**Daily Devotions**

**January 2023**

*01-01*

“An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”

— Matthew 1:1

Main Idea: Jesus claimed many wise and strong women in his genealogy.

The Christmas season is one of the few where the women truly shine. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day are celebrations not only of the baby Jesus, but also of his mother Mary. In some traditions, Mary is celebrated as the mother of God—a truly remarkable title!

On this Sunday when we look at Jesus’ genealogy, we have another opportunity to celebrate the roles women played in Jesus’ history.

At a time when lineage was recognized as being passed down through the men, it’s interesting to read that Jesus’ genealogy includes several women. It’s easy to think that women didn’t have important roles to play in history because history is written by men from the perspective of men. But none of these men in Jesus’ lineage would exist without the women that bore them.

And these were powerful, wise women. Tamar tricked her father-in-law Judah into impregnating her, cementing her status as the mother of Judah’s heirs.

Rahab hid two Israelites that had been sent into Jericho to scout it out before Israel attacked and conquered it. She was instrumental in the Israelites receiving God’s promised land.

Rahab’s son Boaz married Ruth, a Moabite woman who followed her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem in Judea. Ruth shrewdly enticed Boaz to marry her, ensuring Ruth and Naomi’s place in society. Rahab was a Canaanite and Ruth was a Moabite, so Boaz and Ruth’s son Obed was not a pure Hebrew. This means Jesus himself had mixed blood.

The women in Jesus’ genealogy were not just passive. They were active players—wise and shrewd, and working within the system to ensure their survival. These were the kind of women Jesus would be proud to claim as his ancestors.

*01-02*

“Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country.”

— Genesis 1:5-6

All of this week’s readings follow from yesterday’s genealogy of Jesus. We will hear over and over about God showing up in the lives of God’s people to ensure their continued survival through births miraculous, challenging, surprising, and even subversive. Each of the stories highlights a different descendant in Jesus’ line. Remember that genealogy was incredibly important to the Jewish people, who were tasked with being able to recite their lineage all the way back to Abraham.

And here we start with him. Abraham is considered the father of the whole Jewish people through his son, Isaac. The Bible is clear that Abraham had other sons—first Ishmael by his slave Hagar, and through whom the entire Islamic people also claim Abraham as their father—then others with his other slaves, as this reading lays out. But time and again, Abraham ultimately rejected his other sons as candidates for his inheritance. He gave all he had to Isaac, the son promised to him by God through his wife, Sarah. It was Isaac’s descendants, and Isaac’s alone, who would grow and thrive and become the people Israel.

One could read this story (and most of the Hebrew Bible) as one of playing favorites. It would be easy to pull out the elements of injustice and question who this God is, who would raise one people above another. But one could also read this story as one that satisfies the very human need to belong. The Jewish people were forever moving about, being subjugated to slavery or being conquered by various nations and empires; encountering cultures whose practices went against all they believed. Knowing that this origin story that goes back to Abraham is ahistorical, one can see a people, so often rejected, needing something to bind them together in loving solidarity. This heritage connects all Jews everywhere to this day—and all Christians, too, for we, too, are the offspring of Abraham, and beloved children of God.

What different communities do I belong to? What helps me determine my identity?

*01-03*

“The Lord swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: ‘One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne. If your sons keep my covenant and my decrees that I shall teach them, their sons also, forevermore, shall sit on your throne.’”

— Psalm 132:11-12

Matthew makes it clear in his genealogy that Jesus is a direct descendant of King David and therefore the fulfillment of this promise. At the time, people would have been looking for a literal king, and this is what it was believed Jesus would be when he arrived on the scene. Many wanted to make him a king so that he would overthrow the oppressive rule of Rome and re-establish Israeli autonomy. This was not his path.

After all, the sons of David’s body did not keep God’s covenant and decrees, and their sons devolved into infighting, split the kingdom, and were overrun and exiled by foreign empires. You would think God had plenty of reason to discard this promise since David’s heirs so egregiously violated their part of the bargain.

But God is merciful and just, and works in God’s own time. Instead of raising up another military leader-type monarch from among the elite of the Jewish people, God took on human flesh and was born into the Davidic line to be the king that all humanity really needed—a humble but powerful king of peace. By doing so, God forgave us our total inability to actually follow God’s covenant and decrees and kept the promise in spite of us.

Of course this confused a lot of the people at the time, and probably disappointed them when Jesus didn’t overthrow Rome but instead was executed like a common criminal—like so many so-called messiahs before him. And we, too, are sometimes frustrated and confused when we see so much injustice and pain in the world and wonder where God is. But we can be confident that Jesus is here, now, working in and through us and the world, and stirring up in us the passion for justice he himself exhibited. As children of God—in King David’s line through holy adoption—we are called into Jesus’ work today and always.

What does a “King of Peace” look like to me? How does Jesus reign in the here and now?

*01-04*

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

— Isaiah 11:1-2

A step back, today, to David’s father, Jesse. Isaiah, as in yesterday’s psalm, is referring to the promise that God’s people would be restored under a just and mighty king who is/was a direct descendant of King David.

I wonder about Isaiah’s purpose in stepping back a generation. Jesse was no great king—just a man living in Bethlehem tending his lands and his flocks of sheep like so many others. He had several other sons, all of whom the prophet Samuel passed over in favor of David, the youngest, being anointed king. He probably had daughters, too, who remain unknown but who would have rounded out one big happy family. It is from the stump of Jesse that a new branch will grow and become God’s promised messiah.

It's a nice contrast to all the patriarchal and military “king” language that surrounds the messiah. It speaks of more humble origins, of warmth and family, of hard work in the fields and flocks, of essential humanness. This is the Jesus I know and understand—not the descendant of a mighty (and deeply, deeply flawed king), but of a farmer who was probably completely shocked when his youngest son was anointed king. It speaks to me of stables and carpentry, of the everyday and mundane life Jesus would have lived until he began his ministry—God fully embodied in human flesh, a baby, child, adolescent, and then a man. I imagine the same surprise in those around him that Jesse experienced when Jesus began to teach and heal and gather an enormous following of people who knew him to be the fulfillment of God’s promise.

It helps me to hear God’s call in my own boring, run-of-the-mill life—I can be the embodiment of God’s love in lots of ways, no matter how humble or insignificant.

How can I show God’s love in big and little ways?

*01-05*

“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

— Ruth 4:13, 17b

Ruth is one of three women mentioned in Jesus’ genealogy in Matthew. What is significant about her is that she was not a Jew by birth (nor was Rahab, who is also included). Again, we are reminded that God regularly extends God’s welcome and love to people outside the imagined inner circle of God’s people. David, Israel’s most beloved king, had a great-grandmother who was an immigrant from a foreign nation. What does that make him, 1/8 Moabite? That’s not insignificant.

I’ve seen a few videos—over-dramatized to be sure, but still kinda fun—in which people who have participated in genetic genealogy testing find huge surprises in their heritage. People who believed they were 100% Norwegian discovering they are 75% Swedish (the horror!). I wonder what would have happened if these tests had been around in Nazi Germany—how many Nazis would have found they had Jewish blood? The point is that the myth of eugenics and being “pure” in any way has been thoroughly debunked a thousand times over and we are called, rather than to try to find out what distinguishes us from others, to notice all the ways we are interrelated—one people.

Jesus was a mutt just like the rest of us, and it’s beautiful.

Do I try to separate myself from others in order to feel superior?

*01-06*

“The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.”

— Genesis 21:1-2

Let’s not forget Sarah. Or all the other women in Jesus’ line who are brushed aside or not even mentioned in the Bible. Jews traced their genealogy to Abraham through the patriarchal line, and it’s unfortunate, because it only tells half the story. And, yes, I get the practical reality of trying to recount every line in every direction back to its source is crazy-making (though thousands of people engage in just that hobby today). But imagine just how much richer our picture of Biblical folks would be if we focused more on the women.

It says that Abraham named their son Isaac, but it was Sarah who had laughed when the messengers said she would have a baby. Isaac means “laughter.” I have to believe that it was she who chose the name, even though custom required the father to officially bestow it. Remember, too, how Leah bore so many sons to Jacob (Israel) and their names reflected her experience, not his, which implies she chose those names. And isn’t that story rich? (Or maybe I’m just remembering a wonderful musical performance I did about Rachel and Leah…)

Anyway, when we think about Jesus during this Christmas season, we would do well to remember all the amazing and wonderful (and largely unnamed) women who played a role in making him who he was—and is—for all of us.

Who chose my name? Does it have any significance?

*01-07*

“When the time of her delivery came, there were twins in her womb. While she was in labor, one put out a hand; and the midwife took and bound on his hand a crimson thread, saying, ‘This one came out first.’ But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, ‘What a breach you have made for yourself!’ Therefore he was named Perez.”

— Genesis 38:27-29

Tamar was brilliant. When Judah (one of Jacob’s sons) violated his promise to let her marry his son, she tricked him into getting her pregnant in order to guarantee her own future. Perez—a direct descendant of King David and Jesus—was technically born out of wedlock by a woman who pretended to be a prostitute to entrap a disingenuous man. And she gets namechecked in Matthew’s genealogy, a testament to her importance.

What does this tell us? I don’t know about you, but I am deeply impressed by someone who in her societal oppression (as a woman) used what power she had (her sex) to subvert the status quo (the patriarchy) and elevate herself at least to a place where her future survival was guaranteed. Jesus would have been well aware of her place in his ancestry, and maybe that’s part of why he was so eager to reach out to women and invite them into his inner circle. Bound as his humanness was to the societal norms of his day, he still found ample opportunities to cross boundaries and elevate women. The gospels don’t do a very good job focusing on this, as Jesus’ women followers seldom featured in stories other than his crucifixion and resurrection, but non-canon gospels of the era are clear that women like Mary Magdalene had a significant leadership role. And we do hear in great detail from the gospel of John about the Samaritan woman at the well who became an apostle in a vital way.

I like to think that when Jesus bucked the norms of his time to welcome women into his inner circle he always had Tamar top of mind, and pushed to make it so that women didn’t have to resort to what she did in order to live full lives.

Are there any women in your family history who really stand out? Who and why?

*01-08*

“In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

— Matthew 3:1

Main Idea: We cannot rest on our laurels. There is work to do.

Prophets were not uncommon at the time of Jesus. John was special. His words cut deep, and his actions saved many. He became so popular with the crowds, the Pharisees and Sadducees went out to see what he was about.

John was wary of them immediately. He knew that the religious leaders of the day were more interested in their reputations and maintaining their status than they were of real change. He knew they would claim their inheritance of God’s kingdom based on their birthright as children of Abraham.

John wasn’t having it. It would no longer work to rest on their laurels. John demanded action. Change. Repentance. John also knew someone was coming after him who would take his words to a whole new level. That someone would require more than just repentance. He would turn the whole world on its head.

John didn’t have to wait long. When Jesus came for baptism, he knew this was the one he’d waited for. Though he resisted at first, John did baptize Jesus, and the heavens opened to him. The time for action had come. Things would never be the same.

It can be tempting to rest on our laurels. We often spend so much time putting in the work so we can coast on what we’ve already accomplished. But God’s work is never done. We can never say we’ve done enough. Turning toward God takes work every day. But we don’t do the work alone. Jesus stands with us, shoulder to shoulder, giving us strength, wisdom, perseverance, and whatever we need so that we can do what God has called each of us to do.

*01-09*

“I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’”

— Psalm 2:7

You are God’s beloved child. Today God has begotten you. The psalmist most likely was referring to David. The words also evoke the baptism of Jesus, David’s descendant. But just for a moment, recognize that these words are spoken to you.

God created us in God’s image from the stuff of earth and the Holy Spirit breathed life into us. Whether or not we are “officially” baptized into any given church, God claims us through water and the Spirit, adopting us as children of God—no longer just creations out of earth, but new creations with full membership as siblings of Jesus.

You are a beloved child of God, today and always.

How does knowing that I am beloved by God inform my way of being in the world?

*01-10*

“And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, ‘Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.’”

— Judges 13:3, 5b

Another miraculous birth. The Bible is full of them—so many barren women, some named, some unnamed as Samson’s mother, who are vindicated by divine intervention and finally conceive. In all these stories, or at least the ones that are top of mind, the child of the miracle is to be no ordinary child, but a powerful sign of God’s presence in the world. God shows up in power to open barren wombs as a proclamation of this presence. Sarah birthed Isaac. Rachel birthed Joseph. Hannah birthed Samuel. Elizabeth birthed John the Baptist. And “the woman” birthed Samson, who would be dedicated to God’s service for his whole life, set aside in a special way, as a nazirite.

Today I connect with this concept in a different way. I think of all the ways that my life can seem barren, opportunities that just don’t present themselves, life-giving projects that I just can’t seem to find the time or motivation to bring to fruition, struggles in my personal life that linger stubbornly despite all my best efforts. This simple passage is a reminder that God’s unfathomable love can open us to new ways of being in the world. God has shown up in the midst of my frustrations in the past and transformed situations, bringing life out of what seemed a parched and lifeless desert.

If God has done this before—for me and for countless others—God can and will do it again. God shows up in love for the barren and creates for them a life of promise. May we live in that hope throughout all our difficulties.

Where do I feel most blocked in my life? How can God bring meaning and purpose in the midst of my struggle?

*01-11*

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

— Isaiah 11:6

This is such an evocative image for me. I can absolutely see it as clear as day. The child has a flute and leads the animals around like the pied piper. The leopard and the lion roll and play like kittens, the baby goat leaping about with the lamb, the baby cow bobbing its head in time to the music. They frolic together in a lush meadow on a sunny day, as a light breeze tosses the tops of the grasses. All is joy and contentment and love. This is what God promises us through Isaiah, and ultimately through Jesus.

What does that mean for us today? Ponder this little re-write, if you will.

The wealthy, who have gained all they have through injustice and oppression, will change their ways entirely so that they will live in equity and love with those upon whose poverty they had formerly profited. The powerful who have visited generational trauma on those from whom their power was taken will give up their predatory ways and share all their power with those they once victimized. Those who have lived their lives nursing their own superiority by indulging in hateful narratives against all who differ from them will open their hearts to all people and live together in mutual support and respect. And God, in Christ Jesus, will raise up leaders whose relentless love for all they lead will cause them to work tirelessly that this new way should persist to the end of time.

Where do I find myself in this re-imagining of the text? How am I called to play a role in moving toward this promised future?

*01-12*

“For on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day.”

— Zechariah 3:9

This vision of Zechariah concerns the elevation of Joshua as the high priest of the new temple being built in Jerusalem. It’s filled with symbolism of course. We initially find Joshua in filthy clothes, which represent his time in exile, and these are piece by piece replaced with the pure vestments of the high priest, including this seven-faceted stone, which was part of the priest’s headpiece. All of this symbolism is for the Jews returning from exile, but we can glean for ourselves the ways these images also speak to us today as words of hope.

God will remove the guilt of God’s people in a single day. In other words, generations of sinfulness and warfare, greed and failure to care for the widow and the orphan, centuries of corruption and subsequent punishment—none of this history prevents complete forgiveness on the part of God. There is nothing—not one thing!—we can do that will separate us from God’s all-embracing love and grace.

What a word of hope for our society in this day and age. What a word of hope for us as individuals who have both caused and experienced so much pain. Know today that God can and will remove the guilt of all humanity in a single day.

What harms have I caused that I need to be forgiven for?

*01-13*

“This is the statute of the law that the Lord has commanded Moses: gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, and lead— everything that can withstand fire, shall be passed through fire, and it shall be clean.”

— Numbers 31:21b-23a

I know I’m supposed to riff on the symbolism of purification by fire, but I just can’t. I read the previous portion of the chapter and came to find out that this gold, silver, bronze, iron, tin, and lead were the spoils of a war with Midian in which, at God’s command, all the men of Midian were killed, and when the women and children were taken as spoil, it was further commanded that only the virgin women and girls should be spared, so the other women and the male children were all murdered.

It takes my breath away, the causal language in which these terrible war crimes—commanded by God!—are written. I can’t read this next passage about how to make all the precious metals stolen from Midian needed to be purified, since they came from an impure—non-Jewish—people. Nothing, and I mean nothing, can make those precious metals “clean” in my book.

Where are we to find gospel in this account of atrocity? I think of all the war crimes that have been and are being committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine and how there is a narrative of moral superiority from Russia that makes the rest of the world scoff, but perhaps helps justify to the Russian soldiers their horrific actions. Then there is the fact that all war is itself a crime in my book. Yes, the Midianites attacked the Israelites first, but the idea that God would then direct Moses to take revenge on the Midianites seems preposterous to me.

So where are we left with this today? I take some comfort in the fact that this portion of scripture is ahistorical, not that such wars didn’t take place, but I don’t believe God commanded them. I come back to yesterday’s daily devotion text that promises God will remove our guilt in a single day. God’s promises are sure. We are all guilty of something, and some of us are guilty of great atrocities at least in our minds and hearts. We are human, after all. Yet we are God’s humans. And God’s love purifies and redeems more thoroughly than any fire.

Where do I find God’s gospel of peace and love in the midst of challenging texts like this one?

*01-14*

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”

— Isaiah 40:3-5

This text is revisited in the gospels as a prophecy fulfilled in John the Baptist. John did, indeed, cry out in the wilderness “Prepare the way of God’s promised Messiah.” His preparation was less about landscaping the earth and more about landscaping the heart. He called out to the people then and to us now to remove any obstacles we have put in the way of our full communion with God in Christ Jesus.

My heart can be quite the rugged and impassable wilderness sometimes. Self-will, self-righteousness, judgment, perfectionism—these are the primary stumbling blocks I put in the way of a right relationship with God on the daily. Of course they’re not obstacles for God—God can easily pass over, around, and through them (and frequently does) in order to shower me with grace and hope. But I absolutely cannot get around them myself. I know I don’t need to earn God’s love, but I do have a part to play in what is a two-way relationship. It’s on me to heed the voice crying in the wilderness and take whatever action I can to alter the landscape of my heart. For me that looks like intensive recovery work, active participation in a faith community, prayer and meditation (to the best of my ability), and acts of selflessness. Again, none of these earn me God’s favor. They help me move closer to who and what God might have me be in the world, and open me to receive God’s transforming love rather then turning it away.

I do none of this perfectly. Those obstacles still remain. But now and then I may find a more gentle path that leads me into quiet rest in the Holy Spirit.

What obstacles do I place between myself and God?

*01-15*

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”

— Matthew 4:1

Main Idea: Jesus faced temptations that would make his work easier and less painful. But Jesus chose the harder path.

This story of Jesus’ temptation is one of the few that really shows how challenging it was for Jesus to be human. It can be tempting to think Jesus wasn’t really tempted—he was God, after all. But the fact that Jesus really did struggle with these temptations is part of what makes Jesus’ incarnation accessible. To be human is to know temptation.

Let’s take a step back from the supernatural aspect of this story (the devil doesn’t usually show up in horns and a pitchfork to tempt us). Temptation doesn’t always come at us from outside ourselves. Often, the temptation is a struggle we have within ourselves, and the voice of “the devil” is a battle between what the mind wants and what the body wants.

Jesus had fasted for forty days. Of course, he would be famished! He also knew he had the means (supernatural or otherwise) to eat at any time. But the fast was a spiritual practice he had committed to in preparation of his years of ministry. To finish his spiritual journey meant he could handle whatever God and people would throw his way. To eat meant he might not be ready to answer God’s call. By refusing to eat, he overcame temptation and prepared himself for the difficult work ahead.

Next, Jesus was tempted to test God. It would be natural to want to know that God has your back if you’re going headfirst into such a challenging mission. But God doesn’t work like that. You don’t make God prove that God’s got your back. The test of faith is moving forward, even when you can’t prove God’s got you.

Finally, after conquering his physical hunger and accepting his faith, Jesus was ready to handle whatever came his way. He was so ready in fact, he knew that his wisdom, strength, and conviction could take him far. It could probably even take him to the top of the political realm. In fact, he could probably become king and avoid all the suffering that would likely come with the kind of work God had laid out for him. But that was a temptation too far. Jesus knew the work God had for him, and he knew it would be difficult, painful, and thankless. Ultimately, Jesus would resist that final temptation. He would do the harder thing.

*01-16*

“Because you have made the Lord your refuge, the Most High your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent.

For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.”

— Psalms 91:9-12

Crafty of the tempter to use God’s words against God. He knew Jesus was well aware of the scriptures and would have known this Psalm. He knew Jesus was no ordinary man and surely God would not let him swan dive off the temple pinnacle to his death. Its far more sinister and insidious to use what seems like truth to try to control others than to outright lie to them. Throughout the history of Christianity countless people have tried to do just that, right up until today when they remove context in order to convince people that God hates anyone other than cisgendered straight white wealthy men and those women subservient to them. Or that God approves violence in God’s name. Or that everyone who doesn’t agree with them is destined to burn in hell for all eternity. “Come on,” the tempter cajoles, “it says right here in scripture that [fill in the hateful rhetoric of your choice.]”

Jesus was smarter than that. He knew that the perversion of scripture in the service of evil was just that—evil. He calls us to the same discernment that allowed him to resist all the temptations in the wilderness, as we navigate the often harsh wilderness of our own lives. God is love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, radical welcome, justice for those who are poor and oppressed. Any attempt to use God’s words to justify something other than these deserves our deepest scrutiny.

Have I ever had scripture directed at me in a way that was not loving?

*01-17*

“Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

— Genesis 1:26-27

Dominion means ownership and authority. Right out of the gate that’s problematic, of course, if one holds that all of creation belongs to God and that we are to be loving and careful stewards of what does not belong to us. I can’t deny the definition of the word. But I can argue that dominion—ownership, authority, rulership—does not have to play out in the way that it always has.

Human beings from their earliest societies have been obsessed with gaining power simply as a survival instinct. With a fear of death and a mindset of scarcity, they have set out to exploit everything they touch in the service of extending their lives. Rather than recognize God’s gift of dominion as a charge to keep all that we “own” in pristine condition for the good of ourselves and others, we have instead destroyed it with shortsighted, selfish thinking. I mean, who among us, if given a highly valuable gift, will willfully smash it to pieces, removing its value permanently? So this idea of dominion, if we must accept it, at least challenges us to preserve the value of the gift we’ve been given.

Another thought is that God gave dominion to all of humankind—not just to a particular sub-set of them. So for oil companies, for example, to knowingly profit from the inevitability of climate change, which they falsely denied existed and later have downplayed, is a direct slap in the face to the collective ownership of all creation by all God’s beloved human beings.

So, whatever you personally feel about the term “dominion” in this passage, even if we take it at face value, any and all attempts by a particular group of people to profit from creation’s destruction is a violation of what God actually called us to when we were created. Nuff said.

What do I believe is the proper role of human beings in creation?

*01-18*

“But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’”

— Genesis 3:4-5

This is the moment humanity realized its own mortality. Opening their eyes to good and evil, as I see it, is really about people moving from the instinctive, animal-like innocence they had into the full self-awareness that distinguishes humans from other animals. I think it comes down to the understanding that we will die and all the fear of the unknown that kicks up for us.

From that fear of mortality comes all evil. In one of my seminary classes, a beloved professor talked about how slavery came into being as a buffer between the hard, early-mortality life of hard labor (especially farming) and those who owned the land/resources. Fear of mortality underlies the hoarding of wealth and resources, war, genocide, imperialism, you-name-it.

The serpent was hardly an ordinary animal here—as I understand it, snakes aren’t aware of good an evil or their own mortality. Instead, the serpent was whatever jump in human evolution took us to the place where good and evil became a choice, and evil won out again and again in the service of our fear.

Of course, this text is ahistorical—a sort of folk tale like Pandora’s box to explain the entry of evil onto the scene. But at the same time, it is a perfect allegory for what actually transpired in the development of humanity. To this day, that moment or choice or evolutionary jump is at the root of our propensity for self-preservation by any means. It is also the moment at which we realized that rather than taking God for granted or even being unaware of God, we absolutely need God in our lives to help us navigate a challenging world, trusting that God will provide for us so that we do not need to resort to evil in order to feel some kind of control over the uncontrollable.

How do I interpret this scene when I read it? Who is the serpent? What is the fruit?

*01-19*

“Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments.”

— Deuteronomy 8:2

Humility: The acceptance of the fact that I am not God. In yesterday’s text we explored the origin of evil—the knowledge of our own mortality and the reprehensible things we do in order to try to prevent it (impossible) or at least put it off as long as we can. This is all an attempt to be our own god—to rely on ourselves because we no longer trust God to take care of us.

While I don’t believe God deliberately tests people, I do believe that life’s challenges can lead/push us to a place where we have no choice but to rely on God because we simply cannot succeed at being gods in our own lives.

The story of the exodus of God’s people from Egypt and into the wilderness for 40 years is all about reliance on God. It was God who called and equipped Moses, God who demonstrated the necessary power for the pharaoh to let the Hebrews go, God who opened the sea for the people to pass to safety, God who provided water and food in the desert. By the time they were ready to move to the next phase of their lives in the promised land, they had been fully relying on God for so long that they had the humility to recognize they weren’t calling the shots. (Of course it didn’t last, but those are stories for another time.)

Everyone has challenges in their lives, big and small. Every challenge we face is an opportunity for us to step back and ask God to guide and care for us. Rather than throw all of our willpower at a problem, trying to be our own god and force solutions in our favor, we can have the humility to recognize that we need help and then ask for it, trusting that God is present with us in all things and will lead us through whatever wilderness surrounds us.

Where do I have an opportunity to develop humility and rely on God today?

*01-20*

“Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

— Matthew 4:20

I don’t know that I could drop everything and just follow Jesus. I could claim that my life is way more complicated than that of those first disciples, and maybe it’s true. But Peter was married—the gospels mention his mother-in-law. He might have been widowed though we don’t know as his wife is never once mentioned. So at the very least he walked away from his means of financial support and his entire family except his brother, who followed Jesus with him. James and John left their father with the whole fishing operation and one wonders if that left Zebedee in a lurch. There are likely a whole host of factors that played in to the decisions of these men to “immediately” follow Jesus.

The one factor in common was, of course, Jesus. Clearly the man had something going for him if he could simply walk by and say “follow me” and people would. What I’m left wondering is not why these men left everything on the spot to follow Jesus, but what Jesus chose these particular men in the first place. Did Jesus know they were available in some way? Did he see in them some potential that was being wasted in a life of fishing? So many stories in the gospels show that these people were pretty obtuse, yet other demonstrate incredible faith, insight, and wonder.

I think Jesus chose them for the same reason he chooses us. They were beloved children of God and they were willing to follow. We are no different than Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We’re all imperfect yet complex, capable of being completely obtuse one minute and profoundly insightful the next. And while I don’t think Jesus expects us to drop everything and go into a monastic community (which honestly sounds tempting to me sometimes) he does give us opportunity after opportunity to put following him first on our agenda. And when we do that, we receive far more than we invest.

Have I ever thought about why Jesus chose the followers he did?

*01-21*

“So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them.”

— Matthew 4:24

My daughter recently made me watch Jesus Christ Superstar. I had never seen it. Truthfully, I didn’t love it, though there were some aspects of it I found compelling. For me, the most heart-rending and powerful scene was one in which Jesus wanders off on his own and is confronted by crowds of the sick, outcast, and downtrodden. They all reach for him, grab at him, beg him for help and he is completely overwhelmed and unable to do anything. He is crushed under the sheer weight of need in his world, and paralyzed by the knowledge that there is no one other than he who can or will help them.

You could pooh-pooh the whole scene and point to the gospel texts where Jesus is able to heal everyone, even those who simply touch him. But I found that it made Jesus so relatable, so human, which he was. Unlike Jesus I am not both fully human and fully God, so I literally do not have the power to heal with a touch. Also unlike Jesus, I live in a time where global media shows me not just the people in my immediate vicinity who are in need, but the absolutely overwhelming need throughout the world. And while I don’t feel like all that need to grabbing at me, begging me for help, I do feel responsibility to do what I can, and yet it never feels like enough. The underlying forces that create such levels of catastrophic need are so powerful, so vast, it feels impossible to make any difference whatsoever.

Yet outside of this short paragraph and others that speak of crowds following Jesus to be healed, there are also many stories of Jesus healing just one person or a handful of them—encounters full of compassion, love, and power. These are the stories that inspire me to act. There are plenty of organizations leading movements to change or overturn those vast forces that victimize so many. I can have the humility to know that I am not God and lend my voice as one among many to the efforts already underway to bring healing and wholeness to all of creation. When I feel like that scene in Jesus Christ Superstar, I can step back and remember those single, intimate encounters with Jesus—maybe just drops in the bucket—that demonstrated the reign of God in the here and now.

How do I handle feelings of overwhelm at all the pain and suffering in the world?

*01-22*

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

— Matthew 5:12

Main Idea: Jesus offers words of comfort to people whose situations were unlikely to change much.

If you are reading this, you are likely living in a capitalist society. The driving force behind capitalism is that private owners can produce, sell, and make a profit off products freely available to a free market. The more businesses sell, the more money they make. To sell more, businesses must create a need for their product. They create the need by advertising how good life would be with the product, and how awful life will be without it. Capitalism, then, does better when people do worse. Our entire economy thrives on people’s suffering.

One of the downfalls of this system is that it preys upon the poor. The entire system is designed to make the rich richer and keep the poor in poverty. In a sense, our culture values the status quo of wealth and poverty, of thriving and suffering. To bring people out of poverty, silence, meekness, and suffering would mean the toppling of the capitalist system, and that’s a tall order. Systems don’t easily change.

Jesus saw a similar systemic imbalance in his world. There was a deep divide between the wealthy and the poor, those with a voice and those without. Jesus’ words were strength and comfort to people with little chance of escaping their social status. True, Jesus came to turn the world’s social structure on its head. Also true, it was a goal that will likely never be fully realized.

Jesus’ words assured people: your suffering doesn’t go unnoticed. It isn’t irrelevant. It won’t last forever. God knows and remembers those mourning, suffering, silenced, sick, and poor. God blesses those who cannot find blessings for themselves. And Jesus promised the upheaval of the world—because you have been treated as the least on earth, you will be greatest in heaven.

*01-23*

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.”

— Psalm 1:1-2

I struggle with meditation. It’s a practice I have tried to develop on and off since I have been in the recovery community. In eighteen years I have yet to succeed in being consistent. I have what a friend of mine says is called “restless mind”—one of the greatest stumbling blocks to meditation. As soon as I start trying to quiet my mind, it goes off on wild tangents and I have to bring it back to my breath over and over and over again until I finally say, “Phooey. This isn’t doing me any good.” And when that happens over and over, I get to the point where even the thought of sitting and meditating spikes my anxiety, so I’m starting off on the wrong foot.

I’m in the process of trying yet again to establish this regular practice. I am told it is so fruitful in so many ways, and I believe it to be true. The practice is ancient and exists across countless cultures and faith traditions. Here, the psalmist speaks of meditating on God’s law day and night, and how that brings happiness—delight, even. (Day and night? I’m lucky to get 5 minutes some days!)

Of course it’s not the meditation itself that brings happiness according to the psalmist, but specifically the content of the meditation—God’s law. Deeply contemplating the nature and content of what it is that God wants for us and from us gives us the presence of mind to resist “the advice of the wicked”, to choose a different path than the one that “sinners tread”, to accept God’s direction and love without being a “scoffer”.

In that case, I suppose that even the practice of writing these daily devotions is a kind of meditation on God’s Word, and I do find it fruitful (and I hope you do, too.) I’ll still keep trying to build up a regular practice of quieting my mind and being fully present in the moment, focusing on my breathing, and inviting God to be fully present with me. But in the mean time, I am grateful for these moments of deep contemplation of scripture.

What does meditation mean to me?

*01-24*

“So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

— Matthew 5:23-24

This is where the practice of the “greeting of peace” originates. It comes right before the gathering of the offering in most worship services, because it’s supposed to be that moment of being reconciled to one another. I don’t know if many people are really aware of that. I just can’t see people who are involved in some church-politics infighting walking up to each other during this part of worship and actually reconciling. Is it meant to be symbolic? Or was there a time when this practice was taken as just that kind of opportunity to truly get right with others?

I suppose the bottom line is that if we are engaging in resentment and bad behavior toward our fellow human beings, it’s hardly appropriate to offer a gift to God as if somehow that will make up for it. We can’t buy forgiveness or right relationships. Forgiveness is freely given by God in spite of us. Right relationships take work and that work begins with humility. It’s not something that can be accomplished with a simple handshake in the middle of a worship service. But maybe next time you participate in the greeting of peace you might bring your awareness to anyone you might be harboring a resentment against, and ask God to help you take steps to resolve it.

How does holding onto resentment towards other diminish my relationship with God?

*01-25*

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

— Matthew 5:27-28

Sometimes Jesus was truly forward-thinking when it came to women. Other times, like this, he was completely bound by the cultural thinking of his particular context. I mean, isn’t it adultery to look at a man lustfully? It’s not like women don’t do this. Why is marrying a divorced woman (v. 32) committing adultery but not marrying a divorced man? It calls out women as objects of sexualization without agency and I have such a hard time moving past my modern lens to glean whatever gospel is to be found here.

In Matthew 19, Jesus’ teaching on divorce is slightly different. He lays the responsibility at the feet of the men—if you divorce your wife and marry someone else, you commit adultery, not the divorced wife. Here he is looking out for the oppressed community of women whose security is wholly dependent on being married or having sons to support her. It’s a far cry from equality for women, but it’s something.

What’s most challenging for me when I read passages like this is the recognition that these Judeo-Christian attitudes about women and sexuality persist to this day. It is not just the fully human Jesus who was bound by the cultural thinking of his context. Two thousand years later women and girls are still overly sexualized (especially BIPOC women) and given less agency than men. Maybe this was Jesus’ attempt to reign in the male fixation on sex and move them toward a more egalitarian ideal. I don’t know. Because we’re still nowhere near there.

How do my religious beliefs inform my attitudes about sexuality and marriage?

*01-26*

“Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

— Matthew 5:39-41

I’ve heard it preached that turning the other cheek is an act of defiance. A refusal to be intimidated. I definitely prefer that interpretation to one that requires followers of Jesus to accept abuse and oppression. Instead it’s the essence of active nonviolence. If someone sues you for your coat and you pre-emptively give them your coat and your cloak, you effectively take away the power of their attempt to subdue you. If someone forces you to walk a mile and you willingly continue on for a second mile, you take back your agency. If you fight back when you are clearly not in a position of power, you simply justify your enemy’s continued assault. But if you strategically practice active nonviolence, you expose your enemy’s unsupportable violence.

It doesn’t mean you do nothing. Quite the contrary. It is active nonviolence after all. But it does mean you don’t engage in pointless one-upmanship and revolving revenge.

When have I had the opportunity to stop an unhealthy cycle in my life by ‘turning the other cheek’?

*01-27*

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

— Matthew 5:43-44

There’s a wonderful nugget of wisdom that comes out of 12-Step recovery literature. If you want to be rid of resentment toward another person, you pray every day for two weeks that God would give them everything you would want for yourself, even if you don’t want to or don’t believe the words you’re praying. Just do it, and the resentment will be lifted. In my own experience, sometimes this takes more than two weeks. And there are some resentments that stubbornly persist in spite of all effort to be rid of them. But there are really only one or two of those. For the most part, this absolutely works. Praying for my “enemies”—a strong word, which I would replace with “those whose actions and inactions have caused me genuine or perceived harm”—really does move me to a place of forgiveness. I begin to recognize their humanity, which is as imperfect as mine. I might even develop compassion for whatever it is in their lives that has led them to act in the way they do. Mind you, this doesn’t condone their actions or absolve them from responsibility, nor open me up for abuse. That’s between them and God. But I definitely benefit from the freedom that forgiveness of others gives to me.

How do I practice love for my enemies?

*01-28*

“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others.”

— Matthew 6:2

I’ve been reading a lot lately about the myth of the billionaire philanthropist. The whole concept that wealth is acceptable because it allows those who have it to do large, sweeping amounts of good for the world is utter nonsense. The truth is that wealth in any form owes its existence to the very actions that have created the problems rich people now deign to try to address with said wealth. It’s ridiculous. Moreover, that concentrated wealth means that the philanthropist (almost always white and male) makes decisions about what will solve the problems (that his wealth created) without giving any agency to the affected populations. Put another way, Person gets rich by making others poor. Rich person donates a slim portion of said riches to organizations (run primarily by white do-gooders) that do not center the communities they supposedly serve. Put still another way, just because Jeff Bezos donated $100 million to Dolly Parton doesn’t make him a good guy. At the time of the gift he was planning to lay off around 10,000 Amazon workers, not to mention Amazon’s pathological refusal to allow workers to unionize, and a whole laundry list of business practices that create more wealth for him while causing financial hardship for his company’s employees. No amount of news coverage—sounding the trumpets before them so they will be praised by others—alters the fact that this wealth was ill-gotten.

That being said, it’s not a bad thing to donate money to charitable causes. There are amazing organizations out there doing incredible work that is fully reliant on donations. Jesus encourages us to give, but humbly, even secretly. And in this day and age, I would add mindfully.

How well do I understand the work of organizations I donate to?

*01-29*

“Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

— Matthew 6:8b

Main Idea: Prayer levels the playing field. We all have direct access to God, whether we store treasures or have none to store.

People have it all wrong. We store up treasures that other people think we ought to have. We hoard possessions we think will make us happy. Our values are completely misaligned.

These are hard words to hear. Everyone wants to believe they are an exception to the selfish, that they are more selfless than is reality. We give to the church. We live in humble houses. We drive modest cars. We eat healthy food.

You hear it, don’t you? We have enough money to give some away. We own or rent four walls, a roof, and likely all the luxuries and amenities that come with living in the developed world. We have cars (or bikes or access to public transportation). We don’t have to travel farther than the grocery store for every kind of food we can imagine. We are the hypocrites that “heap up empty phrases” and “disfigure [our] faces so as to show others” how much we suffer. (Money’s tight this month because I had to pay my cell phone and cable bills.)

But none of that diminishes the gift God has given us, which cannot be bought or owned—access to God. Most of us can’t call the White House to chat with the president at will. Most of us can’t stop by the clubhouse to hang out with our favorite athlete. I barely have access to those who own the businesses I frequent regularly. But we all have access to the one who created and redeemed us. We have a direct line to God. As do the people who do not have the treasures that we do. Prayer levels the playing field. It humbles us all, and it uplifts us all.

*01-30*

“Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.”

— Psalm 20:7

This is another take on the “treasure in heaven” text from yesterday. I kind of chuckle when I read it because I imagine fancy cars in place of horses and chariots. Every time I pass a Corvette or Porsche or similar car I say, “How’s that midlife crisis going?” (Because yes, I’m kind of judgmental and snarky sometimes…) Honestly I have no idea what makes a person buy that kind of car—just because I never would doesn’t mean they shouldn’t. But they do just scream “Look at me! Look how cool I am!”

It wasn’t just Jesus telling us what really matters when it comes to possessions. The psalmist wrote these words hundreds of years before Jesus, after all. There is something at the core of our faith tradition that recognizes our weakness for conspicuous consumption and seeks to return our hearts to what truly matters, that greatest of all commandments, to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. And maybe it’s possible to drive an Audi R8 ($160K-$222K) and still take pride only in our love for God. Maybe.

What is my most prized possession? Do I take more pride in it than in my faith?

*01-31*

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”

— Matthew 6:24

Seldom is Jesus so direct. He answers questions with other questions. He speaks in parables and allegories. Even his own disciples don’t understand him half the time. But this time there’s no spinning it, no getting around it, no avoiding it. You cannot serve God and wealth. Period.

Well, someone might say, what exactly does it mean to serve wealth? I mean, doesn’t wealth serve you? Doesn’t it allow you to better serve God? Yeah…no. In order to acquire and maintain wealth—and I’m talking riches, not the funds necessary to cover basic needs and a life of meaning and flourishing—you have to put it first, above all other interests. You have to make decisions which, if you were putting God first, you could not in good conscience make. You have to find ways to justify those decisions. You have to deliberately close yourself off to any thought or outside influence that suggests the way you acquire money might be morally questionable. This is the work of serving wealth.

Serving God requires trust. Trust that there is enough. That you are enough. That your needs can and will be met and you can have a full and joyful life without wealth. Serving God means seeing your neighbors as beloved children of God just as you are, and living in a way that allows them to also have enough. Serving God means sacrificing what you think you need out of love for others, and then coming to find that what you get in return is far more than what you were afraid to lose. Serving God is a daily practice, and it happens on every level of our lives. To be certain, it is not an easy practice. We must, in the immortal words of Yoda, “unlearn what we have learned” from the money-and-appearance-obsessed societies in which many of us were raised. Luckily, we don’t do it alone. God meets us more than halfway, supporting and encouraging us, reminding us just how much we are loved, and how valuable we are to God.

Do I serve God above anything else? What does that look like in my life?