**Daily Devotions**

**December 2022**

*12-01*

“What use is an idol once its maker has shaped it—a cast image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in what has been made, though the product is only an idol that cannot speak!”

— Habakkuk2:18

The God of Habakkuk’s people was like no other. Throughout the region and the period of history, different peoples and nations worshipped different gods, and they frequently carved idols to represent those gods. It was just what you did. God made it clear to God’s people from the get-go: You shall have no other gods. But the Israelite peoples were surrounded by and frequently intermingled with other peoples, and it’s only natural that cultural exchanges happen. Habakkuk is here trying to make a case that to worship an idol is a ridiculous waste of time. It’s a god created by human hands. Where as capital-G-God is before, above, and beyond anything humans can conceive. Put down the idols, people. God is the only one who actually has any power.

We all create idols for ourselves, whether we’re aware of it or not. Money, possessions, celebrities, athletes, musicians, work, hobbies, relationships…I could increase the list ad infinitum. We may not set out to make those things into gods. We may not be aware that our behavior is akin to worship. It doesn’t mean we’re horrible people that God is going to come down on and punish harshly as Habakkuk is predicting. But it is good for us to be honest with ourselves about where we are putting things in the place of God rather than in their proper place. When our reliance upon these things to make us feel okay in the world becomes our primary focus, it’s time to take a look at reality.

And the reality is that none of these idols has any power to bring real change, healing, stability, or growth to our lives the way a relationship with God can. Something to think about this Advent season.

What things in my life sometimes take a higher level of importance than my relationship with God?

*12-02*

“O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.”

— Habakkuk 3:2

It sounds as though God’s people have forgotten. Habakkuk is praying to God like a long-lost being, whose renown has fallen into distant memory. And perhaps that’s what was happening during Habakkuk’s time. Clearly the prophet is haranguing the people for turning to idols in their day to day life. Perhaps society as a whole has forgotten what it is to be Jewish; is not following the laws of Moses at all. I’m not enough of a biblical-historical scholar to know off the top of my head. But the sentiment is clear. God has fallen out of favor with the people—has been, if not forgotten, at least put on a shelf somewhere. Habakkuk prays that God would show up again in a big way, and make it clear to everyone that God’s the one in charge. Oh, and God, if you come in anger because we’ve forgotten all about you, please remember mercy—we’re human beings. We forget.

As we move through Advent with expectant hearts and minds, we would do well to acknowledge our tendency to forget, and remember that God is merciful. It won’t be long before we celebrate God showing up and reminding us who God is in the biggest, most spectacular, most world-changing way possible—and yet in the humble semi-dark of a stable.

What helps me to remember to put God front and center in my life as I prepare for Christmas?

*12-03*

“I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me. I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.”

— Habakkuk 3:16

Rottenness enters into my bones. What a curious phrase. Is it that they become brittle and can’t support me? Is it from clenching my body in anticipation of my vindication? This vivid, bodily imagery around Habakkuk’s waiting paints clear picture of just how invested he is in God’s action. He has been speaking all this time of the invading Chaldeans and calling upon God to rout them and save God’s people even though they don’t deserve it. And now he waits, not just a little terrified.

We, too, wait for what we don’t know. We, too, are witnesses to injustice and the bearing down of visible and invisible forces on our society that mean us no good. We, too, need God to show up in a big way on our behalf.

Advent is about waiting. Waiting for God to keep God’s promise to all of creation, a promise that is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. But that waiting can be exhausting, and rottenness can enter into our bones. May we listen to our bodies during this often stressful season and surrender all our hopes and fears to our God who keeps promises.

What am I waiting for in the world today?

*12-04*

“Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.’”

— Esther 4:15-16

Main Idea: Esther was reluctant to go to the king for fear of her life. Once she accepted it was the right thing to do, courage took hold of her.

Esther’s uncle Mordecai had angered Haman, who had issued a decree for the destruction of all the Jews. Mordecai pleaded with Esther to intervene with the king on their behalf. At first, Esther resisted. It was against the law for someone to go see the king uninvited. He could have her put to death or he could spare her.

Mordecai reminded her that she too, was a Jew. There was nothing to stop Haman from killing her, too. And even if she was spared and if God saved the Jews some other way, her inaction might anger God, who could punish her family for her failure to act.

Esther decided she would take the chance for the sake of her people. She asked Mordecai to send word to the Jews to fast and pray for her. She and her servants did the same. She would take her plea to the king and accept the consequences.

It’s not often we’re asked to make a decision that can result in our death. But that doesn’t mean all our choices are easy. We are often asked to act according to our integrity, even when it is an unpopular opinion.

I have often been in conversation with people struggling between two choices. After listening to them, I regularly advise them this—they do know what to do; they just don’t want to do it because it’s the harder thing. Sometimes just acknowledging that it’s the right—if harder—thing makes the decision easier to make. It can be a lot easier to battle fear than indecision.

*12-05*

“This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s behavior will rebel against the king’s officials, and there will be no end of contempt and wrath!”

— Esther 1:18

This is a comedy, remember. King Ahasuerus ordered his wife, Queen Vashti, to make an appearance at a party and she refused. Rather than simply sulk about it, he has to take bold action to send a message to all the women in his kingdom: Obey your husbands or be cast off!

To modern ears this is horrific, especially if you didn’t know or forgot this is a comedic play. In a culture where women are still fighting for equality with men in all areas of life, this is just one more example of oppression. But the subtext of the declaration is that women hold way more power than the “ideal” norms of the time would dictate. Women obviously exerted themselves in their relationships with their husbands, otherwise why make fun of it by having to create a royal decree? Mind you, I’m not saying it’s a good joke that should be just brushed off without reflection, but I imagine the inherent ridiculousness of this was clear at the time and maybe we can see it as further support of the idea that society needs to change radically to render this entirely moot. Giving women full equality to men doesn’t lead to “contempt and wrath” toward men. Quite the contrary, it removes the need for contempt and wrath because everyone is on the same level.

The ironic twist in this story is that Esther, when she comes onto the scene, is the epitome of the quiet, obedient woman who only lives to please her husband, yet she exerts incredible power and influence to the tune of saving her entire people from genocide, thus subverting the oppression her role puts on her.

If nothing else, I certainly encourage you to make a cup of something warm, kick back, and read the book of Esther as if it is the script of a ridiculous farce—it really is a lot of fun!

How can I find humor even in the struggles of my life? How is humor healing for me?

*12-06*

“Now Esther had not revealed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.”

— Esther 2:20

Enter the perfectly obedient heroine. She is the complete foil to Queen Vashti, the picture of ideal femininity within Jewish law: obedient to authority (read: men). As I wrote yesterday, this is intentional to set up and subvert this ideal by giving Esther incredible power in spite of her oppressive station in life.

Meanwhile, this old melodrama is about more than just the oppression of women. The lives of the entire Jewish people are on the line! Here we set the stage for the later dramatic reveal, having Esther keep back from her new husband, King Ahasuerus, that she herself is a Jew. As the story progresses, it’s clear he is hardly even aware of the Jewish presence in his vast kingdom at this point, so it’s not like it would have even been a blip on his radar at the beginning to know that his new wife was Jewish. But, as we well know, this becomes absolutely central to the entire tale! Suspense! Mystery! Scheming! Counter-scheming! For the total over-the-top nature of this rollicking comedic play, you need an Esther—the soft, sweet protagonist with a heart of gold, an iron will, and a BIG secret.

In real life, of course, obedience is not a positive character trait in my book. In fact, I have a clear memory of my childhood pastor telling my confirmation class that obedience was not good at all. I don’t remember the context, but while I get that we need to be obedient to God’s call to do God’s work in the world, obedience to any human authority whatsoever is likely to get in the way of God’s call.

On the other hand, Esther also teaches us that we can be effective in creating large-scale and life-saving change from wherever we are in life.

Is obedience a positive trait? Why or why not?

*12-07*

“When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance to him, Haman was infuriated. But he thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai’s people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.”

— Esther 3:5-6

Mordecai is the example of what happens when people refuse to bend to worldly authority for moral reasons. We have Esther up in the castle, hiding her Jewish identity and dutifully obeying both her uncle and the King. Now we see Mordecai among regular society refusing to worship Haman because (although it is not said) God’s commandments forbid it. Jews got in trouble all over the Hebrew Bible for refusing to bow down to kings and idols. This is another example.

God is the only true authority for Mordecai and for us. But if we actually live that way, we put ourselves in a position to be retaliated against by the powers that be. Thus protesters, activists, and dissenters are arrested, assaulted, or murdered. Thus writers and artists who draw public attention to the evils of unjust economies and governments are derided and defamed (or arrested, assaulted, murdered, etc.) At the very least, taking a stand against oppression takes time, energy, and resources and isn’t comfortable. God calls us out of our comfort and into the world on behalf of justice.

How many of us, down in our hearts, would just rather bow to Haman and be done with it? How many of us are aware that this is just what we do when we sit by and accept the unjust systems in which we are complicit?

May God give us the willingness to answer God’s call despite the challenges.

How can I follow Mordecai’s example in my life?

*12-08*

“Haman added, ‘Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet that she prepared. Tomorrow also I am invited by her, together with the king. Yet all this does me no good so long as I see the Jew Mordecai sitting at the king’s gate.’”

— Esther 5:12-13

Boo! Hiss! That’s what the original audiences of this play were to do whenever Haman came on the scene. If Esther is the pure heroine and Mordecai the representative of the faithful Jewish people, Haman is the villain, twisting his long moustaches and cackling as he plans the demise of all that Mordecai represents. Like most villains, he is destined to be thwarted and his ultimate take-down is aided in this case by his incredible pride. “Even Queen Esther let no one but myself come with the king to the banquet she prepared.” The audience can laugh at his hubris, knowing full well that Queen Esther is also a Jew and is counter-plotting his demise.

His pride is so great that just the sight of Mordecai, who refuses to bow down to him, spoils the otherwise wonderful attention he is receiving from the queen. Which makes me think of all the times in my life when I’ve let something I have no control over steal the enjoyment of some happening or another. Why? Pride. In those moments, I think I deserve and easy, pain-free life where everything goes exactly the way I want. And, of course, that’s not how life works.

It takes effort sometimes to see past the little or even big challenges and allow myself to enjoy the moment—effort I often need to ask God to help me find the willingness for. As we move ever closer to Christmas, which often entails family gatherings and other stressful situations, we’ll get lots of opportunities to ask God to let go of our pride so that we don’t let the little (or even not-so-little) things steal our joy.

Has my pride ever gotten in the way of my true enjoyment of the season?

*12-09*

“When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, ‘If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him.’”

— Esther 6:13

It’s a curious things for Zeresh to say. As a theatrical device, she’s just foreshadowing the ultimate demise of her villainous husband along with all his plans and designs. But she also makes a profound statement about God without mentioning God. In fact, God isn’t mentioned directly at all in the book of Esther. But indirectly? It’s a melodrama about the Jewish people, who become near victims of genocide simply because of their cultural identity. And what is their cultural identity based on? The worship of God. The following of God’s commandments, which include not having any other gods, thus preventing Mordecai from bowing down before Haman, which sets the whole plot into motion.

Zeresh, to the thrill of this play’s original audiences (and us, if we know how to read it) proclaims that God is more powerful than anything Haman or even the King can through at God’s people. Haman conspires to have Mordecai killed and winds up being tricked into throwing Mordecai a parade and giving him the highest honors. Why? Mordecai has God on his side and Haman, as hard as he tries, will not prevail over the will of God.

It's a powerful message to us today in the midst of a world filled with tragedy, sorrow, oppression, injustice, hatred, and greed. We can proclaim with Zeresh that these powers will not prevail over us, because we are God’s beloved children and that God’s promise of justice is sure—even if we don’t see it right now. Zeresh is foreshadowing the future, and we can look with hope to that future when God’s reign is fully realized in our midst.

What signs do I see in my life that God keeps God’s promises?

*12-10*

“By these letters the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods on a single day throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.”

— Esther 7:11-12

Okay, so the end of the play is a little over the top. Rather than simply rescinding the order to kill the Jewish people, or making it a crime to oppress them, the King makes another decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves by killing their attackers and to plunder the area willy nilly. I suppose it is a melodrama, so that a melodramatic ending is called for, but I’m no fan of violence, especially when it could be so easily prevented.

On the other hand, I have deep sympathy for communities who have been so oppressed for so long that when something catalyzes mass protests, violence erupts. It’s not that I think rioting and looting are good things in and of themselves, but they are completely understandable when you look honestly at the history of brutal injustice that has been used to keep BIPOC communities down.

There’s nothing comedic about that sort of oppression and violence. But in reality there wasn’t much to laugh about for the Jewish people who originally performed Esther—a people with a long history of being hated, feared, conquered, and oppressed, much of which continues to this day. Maybe it was cathartic for them to imagine being given complete freedom to act out their pain and rage in a visceral way. Who knows. All I can tell you is that this farcical production comes to its happy ending—Esther saves her people from destruction and they celebrated from that day on with the festival of Purim.

Is violence ever justified? Why or why not?

*12-11*

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

— Isaiah 42:1

Main Idea: God promised to do a new thing with an old covenant, and it’s coming. Soon.

God spoke to a weary, exiled people—a people that had suffered because of their own failure to walk alongside God. God would not let them suffer indefinitely. One day God would send a servant. This servant would have God’s spirit. He would bring forth justice not with a shout or might, but with strength and faith.

God would renew God’s covenant with God’s people, but in a new way. God would use this servant to bring light to darkness, to free prisoners, to bring God’s people back so that they might worship only God once again. God would do a new thing with an old covenant.

On this third Sunday in Advent, we too can become weary of waiting. We are weary of consumerism, of war, of cold, of a seemingly unending cycle of seasons, spending, enduring, and then doing it all again.

What if this season we took God true to God’s word and acknowledged the freedom, light, and joy that comes with stepping off the hamster wheel and living in a new way, according to the newness offered by God through the servant, Jesus. What if we stepped into this Christmas with new eyes, new goals, and new expectations? What God might do with us then!

*12-12*

“Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.”

— Isaiah 42:10

Nature sings the praises of God. Today as I write this, the song is quiet. A blanket of fresh snow covers the ground and muffles ambient sound. The sun is muted by a thin scrim of cloud cover. An expectant hush has descended over my little corner of the world. And how appropriate in these early days of Advent. As we try to maintain a modicum of peace and balance through what the world tells us should be a time of 24/7 activity, spending, doing, eating, over-doing, we can be intentional about setting aside time to praise God by being still and breathing deeply.

Yes, Isaiah writes of a cacophony of praise—roaring seas and creatures—and there is a place for that in Advent, too. That irrepressible joy must and will come out as we move closer to the fulfillment of God’s promise in Jesus. But the tension between the quiet waiting and the inevitable celebration can be held in our hearts one Advent day at a time. We can breathe through our excitement and remember to stay in the moment rather than rushing to the finish line. It won’t be long now before the whole earth cries out in exultation at God’s world-transforming gift. Until then, enjoy the quiet praise of God’s beautiful creation all around you.

How do I stay patient and still joyful during Advent?

*12-13*

“So he poured upon him the heat of his anger and the fury of war; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him, but he did not take it to heart.”

— Isaiah 42:25

Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. When things go horribly sideways it can be easy to wonder what we’ve done to deserve it, as if bad things happen as a punishment. That was the mindset in Isaiah’s time. The Israelite people were in a bad way and the prophet told them it was because they were disobedient to God and God caused them to be overtaken. I personally don’t believe God works like that, but I do believe we ourselves have a definite role to play in creating our own pain.

This last verse stood out to me. God has made it abundantly clear that God is not pleased with the people—causing terrible things “the heat of anger and the fury of war” to descend upon them. But the people still do not get it. They get burned by the heat and seem to have no idea that they’ve caused it.

Let me be clear that there are plenty of tragic things in our lives over which we have absolutely no control—this is not what I’m talking about here. I’m talking about the decisions we make every day in our interactions with other people, in our choices about all manner of things that blow up in our faces, and which are entirely preventable.

Some of the greatest gifts I’ve received from my recovery work are the tools I use to look with complete honesty about my part in any given situation and identify where my own fear, resentment, ego, and selfishness have led to the difficulties I’m experiencing. It helps me to see where I’m being “burned,” “take it to heart,” and step away from the fire.

As we head into a season often filled with family strife, it’s good to recognize that we have the agency to either contribute to that strife or choose not to participate in it. May God help us to read the signs and take them to heart.

When have my choices led to negative outcomes that felt like punishment?

*12-14*

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.”

— Isaiah 43:1-2

Such beautiful words of hope this Advent. No matter how challenging our lives are, God never abandons us. All of us, no matter who we are, deal with difficulties. It’s a bad idea to try to compare our issues to those of others. Either we determine that our difficulties are far less than those experiencing “real” trauma and we decide that we do not deserve God’s help, or we determine that we have it worse than others and are in danger of spiraling into self-pity, wondering “why me?”

Know that whoever you are, whatever you are struggling with, you matter to God. God calls you by name and you are God’s. God created you and is with you always in every circumstance no matter what. And you deserve whatever help and hope you receive in your grief or pain or sorrow.

May you live in the peace of God’s promise that all will be restored.

Do I find myself comparing my difficulties to others’? How can I move away from that practice toward a radical acceptance of where I am and of the promise of God’s help?

*12-15*

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

— Isaiah 43:19a

This gives me goosebumps. I am about to do a new thing.

Sometimes I get really jaded and cynical. I fall in to my Ecclesiastes mentality that there is absolutely nothing new under the sun. (I love Ecclesiastes, by the way. Don’t get me wrong.) I wonder if anything really matters. Like, at all.

Then I read God say, “I am about to do a new thing” and my heart skips a beat. Just let that simple statement sink in. Repeat it. Breathe through it. Recognize the expectation: I am about to. We’re on the cusp. Newness is possible. It’s imminent. Something is going to be transformed. Because even if I fall back to “nothing is new under the sun” I believe in transformation. I’ve experienced it. It’s breathtaking. This new thing God is about to do isn’t about creating some novel thing or experience in the way we demand as modern technology-driven consumers. This new thing is a complete reordering of all that is. It is a transformation of the world, but more importantly, it is a transformation of us.

I say all the time when I teach kids or write kids’ materials: Jesus changes everything. Or Jesus turns everything on its head. During Advent, we wait with ever-growing excitement for God’s action in our jaded and cynical world.

God is about to do a new thing. Do you feel it?

Do I find myself not believing new things are possible? How do I interpret this verse from Isaiah?

*12-16*

“I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. Accuse me, let us go to trial; set forth your case, so that you may be proved right.”

— Isaiah 43:25-26

This reminds me of a story told by Holocaust-survivor Elie Wiesel. The Jewish leaders in the concentration camp where he was held actually put God on trial. They wanted to know whether God had violated God’s covenant with God’s people by allowing the Holocaust to happen. In the end, they convicted God of violating the covenant. Then the rabbi in charge said, “And now it’s time for our evening prayers,” or something along those lines.

A covenant is a two-way thing. That means either party can and should hold the other accountable if it’s not going well. The Hebrew Bible is full of such accounting. God’s people are not just invited but actually encouraged, even obligated, to stand up to God and argue. If it’s just a one-way street—God sets forth the law and punishes the people for not obeying it—it’s not much of a relationship. That’s not what God wants. God wants God’s beloved children to be fully engaged with God, in conversation, in distress. God has promised to protect people, and where God has not held up God’s end of the bargain, the people can raise a stink.

This isn’t limited to the Jews of antiquity. We, today, are obligated to wrestle with God and hold God accountable. We need to make space for lament. When we just sit back an accept what is as “inevitable” or chalk tragedy up to “God’s will” we’re abandoning our side of the covenant. It’s okay, even in the midst of Advent—maybe especially in the midst of Advent—to lament the evils of the world and remind God of God’s covenant promises to us.

What is something I need to “have it out” with God about?

*12-17*

“Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.”

— Isaiah 44:8

Witness is powerful. In my particular faith tradition we don’t do it. Or we certainly don’t do it enough. So many of us have stories to tell about how God has reached into our life and transformed it. Even if it’s not on a major scale, we all have some experience, some sign that God is working in our lives, holding us in our sorrows, inspiring us through our challenges, calling us to do God’s work in the world. We need to share those stories. We need to listen to one another and find the similarities, the commonalities our faith journeys.

After all, it’s easier to have courage when the community rallies around you with the confidence of faith. It’s more joyful when your church family celebrates with you because they, too, have reason to celebrate. It’s transformative to know that the sum total of our witnessing demonstrates that there is no god besides our God. There is no other rock. We know not one!

Is it easy for me to share my faith story? How can I witness to God’s work in my life?

*12-18*

“When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.”

— Matthew 1:24

Main Idea: Many people had roles to play in the story of Jesus’ birth.

Much art, story, and tradition has been built around the angel’s announcement to a frightened young girl Mary, that she would soon bear God’s son. Far less imagination has been spent on Joseph’s vision in a dream. Yet it is as critical to the successful birthing and raising of Jesus.

Joseph was willing to marry a girl who had been seemingly unfaithful so that she would not be shunned or murdered. His understanding and willingness to take on this role made it possible for Mary to continue her pregnancy safely and with the social and financial security of a husband. His carpentry trade offered the small boy Jesus the option to grow up with the means to make a living and obtain some religious education.

In today’s world where independence is touted as the gold standard, it is refreshing to read once again the story of Jesus and the many people who had to be involved for his life to flourish. It is not a story of a mother and child; it is the story of a mother, father, child, a supportive community, and the love of heaven’s host. Certainly, God would have found a way if Joseph had decided to tap out. But Joseph had a role to play, and he accepted it with dignity and grace.

*12-19*

“God brought Abram outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then God said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”

— Genesis 15:5-6

Abram’s belief was no small thing. In this earliest era of civilization, we still functioned as animals—our singular drive was to ensure our immortality by making sure we passed on our genes. We loved our children, but they were as valuable for their ability to create still more descendants as for any inherent value they might have had—probably more so. And here was Abram, advanced in years with one wife (unusual at the time) who was also advanced in years and had yet to produce a child. Possibly Abram was okay with that. He had a nephew, after all, and Lot carried some of his genes. He clearly loved his wife, Sarai, despite their childless state, and hadn’t married other, younger women to produce heirs. Maybe he was content with the long life he’d led and happy to let his own line die out with him.

But God had other plans. “Nope. Abram’s it. The one I pick. He and Sarai will be the ultimate source of all my people.” Why Abram and Sarai? Why not? “Abram, count the stars, if you can. Hint: you can’t, but there’s a lot of them. That’s how many descendants you will have.”

And Abram, apparently without skipping a beat, completely disregarding his current state and the laughable unlikelihood that such a thing was remotely possible, says, “Yep. I believe it.”

I imagine God, at that point, thinking, “Well I made the right choice.” And now that I think of it, maybe that’s why God chose Abram and Sarai to be the founders of an entire nation. Because as far as human beings were concerned, it was impossible. Yet here was an opportunity for God to say, “With me, nothing is impossible! Imma take a little old couple and make them a people too numerous to count. And the whole world will be blessed through them!”

As we look toward the coming of Jesus in the midst of a sad and broken world, let’s remember the incredible faithfulness of Abram that with God all things are possible.

Have I seen the impossible happen in my life?

*12-20*

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

— Isaiah 7:14

Let me be frank: this passage was not written about Jesus. It was a prophecy about a very human king that would one day rule Israel after all the warlords and empires around them petered out. Prophecies in the Hebrew Bible about a coming messiah did not have the concept of the kind of completely reality-changing king that Jesus—God in human flesh—would be. They were limited by their human experiences to that time.

New testament attempts to “prove” Jesus is the promised messiah by connecting him to Hebrew Bible prophecies, especially in Matthew, are sometimes, frankly, a stretch.

However, they lead us toward the most powerful—and really the only appropriate Christian way—to read the whole of the Bible: through the lens of Jesus Christ.

That means we can and do find Jesus’ presence throughout the whole of scripture, long before anyone had the slightest concept of who Jesus was. We find Jesus in the story of creation as one with God and the word God spoke to bring all things into being. (We also find the Holy Spirit everywhere, leading to the concept of the Trinity which is, as we understand it now, not found anywhere in scripture).

Is this revisionist history? By no means! The Bible is a living, breathing, dynamic document, the word of God set down (by men, mostly) on paper, through the lived experience of a particular people over the course of hundreds of years. Because it is alive and well, and because it is limited by its contextuality, we get to dive deep into it with eyes wide open and wearing the glasses that are our modern understanding of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When we do, we find that Jesus meets us on every page and calls us into divine relationship not only with the Triune God, but with every single human being and animal and everything in all creation from the beginning of time.

How awesome is that?

When have I looked for signs of Jesus in the Old Testament?

*12-21*

“On that day one will keep alive a young cow and two sheep, and will eat curds because of the abundance of milk that they give; for everyone that is left in the land shall eat curds and honey.”

— Isaiah 7:21-22

I’ll admit to being kinda stumped by this passage. I mean, I get that the current warlords will just disappear and there will be a promised messiah who will be called “God with us” and he’ll eat curds and honey and now it seems like everyone will be eating curds and honey. But at the same time, huge areas of land will turn from valuable vines to briars and thorns where nothing useful will grow, but the cows and sheep (who are making all these curds) will graze happily. And then, throughout it all, we keep hearing about the king of Assyria, who we know is the next big bully who will come along and conquer Judah.

All I can glean is that God is saying things are going to get a whole lot worse before they get better. But don’t worry. I’m sending help eventually. In the meantime, enjoy some lovely cottage cheese and honey.

So I will simply reiterate the promise of Advent in the midst of an often frightening world, in which crises of climate, injustice, war, and sickness lie over all creation like a pall. God hears us, suffers with us, weeps with us, and promises transformation and renewal. That transformation came in the birth of Jesus two thousand years ago, it breaks into the world wherever and whenever God’s justice is done, and it will finally, once and for all, renew all that is for all eternity.

Meanwhile, help yourself to the cottage cheese.

Do I often find myself scratching my head when reading the Bible? What things help me find meaning in perplexing passages?

*12-22*

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

— Isaiah 9:6

How can you not sing this? Then again, I suppose there are plenty of people who have never heard Handel’s Messiah. But even if you haven’t, how can these words not somehow lift you up? These beautiful names for the one God will send to lead God’s people out of their constant warring with their neighbors and the Assyrian empire, the king who will reign over a peaceful world. We interpret this description to Jesus and while it might not have been originally written with him in mind, we are now well aware that these words describe him to a T.

We are growing ever closer to the day when we celebrate a child being born for us, a son given to us, upon whom the authority of all creation, not just some single nation, rests, and who is indeed a wonderful counselor, a prince of peace, our everlasting life-giving mother, and none other than our holy and all-powerful God in human flesh.

Whoa.

Are you singing yet?

What are my favorite pieces of music during Advent and Christmas?

*12-23*

“Let it be known to you therefore, my brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you; by this Jesus everyone who believes is set free from all those sins from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.”

— Acts 13:38-39

Jesus transforms life as we understand it. Before Jesus, God’s people had to sacrifice animals in order to be forgiven for their sins. And it sounds from this passage like there were some sins there was no coming back from. The laws of Moses were (and are) so important in helping God’s people to live with one another in harmony. But as anyone who understands the U.S. criminal justice system can tell you, punishment is not a deterrent of crime. Arresting, punishing, and jailing people does not lead to changed lives, safer cities, or anything positive whatsoever (unless you’re among those earning ridiculous profits from the horrific private prison system).

Laws are right and necessary, but they only go so far. What creates peaceful and mutually supporting communities are relationships. Jesus—God—is a God of relationships. The Laws of Moses could not accomplish for people what Jesus did. Jesus wiped away sin, abolished the very idea that God is a punishing God, and set us free from eons of guilt and shame.

We still need to obey the law—the just ones, anyway—and when we harm someone, we need to make restitution. We still need to work, with God’s help, to release guilt and shame that are somehow baked into our DNA and get activated by our often painful lives. We still need Jesus to walk with us every step of the way, reminding us that we are not our sins and that through loving community—with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, our neighbors, and all of creation—we can live in newness of life.

Where does guilt and shame linger in my life?

*12-24*

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

— Luke 2:7

Main Idea: The success of God’s plan would rest on its cultivation on the ground level of society.

Having status and money meant having food, shelter, servants, power, and influence. At a time when social and political status meant everything, God did an unexpected thing. God sent a baby to an unmarried, nomadic young girl. God’s angels spread the news to the working class in a common town.

Centuries prior, God sent Moses to save the people. Moses was raised in the palace of Pharaoh. He had education, money, and resources. He did save God’s people. But that liberation didn’t last. Eventually God’s people would be conquered again—more than once. It turns out bringing a savior into the stratosphere of power wasn’t a lasting solution.

This time God would do it differently. God would send the savior to the bottom, rather the top. God would speak directly with the people God had come to save. God’s plan was to deliver them not only from Rome, but from sin and death. To accomplish a dramatically different result, God performed a dramatically different action.

As with many good things, it would take time to nurture and cultivate this dramatically different thing. God would grow up among God’s people, speak their language, eat their food, suffer the normal bumps and bruises, receive educational instruction, and attend ceremonies. God couldn’t have accomplished what God did with money or power. God did it by engaging the imaginations and skills of the people God had come to save. God took God’s plan to the grassroots and let it unfold as it would.

*12-25*

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

— Luke 2:17-18

Main Idea: God becoming flesh does warrant our respect.

I don’t know about you, but if I’d been working my night job and the sky lit up with a host of heavenly angels, I’d be terrified. And when the angels spoke, saying “Do not be afraid,” I’m out! Maybe I’ve seen too many horror movies, but when such an unexpected supernatural event occurs, you don’t stick around to see how it ends.

But these shepherds did stick it out. They watched and listened as the angels proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest heaven!” But it didn’t end there. When the angels left, the shepherds decided to go check it out for themselves. (“No, don’t go into the basement!”)

When they arrived, they found the baby just as the angels had said. But it didn’t end there. They told Mary and Joseph what they had seen. (Here’s the part where the nurses lock them into the asylum for talking crazy.)

Obviously, this isn’t a horror movie, nor is Jesus a scary character. At the same time, Jesus is a powerful player, and certainly scared plenty of people during his lifetime. Nothing important ever gets accomplished without ruffling some feathers, and Jesus ruffled plenty.

Maybe it’s ok to be a little intimidated by this tiny baby with the power of heaven behind him. Maybe we can cultivate a healthy respect for God made flesh. This is unlike anything we’ve ever experienced or ever will again. It’s ok that we don’t fully understand it and that we afford Jesus the respect—and maybe even a little fear—that he warrants.

*12-26*

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.’”

— Luke 1:13

The angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah.’ Zechariah had every reason to be afraid. He was standing in front of an angel, after all. And although everyday angels in the Bible were not the big, winged, creatures in the popular imagination, or the rather horrific cherubim and seraphim described in apocalyptic Bible passages, but rather generally appeared as more-or-less human, there was obviously something about them so obviously otherworldly that they inspired terror. Angels nearly always begin their interactions with humans by saying, “Don’t be afraid.” Ergo, angels are frightening.

Why? They are messengers from God. They are holy creatures bearing God’s own words, not as interpreted through a human prophet, but direct—the actual voice of God. Sometime I think we just forget that God is a completely incomprehensible cosmic power who can create out of nothing and bring back to nothing anything in creation. We get wrapped up in our modern ideas of God as friend and comforter (completely true) and I think we’re a little uncomfortable thinking about God as scary when there’s enough in the world that’s scary.

I think God’s scariness is distinctly different than worldly terror. More like awe. A thrill. Still off-putting and needing reassurance, but fear that’s more akin to joyful anticipation. Like being at the top of a roller coaster waiting for the first drop. Because the next statement from almost every angel after “Do not be afraid,” is some kind of mind-blowingly good news. It was true in Zechariah’s case, and it is true in the lives of so many every day.

Have I ever felt real awe and fear in a God-encounter in my life?

*12-27*

“The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.’”

— Luke 1:30-31

The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary.’ This passage begins identically to yesterday’s, about Zechariah. Like him, Mary had good reason to be afraid. This was an angel after all. But unlike Zechariah, Mary had an even more profound reason to be afraid. Even though the angel’s admonition to not be afraid was followed by what appeared to be good news, the social norms of the day made that good news far more frightening than just the appearance of an angel.

Mary, an unmarried woman, was being told to carry an illegitimate child. Unlike Zechariah, a man of privilege who was married to the woman who was giving birth to his heir, Mary was a second class citizen held to an entirely different standard than her counterpart in these passages. Women had no power and no value except as married producers of children. Doing what God—who called it “good news”—was asking meant risking her reputation, her entire future, and even her very life.

Miraculously, Mary said, “Yes.” Her faith in her God who keeps promises far outweighed any fear of the human culture she knew to be corrupt and unjust (as you will see when you read her Magnificat in a couple of days). She is an astonishing example to all of us who are called to do the often frightening work of God in the world.

What is the hardest thing I have ever felt called to do?

*12-28*

“Elizabeth said, ‘And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.’”

— Luke 1:43-44

Elizabeth was Mary’s “kinswoman.” We’re not sure exactly how they were related. There was obviously a large difference in age. Elizabeth had married a priest and was therefore fairly privileged. We always talk about Mary as if she was poor, though it’s not explicit in the text. Jewish families were large—offspring, especially sons, were highly valued—meaning extended families could include dozens of people. We do know that Mary felt close enough to Elizabeth not just to go visit her, but also to confide in her. Elizabeth was about six months pregnant at this point, and Mary only just pregnant. It’s possible no one even knew (other than Joseph) that Mary was pregnant at all.

But Elizabeth knew. Whether because Mary had told her in advance, or simply because the baby in her womb jumped for joy and “told” her, Elizabeth knew Mary was not only pregnant, but pregnant with “the Lord.”

I wonder whether Mary actually went to Elizabeth’s for her own safety—to hide away her pregnancy from those who would judge her or insist she be stoned for her adultery. Maybe she stayed there right up until she and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem. The text doesn’t say.

I suppose all my rambling about this beautiful text leads me to conclude this: there is such a special relationship between close women friends going through similar life experiences such as pregnancy. It fills me with the warmth of the season to imagine the love and support these women showed each other, and makes me want to reach out to my friends and tell them just what they mean to me. This Christmas season, I encourage you to do the same.

Do I have one particular friend with whom I can be completely myself?

*12-29*

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

— Luke 1:52-53

Mary is clear about her Son’s mission. Despite five hundred plus years of her society’s belief that the messiah would come and restore the throne of David and throw off the tyranny of Rome to restore the status quo of Israel, Mary’s song sounds more like the prophets who lambasted Israel’s status quo for violating everything God stood for.

Mary knows that her son is destined not to restore Israel’s former glory, but to bring about a whole new ordering of society in which God rules over all people in justice and love. The haughty, the wealthy, the powerful—of which there were still many in Jewish society even under the Romans—would be deposed, and those who were oppressed—those who were poor, hungry, sick, outcast, unwanted—would be lifted up and given all they needed to flourish.

This was straight up revolutionary language. Maybe all the more reason that Mary was lying low with Elizabeth until she could give birth and officially marry Joseph. Make no mistake: Jesus was subversive even before he was born. He is still subversive today. May we sing with Mary the hope of justice for all of God’s creation.

Is it easy or hard for me to think about Jesus as a revolutionary?

*12-30*

“All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.”

— Luke 1:66

John’s birth was surrounded with mystery and power. Zechariah, who wasn’t willing to believe Gabriel’s message that his wife would give him a son, was struck speechless until the child was born. That’s nine months, give or take, where all Zechariah could do was jot down what he wanted to say. And it’s not like there were notebooks and pens lying around in this era. I giggle a little when I imagine that Elizabeth enjoyed the respite.

Then when the baby was born, and Elizabeth wanted to name him John, no one wanted to listen to her. It wasn’t a family name. Plus it was the father’s right to name the child. So they handed Zechariah something to write with and he wrote, “His name is John!” What was that all about? Where had that name come from?

And then, instantly, Zechariah could speak again.

The people around Zechariah and Elizabeth—their friends, family, neighbors, living in close proximity to them, bore witness to this whole bizarre story. It’s no wonder they pondered what John would become. But I imagine it was a bit of an excited wondering—surely God was at work in all of this!

When have I witnessed something in my life that made me stop and say, “Whoa. God has a hand in this.”

*12-31*

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”

— Luke 1:76-77

Almost as soon as Zechariah could speak again, he prophesied. He was a priest, after all, but this was something altogether different. Following his encounter with Gabriel, he had nine months without being able to speak, in which he had plenty to time to contemplate what this all meant. Gabriel had essentially told him that John would be a prophet, but Zechariah proclaims the nature of John’s prophecy—to prepare the way of the Lord. He doesn’t specifically mention Jesus. “The Lord” could be God. But the implication is that God is about to do a new thing, and the people need to be prepared to receive it. John is the one God has chosen to do the preparing, which we know from later texts that he does by baptizing people in the Jordan River and calling upon them to change their ways, to prepare their hearts for the coming of God’s promised messiah: Jesus.

Zechariah was clearly moved by the whole experience. And maybe there was some pride that his son had been chosen for such an important task. I wonder how he felt when John—his only son, born late in life—wandered into the desert wearing camel’s hair and eating locusts and wild honey. Sure, that’s what a lot of prophets did, but as a parent, I’m sure a part of Zechariah might have wanted a “normal” son who stayed in the family business and became a priest in the way Zechariah was. On the other hand, maybe Zechariah was one of those dads who fully supported his son’s chosen path. Especially since that path was chosen by God.

Does my calling in life ever cause conflict with my family or the people around me?