**Daily Devotions**

**June 2023**

*06-01*

“Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”

— Romans 15:7

The way Christ welcomes us is radical welcome. No exceptions. No criteria. No hoops to jump through. He crossed I don’t know how many boundaries in his short ministry—more, I’m certain, than made it into the gospels. For Jesus, any and all social boundaries were arbitrary and oppressive, and therefore not the will of God.

Try as we might, we are bound by our own understanding of what is socially acceptable, “normal”, comfortable for us. So often without realizing it we are putting up these boundaries between ourselves and Others. It takes intention, effort, to even recognize the boundaries, much less begin to dismantle them. But this is our call. To reach out to every single human being in unconditional love. To see each and every person as a child of God—in fact to see God in them.

Again, this does not come naturally for most of us. And when we fail, God still loves us. But God continues to call us to do and be better, so that all of God’s children can experience love, and so that we as a people can move toward justice and equity for all.

When was the last time I practiced radical welcome?

*06-02*

“But as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand.’”

— Romans 15:21

There is freedom in this statement. Freedom from the age-old Christian urgency that has pushed so many modern Christians to this idea that their whole role in life is to make sure others are “saved” by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal lord and savior. Paul’s quote makes that central focus obsolete. The way I see it is that it’s up to God whether and how people understand God and have a relationship with God. My role as a Christian is to live in the Way of Jesus to the best of my ability. That means my focus is on doing justice for all people regardless of what they believe. It means I am called to reach across boundaries and extend radical welcome to every single human being, loving them exactly as and where they are, and working to facilitate the inbreaking of the reign of God on a day to day basis. And, of course, when I live out my faith in this way and I am not shy about proclaiming that it is my faith that calls me to this way, it is an opportunity for those who have not heard or have not believed to see the way God is present and active in the world. And maybe, just maybe, they will “see” and “understand.” But that’s not up to me.

How do I understand my role as a Christian in this world?

*06-03*

“So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.”

— Romans 15:28-29

I wonder what would’ve happened if Paul had had access to the internet. I don’t necessarily think it would’ve been a good thing, per se. But I raise the question simply to highlight the frankly astonishing things Paul accomplished in a time when he had to walk hundreds of miles to plant churches and could communicate with them only through letters carried by friends who walked hundreds of miles to deliver and interpret them. A quick internet search just now told me that Paul traveled a total of more than 10,000 miles—on foot—throughout his journeys. At my pathetic rate of walking maybe an average of 2 miles a day, that would take me almost 14 years. Keep in mind that between all that walking, the guy spent a fair amount of time building up new churches and/or sitting in prison.

So I guess I’m just wondering to myself: how far would I go/have I gone to live out my faith? Literally or metaphorically speaking. There’s simply no way I could measure up to Paul, of course. But I can point to the distances I’ve traveled to learn more, to teach kids, direct plays, lead Vacation Bible School programs, write devotions, publish church resources… Actually I just surprised myself making that list. I’m doing more than I think I am. Of course, it’s a lot easier for me. I have a car. And the internet.

Where and how do I journey to live out my faith?

*06-04*

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

— Isaiah 6:8

Main Idea: God promises to hold us close in times of suffering, sharing with us a uniquely redeeming, refining and ever-present power.

The fact that this passage starts with a death tells us that we are in a time of uncertainty, upheaval and anxiety—and a quick, contextual look into Isaiah Chapters 5 and 7 confirm that. King Uzziah is no longer in control, social injustices have been called out and violent foreign invasions have been predicted. Folks are feeling scared. Folks are feeling worried. Folks are feeling disoriented and stressed out and vulnerable.

You would think they would find comfort in a prophetic vision of a God whose authority—unlike Uzziah’s—has no end. You would think that the image of the creator of the universe sitting high and lofty on a throne surrounded by a heavenly host of mystical creatures would bring them some peace of mind and spirit. The promise of an eternal power in the face of an incredibly temporal one seems nice. But Isaiah responds to this promise with worry, insecurity, and self-doubt. “Woe is me!” he says. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

Isaiah is having feelings about his feelings. Has that ever happened to you? Maybe you’ve caught yourself feeling guilty about feeling good. Maybe you’ve felt frustrated about feeling sad. Or maybe you’ve realized that you feel a little excited about feeling angry. The combinations of feelings about feelings border on limitless.

Isaiah is feeling nervous about feeling nervous in the wake of the death of Uzziah. He is feeling embarrassed about feeling discouraged about the hardship about to come, but equally embarrassed about letting himself dare to hope that God could call him to do something about it. Ultimately, Isaiah is feeling small and insignificant in the presence of a kingly God—ashamed about his shame. Maybe Isaiah isn’t the only one feeling this way. Maybe the people to whom he is speaking—the people he represents—are struggling with their own tensions. Their own feelings about their feelings.

But what does God offer Isaiah and, by extension, his followers? Encounter. Change. Refining fire. God shows Isaiah that cutting through the layers of emotion that amplify stress—embracing pain and trauma and scary things head on—can bring with it the relief of healing.

Our God is a God who wants us to experience delivery, not despair. Our God is a God who offers us the gift of redemption instead of leaving us to linger in remorse. God loves us too much to let us stay stuck in the feelings we have about our feelings.

*06-05*

“Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord.”

— Isaiah 1:18a

What a beautiful statement of covenant relationship! God is ticked off at the people. The people are ignoring God. Instead of squashing Israel like a bug, God invites them into an argument! I can’t tell you how much I love this. “Bring it,” God says. “Let’s have it out.”

This is so important to remember not just when we’re the ones who’ve messed up yet again and God is calling us to account, but when God is the one who has failed us and we get to call God to account. “What gives, God? My life is a mess!” God can take it. God wants us to engage, to struggle, to wrestle as Jacob wrestled.

Don’t get me wrong. It’s not like I think I’m equal to God in any sense of the word. But God comes down and meets me where I am when I’m a mess (which is more often than I care to admit) and invites me to hash things out with them. And I love that. Because it reminds me that God is right there, immediate, present, and ready to engage in mutual discussion. God loves me and wants the best for me and is willing to let me rage and kick and scream about it so I can get through it and back on an even keel. My relationship with God is a two-way street, always, and it’s beautiful.

Do I let myself argue with God? Do I ever win?

*06-06*

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”

— Isaiah 2:3a

I’m a lifelong learner. I actually went to seminary to just dig deeper into my faith tradition. Yes, I earned my master’s, but it was never about the degree. It was about the engagement with scripture, the discussions with professors and students, the delving into doctrine, church history, theology, all of it.

We are all invited at any time to “go up to the mountain of God” to learn God’s ways, whether it’s through our own reading, through engagement with members of our faith communities, conversations with friends, or formal education.

I remember talking about how we, as mortals, can never fully understand God, but that this does not mean we should simply give up trying. It’s not a roadblock, but an invitation. God wants us to see and know and experience God. God wants us to go deeper in our understanding every day, and walks with us on that journey, revealing God’s self to us in myriad ways as we go. I, for one, absolutely love that journey.

How do I deepen my understanding of who God is and who I am in relationship to God?

*06-07*

“Turn away from mortals, who have only breath in their nostrils, for of what account are they?”

— Isaiah 2:22

I’ve put people on pedestals in my life. I think it’s safe to say that most of us have. As children, wholly dependent on the adults around us for our wellbeing, we see our caregivers , good or bad, as godlike. When I married (way too young) I had the naïve belief that my husband would satisfy my every emotional need. I spent most of my life trying to impress authority figures and conversely terrified of disappointing them.

It wasn’t until I was in my thirties that I began to recognize the truth of Isaiah’s statement: that I was holding up these “mortals” as idols, hoping they would deliver me security and self-esteem. And of course, it never worked. Only God can give me what it is I really need. In fact, only God really knows what that is. I sure as heck don’t half the time. So life has become a daily spiritual practice of turning everything over to God, laying bare before God all my gratitude, my fear, my yearning, knowing that God’s got this. It’s not always easy to trust in God. But it’s way better than putting my trust in fallible human beings.

Have I ever made another person an idol without even realizing it? Who?

*06-08*

“Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.”

— Isaiah 5:1-2

I do not have a green thumb. I’m perfectly happy digging in the dirt and planting things, and I adore them while they’re doing well. But, you know, you have to actually remember to water them and occasionally weed and maybe fertilize and, um… well I think you can see where this is headed.

God, on the other hand, never gives up. God creates the perfect conditions for us to thrive, plants us with love, and continues to tend to us on the daily, so that we have all we need to bloom and bear fruit. And still, we perversely insist on ignoring all of this tending so that we can do whatever we want whenever and however we want. So our grapes are often on the sour side.

We could expect God to just uproot us completely, as is so often depicted in the Bible by Israel’s being overrun and/or destroyed by other nations. But that’s not actually what God does. We may do it to ourselves (and we often do) and yet in the background, God is still diligently kneeling in the dirt, plucking out the choking thorns, adding fertilizer to our roots, and nourishing us with lifegiving water, knowing that the potential for good fruit is always there, and waiting with eternal patience for the time when we remember whose we are and respond in gratitude for all that we have been given.

What does it mean to me to bear good fruit in my day to day life? When do I refuse and bear wild grapes instead?

*06-09*

“Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint.”

— Isaiah 7:4a

Easier said than done, sometimes. I mean, in this story, Ahaz is freaking out with good reason, as two other nations are plotting to attack Israel. Isaiah reassures him that, “Hey. God’s got your back.” And it’s true. But in the moment we don’t always see it.

I just finished slogging through about six months of extreme stress. I won’t bore you with the details. Suffice it to say that there were many mornings I woke up and sobbed on the phone to friends and spiritual advisors because I didn’t know how I was going to make it through.

They, like Isaiah, reassured me. I had dealt with chaos and grief before and I came through it. I had been in this emotional place in the past, and God never dropped me. I had been in fear and with a faint heart, and God had lovingly shared my place, walking with me through whatever was going on. I needed to be reminded that God continued to do just that, and I was so grateful for the many Isaiahs in my life.

Who are the “Isaiahs” in my life who reassure me that all I need do is take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let my heart be faint?

*06-10*

“Take counsel together, but it shall be brought to naught; speak a word, but it will not stand, for God is with us.”

— Isaiah 8:10

Nah nah nah nah boo boo. You can’t get us. So Isaiah declares to those who would plot against God’s beloved people. He exhorts God’s people to walk away from the ways of other nations—to not fear what they fear, to not buy into the conspiracy theories (yes, it says that) of others. Stick to the actual truth of God’s love.

The childish opening to this devotion aside, the message still stands. We are surrounded by a million clamoring voices all trying to get us to believe that if we don’t think a certain way, we’re all going to hell (literally) in a handbasket (a metaphor I’ve never quite understood) and that the answer is to subscribe to an oppressive regime of white supremacy, Christian nationalism, xenophobia, and I could go on.

God isn’t having it. “Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears or be in dread,” Isaiah proclaims. Fall back into the truth that God is the one in charge, not us, and our job is to love as God loves. End of story.

What am I afraid of in this day and age? How do I work with God through my fear?

*06-11*

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.”

— Isaiah 9:2

Main Idea: God isn’t satisfied with pulling us out of the darkness and into the light—our God goes so far as to be light for us.

Isaiah leans on contrast as his main, rhetorical tool in this portion Chapter 9—and a paradoxical kind of contrast, at that! In just a few verses, we see darkness pitted against a great, shining light; the process of harvesting versus the process of divvying up a bounty (perhaps said better as “before” versus “after”); military destruction swallowed up by natural destruction; ultimate authority and endless cosmic influence ascribed to a little, newborn baby. On the whole, these binaries play into a spirit of promise. A foretelling of a savior.

If we zoom out a bit, we see contrast on an even larger scale. Isaiah Chapter 8, Verses 16-22 do not promise or foretell anything, but rather, condemn. They do not talk of hope, but rather, of despair. These verses describe time of divine silence—disconnection between God and God’s people that results in a hunger that is likely just as existential as it is literal.

Just about every one of us can relate to both of these states of being. Just about every one of us has experienced genuine hope, and probably genuine hopelessness, too. What the Holy Spirit is promising us in this Word today is that “good” and “bad” aren’t necessarily mutually exclusive realities. Joy doesn’t always play out separately from grief. Relief doesn’t always occur outside of the context of struggle. In other words, the line between the darkness and the light is very thin in our day to day.

But what we can trust is that we’ll always be able to cross over that line to the good—the joy, the relief, and the light—because Jesus came into the world the make sure of that very thing. Sure, we all experience hardship. But because we know Jesus, hardship doesn’t get the final word. Because we know Jesus, we can trust that hardship will be kept at bay. The grace that Jesus brought into the world makes it so that the battle between the darkness and the light isn’t really a fair fight. The light will always win out in the end.

*06-12*

“They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

— Isaiah 11:9

Do you ever just get tired of all the violence? I was just thinking about World War II and how the further we move away from that era, the more abstract the magnitude of that violence becomes. And at the same time, we have become so desensitized to violence in our modern culture—we have all lost count of the mass shootings, the BIPOC men and women killed by police—it sometimes doesn’t even register. I wonder sometimes whether these words of hope from Isaiah wouldn’t fall on deaf ears today simply because so many of us have compartmentalized the daily atrocities of our society that we don’t even recognize violence anymore.

These words break my heart, honestly. I ache for the promise they convey and sometimes it is hard to believe it will ever come to pass. But God is faithful, and I have to trust that though I will likely never see it while I am on this earth, it will be fulfilled in God’s time.

Do I sometimes find God’s promises hard to believe?

*06-13*

“In that day the Lord God of hosts called to weeping and mourning, to baldness and putting on sackcloth; but instead there was joy and festivity, killing oxen and slaughtering sheep, eating meat and drinking wine. ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’”

— Isaiah 22:12

Our God is nothing if not consistent in her call to do justice and to repent of wrongdoing. Yet we live in and are complicit in a society that glorifies self, wealth, and comfort at the expense of the wellbeing of countless of our neighbors. It is a way of being that—though many claim to be people of faith—operates as if there is no God at all. “Get it while you can.” “You can’t take it with you.” “Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em, kids.” So in the midst of great oppression and suffering, which we ourselves have created and/or continue to contribute to, we ignore God’s exhortations from the beginning of time in favor of living it up. And, worse, so many Christians try to justify it theologically (I’m looking at you, Prosperity Gospelers). Isaiah is not just talking to Israel umpteen hundred years ago. Isaiah is looking us right in the eye right here right now and saying, “Cut it out.” And therein lies the work to which God calls us.

Do I live as if there is no God? How or how not?

*06-14*

“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”

— Isaiah 25:7

I have not experienced much loss in my life. Four grandparents, an aunt, and an uncle, all after long lives. I know I am in the minority among my peers. Most of my friends have lost parents, some have lost siblings, some children, some close friends. Beyond my own circles, tragedy abounds. I cannot begin to imagine the pain of loss experienced by those who have lost loved ones to state violence, to mass shootings, to freak accidents, to sudden illness.

Yet this promise is for all of us, no matter our experience of death and loss. I would love nothing more than to know my grandparents better, especially my grandmother Fergus, of whom I am the spitting image, and who was gone before I had the maturity to seek out a closer relationship with her. I cling to this promise of the end of death in the hope that one day I can kick back with her in the hammock up at the cabin and really understand the depth of our connection. Maybe that sounds silly in light of the deep traumatic tragedy so many experience. But I don’t think God has some kind of measuring stick to determine who deserves God’s promises. When God swallows up death forever, it will be fore everyone.

What has been my experience with death? How does this promise help me understand my experiences?

*06-15*

“In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.”

— Isaiah 27:6

Creation is alive. I have been reveling and relishing the explosion of greenery, the blooming of trees, the raucous birdsong, and the vibrant life all around me. On my morning walks this week I have been enveloped in the heady fragrance of the myriad black locust trees blooming all along the road, delighted at the sight of mated pairs of orioles, awed by dramatic cloud formations. So that when I read these words of Isaiah I am reminded once again of God’s promise to us that we will flourish and God’s call to us that we should bear fruit—fruit that is for the flourishing of all creation, fruit that is the justice of God for all people, animals, habitats: everything!

In days to come, Isaiah says, but those days are now and always.

Where do I feel most connected to God’s call?

*06-16*

“For they are a rebellious people, faithless children, children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, ‘Do not see’; and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.’”

— Isaiah 30:9-11

Speak to us smooth things. What a provocative phrase. It kicks up all the ways in which we seek to ignore our complicity in the violence and oppression that we hope to contain in places “not in my backyard.” We don’t want to be prophesied to about what is right, because if we know what is right then we are on the hook to actually do what is right, and that’s hard work. Uncomfortable work. How much easier to be spoken to of smooth things, easy things, where we can pretend there isn’t a problem or it’s not our responsibility to fix it or if we just elect the right leaders the problem will go away.

We are so lucky that God’s grace is infinite, that God knows our weaknesses and our rebelliousness and faithlessness and loves us anyway. We are so lucky that God continues to send us prophets to exhort us to action, to invite us to partner with God in the work of justice and equity. We are so lucky that God hasn’t given up on us and never will. My God open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts and stir us to action.

Do I find myself wishing to hear only “smooth things” sometimes?

*06-17*

“My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.”

— Isaiah 32:18

Quiet resting places. I live in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area. My townhome is sandwiched between a fairly busy road (currently under construction) and the construction site of a new light rail line. Quiet is sometimes hard to come by here. This is why I cherish the early mornings, those precious hours before the first truck rumbles by outside my window, its back-up beeping a persistent reminder of my particular location.

Don’t get me wrong—I love where I live. And while part of me would like to disappear into the woods and be a hermit, I can’t deny the fact that I grew up in the suburbs of New York City and, well you know the old adage: You can take the girl out of the city, but you can’t take the city out of the girl. So I sort of hope this promise of Isaiah’s gets to be a “both/and” promise. That this peaceful habitation can be urban and still quiet, these secure dwellings can still be rowhouses like mine, where kids play out in the street and neighbors greet one another with big smiles, and still provide the reverent hush of those early mornings I so enjoy.

Am I able to find and enjoy quiet where I live?

*06-18*

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”

— Isaiah 55:1

Main Idea: Abundance in a life of faith isn’t just about the counterintuitive…it’s about the ordinary.

A lot of us are used to hearing about an “abundance mindset” in direct contrast with a “scarcity mindset.” This is a helpful comparison in that it reminds us to think in terms of gratitude instead of fear—to preempt things, people, and situations instead of reacting to them and to maintain a vision of thriving instead of rationing. Living abundantly is a little like playing offense instead of defense. Like going after what you want—or maybe even what you know God wants for you—instead of worrying about what might get in the way of all of that.

In a way, then, an abundance mindset is a bit counterintuitive for most of us. We are conditioned socially, politically, and economically to plan and prepare for the worst. We are encouraged to compete with other people on every front and to measure our goodness—our worthiness—using achievements. We tend to equate our senses of self-worth with productivity. We are told that you can never have too much, which means you can never truly have enough, either. It's clear in this passage that God calls us to shirk these kinds of teachings. Blatantly. Dramatically. Fully. An abundant life of faith is a life that goes against the grain of self-sufficiency and scarcity.

But what’s even more clear—and infinitely more interesting—is that God calls us to ground ourselves in the most basic, foundational, ordinary things we could possibly imagine. Water. Bread. Sprouting seeds. According to the Prophet Isaiah, the path to everlasting covenants and steadfast love is paved with small-scale, mundane, base-level things like what you use to nourish your body and what you see coming out of the dirt.

Really, “mindset” isn’t a term that does true abundance much justice. Because what this text tells us is that abundance is more than a mindset. It’s more than a reframe. It’s more than a series of tricks to help us avoid the pitfalls of scarcity thinking. Abundance is about a creation-wide transformation that centers and appreciates the magic in everyday things. A transformation of everything from our hearts to the trees. Abundance is about internalizing the uniquely powerful grace of God and letting it lead us—letting it inspire everything we think and everything we do, starting with the basics.

*06-19*

“He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”

— Isaiah 40:11

Sometimes we just need to be held like this. Among my friends are people dealing with chronic illnesses, mentally ill and/or disabled children, parents with dementia, relationship struggles, financial insecurity, and more. I myself deal with some of these issues. The hits just seem to keep coming and it can be easy to wonder where God is in the midst of all of it.

But that’s exactly where God is: in the midst of all of it, holding us in her arms, holding us in her bosom, feeling our pain with us and loving us through it. Maybe that’s small comfort when our realities threaten to overwhelm us with grief. Yet I find when I lean back into God’s arms, she gives me what I need not only to persevere, but to find incredible joy all around me.

When have I felt held by God in the midst of challenges?

*06-20*

“No, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind.”

— Isaiah 41:29

Idol worship dies hard. It’s not like we moved past the days of being surrounded by civilizations who worshipped the Baals and other gods and suddenly there was no longer anything the pull us away from God. One hardly has to pray to a statue to worship idols. At the risk of alienating any sports fans, I have to call out the whole culture of athlete-worship that professional sports engender. I have had people in my life who take a sport so seriously they become genuinely infuriated by any suggestion that “it’s just a game.” In one of my seminary classes, my professor laid out how modern professional sports are essentially a religion (it was fascinating).

I’m not saying it’s wrong to like professional sports. Or movies or music or any other forms of entertainment. But I think it’s good for us to be curious about when appropriate enjoyment of gifted individuals sharing their talents with the world crosses the line into idol worship.

Are there any celebrities, athletes, or activities that tempt me to idol worship?

*06-21*

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

— Isaiah 42:3

This image intrigues me. Sometimes when I think about the state of the world and our communities, the urgent need for change makes me want to bulldoze through anyone and everyone standing in the way. Yet the justice of this servant Isaiah describes is gentle. Or, at least, gentle to those who are suffering injustice. These are the bruised reeds and the dimly burning wicks, the people who are unheard and marginalized.

What it makes me think of is the idea of centering BIPOC voices and leadership in the cause of justice, rather than stepping into the role of white savior. When we think we know what is best and push for the agenda we think would solve the problem, we risk breaking the reeds and quenching the wicks of the very people we are supposed to be serving. Instead, we can faithfully bring forth justice by listening to what our BIPOC siblings ask of us and doing it without regard for our own personal esteem.

How can I work for justice without making the work about me?

*06-22*

“By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.”

— Isaiah 53:8

Justice is easily perverted. In fact, I don’t think people can even agree on what “justice” actually means. It can be confused with “revenge.” It can be twisted to favor those in power at the expense of the powerless. It can be used to justify atrocities of every kind in the name of “security.”

This prophecy is often associated with Jesus, who was a victim of state violence in the name of “security” and preserving the status quo. He suffered in solidarity with all those oppressed he came to set free. He still suffers in solidarity with all those who continue to be victims of state violence that pretends to be justice and calls us to his work of liberation.

To that end, it is critical that we examine our understanding of justice and recognize all the ways it has been and continues to be perverted. Until we do so honestly, we won’t be able to move toward God’s perfect and liberating justice for all creation.

What is my definition of “justice?” Do I think my country’s ideas of justice match up with this? Why or why not?

*06-23*

“Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord; and I will heal them. But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked.”

— Isaiah 57:19-21

I do this to myself. If you take a moment to read the rest of the passage, you’ll see that God keeps trying to heal us and comfort us and lead us in the right way, but we stubbornly and perversely insist on our own way which only hurts us. In our endless search for peace (on our terms), we sabotage any chance of actually achieving it, because we turn away from the only one who can provide it.

As a recovering addict, I am very in touch with the way my need to control the universe in order to wrest some kind of inner peace from it backfired over and over and over again. It wasn’t until I gave up and let God run the show that I found the release I needed from being the “tossing sea that cannot keep still.” But even now, I can find myself starting to “toss up mire and mud” when dealing with uncomfortable situations, and sometimes it takes beating my head against a wall for a while before I realize I don’t need to keep doing this to myself. God’s peace is fully and vitally available to me any time I loosen my grasp on my need to control.

When do I find myself struggling to find peace? How does God help me?

*06-24*

“The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.”

— Isaiah 59:8

Peace is another one of those concepts that’s hard to nail down. For the most part, we associate it with tranquility, quiet, the absence of conflict. That’s the more pleasant, easily digestible definition. But there is another definition that runs counter to this, which says that peace is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of justice. In which case, peace is not at all about tranquility or quiet, but about speaking truth to power, standing up for our oppressed neighbors, working for change in our systems and our culture. Few things sound less peaceful than that, and yet this definition of peace hews closer to Isaiah’s understanding of peace than the mere lack of conflict.

That being said, as with most things, there is a both/and in play. God’s peace is also associated with rest, something we all need. Thus while we are called to strive for peace which is God’s justice, we are also called into the peace that comes with allowing ourselves to relax into God’s loving arms and trust that our efforts will not be in vain because ultimately, God’s got this.

How do I define “peace?” What things bring me peace in my day to day life?

*06-25*

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

— Isaiah 61:1

Main Idea: God pushes the limits of everything we know in promising us justice, working across borders, barriers, generations, and—in the person of Jesus—entire realities.

The good news of deliverance that the Prophet Isaiah relays in this passage is incredible in its depth. It describes a liberation with hardly any nuance or discrimination—a liberation that touches the brokenhearted, the oppressed, captives and prisoners, mourners and strangers and, we can assume, anyone who is any combination of those things (or any combination of things remotely like them). So, what we’re hearing today is that God’s justice is for everybody.

This good news is also incredible in its breadth. Much as it heals the traumas unfolding in the present, this deliverance—this liberation—reaches back in time, healing the brokenness of the past. We are told that it looks forward, as well, and that God’s promise of righteousness is intended for generations to come. So, what we’re hearing today is that God’s love for justice was, and is, and is to be.

What could limit this powerful of a love? What could compromise this promise, or act as a barrier to it? The short answer: nothing. God is promising us today that God’s justice can’t be thwarted.

In reflecting on our message today, it could be helpful to focus on Jesus’s words in our secondary text from the Gospel according to Luke. He talks about fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures—in fewer words, he essentially tells them that he is, in his very person, the completion of a long-awaited cosmic plan.

God loves justice so much that God will not limit a promise or pursuit of it to one community, one generation or even one plane of existence. God is so ferocious about bringing justice into the world that God put justice into a body that we could know. That we could experience. That we could understand. God dwelled among us for the sake of bringing justice to God’s creation, and God and promises to dwell among us again for the same exact reason.

Where might we look to see the limitless justice of God today?

*06-26*

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.”

— Isaiah 62:1

We cannot keep silent. The prophet Isaiah stood up and shouted his demands for God’s justice, first against God’s people whose actions oppressed those God commanded them to serve, and then on behalf of God’s people who became victims of the oppression of others. With Isaiah we are called to be prophets, to speak God’s words of justice to all who would pervert it for their own gain. It has been said many times that “silence is violence” and that “silence is complicity” and these things are absolutely true. When we turn away and pretend the pains and trials of those who are different than us are not our problem, we become responsible for their pains and trials and answerable to God for our failure to speak up.

For the sake of God’s beloved children and all of creation, we cannot keep silent, and we cannot rest until their vindication shines out like the dawn.

When have I failed to speak up when it was required? When have I spoken up?

*06-27*

“It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

— Isaiah 63:9b

God acts directly in our lives. For most of my life, I didn’t really believe this was true. Despite all my understanding of theology and love of growing up in the church, I lived as a functional deist—believing that God was “out there somewhere, off busy doing other, more important things” and that it was up to me to wrest happiness from life using the gifts God had given me at birth. It took a bit of a beat-down by life and the practice of a recovery program to make me realize the disconnect. These days, I am quick to see where and how (and through whom) God shows up in immediate, vital ways on a regular basis. And of course, it’s not as though God didn’t show up before then—God always did. It’s just that now I see it in real time as much as in retrospect, which is cool. It’s “no messenger or angel, but God’s presence” that makes my life livable (and wonderful) in spite of whatever challenges get thrown my way.

When has God shown up directly in my life? Was I aware of it in the moment or only in retrospect?

*06-28*

“Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you? Turn back for the sake of your servants, for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.”

— Isaiah 63:17

This language has always bugged me. Probably I need to do more theological digging somewhere, but I really do not like the idea that God hardens people’s hearts in any way shape or form. Talk about blaming the victim. Our hearts are hard because we make them hard. We want to control outcomes. We want to live lives of ease and comfort without effort. We don’t want to have to listen to God’s exhortation to work for justice on behalf of our neighbors.

On the other hand, when I think about this in the language of addiction and recovery, I understand why people might want to attribute their hardness of heart to God. Because as an addict, no matter how much I wanted to not pick up that substance in order to numb the pain of my unhappiness, I always did. Wanting to change did not make the change happen. And it feels to me like this passage is from a people crying out, “We want to be different. We want to follow your laws, God, and live as you would have us. But no matter how hard we try, we can’t. So it must be you hardening our hearts because we can’t come up with any other explanation.”

The truth is that God is always there ready to soften and open our hearts if we just let God. That means giving up our attempt to control our lives, and turning the whole kaboodle over to someone with the power to actually change us.

When and how have I allowed God to soften my heart so that I can walk more closely with God?

*06-29*

“Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”

— Isaiah 64:8

I was recently at an “Empty Bowls” fund raiser. If you’re not familiar with this concept, you can check out more information here. As part of the evening there was a pottery demonstration, and my son and I watched in awe for a while as the young woman at the wheel brought forth beauty from shapeless lumps. She invited my son to try his hand at it, and while it started out as a lovely little vase, it wound up flopping over on one side. Surprisingly, the artist said she absolutely loved it. It was truly unique and quite beautiful and for the rest of the night, she displayed it on her workspace for all to see.

Now I imagine that God, as potters go, was a lot more like the artist than my son in terms of the beauty God is able to draw from shapeless lumps of earth. But I also know that, while we are all beautiful, our beauty does not always conform to what the world recognizes as perfection. Yet in God’s eyes we are whole and perfect even, and especially, when the eyes of the world don’t see it. Truth be told, I think we’re all a little more like the piece my son made than the ones the potter did. And God puts us front and center on God’s work table because God thinks we’re beautiful.

Am I able to see those things in myself that might be imperfect by the world’s standards as something beautiful and whole in God’s eyes?

*06-30*

“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.”

— Isaiah 65:17-18

Is it okay to forget? We talk all the time about how we cannot and should not forget the atrocities in our past history lest we repeat them in the future. Yet this promise is of a time when there will be no chance of repeating them ever again, since it will be in God’s reign, where there is nothing but perfect justice and peace for all of creation. Maybe, then, it is the hope that we can be freed of our individual and collective traumas because the memories will no longer exist to haunt us. It’s not about burying or repressing our painful pasts, but about removing them entirely, returning us to a state of perfect wholeness.

Maybe I’m jaded, but this leaves me feeling a little suspicious. I’m reminded of the movie Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, which explored the ramification of the removal of painful memories and drew the conclusion that these things cannot truly be erased because they are what make us who we are. In a perfect paradise in which there is no memory of pain, can any of us actually continue to be who we are? Or is God able to preserve our individuality without the memories of our pains? I don’t have any great insights here. Just curiosity. Who knew that a Jim Carey movie could become grist for the theological mill?

How do I envision who I will be in God’s eternal reign?