**Daily Devotions**

*12-01*

“Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.”

— 2 Kings 23:25

Was Josiah even greater than David? This is high praise for a king who came to power at the age of eight. The Bible says he “did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and walked in all the way of his father, David.” Father meaning ancestor, not literal father. It makes me wonder about his mother, Jedidah. Surely she had something to do with this eight-year-old boy finding so much favor in God’s sight. And this before he even discovered the book of Deuteronomy and brought all of Judah back to following the laws of Moses. Of course, a parent can’t take all the credit for their child’s goodness, in the same way as they can’t take all the blame for their mistakes and challenges. But I’d like to think Jedidah was a major influence on her son, and gave him such love and guidance as to set him up to be one of the greatest kings God’s people had ever had—like none before and none after. Not even David.

As a mom, I don’t have any illusions that my kids will be the greatest rulers in the world. I have no aspirations for them to have power or fame. All I want is for them to be healthy and resilient, compassionate and joyful. Probably these are the qualities Jedidah instilled in Josiah. So king or not, that was enough.

What qualities are most important in a good leader?

*12-02*

“In his days Pharaoh Neco king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates. King Josiah went to meet him; but when Pharaoh Neco met him at Megiddo, he killed him.”

— 2 Kings 23:29

Even the best kings were not exempt from God’s “wrath.” Yesterday’s devotion was all about how Josiah was so wonderful there had never been a king like him before or after. Yet he was killed in battle at the tender age of 39, simply because God decided to “remove Judah out of my sight.” He was followed by four rotten kings and then Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. I suppose the chroniclers of Israel and Judah needed some kind of explanation for why such an amazing—such a truly good king would be cut down in his prime. Usually God’s punishment was for bad behavior. In this case, it was utterly capricious.

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. God doesn’t randomly punish people. God doesn’t even punish people when they absolutely deserve it. Bad things just happen. God moves in our spirits, in our lives, to help us respond to bad things. God stands in solidarity with us, suffering with us, sharing our place, and strengthens us to move forward through it. It’s sad that Josiah died young, that Judah suffered under bad rulers, and was eventually conquered. But God didn’t make it happen. Instead, God was in the midst of the people, loving them through their circumstances until they once again came home.

How had God helped me respond to challenges in my life?

*12-03*

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”

— Jeremiah 33:14

Main Idea: In God, we have a robust history behind us and a hopeful future in front of us.

One of the greatest advertising lines in history is “Coca-Cola: It’s the Real Thing.” So explicit. So in-your-face. So direct about how important authenticity is, and how simple authenticity can make everything else.

It’s kind of funny to think, then, about how many different ways that Coca-Cola has come to the consumer since it hit the market. The bottles have looked different year to year, and now of course, it comes in cans. For a while, you could look for a can that had your name on it! Or your friend’s name. There are specialized Coca-Cola Christmas campaigns with polar bears. There are low sugar and low calorie options—CokeZero and Diet Coke—and a ton of different flavors, too. Lime. Cherry. In recent years, we’ve even seen the terrifying mix of Coca-Cola and coffee!

All of this begs the question: if Coca-Cola is the real thing, why do we have so many versions of it? Can the real thing be so varied and so eclectic and still be the real thing? Authentic?

The very same question lies in our scripture this morning. These verses from Jeremiah are often referred to as “the New Covenant,” because in them, God relays to the prophet that God is working within a set of historical promises to do something new. It seems like there will be portions of this new covenant that seem familiar and that relate to things that God’s people already know. But it seems, too, like portions of this new covenant will have to be experienced and learned for the first time.

When Jesus asks his disciples who people say that he is in our second text—our reading from Mark 8—we see this kind of tension. It’s clear that people associate Jesus with the Hebrew tradition in which they are versed. It’s clear that they view him as connected to prophetic wisdom and work. Some even go so far as to recognize him as the messiah. But the full meaning of that term involves some newness that none of them could possibly have understood, because though it was foretold, it had never been experienced. God’s new covenant in Jesus is a beautiful example of God working through historical promises to do something new.

It’s nice to be able to remember that God can connect with us through many promises all at once. It’s comforting to know that God’s promises don’t have to be mutually exclusive. God speaks to different people in different ways, but stays authentic through it all. Our promise this morning is that God can be experienced in many flavors, but God is still the real thing every time.

The first Sunday of Advent is known as the Sunday of “hope.” As we enter into a season of anticipation of the new things God is doing, we look to them with hope instead of fear. With humility instead of confidence. With curiosity instead of insistence on the familiar. New covenants do not make old ones moot; they simply beautify the complex web of ways that God seeks to connect with us and work through us.

*12-04*

“He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’”

— Mark 8:29

The waiting has begun. We are officially in Advent, called into contemplative anticipation of God’s resounding and redemptive “Yes!” to all creation. Jeremiah proclaims “They days are surely coming!” and a few hundred years later, Peter speaks revelation: Jesus is the one. We live now in the “already and not yet.” The promised messiah has already come and redeemed the world and at the same time, the reign of God is not fully here. We continue to wait and to work for God’s reign to break into the world anywhere and everywhere God’s love is shown. We continue to set aside this time each year to dwell in the “in between.” Let us not rush to fulfillment, drawn into the secular, consumer-focused holiday chaos that began way back before Halloween when stores began stocking lights and trees and gifts. (I’m writing this on October 26th. I’m flabbergasted at how many Christmas displays I am already seeing, when costumed children have not yet arrived at my door asking for candy!)

Step back. Take a deep breath. Pray and meditate. Immerse yourself in the waiting. Walk slowly and humbly with your God this blessed Advent season.

How do I observe Advent? Do I find myself rushing to Christmas?

*12-05*

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

— Jeremiah 1:5

Everyone has a purpose. And while few of us are called to be prophets in the way Jeremiah was, we are, in fact, all called to be prophets in real and vital ways. A prophet is simply someone who speaks God’s words. And what words of God do we all have the opportunity to speak every single day of our lives? We can speak love. We speak love not only literally by choosing kind and compassionate ways to communicate, but in our actions, by choosing kind and compassionate ways to interact with everyone around us.

As we approach Christmas, this can actually get harder, as our stress rises with all the “to dos” and events and frenetic activity. Tempers grow as short as the daylight in the northern hemisphere. (We get only around 7 hours where I live.) In this season of contemplative waiting, let us step back and remember Jeremiah, and all those God called throughout time to speak God’s words of truth, hope, and love. Let us count ourselves among the prophets, and consider how we might speak in this same way.

When, recently, have I had an opportunity to speak love? Did I choose to? Why or why not?

*12-06*

“But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them.”

— Jeremiah 1:17

I feel a little like God is a boxing coach here. Or some kind of personal, motivational coach. He’s given Jeremiah a message that the people will absolutely not like. And the people have a history of killing prophets who tell them what they don’t want to hear. But God is in Jeremiah’s corner, giving him a rubdown, shouting in his ear over the roar of the out-for-blood crowd: Just do it! Stand strong or you’ll deeply regret it. Later in the passage, God says, “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you.”

God is in your corner, too. We all face challenges. We all sometimes have to step into uncomfortable conversations, to set healthy boundaries or stand up for others. Most of us don’t care much for confrontation, but there are times when it is absolutely necessary in order for positive change to occur. When God calls us to speak up, we can be assured that God is standing right behind us and will equip us with what we need to weather the difficulty.

When have I had to take action that I found uncomfortable? Did I feel supported in any way?

*12-07*

“Thus says the Lord: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves?”

— Jeremiah 2:5

God is clearly hurt. “What did I ever do to the people that they rejected me?” I hate to say it, but a little, petty part of me wants to say, “Um…and how many times have you visited your wrathful punishment on them?” But that petty part just wants to be snarky and argumentative. God’s complaint is valid in that God recognizes that the people’s rejection of God only leads to their own misery. In our modern context, so many people live as if there is no God, even if they say they believe. We chase after material things or people or reputation—worthless things—as if they can satisfy our deepest needs. They can’t. Only a vital relationship with God can fill our wells and keep them full. Such pursuit doesn’t make people “worthless” as Jeremiah says. But it sure as heck can make us feel worthless. Ask even the wealthiest or most famous people and you’ll hear again and again that they are tortured by feelings of “not-enough-ness.” They will never have enough or be enough no matter how much they accumulate.

God knows the solution. God wants so much to have that vital relationship with us, wants so much for us to set aside our pursuit of those worthless things and pursue simplicity and beauty and love for God and our neighbor. This advent season, consider how you can set aside pursuit of material things and spend more time cultivating your relationship with God.

What “worthless things” do I sometimes find myself pursuing? Do they satisfy?

*12-08*

“Thus says the Lord: If any of you could break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night would not come at their appointed time, only then could my covenant with my servant David be broken, so that he would not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with my ministers the Levites.”

— Jeremiah 33:20-21

David’s descendant will reign. Unless any of us can alter nature’s rhythms and patterns, we have no chance of making a dent in God’s resolve in this matter. It is a solemn and unbreakable promise to God’s people—to us—which is fulfilled in Jesus.

This same relentless promise is what God continues to have for us today. God’s justice will be done. God’s reign will come to pass on earth. Regardless of what it might look like in the world around us right now, love will win. Let that be a resounding message of hope in this season of waiting.

How do I envision the reign of God? Do I see evidence of it already? What do I think it will look like, ultimately?

*12-09*

“And you yourself shall not escape from his hand, but shall surely be captured and handed over to him; you shall see the king of Babylon eye to eye and speak with him face to face; and you shall go to Babylon. Yet hear the word of the Lord, O King Zedekiah of Judah! Thus says the Lord concerning you: You shall not die by the sword; you shall die in peace.”

— Jeremiah 34:3-5a

In the midst of devastation and despair, hope. Judah is going down. Babylon will conquer it. But the king will die “in peace.” Which means there will be peace. Yes, a large number of the people will be exiled. Yes, they will live under Babylonian rule. But the warring will stop. At least for a time.

I’ve had long periods in my life when things were especially challenging. Sometimes it could be hard to see where God was working. But even in the midst of it, there were moments of serenity and even joy. Glimmers of hope. And, on my best days, feelings of profound trust that I (and everyone else) was going to be okay, no matter what happened.

Advent is a good time to reflect upon the kind of patience we need to weather the challenges we all face, some of which seem never-ending—some of which might actually be never-ending, such as a chronic, incurable illness. Where do we see God showing up with words of peace and promise? How can we lean into the love God has for us?

Am I able to find moments of joy and hope in the midst of my difficulties?

*12-10*

“A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

— Isaiah 40:3

Main Idea: The temporal is precious in God’s eyes—so precious that God uses it as the primary vessel of what is eternal.

When we read this passage from Isaiah 40, we are often drawn to Verses 6-8. That’s because those verses are about people. Those verses are about us. Just as often, we are tempted to interpret Verses 6-8 in a dangerous way—that is, in a way that diminishes our place in the cosmos as it glorifies God’s.

Surely the point of this prophecy is to celebrate the reach, the grandeur and the all-encompassing power of God. The author of Isaiah uses timelessness to get this point across. The best way he knows how to describe God’s greatness is to equate it with something that transcends beginnings and endings as we know them.

So, when he contrasts God’s immortality—the “foreverness” of God, for lack of a better term—with our inherently temporal natures, we can end up drawing a false binary and assuming that our mortality—our lack of “foreverness”—makes us inferior.

What the Spirit wants us to hear today is that we don’t need to be so deprecating. We don’t need to fall for that logical fallacy. God’s greatness does not imply that we are not great. God’s grandness does not imply that we are small or insignificant. The author of Isaiah is saying quite the opposite! He is telling us that the temporal is precious in God’s eyes. So precious, in fact, that God chooses to embrace and engage with it. To infuse it with comfort and tenderness. God looks on the temporal—looks on us—with love and mercy, using our finite essence as the primary vessel of God’s infinite essence.

The author of Mark pushes this claim even further, teasing us with a reminder that God doesn’t just look on the temporal. God took on the temporal. God in all of God’s glory became human for no other reason that to love what is human.

And that’s particularly good for us to remember today. The theme of the Second Sunday in Advent is love. When we light the second candle in our Advent wreaths, we bring our collective attention to God’s love for us. To God as love among us. And to our love of God and of one another. God loves us so much that God became one of us in Jesus. And because God’s word will stand forever, we who would normally wither or fade away left to ourselves know that we will not wither or fade away now. Essentially, our good news today is that God loves the flowers and the grass for exactly what they are, and just exactly as they are. And God fuses God’s very self to the flowers and the grass to make what was once impossible for them, possible.

*12-11*

“Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.”

— Isaiah 41:10

God promises deliverance. Israel is languishing in the Babylonian exile, far from home and all they have held dear. I imagine there was pressure for them to assimilate and lose their identity. Like any conquered and oppressed people, they face losing everything that makes them who they are. It would be cause for great fear. God promises them that God will be in the midst of them, give them strength, hold them in God’s strong arms. Whether from the Egyptians or the Babylonians or the Romans, God continued to promise God’s people that they would never be abandoned. And in the end, God sent Jesus to break the hold of sin and death over everyone always. Whatever it is we fear, we know that we are not alone. God is our God and will strengthen us, help us, and uphold us in all things.

What am I afraid of? How does God help me in my fear?

*12-12*

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

— Isaiah 41:29

Delusions are false beliefs. We are all incessantly bombarded with information from so many quarters it can be a real challenge to discern what is truth and what is falsehood. So much of the information we receive is spun in a specific way to elicit a specific response, giving us messages about who we ought to be, what we ought to wear, who we ought to hang out with, what we ought to drive or eat or use as a smartphone. Some of it is designed to frighten us into staying glued to a specific news outlet or supporting a particular political candidate or condemning an entire group of people who aren’t “like us” in some way. When we fall prey to delusions, we are pulled away from God and neighbor, pulled away from love and compassion. Unlike Isaiah’s admonition that these idols are empty wind, they actually have as much power as we give them—power to separate us from those things that nourish us, that sustain us, and that lead to the flourishing of all creation.

How do we discern the true from the false? How do we suss out the motives of those delivering the information we receive?

I default to the greatest commandment and Micah 6:8—the simplest but also the most potent litmus test for reality. If something I hear or see demonstrates love for God and neighbor, if it is concerned with and comes from a place of justice, kindness, and humility, then it is more likely to be true. If it is couched in fear, evocative of hatred, supporting of oppression of anyone for any reason, the chances are that it’s false. In any case, I don’t discern on my own. I talk about it with reliable, trustworthy, and loving people, and I look for corroborating sources. Hopefully, with God’s help, I can figure out where the idols are lying in wait with their delusions.

How do I discern what is true and false from the deluge of information I experience each day?

*12-13*

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”

— Isaiah 42:6-7

Ultimately, this is about Jesus. But it is also about us. As followers in the Way of Jesus, we are called to this same task: to carry out God’s promises, to be beacons of light and hope in a dim and confusing world, to open people’s eyes to the truth, and to free the oppressed. As we watch and wait for the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem and again at the end of time, it is good to contemplate how we might bear this promise into the world on a day to day basis. It doesn’t need to be in any major or showy way, though if you feel called to public service or direct action by all means, go big! We need you! Anyone can serve God in the way Isaiah lays out. We serve God when we serve others. Jesus modeled this by humbly washing his disciples’ feet. A small, intimate thing. We, too, can bear God’s love to others in simple acts like donating to an important cause, serving a meal—at a homeless shelter or to an individual, cleaning up a mess—in the neighborhood or in your basement, writing a letter to a congressperson, reading to someone, the list could go on. Perhaps it would be a fun spiritual practice to write ideas on strips of paper and draw them out of a jar each day. However you do it, I encourage you to enrich your Advent with acts of service.

How can I serve others today?

*12-14*

“I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.”

— Isaiah 42:16

Blindness isn’t only physical. In many ways we can all be blind. Blind to our own weaknesses, to our inner selves, to the deep spiritual need for connection to God. When we fail to acknowledge these things, we wander through our lives discontented and irritable. God doesn’t forsake us. God provides opportunities for us to connect: to ourselves, to our neighbors, and to God. Our lives may be rugged roads to travel—we all deal with pain and challenges to various degrees; no one is immune. But when we allow God to lead us through our difficulties, we often find that the rough roads are smoothed out, the ground becomes level, solutions we could not see are suddenly illuminated for us. This letting go isn’t easy; we will always do it imperfectly. But God will always be there, never forsaking us, ready to hold us through whatever life throws at us.

When has God led me through a particular challenge?

*12-15*

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

— Isaiah 42:25

Sometimes we fail to recognize the consequences of our actions. Not that God metes out horrific punishments for our missteps. But the fact is that we all sometimes make bad choices (or fail to make choices) for whatever reason, and it can have a serious negative impact on our lives. In this text, Israel couldn’t connect the dots between its rejection of God and the continual assault of other nations from all sides, thus they didn’t change their ways and the challenges continued.

For years of my life, I was restless, irritable, and discontent, and I used food to self-mediate, which only exacerbated my problems and made me miserable about my body (and worried about my health). I was completely unable to see how my choices or lack thereof were contributing to my issues until I wandered blindly into a 12-Step recovery program for food addiction. There, through the daily spiritual practices and disciplines, I finally recognized how much of my unhappiness was of my own making—and how much were circumstances beyond my control, but over which I could exercise some choice (by removing myself from dysfunctional situations). These days I have tools and people to help me identify when I’m taking or not taking actions that are leading to negative consequences in my life, and I can take steps to rectify the situation. I don’t need to wait until life sets on me “fire all around,” but can take it to heart and work to change myself.

When have I recognized consequences of my actions or inaction and made a positive change in my life as a result?

*12-16*

“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

— Isaiah 43:1

Names are powerful. Calling someone by name, in the way this passage suggests, implies a level of intimacy—of love, and of recognition of who and what the named one is. We are, each and every one of us, created, redeemed, called, and claimed by God. How beautiful to know that God calls me “Rebekah”—the name my parents gave me, but which ultimately was a gift from God. How beautiful to know that God sees my name as more than a random word that sounds nice, but as the sum total of my identity, my personhood, so that when God calls me by name, God is proclaiming, “I know you. I love you in the entirety of who you are.” Honestly, it gives me goosebumps thinking of my name on God’s lips. And it makes me like my name more than I already did! Know that today and every day, God sees and knows you intimately, and loves you completely.

How do I feel about my name? If I could change it, what would I choose?

*12-17*

“Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them! —are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.”

— Ezra 1:3

Main Idea: We will always have to navigate a mixture of joy and sorrow, but because we know Jesus, we know that joy will always have the last word.

While it is relatively obscure to us in the Christian tradition, this decree given by King Cyrus is not only common knowledge in the Jewish tradition, but also incredibly significant. It is the very last verse of the entirety of the Jewish canon. This means that the final word—the central, defining idea—of the Jewish tradition is that we need always to be looking to the future with hope.

The author of Ezra reinforces that point through contrast. He highlights the fact that many people in this crowd in Jerusalem are not looking to the future, but rather, to the past. These are people who knew the former Temple in all of its glory and who find it impossible to celebrate a new foundation. They are convinced that their new reality will always feel diminished in comparison to their old one. They are in mourning, experiencing deep loss that the younger generations alongside them cannot understand or relate to—that younger generations do not share. These are people who weep while others shout with joy.

We can understand this tension from both perspectives. It’s rare that any of us experiences only positive things or only negative things, whether from hour to hour, day to day, week to week or year to year. When it comes to defining any number of seasons in our lives, many of us are used to a mixed bag of emotions and opinions.

Gaudete Sunday—the third Sunday in Advent which translates roughly to “Rejoice” Sunday—is special because it is meant to bring our attention to the good things in that mixed bag. It is meant to encapsulate the happiness, excitement and glee of this season of anticipating Jesus. The candle for this Sunday is a rosy color, different from the others. The vestments we wear on this Sunday are distinct, too. And that is to remind us that it’s okay to pay our undivided attention to the joyful—and, in this case, unifying—parts of our shared experience in the Christian life.

On this day, the Spirit connects us to the people in Ezra who are singing songs of praise and shouting to the heavens with joy. On this day, the Spirit invites us to empathize with their excitement and their confidence, both of which stem from seeing the (literal) foundation of their faith established anew in front of their very eyes. On this day, we remember the foundation of our faith established anew—Jesus Christ, born in a manger and ready to turn the entire cosmos on its head out of the love he has for us.

We know, deep down, that the joy of anticipating Jesus’s coming brings with it the pain of anticipating Jesus’s journey to the cross (not to mention his death on it). That pain is very real. That pain is very serious. That pain will fundamentally change each of our lives at some point. But that pain is not what we lean on when we tell our story of faith. That pain is not the last verse of ourmetaphorical canon. That pain is not more powerful than our joy, and it cannot steal our focus away from the future that God is laying the foundation for, here and now.

*12-18*

“When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments were stationed to praise the Lord with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, according to the directions of King David of Israel.”

— Ezra 3:10

What a ground-breaking ceremony this must have been! At last, after the destruction of Solomon’s temple, the Israelites were allowed to rebuild this central symbol of their entire identity. I don’t think there is any single building in my country that could equate. The instructions for the building of this holy house were given by God in the laws of Moses in excruciating detail, every iota carrying weight and meaning. When that first shovel went into the ground, the trumpets and cymbals erupted with joyful noise, a proclamation of an identity reclaimed.

I think that every time I wander away from God and find myself trying to run the universe again, it’s a mini-Babylonian exile—a loss of my center, and a risk of losing my identity. Then, when I catch myself and once again let go of control and return to God, I imagine there’s quite a fanfare in God’s heart. And well their should be in mine, as I once again dig deep into who I am and whose I am, and know that I am loved.

What different foundations have I laid in my life over the years? How have they supported me in my journey of faith?

*12-19*

“Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and made them afraid to build, and they bribed officials to frustrate their plan throughout the reign of King Cyrus of Persia and until the reign of King Darius of Persia.”

— Ezra 4:4-5

Not everyone likes it when you thrive. The Israelites were rebuilding their temple after years of exile, and the locals weren’t thrilled. They probably recognized that it would make the Israelites unified and strong, and weaken their own influence in the region. They offered to help build the temple in an effort to exert that influence, but the Israelites said, “Thanks but no thanks. This is ours to do.” So failing their attempts at control from within, they resorted to straight out meddling—using intimidation and bribery to try to stall or stop the project.

Honestly, I think people are doing the best they can. I don’t think anyone (well, there are exceptions, but I’ll leave that for now) intentionally works to try to keep other people from flourishing. But we are all subject to our own fears and prejudices in big and small ways, and ultimately can revert to behavior that puts us first or gains us the most, even at the expense of others. Dysfunctional relationships and family systems demonstrate this regularly, as people sabotage one another seemingly without reason.

I’ve found that it’s critical for me to examine my motives before taking any sort of action, to make sure that what seems like the right thing for me to do isn’t undermining anyone else. I’ve also found that it’s critical for me to just stay out of other people’s business, and not be tempted to try to regulate anyone other than myself. It’s not always easy—especially as a parent!—but when I keep the focus on keeping my own side of the street clean, it’s easier to trust that God’s got everyone else, and I’m at much less risk of causing harm.

Have I experienced a dysfunctional relationship in which my well-being (or theirs) was undermined? How did I handle it?

*12-20*

“Then when the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read before Rehum and the scribe Shimshai and their associates, they hurried to the Jews in Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. At that time the work on the house of God in Jerusalem stopped and was discontinued until the second year of the reign of King Darius of Persia.”

— Ezra 4:23-24

The drama continues. Failing to stall the rebuilding of the temple through subterfuge and then outright intimidation, those in opposition went straight to the king and got a “cease and desist” letter. And the Jews had to obey, leaving the temple a partially-built hulk, and probably a reminder that they didn’t really have any power, despite being allowed to return to their homeland. I can only imaging how discouraging that must have been.

How many of us run into similar road blocks in our lives? An injury forces us to give up a favorite, life-giving activity. A job loss sends us into deep financial insecurity for an extended period. A medical condition takes over our lives completely. Life can throw any number of curveballs at us, and leave us in frustration or even despair. Like the Jews, we are ultimately powerless over most everything.

God doesn’t abandon us in these circumstances, just as God continued to hold and sustain God’s people despite their discouragement. When we lean into God’s loving arms, we are more able to reach a level of acceptance of what is, and hope for the gifts God will continue to give us one way or another.

How does God help me get through periods of uncertainty or discouragement?

*12-21*

“And now, if it seems good to the king, have a search made in the royal archives there in Babylon, to see whether a decree was issued by King Cyrus for the rebuilding of this house of God in Jerusalem. Let the king send us his pleasure in this matter.”

— Ezra 5:17

Regimes change. The circumstances of our lives shift, challenges ebb and flow, and the fact of change is the only guarantee. After being forced to stop working on the temple in Jerusalem, the Jews appealed to the new king, Darius, and reminded him that it was his predecessor, Xerxes who originally decreed that they could build it, and would he please seek the original decree that proves it. Darius, in fact, does, and re-grants permission for the project to go forward.

While some of us do face challenges that aren’t easily resolved, much of the time the issues we deal with are time limited. Life course-corrects, sometimes all of itself, sometimes through dedicated action on our parts, sometimes with outside help. In the moment of difficulty, it can seem like this is going to be the way it always is. It’s scary. But in my own experience, I have found that nothing is forever, especially not the lows and frustrations. I trust that God has my back and will be there to sustain me until the tide turns.

How does it feel when a seemingly impossible challenge finally resolves?

*12-22*

“The people of Israel, the priests and the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.”

— Ezra 6:16

Having to wait can make things much sweeter. This section of Ezra outlines all the frustrations and challenges of finally getting the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt following the Babylonian exile. From the excitement of the laying of the foundation to the numerous roadblocks thrown up by the locals to the cessation of construction under Artaxerxes, to the final go-ahead by Darius, it was an exercise in patience. Then, at long last, the temple was completed, and the people celebrated.

I sometimes struggle with patience. When I figure out what it is I want, I want it… well… now. And a lot of the time, it’s simply not up to me. There are circumstances I can’t control, roadblocks in the way, or it’s just going to take time. This is when I have to pray for patience, and trust that all good things can and do happen in God’s time, not on my schedule. If I can let go of control and just take the next right indicated action, I can move on with what’s in front of me to do and leave the rest to God. In those times, when whatever it is I was hoping to do or be or have finally comes to fruition, the outcome is so much more rewarding for having had to wait. It makes me truly value what’s happened, and elevates my state of gratitude to God. Like the Jews dedicating the temple, I can celebrate it with joy!

What have I had to wait for in life? Did waiting make the outcome more rewarding for me?

*12-23*

“On the fourteenth day of the first month the returned exiles kept the passover.”

— Ezra 6:19

Observing sacred rituals brings us closer together as a community of God. Having finally completed the temple, the center of worship life for the Jewish community in Jerusalem, the people resumed the observation of the annual celebration that most loudly proclaimed them the people of God: the Passover.

And here we are at the end of Advent, ready to celebrate Christmas tomorrow evening and the day after. And while Easter is really the greatest proclamation of our faith in Christ Jesus—we are an “Easter people”!—Christmas is also a time when our shared rituals bring us together as the Body of Christ in a statement of who we are and whose we are. God comes to us in the human person of Jesus, humbly among the animals in a stable, a weak and wholly dependent baby in a manger. Candlelight, caroling, garlands, special foods, family time—all these and more help us center ourselves in what it means to be a member of the communion of saints throughout history and around the world. May your personal, family, and community rituals draw you closer to God this Christmas.

What practices do I observe at Christmastime that help connect me to the greater Church community?

*12-24*

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

— Luke 1:76-77

Main Idea: The work of building God’s kingdom is meant to be shared—and that means that the joy of God’s grace is, too.

It’s curious that, in this passage of text, Elizabeth is the one who corrects her neighbors and relatives. After all, we are told that instructions to call her child “John” were given to Zechariah—we are also told that Zechariah is the person whom this community considers ultimately authoritative regarding her child’s name. (Zechariah doesn’t just reiterate the name “John” for the crowd. He also goes on to prophesy in Verses 67-80, shutting down any potential arguments like those they presented to Elizabeth).

While she is the one whose body bears the literal weight of this promise from God, Elizabeth actually seems to have very little to do with the birth of John as it is relayed here. Her involvement is passive—it is simply mentioned.

So why would the author of the Gospel of Luke include Elizabeth at all in this back-and-forth at the briss? What is the point of having her intercede if the crowd won’t listen to her or believe her?

The Spirit could be trying to tell us on this last Sunday of Advent—this Christmas Eve—that the work of God is so big, so incredible and so unlike anything else we encounter in our lives that the news of it doesn’t always take or sink in the first time around.

If we read between the lines in this passage, we know that Zechariah told Elizabeth everything that the angel told him. It seems like the two of them considered this promise to be a team venture, and not just because Elizabeth was the one who would conceive, grow, deliver, and raise John. It’s clear to us as readers that Elizabeth had internalized the cosmic significance of the angel’s word—it’s clear that she believed down to her bones that her son would be an integral part of God’s work in the world and that his name needed to reflect that. Elizabeth knew that the angel was telling the truth, so she was determined to follow the path he laid out, down to the details of it (details like John’s name). There aren’t many other reasons why she would have ignored tradition or gone against the grain when her neighbors and family members suggested calling her child after his father.

Zechariah is a fierce advocate in this story. He defends and supports Elizabeth in what she is saying, mirroring her faith and strengthening it in the process. Because the two of them are united by the word of God, and because they profess it together, they are able to instill awe and belief where there was once skepticism and doubt. They are able to turn the focus of an entire community toward something divine instead of something mundane. They are able to plant the idea of something new instead of promulgating the same old, same old.

There are going to be seasons in each of our faith journeys where we feel like Elizabeth—unheard, discredited and brushed aside. There are going to be seasons, too, where we feel like Zechariah—chosen, valued and inspired. Our good news today is that the word of God is only ever meant to be heard, understood and internalized as a community venture. We will have each other to lean on and we will have opportunities to advocate for each other. We can expect that living out God’s promises will bring challenges with it, but we can also expect that it will bring joy beyond our wildest imagination.

*12-25*

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

— Luke 2:7

Main Idea: The baby Jesus is our promise of God’s topsy-turvy justice.

The author of the Luke is known as the “historian” of all of the gospel authors. He values a high level of context and includes a lot of details in his accounts of Jesus’s life in the hopes of legitimizing the story, or building the most credibility possible for Jesus’s case.

The fact that Chapter 2 of his Gospel opens with a decree from Emperor Augustus could simply be a natural consequence of Luke’s style—a way to explain the time and place of the story, not to mention Jesus’s family ties to the line of David. However, it could also serve a theological purpose. The story of Jesus’s birth opens by centering Augustus, the grown, established, authoritative and embodiment of Empire who lives in a palace and who everybody knows and who has thousands upon thousands of people interrupting their routines and uprooting their lives to respond to his command for a census count. In contrast, the story of Jesus’s birth closes by centering a newborn baby, the vulnerable and completely dependent embodiment of a merciful promise who nobody knows, who nobody was prepared for and who, as a result, came into the world in the lowliest of places.

One way we can interpret this narrative trajectory is to proclaim that no matter what we consider our starting point in our faith journey—and no matter where we are on that journey now—God promises us the same ending point. And that ending point is the turning of our world on its head. That ending point is justice. That ending point is a divine love that will stop at nothing to seek us out, even if seeking us out means becoming one of us. That ending point is Jesus.

The Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise in Luke 1:46-55, tells us in no uncertain terms that God is all about the reversal of power as we know it. God scatters the proud. God lowers the powerful and lifts up the lowly. God feeds the hungry and turns the wealthy away empty-handed. Our snippet of Psalm 146 makes it clear that God’s power is paradoxical—that while God’s influence expands farther and deeper than we could ever imagine, it tends to shows up in the little things. In our everyday lives. God makes sure that those who are at the highest risk of feeling alone never have to. God sabotages wickedness. God offers clarity and freedom and mercy.

As we go into Christmas Day celebrating the fact that Jesus is here, we can also celebrate what that means for us and for all of God’s children around the world who rejoice alongside us: that God’s justice is what will have the last word. That God’s justice is what our stories build to. That God’s justice is finally here and ready to empower us in building up God’s kingdom.

*12-26*

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

— Luke 2:17-18

Main Idea: As Jesus embodies the promises of God, we can embody the acceptance of those promises.

There are many points of difference between Luke’s account of the Christmas story and Matthew’s that can leave us wondering what really happened on the night Jesus was born. Are we talking about shepherds or wise men? Is Herod involved or not? Did angels lead these people to Jesus, or was it a star? Could it be that both of these stories happened independent of each other?

Rather than getting caught up in the significance of these details, it might be more helpful to focus on the one thing that these stories have in common: while the people seeking Jesus knew what they were looking for, they didn’t actually know what to expect upon finding it.

Angels gave the shepherds guidance and encouragement; Herod gave the wise men a mission and instructions for executing it. But once the shepherds found Mary and Joseph—once the wise men knelt down to pay homage to Jesus—the magic, surprise, and beauty of encountering a fulfilment of ancient prophecy changed them forever—changed them in a way they couldn’t have foreseen; in a way they might not even been able to imagine or known how to hope for.

“Amazement” and “glory” are the words that Luke uses to describe this change. “Overwhelming joy” is how Matthew puts it. Whatever the exact verbiage, the shepherds and wise men react to Jesus so strongly and so explicitly that it is clear to us, as readers, that they are being transformed in the moment. The shepherds tell everybody they know what happened to them and why it matters. The wise men defy the ruling authorities of their day and make their own plans to keep traveling instead of returning to inform Herod as they had originally promised to do. It’s almost certain that none of them had planned on doing any of that as they were traveling to Bethlehem. But here they are. As the baby Jesus embodies the promises of God, the shepherds and the wise men embody the acceptance of those promises and the all-consuming delight that stems from that acceptance.

God’s hope for us when we hear the news that Jesus is finally here is that we experience amazement. That we experience glory. That we are so overwhelmed with joy that we can’t help but return to our familiar world with unfamiliar and radically new inspiration. Our good news this Christmas Day is that we have found what we have been looking for in Jesus, but that he is so different, so much better, and so much more than we every could have expected.

*12-27*

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

— Luke 1:30-31

Even good news can be scary. As a faithful Jew, and one whom it appears has an extraordinary grasp of scripture, Mary was waiting for the coming of the messiah. She couldn’t possibly have known she would be the one to bring him into the world, of course. So I imagine the angel’s message was met with conflicting emotions: confusion (why me?), fear (what will happen to me?), and intense joy (the messiah is coming now!!!). The angel’s first words: don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid that I’m an angel. Don’t be afraid of what comes next. Rejoice for you have found favor with God. You are chosen, Mary, for this incredible and terrifying work of changing the world forever.

God calls us into that same work. Not literally—we will not give birth to the human incarnation of God in a biological sense. But in real and vital ways, it is our call to bring Jesus into the world every day of our lives. To work for justice and peace and be Jesus to those who are oppressed and suffering through our words and deeds. To see Jesus in the faces of our neighbors and in all of creation. It is good work. It is hard work. It can be scary work. But rejoice! For you have found favor with God. You are chosen for this incredible and terrifying work of changing the world forever!

How do I see myself called to bring Jesus into the world today?

*12-28*

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

— Luke 1:51-53

Jesus turns everything on its head. With the idea of “Christendom” so established in the western world, Biblical themes and ideas so deeply embedded in our culture that we don’t even realize their origin, being Christian the accepted “norm” in society, we forget that when Jesus came into the world, it wasn’t to uphold the status quo, but to completely uproot it. We can fall into complacency thinking that Jesus accomplished what he came to do on the cross and we’re off the hook. That this—what and how we are living now—is the natural outcome of his work. Not so! Our current systems are set up to enrich the few at the expense of the many, to oppress anyone who doesn’t fit into a white-supremacist, heteronormative worldview, to ignore the needs of those experiencing poverty, sickness, imprisonment, and more. Were Jesus to be born into this world now, Mary could sing the same song, praising God that the current status quo would be upended in favor of the meek and the lowly.

This Christmas season, let us be ever mindful that while we carol the savior and enjoy the trappings of the holiday, the truth is that we are a far cry from the life and the world that God brings to bear in Jesus Christ. See it not as a reason for guilt, but a call to joyful action in gratitude for the gift of God with us!

What things do I think Jesus would speak out against in our modern world? Why?

*12-29*

“After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.”

— Luke 2:21

Jesus was a human boy, a member of the Jewish community. One of the most incredible things to hold onto when we think about Jesus’ birth was that he, although God, was also entirely a particular human being at a particular time in a particular place and culture. At eight days old, he was taken to the temple for a bris—circumcision—and formal naming. This simple fact leads to others: he had to have his diapers changed, learn to eat, to walk, to talk, to dress himself. He probably fell down and scraped his knees on more than one occasion. Chances are he was naughty sometimes—some people might not want to believe that, holding onto the fact that Jesus, being God, was perfect. But I’m pretty sure that Jesus was also a toddler, testing boundaries to see where he ended and the world began. He had favorite foods. He got bug bites. Sometimes he couldn’t sleep. I love taking time to think of all the ways Jesus was just like me, and know that he understands what it feels like when I accidentally burn myself in the kitchen, or stub my toe, or feel fear about my parents’ health issues or troubles in my community. Yes, Jesus was God. But God in a way that God had never been before. I find that a great comfort.

What does it mean to me that Jesus was fully human and part of a particular human community?

*12-30*

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

— Matthew 2:10-11

In the midst of celebrating the human person of Jesus, the Magi give us a stark reminder that Jesus was, in fact, God. He was foretold in their astrologer prophecies, down to the time and place of his birth. And when the magi came, their gifts were representative of the future Jesus would experience: gold for a king, frankincense for a deity, and myrrh for embalming the body of the dead—Jesus crucified.

What must Mary and Joseph have thought when these strangers from a far country showed up with such extravagant gifts for their toddler? I’m certain they were already aware of his divine nature, considering the events surrounding his birth. But these magi weren’t even Jews! If Jesus was to be the messiah for the Jewish people, where were these Gentiles coming from to worship him? It was a sign that Jesus was way more than anyone could have expected and was for way more than just one single community of people.

We would do well to find ways to relate to the magi in our own lives—to see Jesus for who he was (fully human but also fully divine) and to recognize that he doesn’t belong to any one denomination or sect or ethnic group or geographical community. Jesus reigns over all the world, claiming each and every human being and all of creation in boundless love.

Do I sometimes feel like I “own” Jesus in some way more than another person? Why or why not?

*12-31*

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’”

— Mark 1:14-15

Main Idea: Our God works as much in between the lines of our faith stories as God works in the headlines.

This opening chapter in Mark moves fast. In just 20 verses, multiple huge stories are thrown at us as readers: the ministry of John the Baptist, John’s foretelling of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the arrival and baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, the testing of Jesus in the wilderness and the call of the first of Jesus’s disciples. Any one of these stories could fill chapters on its own. So why might the author of the Gospel of Mark have sped through them like this?

Part of the answer lies in the fact that Mark is the most notoriously choppy of all the Gospel accounts. His Greek is the most unpolished and rudimentary, his level of context is the lowest and his focus is very much on Jesus as an adult, traveling and practicing his public ministry. The author of Mark doesn’t linger too much on any one idea, and he doesn’t spend any time on filler, either. Immediacy is the theme that rises to the top throughout all his writing. He likes to get straight to the point (remember that Mark is also the chronologically earliest Gospel account in our canon. It lays out the very basic points upon which the other accounts were able to expand given more time and more information).

So, a better question for us to ask might be why the team of ministerial leaders who assembled the Narrative Lectionary choose this specific portion of Mark for us to read after Christmas as we head into a new calendar year and liturgical season knowing that Jesus has broken into the world.

It could be because Verses 1-20 are all we really need to understand the full-circle story of a call to a life with Jesus. A life knowing Jesus. A life in Jesus. We see five primary plot points in this passage:

1) Jesus is foretold

2) Jesus arrives

3) Jesus is named and claimed by God

4) Jesus’s name and claim is tested

5) Jesus prevails with the help of God

And then, we see Jesus set the exact same cycle into motion for his (eventual) followers:

1) Jesus foretells the kingdom of God

2) Jesus comes to his beloved as an embodiment of the kingdom of God

3) Jesus names and claims his beloved

We know that these beloved will eventually be tested. We know that these beloved will eventually prevail with the help of God. We know that this is how the good news of Jesus spreads. That this is how grace is shared. That this is how people are transformed forever and ever, in and through and by Jesus.

Now we are a part of this cycle. Now that Jesus is here, his journey to the cross begins—and his call to us to join him rings loud and clear. As long as we have been named and claimed by God, no trials, tribulations or tests on that journey can separate us from God’s help and provision. Our snippet from Psalm 91 outlines this promise: “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.” What the Spirit is telling us today is that these headlines that make up the beginning of the Gospel of Mark actually speak to the fact that God dwells with us in between the lines. As much as God shows up in our big, obvious big plot points, God shows up in what’s insinuated—what the author doesn’t mention—too.