the world, turned around and blew it in the end. Wives who worshipped other gods and enticed Solomon to do the same. Altars in “high places” to gods other than the God of Israel.

What?!? Honestly, I wonder if Solomon didn’t suffer from dementia in his old age, to have so completely forgotten everything he had ever believed in and lived for. That would certainly let him off the hook, although God didn’t completely. Because of Solomon’s poor choices, God would tear Israel apart—what we would soon see as the split between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. His son would succeed him on the throne, but when Israel splintered, he would be left with only one tribe. God’s one concession is that God would do this after Solomon had died, and God says it’s for the sake of David, not Solomon, that Solomon would be spared the chaos. I find that somewhat odd, that after just how much Solomon exceeded his father in almost every way, God would continue to hold David up as God’s most beloved servant king.

I suppose it doesn’t really matter—the how and the why. What matters is that even such towering figures as Solomon and David, as Moses and Jacob, and pretty much every major figure in the Bible, were entirely human, and therefore flawed. And God loved them—and us—anyway. There are still consequences for our actions, of course, but we know that in spite of them, God still loves us, and wants to help us do better.

Have I every done anything I believe is unforgivable? Can I believe that God forgives me?

*11-06*

“Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, “Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel.”

— 2 Kings 5:15a

Main Idea: Sometimes the values held by our work and personal lives are in conflict. God gives us room to make a living, even as we wrestle with the dissonance of conflicting values.

Naaman was a commander of an army of the king of Aram. Elisha was a prophet of the king of Israel. While not exactly enemies, they certainly were not the same. Syria had its own gods; the God of Israel lived on the land in Israel.

Through a series of I-know-a-guys, Naaman learned that a prophet in Israel could cure him of his leprosy. Being one of the favored leaders, his king let him go seek relief from his affliction.

But when Naaman approached Elisha’s house, Elisha didn’t even bother to come outside. He simply sent a message that Naaman could wash in the Jordan seven times and be healed.

This angered Naaman, in part because he deemed himself more important than Elisha’s absence indicated. But he was also put out that Elisha’s prescription included a recognition that Israel’s Jordan River was more powerful than Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus. Elisha in a sense, was asking Naaman to acknowledge the power of Israel’s God.

Naaman nearly missed his chance for healing, but a few wise servants gently led to him consent. Naaman washed and was healed. In response, Naaman tried relentlessly to give gifts to Elisha, but Elisha refused. His entanglement with the commander from Aram would end here.

When Naaman saw that this was truly a holy man following a more powerful God than his, Naaman requested two mule-loads of earth to be brought home with him. Since the dirt of Elisha’s God was holy, Naaman wanted some of this holy earth near him even when he returned home. It seems his desire was to worship Elisha’s God from here on out. He would still have to bow to his master’s god Rimmon, but he asked Elisha for pardon since refusing to worship Rimmon would have caused him a great deal of trouble. Elisha agreed. “Go in peace.”

Naaman’s personal suffering led him to be introduced to God, whom he hadn’t really known. Despite Naaman’s political allegiance, his life was irrevocably touched by this God of a foreign land. Naaman found a way to maintain his job and standing in his society while also making an internal shift to Israel’s God.

We don’t always have the luxury of having aligned ideologies between work and at home. Sometimes the values in our work and personal lives conflict. If Naaman’s story tells us anything, we learn that it can work if necessary. While it’s not ideal, we all sometimes have to uphold the values of our jobs to keep our jobs. Perhaps God offers us room to make a living, even as we wrestle with this dissonance.

*11-07*

“He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan.”

— 2 Kings 2:13

I didn’t know the phrase “take up the mantle” came from this story until I wrote a devotion on it a year or so ago. I sometimes don’t realize just how embedded Christianity is into U.S. culture until I come across something like this and go, “Oh, seriously? That’s where that comes from?” It’s a little wake-up call about privilege, honestly, when you realize that so many idioms, customs, and norms are from a tradition that only 64% of U.S. citizens claim to belong to (which doesn’t mean they are actively practicing).

Of course, no one has to be a practicing Christian to use the idiom—it’s a very practical image, after all. One leader sets aside their mantle—jacket, robe, hoodie, superhero cape, what-have-you—when they resign or retire or die, and someone else comes after them to pick up the work they left behind. We have lots of idioms that don’t come to us from Christianity. A “white elephant” has Thai origins. “Close but no cigar” comes from the U.S. carnival circuit. “Pass with flying colors” comes from warships in the 1600s. Maybe it’s not such a big deal. I think it’s just important to just recognize, when we can, what we take for granted in our language, especially when it’s something inconsequential like this, so that when it really matters, we can be intentional about making sure our words are healing rather than harmful to others.

What ideas, images, or stories from the Bible seem to pop up all over the place in my interactions with culture and media?

*11-08*

“‘Thus says the Lord, I have made this water wholesome; from now on neither death nor miscarriage shall come from it.’ So the water has been wholesome to this day, according to the word that Elisha spoke.”

— 2 Kings 2:21b-22

We’ll just set aside the bear maulings for this one [v. 23-35]. I wrote on that last time this text came up. This time, I’ll reflect on Elisha’s purification of the water and reflect for a moment on Flint, Michigan. You remember Flint—the city whose water was found to be full of lead eight years ago and which is still working to address the egregious harms caused by political negligence and exacerbated by racism. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if God could send a prophet to purify the whole system with a handful of salt?

But there are prophets at work in Flint, otherwise we would never have known of it in the first place. There are people working tirelessly to address the social and economic inequities right along with the infrastructure issues. And God is calling prophets to be water protectors, preservers, and purifiers all over the world, as this life-sustaining resource is continually under assault from environmentally-negligent businesses and communities.

I went with a group from my church to visit the water protectors’ camp along the Mississippi where Enbridge’s Line 3 was being tunneled underneath, to pray and sing for justice for this sacred river (and all rivers are inherently sacred), then on another occasion, marched to the capital in St. Paul in protest over the oil pipeline. I did not feel particularly prophetic, but in retrospect, I was doing my small part to walk in Elisha’s footsteps in order to keep the waters good for the health of all of God’s creation. Still, I wish I could simply toss a handful of salt into the river—into all the rivers of the world—and make them pure. Then again, we would just go right on making them impure again, wouldn’t we. I suppose a prophet’s work is never done.

When have I felt like I have acted in a prophetic way?

*11-09*

“She came and told the man of God, and he said, ‘Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest.’”

— 2 Kings 4:7

Elijah also performed a miracle with a Widow’s oil. Elisha has taken up his former master’s mantle and appears to be trying to one-up his mentor in this story. Where as the Widow of Zarephath’s cruet of oil stayed full enough to feed her, her son, and Elijah through the course of a drought, Elisha’s miracle took a single jar of oil and saw it fill an unspecified number (but “not a few”) of her neighbors vessels to the brim, producing so much oil from the one source that it could pay off all the debts her dead husband had left her with and then support her and her children for the rest of their lives. That, my friends, is a lot of oil.

I have never found myself in a situation where there are creditors knocking on my door for any reason, much less to take my children as payment for what I owe. But that doesn’t mean I haven’t experienced moments of financial crisis where I wasn’t sure how I was going to cover a car repair or a medical bill or some other unexpected and exorbitant expense. And while no prophet showed up to work a miracle—God is not the money fairy, after all—I can tell you that somehow things have always worked out one way or another. I may have had to ask my parents for help. Or I might have had another windfall at just the right moment. Or there might have been a little pocket of money tucked away in an account that I was hoping to save for the future, but at least it covered the immediate issue.

I am privileged. I have family who has my back. I have access to resources many people don’t. I personally am not in need of Elisha. But there are plenty of people who are. Plenty of people who live on the edge completely unbeknownst to those around them. Plenty more people who live on or below the edge because of unjust systems that trap them in low-wage jobs or have other barriers. These people need those miracles, and one place they can come from is a social service agency such as I write grants for. The agency provides financial assistance to cover that car repair or wages lost because of a sick child or that month of rent that couldn’t be paid because of prolonged illness. It’s hardly enough oil to live on forever, but it’s what that family needs in that moment, and it comes from the generosity of the community—a true act of loving our neighbors. God shows up in our lives in so many ways, and one way God shows up is when we show up for one another.

Are there organizations in my community that help families with financial crises? How is God calling me to be part of their ministry?

*11-10*

“He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.” The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her.”

— 2 Kings 4:16-17

The woman was understandably skeptical of Elisha’s promise. She just wanted to be helpful to Elisha by giving him a place to stay—she had asked nothing in return. But, as so many women in these stories, she was childless and “her husband was old.” It never says she was unable to have children—only that she didn’t have any. Elisha makes a pretty bold assumption in his promise, that she would even want children. But as that was the measure of a woman’s worth and therefore happiness at the time, it probably wasn’t far off the mark. In fact, the woman’s response confirms it—she rejects the promise out of fear that it won’t happen for her as he says. She does not want to be disappointed in him or in God.

Of course, she does have a son, as Elisha promised, and that should be the end of it, but it’s not. Because as we learn when we read on, her son dies of what appears to be some kind of brain aneurism when he is still young. How cruel could God be?!? She never asked for a son. She didn’t want Elisha’s promise, lest it be broken. And now, after giving her what she couldn’t bring herself to ask for, it is cruelly ripped away.

How often do we find ourselves similarly crushed when what we were absolutely certain was God’s will suddenly goes south and we lose security or health or a relationship or even a loved one’s life? How much more painful it is to lose something that seemed hard won than something that came easily!

Elisha recognizes the profound grief that he has, in some ways, helped to cause, and goes to make it right. Mirroring the resurrection performed by his mentor, Elijah, on another woman’s son, Elisha raises the boy from the dead and returns him to his mother in full health. Most of us don’t have the same experience with that kind of loss. But we do have communities that come around us, people who comfort us, who give us space to grieve and walk with us as we learn to live again. What we have lost may not be restored to us, but through God’s grace, we ourselves can be restored—perhaps not 100% whole, depending on what, exactly, we have lost, but we can live again, lives of meaning and joy, if we open ourselves to the little miracles of healing God provides in lots of big and little ways.

Is there a loss that I have never fully recovered from? Where is God in the midst of my grief?

*11-11*

“He said, ‘Then bring some flour.’ He threw it into the pot, and said, ‘Serve the people and let them eat.’ And there was nothing harmful in the pot.”

— 2 Kings 4:41

Salt to purify water (v. 19-21), now flour to neutralize poison. Elisha was a master of taking everyday items and using them to work miracles. These were not grand-scale miracles—they affected from a few hundred people (the water) to just a small group of people (the stew)—but for the recipients of the miracles they were enormous. They brought restoration and new life.

It makes me think of the adage: “Do what you can with what you’ve got where you are,” which Theodore Roosevelt is generally credited with, but which he attributed to Squire Bill Widener in his 1912 autobiography. Regardless of the ultimate source, the message is beautiful and simple. We may not be able to neutralize poison with a handful of flour, nor purify water with a handful of salt, but we can take whatever it is God has gifted to us and put it to good use as God directs. That might be money toward a pressing cause or our own time and bodies on the front lines in a march for justice. It could be a meal served at a homeless shelter or a full time job doing outreach for unhoused people. As Elisha’s miracles show time and again, the prophet and the substance are merely the catalysts for God’s action in the world. We live in the promise that if we do what we can with what we have where we are, God shows up and works miracles.

What small act have I done that has had an impact on another person’s life?

*11-12*

“He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.”

— 2 Kings 4:44

This story prefigures Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000. Elisha feeds 100 men with 20 loaves of bread. Jesus, being so much more than a prophet, multiplies that 50 times over with even less food to work with. It’s another story of simple items—this time bread (and later fish)—being catalysts for God to show up and work miracles in the world. Jesus is God, fully embodied in the world, so his miracle results in almost ridiculous abundance.

In either case, we hear the truth once again that God is present in the mundane things of life, and that when we let God work through us, our impact on the people around us, our communities, the environment, and all of creation is multiplied beyond what we could have imagined by just looking at what little we thought we had to offer.

This is not an excuse to do less than we can, of course. Remember that the man in this story had 20 loaves and gave them all to Elisha to be shared among the men. The boy in the gospel story had five loaves and two fish and gave all of it to Jesus to share among the crowd. Neither provider held any back for themselves just in case the miracle didn’t work. They were willing to go all in for the sake of others. The results were breathtaking. And so they are when we go all in for the sake of others—to the best of our ability and capacity.

When have I felt I’ve given to a high level, holding nothing back from God? What was the result?

*11-13*

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

— Micah 6:8

Main Idea: God told Israel what God expected of them: justice, kindness, and humbly walking with God.

The gods of Israel’s time were needy. They demanded great sacrifices: bulls, rams, sheep, and yes, even people. The greater the sacrifice, the greater the victory over their enemies. The greater the sin, the greater the sacrifice needed to appease the angry gods.

Israel was facing a serious threat from the rapidly expanding Assyrian Empire. Through the prophet Micah, Israel would learn that God already had plans to save them. God would provide an ancient leader from the little clan of Judah—Bethlehem—to deliver them. What sacrifices would Israel have to offer God to receive this deliverer?

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Israel had stewed over what they must do to atone for their sin. God made it clear. To atone for sin, sin no more. Their transgression had been a failure to follow God and God’s laws. They were not living in justice, kindness, or peace. They were not walking with God, and certainly not with humility. If they turned back to God and God’s ways, their circumstances would change. If they lived according to God, then they would already be living in the presence of a loving God.

While God’s prescription to the Israelites might seem simple, simple is not easy. We are not called to be kind to those who are kind to us, but to everyone no matter what. We are not called to do justice for those who look and act like us, but for all people no matter what. And most of us probably can’t even define humility—we often mistake it for humiliation and want nothing to do with it. We know what is good. We’ll just need lots of help from God to do what God asks of us.

*11-14*

“Make yourselves bald and cut off your hair for your pampered children; make yourselves as bald as the eagle, for they have gone from you into exile.”

— Micah 1:16

Micah comes out of the gate swinging. His prophecy is straight to the point. God is angry at you and you’re going down. He does not, at this point, say anything about why God is so incensed. Except for this one line which—while I can’t say anything about the original Hebrew, so I have to take it at its translated face value—gives a clue: “…cut off your hair for your pampered children…” The word “pampered” is loaded indeed. It means “treated with extreme or excessive care and attention” and when it’s connect with children, it basically means “spoiled.” God’s people in Jerusalem have spoiled their children and as a result those children will be taken from them.

Is it so bad to spoil your children that your entire city will be destroyed and your people sent into exile? Micah gets much more specific going forward, but from this one little word, we can extrapolate quite a bit. Or, at least, I can—and will here.

To spoil your children means you’re lavishing resources on them in order to make their lives luxurious and easy. That means you’re not using your resources on behalf of “the widow and the orphan,” words often used in the Hebrew Bible, which basically mean “the vulnerable and powerless,” which in our context can include people who are poor, victims of racism and other oppressive systems, people who are disabled or differently-abled, victims of trauma and sufferers of mental illness—the list could go on. God has gifted us with ridiculous abundance and makes it abundantly clear in God’s law that we are to use it in just ways. So if it’s all just being poured right back into the family coffers through our children, we are big time missing the point.

Like I said, Micah has a lot more to say over the next few days. But boy does this give us a place to start wondering about what drives him to deliver such a frightening message to God’s people!

Where is the line between supporting our children’s independence and long-term success and ‘pampering’ them?

*11-15*

“‘Do not preach’—thus they preach—‘one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us.’ Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Is the Lord’s patience exhausted? Are these his doings? Do not my words do good to ”

— Micah 2:6-7

This just made me giggle. Every so often, such beautiful snark comes through the biblical writers and I love it! “Do not preach”—thus they preach. It would be funny if this exact thing didn’t happen to prophets like Micah all. the. time. He delivers a powerful, scathing message to the people about all the ways their actions violate God’s laws calling them to do justice for the vulnerable and powerless and they say, “You can’t say that. Those things won’t really happen to us.” Today, people call out injustice in myriad ways and the response is often negative because people feel attacked or they don’t think it applies to them or they claim the message would be better received if they were nicer about it. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was repeatedly told by white liberals to be patient, not to be so incendiary, and it was all about their own discomfort, when the message was urgent and could no longer be delayed.

I wonder how many pastors and preachers out there have been told to keep politics out of the pulpit—have been scolded by this or that parishioner because they spoke up about God’s call to do justice, including racial justice, justice for LGBTQIA+ folks, or climate justice; because they made plain the ways in which our actions or lack of action are causing harm to our neighbors. I knew someone who was so angry when a pastor mentioned “Black Lives Matter” because they went to church to be uplifted (i.e. not challenged). But the thing is, God is challenging. Heck, God-in-Jesus-Christ’s entire existence on this planet was one giant challenge to absolutely everyone and everything unjustly benefitting from the status quo.

Can you blame Micah for his snark? I can’t.

Have I ever been uncomfortable being called to account for my actions from the pulpit? Why? How did I respond?

*11-16*

“Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war ”

— Micah 3:5

If this isn’t a direct call-out to those folks out there preaching the prosperity gospel while children starve in our country, I don’t know what is. In fact, I don’t know if I really have anything else to say about this that Micah doesn’t already say better. After declaring Jerusalem’s rulers corrupt and withdrawing God’s voice from them, he goes on to state that he, in contrast, is filled with God’s justice and might “to declare to Jacob his transgression and Israel his sin.” Then he calls out even more such transgressions and sins—corrupt judges, priests, and prophets who all continue to claim that God is on their side.

I believe that God fills with justice and might all those modern-day prophets who proclaim truth to power, who call out all the ways in which that power oppresses entire communities in order to maintain itself. Sometimes I think we need a whole lot more Micahs out there. Maybe you are one.

How much do I know about the prosperity gospel? What are my thoughts about it?

*11-17*

“In that day, says the Lord, I will assemble the lame and gather those who have been driven away, and those whom I have afflicted. The lame I will make the remnant, and those who were cast off, a strong nation; and the Lord will reign over them in Mount Zion now and forevermore.”

— Micah 4:6-7

Having delivered the diatribe against Jerusalem, Micah now brings the promise. And while everyone knows the “swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks” line, what jumped out at me in this read was the quote above. When Israel is restored and God’s holy mountain established, who will God gather to be God’s people? The disabled. The outcasts. The ones who have been afflicted. (It says the ones whom God has afflicted, but I personally don’t believe God directly afflicts anyone. People afflict people. Random acts of nature afflict people. Maybe God is taking credit for things God didn’t directly do here.)

Just think about that. God’s people are restored, and they are all the people who didn’t fit in, who were oppressed, who suffered. It’s not the wealthy and powerful who get to come back and reclaim their glory days.

This isn’t to say that we are left out now—those of us who have not experienced this sort of suffering, ostracism, or injustice. We, too, are included in the promise, because we are imperfect and in need of grace, which is its own affliction.

For all Micah’s diatribe against the corrupt, I have to believe they are also included in the end, and might come, chagrinned for their actions and flabbergasted by God’s grace, into that blessed place and live in eternal communion—even friendship—with those they had once harmed. If I believe God’s love is unconditionally for everyone, and that God can work miracles, why not this one?

How do I imagine the reign of God to be in its purest form?

*11-18*

“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.”

— Micah 6:3-4

I had an interesting conversation just this morning about entitlement. A friend of mine was talking about how in her family of origin, any time anyone did anything for someone else, there was an understanding that the recipient now owed the giver/doer. Absolutely everything had strings attached. It sounds a lot like God is coming from that place here in Micah. “After all I have done for you, you go and treat me like this?”

But I don’t think it’s really entitlement. I don’t think God believes the people owe God for all that God has done. I think God is just surprised at the people’s ingratitude. And not even just ingratitude—complete forgetfulness. It’s not like God gave the Israelites a gift or some money or took care of a chore for the people. We’re talking an entire nation escaping from centuries of enslavement. Pillars of cloud and fire. Parting the Red Sea. A host of societal laws meant as a gift to engender peace and community. A land to call their own. Strong leaders, Judges, even kings when they wanted them (which is where it really went south). God has given them absolutely everything they have, everything they are. And they seem to have completely put it out of their minds in their pursuit of personal power.

I’ll be honest. I am well aware—when I am thinking and writing about it—that who I am and what I have are entirely gifts from God. I am well aware—when I am thinking and writing about it—that what I do for work and in life are, in general, a gratitude-response to God’s abundance. But when I am not thinking and writing about it, I just go on about my business as if there is no God. I seldom remember, in the moment, to pray. I make decisions, sometimes big ones, based on my own logic and intellect, not remembering to include the source of that logic and intellect in my deliberations. There are times I imagine God rolling God’s eyes and wondering how God has wearied me that I would go on living by self-propulsion. We all have room for improvement in our lives, don’t we?

Do I feel that God is entitled to my devotion? Does God see it that way?

*11-19*

“Do not rejoice over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.”

— Micah 7:8

I find this imagery so beautiful. When I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, God will be a light to me. It speaks to grace and resilience and hope—things we all need in our lives, at some times more than others. As someone who suffers from clinical depression and deals with a fair number of personal challenges, I have moments when the grief and powerlessness are overwhelming and it’s just hard to do life. I don’t have any enemies rejoicing over me when I’m in that state. It’s just the fact of whatever is weighing on me that serves in the role of the enemy. My brain chemistry is my enemy. The old tapes in my head that spew out negativity are my enemies. The overwhelming process to get county services for my kids is my enemy (NOT the county workers—they are my overworked-and-underpaid-friends and allies). Sometimes in those low moments my brain can whisper “This is how you have always felt. This is how you’ll always feel. This is too hard for you.” But I can remember: when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, God will be a light to me. And the hope of that simple message is so life-giving and sustaining. Micah rocks.

What helps me when I am experiencing moments of grief or hardship?

*11-20*

“Do not let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, The Lord will save us. Has any of the gods of the nations saved their land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?”

— Isaiah 36:18

Main Idea: Sometimes our lives become dramatically different through a series of small discomforts. God can deliver us to an even better life.

Assyria was on Jerusalem’s doorstep. The mighty nation had already torn through the countryside conquering lands despite the faith people had in their gods. Now it was God’s turn to be tested. When the Rabshakeh called out Israel, pointing out the futility of trusting in God, Israel’s king Hezekiah crumbled. It was one thing to trust in God when Assyria was still far off. But now Assyria was here. It was time for God to show up.

Hezekiah sent Eliakim and the recorder Shebna to Isaiah covered in sackcloth (the clothing of repentance and despair). Isaiah once again had to reassure the king God would remain faithful to them. God would become the God of all nations one day. We would later learn that Assyria would conquer Jerusalem. We would also learn that God would become God of all nations. Maybe it took their defeat and then restoration for the word of God’s power and reign to reach all the lands. God’s people would one day once again use their weapons as tools for cultivating the land.

Interestingly, when the Rabshakeh threatened Jerusalem, he offered them a way out. If they surrendered (and even if they didn’t), he promised them that they could remain on their land. Until the day they couldn’t. Then they would be moved to another land, but very much like this one. Their lives would hardly change at all, promised the Rabshakeh.

Often, this is how we find ourselves in situations we ought not be in. The change is slow, the discomfort so insignificant we don’t really notice it. Then, slowly, the discomfort grows and one day we wake up and realize we’re nowhere near where we once were. Our lives are dramatically different and we don’t even know how we got here. At that point, there is no way back to what once was. The only way is forward, a long, hard march uphill to reach a new normal. With hard work, this new normal can be rewarding. But it only comes by muddling through the discomfort that we let ourselves become accustomed to, and fighting for a better life, trusting that God will deliver us one day.

*11-21*

“But if you say to me, ‘We rely on the Lord our God,’ is it not he whose high places and altars Hezekiah has removed, saying to Judah and to Jerusalem, ‘You shall worship before this altar’?”

— Isaiah 36:7

This is just one line from a long harangue taunting Jerusalem. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, has sent his emissary, the Rabshakeh, to Jerusalem, which has been blockaded by the Assyrians. He seems to know all about Hezekiah—that Judah’s king was in an alliance with Egypt, that he had torn down all the pagan altars on the surrounding mountains and returned to the practice of worshipping only in the temple in Jerusalem, that he was faithful to his God—and he uses his knowledge to eat away at Hezekiah’s confidence.

“You can’t rely on Egypt—they’ll just as soon stab you in the back as help you. You can’t rely on God—you just tore down all the places your people worshiped God. I’ll bet you two thousand horses you don’t even have enough people to ride them into battle.” Just nasty trash-talking. And it scared everyone.

Sometimes I have tapes playing in my head—old tapes that spew taunts like the Rabshakeh’s in order to undermine my sense of equilibrium. They know all my weak spots, because, of course, they are my own brain. The voice on the tapes tells me I’m incompetent, I’m mean, I’m never going to get what I want out of life, I’m a fraud, I should just give up whatever aspirations I’m holding onto at any given moment. Nasty trash-talking.

Hezekiah has Isaiah to reassure him, as we’ll see in the next few days of this story. I have prophets in my own life to reassure me—close friends and confidants who know what’s on those old tapes almost as well as I do, now, and can refute them point for point, helping me see a path to spiritual growth rather than letting the taunting paralyze me. Words are powerful and can be wielded as weapons, whether by a literal bully or our own minds. Words can also be deliverers of peace and reassurance, and I am grateful for those who use them as such.

Who are the prophets in my life who help redirect me from the taunts in my own mind?

*11-22*

“[The King of Assyria said,] ‘Thus shall you speak to King Hezekiah of Judah: Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.’”

— Isaiah 37:10

Okay, now I just see the Frenchmen on the tower in Monty Python and the Holy Grail saying, “Go away, or I will taunt you a second time!” Because this Rabshakeh dude just will not shut up. Now he says, “You can’t rely on God. All the other nations we’ve smashed to bits called on their gods and none of those gods showed up to save them, so why will you be any different?” I’m just waiting for him to catapult a cow over the wall of Jerusalem.

There are times when we wonder if we can really rely on God. After all, the world is a mess and lots of us are praying all the time for things to change. We’re told to PUSH: Pray Until Something Happens, but so little seems to happen. Occasionally we’ll hear about some victory or other here or there—a law changed, abolished, or passed; community organizations making an actual difference; lives changed. But on the heels of those moments of good news come more dire predictions about climate change, new reports of unarmed black men being killed by police, another mass shooting, the loss of long-standing protections under the law.

I can’t heed the taunting of the Rabshakeh. I have to cling to the belief that God does act—is acting—in the world, through the work of countless prophets and practitioners, scientists and social workers, here and everywhere. I need to continue to PUSH no matter what, trusting as Hezekiah does, that God has our back. And I need to seek out the good news that doesn’t always make it to the nightly news—after all, most news programming is reliant on advertising dollars and has to scream sensational and disastrous headlines to get people riveted to their seats while the ads play. And on that cynical note, I’ll leave it.

Where do I find evidence of God’s action in the world despite bad news?

*11-23*

“So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.”

— Isaiah 37:20

I love the deep meaning in this little turn of phrase. Hezekiah’s city is blockaded by the Assyrian army and might just be overrun. His people would be severely impacted if not killed. His entire reign might be chalked up as a complete disaster. But he doesn’t say, “Hey, God, I think you should step in and save me because I’m such a good king. I listened to you and tore down the pagan altars and restored worship to the temple. I’m such a good king. You should boot the Assyrians for me.” Nope. Hezekiah says, “Hey, God. I’ve told everyone you’re the best there is. If you help us—the underdog—boot the Assyrians from Jerusalem, word will get out that you are, in fact, the one and only God.” Now, maybe that’s trying to appeal to God’s vanity. Maybe Hezekiah is being sneaky and sucking up to God rather than copping to his fear for his own skin and reputation. But I don’t think so. I think Hezekiah is genuinely concerned that all the world know that God is God. After all, it’s what he’s based his entire kingship on. He has, I think, a sense of real wonder and gratitude for all that God has done for God’s people from the very beginning, and wouldn’t it be nice if everyone saw it?

It reminds me of what in the Recovery community is known as the “Third Step Prayer” which contains the line: “Take away my difficulties that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help…” It’s not about having my difficulties removed because I deserve it (even though I might). It’s about having my difficulties removed so that I can point to God and say, “God did this for me; God got me through this tough time in my life; God gave me hope and brought me out the other side” so that others who are suffering might benefit from that same faith. It switches the focus from me and what I want to how my own challenges can be a light in the lives of others. That, I think, is what Hezekiah was all about.

When I think about my prayer life, are my prayers for things I want or for the benefit of others? What is the right balance between these two?

*11-24*

“For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David.”

— Isaiah 37:35

Does God play favorites? I mean, sure, David conquered Jerusalem originally and established it as Israel’s capital. Is that why God will save the city for David’s sake? Solomon was far and away a better king, as I see it. And why not save the city for the sake of the people currently living in it?

Maybe this is just a statement of God’s faithfulness, and I shouldn’t try to read any more into it than that. David held a special place in God’s heart for lots of reasons, and maybe not least of those reasons is because David was so flawed—so painfully and completely human. David epitomized some of the best and some of the worst to be found in all humanity, and God loved—and loves—humanity so deeply and profoundly it’s hard to comprehend. It’s possible God is here declaring in a different way “I am your God and you are my people, and therefore of course I will act on your behalf!”

May that declaration bring hope and joy into your own life today: God is your God and you are God’s beloved child, therefore God has your back. Amen.

Why do I think God always seems to have held David up as the most beloved of all the kings?

*11-25*

“Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah: ‘Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life.’”

— Isaiah 38:4-5

King Hezekiah was going to die. Isaiah told him plainly that he would not recover from his illness, that he should get his affairs in order. Hezekiah was understandably devastated. He “wept bitterly.” He prayed to God and pointed out what a good person he had been. I imagine I would do the same if I were given a terminal diagnosis.

In Hezekiah’s case, God responded quickly—he gave Hezekiah a reprieve from his illness for fifteen years. Not indefinitely. Just for a set amount of time. I don’t know how old Hezekiah was at this point. Was his life extended until he was 45? 60? 80? Would it make a difference?

What would I do if, on my deathbed, I got a message straight from God telling me I had fifteen more years? That would put me at 66 years old. Would I be bitter that I didn’t get to live longer? Would I be so blown away by the second chance that I’d dedicate my life to ministry? Would I try to cram in as much experience—and probably self-indulgence—as I could in that time, I mean really milk it for all it was worth? I would hope that I would see the time as gift and use it wisely and according to God’s will for the time. But I can’t be sure—I’m human and flawed like everyone else.

Perhaps this text is a call to wonder about just what we are doing with our lives in this moment. Are there ways in which we might be closer to God and God’s direction for us? Are we squandering time in worrying about things we can’t control rather than enjoying the abundant beauty of God’s creation? Are we holding onto resentments rather than making peace with the people in our lives? Why wait until we know our time is limited, when we live now in the spaciousness of moments and the blissful ignorance of the day of our death? Why not ask God to point us to the nearest opportunity for meaningful interactions with the world?

How does an acceptance of mortality allow me to live a richer and more meaningful life?

*11-26*

“Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.’ For he thought, ‘There will be peace and security in my days.’”

— Isaiah 39:8

Isaiah has just predicted the Babylonian exile. Earnest but dumb-as-rocks Hezekiah has just shown off all his wealth to an envoy from Babylon, as if dangling a shiny object in front of a crow. Isaiah says (without saying it) “Now you’ve done it, you idiot.” But ever short-sighted, Hezekiah thinks, “That’s cool. I’m only going to live another fifteen years so it won’t effect me.”

And here we are, those of us over fifty, wondering why our young adult children or grandchildren are so up in arms about the climate crisis and the rising conservative extremism in the US and around the world. (Truthfully, I’m feeling pretty young here at 51. If I live as long as my grandfather did, I’ve got another 41 years ahead of me and that’s an awfully long time to deal with the level of uncertainty that makes my children’s anxiety go off the charts).

I wrote yesterday about the importance of living a richer, more meaningful life in whatever time we have left. There is another side to that. We also ought to be committed to working our backsides off for the well-being of the generations following after us. If I had a childhood blissfully ignorant of climate change (despite the fact that by the time I was in elementary school, oil companies had known for more than a decade that fossil fuels would eventually lead to global warming) I owe my kids a future where we have addressed the issue as aggressively as possible in the hope of salvaging a livable world in which they can enjoy nature’s majesty without worrying about catastrophe. If my forebears fought for my right to make medical decisions about my body, I owe my daughter a future where those rights are not only restored to her, but also strengthened.

These are just a couple examples. Let’s not be shortsighted like Hezekiah and either think, “It’s not my problem” or, as in his case, not think at all about the long-term consequences of our actions.

How can I take responsibility for making the world a better place for future generations?

*11-27*

“Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.”

— Habakkuk 3:17-19

Main Idea: Habakkuk chose to rejoice in God despite the violence and destruction he saw all around him.

The prophet Habakkuk saw nothing but destruction, violence, wrong-doing, wickedness, and a lack of justice. If we spend too much time watching news or scrolling our social media feeds, it can be easy for us too, to see only destruction, violence, and wickedness. Wars plague the earth, human beings are trafficked and tortured, hurricanes and wildfires destroy—it can be easy to fall into despair and wonder if this planet is worth saving.

But Habakkuk saw something else, too. Habakkuk saw the presence of God despite the lack of goodness all around him. Despite the lack of fruit on the trees, the flocks cut off from the fold, and no herd in the stalls, he saw God. He rejoiced in God. The circumstances were still dire; in the midst of the ugliness, Habakkuk chose joy.

We can’t always let our joy depend on external circumstances. If we wait for circumstances to change so that we are only surrounded by goodness, we will wait forever. Violence and destruction will always be around us. But we can work to look with God’s eyes to see beauty even among the ugliness. We can choose joy and rejoice in a God of beauty, peace, justice, and love.

[This doesn’t apply to people suffering from mental illness like anxiety or depression. Mental illness is not a choice people make. Joy can be hard to find in the depths of depression. If you are depressed so that you cannot imagine ever experiencing joy, please seek help immediately.]

*11-28*

“Then they sweep by like the wind; they transgress and become guilty; their own might is their god!”

— Habakkuk 1:11

The Chaldeans are coming! The Chaldeans are coming! And, wow, does Habakkuk paint a terrifying picture of them. These are the folks the prophet is crying out to God about: “Look at the violence! Where are you, God?!?” Most chilling about them is this last line, “Their own might is their god!” In other words, they worship their own power. Power is like that. When people have it, their greatest fear is that the will lose it. So they will do absolutely anything to maintain it, at the expense of people, of communities, of nations, or entire societies. Nothing else matters but that they get to have that power. It's a corrupting and all-consuming thing and, quite frankly, human beings aren’t equipped to wield it. When we have it, we sweep through our lives like the Chaldeans, either absorbing or destroying everything in our path. Whether our power exists in a tiny sphere of influence like a single family or the world stage, we “transgress and become guilty.” Habakkuk’s cries for help take on a poignancy and urgency when we realize that we are the Chaldeans in our own lives!

It takes work to recognize where we are misusing our power—we all have some of it. It takes work to accept where we do not have power—which is most places and circumstances. The good news is that God is right there with us in that work. God calls us back into right relationship, reminds us that God is the one who really has all power, encourages us to trust God with the big stuff so that we can work on being of love and service to the best of our ability in our own little worlds.

I find a great deal of relief when I recognize that my hands are locked in a white-knuckled grip on the reins of my life and make the intentional decision to let go of them. Running the universe is way above my pay grade. It’s better to let God be God.

Where do I find myself in the role of the Chaldeans in my own life?

*11-29*

“I will stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint.”

— Habakkuk 2:1

Sometimes we just have to wait. I can get wrapped up in anxiety about things I don’t have much control over. There are actions I can take in certain situations, but not others. I can exert some influence in some areas but need to completely stay out of others. Habakkuk is waiting in fear for the Chaldeans to sweep down over Israel and trample it to bits. He’s made his case to God—raised a good stink over it. And now he stands on top of the wall and watches to see what will happen. Habakkuk waits.

That waiting can be excruciating—and it’s understandable. Even though we know we have no control over those medical tests or that job offer or that benefits decision it’s not a simple thing to just turn off the anxiety and get on with life. I don’t think anyone likes that feeling of helplessness—of feeling so small and ineffectual.

We are never alone in our fear. Whether or not we feel God’s presence, God is there. Right there. Holding us. And no matter the outcome—whether it’s cancer or we don’t get the job or we’re denied services or even if the Chaldeans sweep through and trample our city—we are still not abandoned. God walks through us through ever low (and every high) we experience. God speaks to us directly and through our loved ones or acquaintances or even complete strangers. God will and does answer our complaint—that’s a promise.

What things do I find it hardest to wait for in my life?

*11-30*

“Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough.”

— Habakkuk 2:5a

Like Death they never have enough. Wow. In my recovery experience, we talk a lot about the concept of “enough.” When I was in my disease, I could never get it—enough. And underneath any and all addictive and related negative behavior was a fear of not having enough or a fear of not being enough. I can take absolutely any instance of being angry or mean or what-have-you, and if I dig down a little, I will find that enoughness is what’s at stake.

Through working my programs, I learn, little by little, what “enough” is. I trust, more and more, that I will have all that I need and plenty of what I want. I believe, more and more, that I am a good (if flawed) person who is beloved by God and worthy of love, and that I have a great deal to offer the world. I recognize, bit by bit, that accepting what is enough leads to a life of serenity and joy being of love and service to God and neighbor.

Are there still times I want to “open my throat as wide as Sheol” in an attempt to get more? Oh, sure. But those attempts will always end badly for me, and sooner or later I circle back around to acceptance of what is and find contentment in my enoughness.

Are there things I just wish I had more of? Are there ways I wish I was more?