**Daily Devotions**

**January 2024**

*01-01*

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

— Psalm 91:11-12

It’s not always easy to trust God. When I read passages like this, I am immediately tempted to think of everyone for whom tragedy or oppression or chronic or life-threatening illness is a part of life. Can we really find hope in this promise that if we just trust God, God will protect us from harm?

My life has had its share of challenges. Addiction, neurodivergent children, dysfunctional marriage ultimately ending in divorce, financial challenges, and relatively minor but frustrating health issues are all a part of my story, past and present. I have had profound experiences of God showing up in my life directly and indirectly over the years, and of deep trust that God is walking with me through everything life has handed me. As a result, I could say I whole-heartedly agree with the sentiment of this passage. But in all honesty, I can’t promise that if I get that breast cancer diagnosis I am at such high risk for I won’t immediately feel betrayed and abandoned, and find it impossible to trust. Or that if some unexpected tragedy strikes, same deal. I have such incredible respect and awe for those whose lives have been unspeakably damaged through circumstances beyond their control and who continue to have faith that God loves and cares for them. I would like to think I, too, would maintain my state of trust no matter what happens, and I follow daily spiritual practices to help me in that regard. But I just don’t know. In the end, I just have to trust that if the worst happens, God will preserve my trust.

What is the worst challenge I have ever faced? How did it affect my faith in God?

*01-02*

“Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’”

— Malachi 3:7

How shall we return? This is the essence of all spiritual practice—showing up for our covenant relationship with God. There are as many forms of spiritual practice as there are people in this world, and in this diversity, God finds joy, I am certain. My practice includes (almost) daily prayer journaling time, regular participation in worshipping with my church community, daily literature/writing time for my recovery programs, and the every-meal spiritual sacrifice of my food (in committing it ahead of time, and then weighing/measuring it to my “prescription”). It can also include walks in nature, deep spiritual and philosophical discussions with my partner, and the practice of writing for Clergy Stuff. Then there are all the times God meets me wherever I happen to be in some serendipitous moment and I stop to offer gratitude. There are as many ways to “return to God” as there are to wander away, I suppose. And I admit to doing that on the regular, whether in thought or word or deed. So these spiritual “returnings” help center me—remind me who I am and whose I am, reminders I need all the time. The best news of all, of course, is that as many times as I return, God is there waiting with open arms, happy to see me, keeping up their side of the covenant always.

What different kinds of spiritual practices do I have? Are there things I do that I didn’t even realize were actually spiritual practices?

*01-03*

“The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

— Isaiah 40:8

I recently turned fifty-two years old. In July I started dating for the first time since my divorce more than three years ago. Incredibly, I met the love of my life on only my second try (using an online dating site). It’s exciting and bewildering in the “I’m completely gobsmacked by what God just handed to me” sort of way. But, of course, it’s not enough to be blown away by all the goodness and joy of it. Instead, I have to be impatient. I’m not able to drop everything in my whole life and just run away with him, as much as I’d like to. And I keep grumbling to God, “But I’m fifty-two! How many really good years do I have left???”

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Yes, I’m finite. I will wither and fade away like the grass. But it’s okay. God is infinite love, grace, and power. As long as I’m plugged into God first, I can enjoy the gifts God has given without fear of losing them. Rooted and grounded in God’s eternal word, I am free to live to the fullest in the here and now. Thanks be to God.

Do I give much thought to my own mortality? Why or why not?

*01-04*

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

— Isaiah 44:8

Do not be afraid. Sometimes that’s a tall order. There are things in this world that are cause for anxiety or even alarm. There are actions we need to be taking individually and collectively for the sake of our neighbors and all of creation. Yet there is so little we actually have direct control over, so it’s natural to be afraid. The issue comes when we let our fear dominate our daily living, which benefits no one. Here God is speaking to Israel, who faced constant threat of warfare from kingdoms and empires all around it. God declares God’s unwavering care for Israel and for us. When our fears begin to diminish our lives, we can lean back into God’s arms and trust that if we do our part, it is enough—the outcome is God’s. It's simple, but it’s not easy. Like most things, it requires daily practice—this turning over of the things we can’t control. But over time it can become grooved, and we find that we’re actually more effective than when we are driven by our fears.

How much do I trust God to handle the big, scary issues in the world?

*01-05*

“Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.”

— Joel 2:28-29

The Holy Spirit does not discriminate. We human beings create categories and boundaries to separate ourselves from one another, and we try to assign value to each other based on where we place ourselves. But the fact is that God lives in each and every one of us equally, and the Spirit moves within us, giving us life and breath and incredible potential. That means that you can prophesy and dream dreams and see visions that can transform the world. You might think such things are for others somehow more qualified. But God doesn’t call the qualified. God equips the called. So maybe we can all do better at trusting our guts when we feel like God might be calling us to speak a word of truth or take an action for change and just go for it, instead of waiting for the “right” person to step up.

When have I felt the Holy Spirit calling me to take action? How did I respond?

*01-06*

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

— Isaiah 42:1

This is Jesus, but it is also us. We are God’s servants and God delights in us. God puts God’s spirit upon us and calls us to bring forth justice. Walking in the way of Jesus necessarily puts us on this path. We cannot simply sit back and hope for the best, basking in our privilege not to act while so many struggle for survival and basic human rights. We don’t have to become itinerant preachers and wander the countryside. We don’t have to literally go to the cross. But God equips each of us to make a contribution in our own way. What’s important is to set aside the false narrative of charismatic people single-handedly transforming the world, as Jesus did. For us, as finite humans, our only successes in bringing about justice are collective. Martin Luther did not single-handedly bring about the Reformation. Sure, he lit the powder keg, but it wasn’t long before all kinds of people were taking action (in some cases to protect Luther from assassination!) Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. did not act on his own. He was part of an enormous movement of committed people from all walks of life. Throughout our long history of changing the world for the better there are thousands of unknown, unsung servants of God who walked in Jesus’ footsteps, filled with the Holy Spirit, in whom God delighted. This is our call. May we heed it with joy.

How do I act on God’s call to servanthood?

*01-07*

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

— Mark 1:22

Main Idea: The secret is out—Jesus will always be there for us when we need him most.

It can seem confusing to us living 2,000-some years after this witness why Jesus would ask so many times in this passage for people to keep his identity a secret, first because what he is doing is incredible, but also because he doesn’t exactly seem like he’s trying to keep his identity a secret himself. He teaches and preaches. He casts out multiple demons and cures sickness after sickness, all in front of families and crowds. He literally says to Simon and the people with him in Verse 38, “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.” So why is Jesus asking for so many in the crowds following him to stay hush-hush? Why does he flee to the country to try to stop the momentum of gossip and news from spreading like wildfire?

There are many theories about this, and most of them get heady, fast. After all, whatever our answer might be, it says something big about how we interpret Christ’s very personhood. But the possibility exists that the answer is very simple. Pragmatic, even. Jesus could have been requesting what many theologians and scholars now call the “messianic secret” because he wants to be the first one to break the news about who he is and what he came earthside to do. If we really think about it, he is the only person who knows his story. This passage brings us to a place in history where Jesus is unprecedented—no one like Jesus has ever existed before; nothing even close to Jesus’s mission has ever been conceived or expressed. Maybe Jesus wanted to teach, preach, exorcise and heal so that he could determine the starting point and the course of his narrative. Maybe Jesus wanted people to stay quiet so that he could have some time to do his own PR work. His own brand management.

We’re at a much later place in history. We’re the ones reading the story, not the ones in it. And that means that we can hear the promise of Jesus’s love and transformation differently than the ones in it. We know who Jesus is. We know what he came earthside to do, and how that turned out. We know what’s coming on this journey we’re taking with Jesus to the cross. And beyond! We’re Jesus’s PR team now. There’s nothing we need to keep secret.

So, when we read that the people who truly understand Jesus are people possessed by demons and people afflicted with illness, we know that means something beautiful. When we read that the people who know exactly who Jesus is are people suffering so intensely that they have ceased being themselves, we know that a promise lives there.

And that promise is that in those seasons when we face obstacles that seem insurmountable—when we are debilitated by grief or anxious beyond imagination—we can lean on hope that our solutions, our healing and, ultimately, our peace will come into focus for us more clearly than ever before. The Spirit is telling us this morning that when we need Jesus most, we will be able to recognize Jesus more than most—that Jesus will come to us with love we can share.

*01-08*

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.”

— Psalm 103:2

A relationship with God has lots of benefits. I can only speak for myself, of course, but I’ve spent the last nineteen years in a disciplined 12-step recovery program for food addiction that requires (among other things) daily phone calls, reading and writing assignments, and an active prayer and meditation practice. Despite a lifelong love of my religious tradition, I didn’t really have a connection with God until I hit bottom and started looking honestly at all the barriers I’d thrown up between myself and God.

The results were sudden and drastic—I stopped eating compulsively and woke up to the real, vital, immediate presence of God in my life—but also slow—it took years to let go of the baggage I’d accumulated in the first three decades of my life, and years more to get through the day-to-day challenges of the next two decades (I’m still working on it!)

And through all of it: incredible, incredible benefits. A healthy body, a calm mind, an open spirit, a deep trust that God has my back and wants what’s best for me, a feeling of being equipped to handle whatever life throws at me, a sense of call and purpose and meaning in my life and acceptance of the fact that this ebbs and flows and changes over time. Not a day passes that I don’t bless God for all God’s benefits.

What benefits do I experience in my relationship with God?

*01-09*

“Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth! Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants. Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits; let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy, let them shout from the tops of the mountains. Let them give glory to the Lord, and declare his praise in the coastlands.”

— Isaiah 42:10-12

Sea, coastlands, desert, village, mountains: Nature! It’s hubris to think that human beings are the pinnacle of all creation and the only creatures loved and redeemed by God. All the universe—animate and even inanimate—sings the praises of God. If you’re quiet enough you can hear it. In the distant cry of a hawk, in the hissing of the summer rain, in the quaking of aspen leaves, in the babble of a creek, in the chirping of myriad chickadees, the scrabble of squirrel claws on tree bark as they chase one another up and down, in the crunch of autumn leaves beneath your feet, in the reverent hush of the world during a gentle snowfall. We are not above this, but part of it, inextricably interconnected by the fact that God spoke all of us into being, and continues to create, re-create, and co-create with the whole of existence each new day.

Sing to God a new song and praise God from the end of the earth! Lift up your voice with the sea and the desert and the mountains! Exult in God’s love for you!

Do I feel closer to God when I am in nature? Why or why not?

*01-10*

“I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.’”

— Psalm 2:7-8

This is the psalmist. This is Jesus. This is me. This is you. Just as God called Jesus into servanthood (see January 6), God calls us into sonship. Yes, we are created by God (as opposed to begotten) and yet we know we have been adopted as God’s own children, and can call God “Abba” or “Daddy” or “Mama.” God claims us as God’s children and promises us an inheritance we can’t possibly imagine. It’s not simply offspring and land—these were the signs of favor for those early worshippers of God, the things by which God’s favor were measured. These days, most of us have moved away from the idea that worshipping God will result in prosperity—God promises us nothing of the sort. But God does promise God’s never-failing presence in our lives no matter what is going on around us. God stands with us in our struggles, weeps with us in our grief, sings with us in our joy, and rests with us in our moments of true peace. May you rest in the loving arms of your mother God, knowing that you are loved and nurtured as God’s own blessed child.

What does it mean to me to be a “child of God?”

*01-11*

“He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!”

— Psalm 113:9

God redeems us. Yes, on the cross, obviously—a once and for all liberation from death. But also in the day-to-day. We are all subject to the unpredictability of life. We all face challenges. We all carry baggage from our pasts. In the time of the Psalmist, the highest joy a woman could experience—the proof of her value and God’s blessings to her—was to bear children. A barren woman was to be pitied; she was whispered about by the other women, who wondered what she had done wrong that God had closed her womb. Of course that’s not how God works, but even now in our modern context we look at people who are experiencing challenges or who don’t quite fit into societal “norms” or who never seem to be able to catch a break and our instinct is to blame them for their misfortunes. Without being explicit, we wonder what they’ve done “wrong” that God seems to have abandoned them. It’s easier to default to that explanation than to accept the randomness of life—that’s scary, because we could be next!

No, God stands with us in the midst of our challenges. God opens the barren woman’s womb and makes her the mother of children—metaphorically this means God redeems us in our pain and leads us toward healing. There is a part for us to play in this. It’s not magic. God calls us into a covenant relationship in which both parties are responsible to one another. God wants us to be healthy, joyous, and free, and for that to happen, God calls us to make choices that are life-giving and lead to flourishing. Sometimes (often?) we all need help figuring out what these are, and God is quick to provide people with wisdom and insight who can help lead us in that direction.

No matter what is happening to us or around us, we can lean into God, seek help, and trust that God redeems us one way or another.

How have I experienced God’s redemption in my life?

*01-12*

“The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. ”

— Psalm 146:9

We’re all taught “stranger danger!” as kids. Or, at least, I was and my kids were. I can’t speak for everyone. But the concept of “strangers” in our society carries deep mistrust. Yet everyone who is a stranger to you is still a human being, a beloved child of God, deserving of love—love as an action, not a feeling.

The fact of the matter is that nearly everyone in a world is a stranger to each of us. I am a stranger to you, and you are all strangers to me. Most likely, every Israeli victim of Hamas, every Palestinian victim of Israel is a stranger to us. Every Ukrainian child who is killed in the war with Russia, every Russian soldier conscripted to serve is a stranger. And at the same time, these are our brothers and sister, our parents and children, our siblings in God’s family. God is watching over them. Holding them. And God calls us to show them love in whatever way we can, even (and especially) if it is only to pray for them, these people we may never meet.

In God’s eyes, no one is a stranger. May we extend love and service to every single human being we come across in our daily lives, whether we know them personally or not.

When have I shown kindness to a stranger? How did it make me feel?

*01-13*

“My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn.”

— Psalm 108:1-2

Music is deeply embedded in my religious tradition. I happen to be Lutheran, and I have read how, going back to Martin Luther, Lutheran families sang together. They sang in church. They sang at work. I have always taken this musicality for granted as being in my blood. My great grandfather G. John Markworth, was an organist and music teacher, as was his son (my grandma’s brother) Henry J. Markworth, who was also a composer. So maybe it’s no wonder that the psalms have such an appeal to me, especially the ones that are about praising God with music.

God is music! I hear God’s voice in the cello, the oboe, the French horn, in choirs and tympani and Celtic reels, in children singing (which just makes me cry every time!) and in intense pop music. I feel connected to God when I sing, when I write music, when I crank the stereo in my car (it’s hilarious how often my young adult children tell their mom to “turn it down!”)

The Psalmists knew this. The people felt it. And to this day, many, many people connect to God through experiencing music. Not everyone is musical, of course. So my question for you today is:

Where do I most experience the exuberant, joyful voice of God in my life?

*01-14*

“So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them.”

— Mark 2:2

Main Idea: Because he is uniquely human and divine, Jesus has the unique ability to help us reframe and reprioritize so that we don’t miss the forest for the trees.

Jesus is asked a lot of questions about his behavior in this passage from Mark. First Jesus is surrounded by a crowd so large and in such need of his healing that a handful of men drop their paralyzed friend through the roof in order to skip the line. Jesus is moved by their faith—their hunger for his ministry—and proclaims God’s forgiveness for everyone to hear. A group of scribes in the crowd wonders aloud how he could do such a thing. A little later, when Jesus eats at Levi’s house alongside tax collectors and sinners, another group of scribes asks why he would do such a thing. And finally, when the Pharisees and John’s disciples enter a period of fasting, but Jesus and his disciples do not, everyday people flock to Jesus pushing him for an explanation.

These questions about Jesus’s behavior are more rhetorical than genuine—more judgmental than curious. The scribes and the crowd are challenging Jesus because they have assumptions about what he should be doing and how he should be doing it, and he is not playing by their rules. We could read the “how?” and the “why?” in this passage as, “Jesus, stop!”

This is a story all about how Jesus helps us (re)focus day to day; how Jesus pulls us aways from those assumptions we carry—those judgments we spew—to take a minute to consider whether we are asking the right questions. Lots of things are important, but are we focused on what matters? The two are not always the same.

For example (taking a cue from Jesus physician metaphor here), if you were admitted to the ER with a gun wound, would you want your nurses and your doctors to sit you down and ask for your height and your weight? How many times your exercise a day, and whether or not you smoke? Absolutely not! You would want them to get you on the operating table. Getting information might be important to your overall care, but getting to the gun wound is what matters in the moment.

Jesus’s authority and the mechanics behind it might be important, but what matters is that Jesus’s authority and the mechanics behind it empowered a man to walk when he could not walk before. Jesus’s attention and presence is important, but what matters is that Jesus’s attention and presence are for everyone—even people you might not like or expect to be worthy of it. Adherence to the law is important, but what matters is the living Word of God that brings gospel in the midst of it.

OurGod is a God who doesn’t want us to miss the forest for the trees. Our God is a God who helps us in matters of triage. We hear this morning that Jesus is a new, unshrunk piece of fabric. A patch that can’t be forced onto an old coat. We hear this morning that Jesus is a fresh wine that threatens to burst any used skins at the seams. Our promise as we continue in this liturgical season is that Jesus will help us break free from old (and sometimes limited) ways of thinking and focus on what matters.

*01-15*

“As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.”

— Psalm 103:13-14

God loves us in our finitude. The human body is astonishing in its resilience, its inner workings, its ability to heal. When you look at the complexity of human life, it’s a wonder any of us is successfully born in the first place, much less survive the daily gauntlet of potential peril. And at the same time, our bodies frighteningly fragile and transient. The seemingly strongest person can be laid low by a sudden illness or a freak accident.

God, who created us from the earth—adamah—and breathed the Holy Spirit into our lungs, knows that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and that we are also precarious and finite. And God has compassion for us in all the challenges our physical complexity and its delicate balancing act can lead to. When we are faced with illness or the natural ravages of aging (I’m not fond of the arthritis in my thumbs or the nagging pain in my hip or my need for bifocals) God is right there with us, experiencing our illnesses and infirmities with us, and holding us in our discomfort and fear. God knows how we were made and remembers that we are dust. And God loves us so fiercely as to have taken on flesh in Christ Jesus and experienced even more directly what it means to be embodied. God still loves us that fiercely, and celebrates our embodiedness with us, whether we are in good health or poor.

Does it give me comfort to know that God has compassion for my bodily frailty?

*01-16*

“Then he said to them, ‘The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.’”

— Mark 2:27

Rules—and rest—are a gift. God didn’t create human beings just to have an excuse to try to make their lives difficult by giving them a million little micro-managing expectations. We are created in freedom—expressions of the divine creative love of our God. We are created in God’s image—to be co-creators with God, to live in relationship with God and our fellow human beings, to have life and have it abundantly.

Rules, laws, guidelines, basic moral expectations are ways for us to experience flourishing with and among our neighbors. God does not call us to rest for the sake of enforcing some arbitrary show of control over our lives. God calls us to rest because rest is absolutely critical to our flourishing. When we don’t get adequate rest, our physical health suffers. Our mental health suffers. Our ability to have grace and love for our neighbors suffers. Conflict becomes inevitable and challenging to overcome. When we take action to conform our will to God’s will for us, we are, counterintuitively, more free than if we simply do whatever we want when we want. God’s will for us is that we live in harmony with all of creation: that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors (human and non-human) as ourselves. May we always remember that God’s rules are liberating.

When have I resisted God’s directive to rest? What was the result?

*01-17*

“He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.”

— Mark 3:5

On the surface, this interaction seems preposterous. Is it really “work” for Jesus to heal someone? Is this man’s well-being really less important than adherence to a religious observance? Would people have just stood around ignoring someone’s need in order to appear to be following the rules?

But how preposterous is it, really? Don’t people do just this sort of thing all the time? How often do we get annoyed when a kid is being crabby during worship? Why do we find ourselves mildly irritated with that visitor who has no idea how to navigate the communion line? Or with those visitors who’ve sat in our seats? Silly examples, of course, but might we look at them a little more critically and ask ourselves whether we aren’t a bit Pharisee in our desire for our own comfort in our religious observances?

The fact is that people who are struggling make other people uncomfortable; people who don’t exactly follow an accepted script make other people uncomfortable. Jesus made and continues to make people uncomfortable, by crossing boundaries, ignoring norms, and standing with those who suffer.

When have I thought or acted like the people in the synagogue who wanted to accuse Jesus?

*01-18*

“He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him; for he had cured many, so that all who had diseases pressed upon him to touch him.”

— Mark 3:9-10

This image is a little scary. I think of the horrible news stories about fans crushed to death at concerts or shoppers crushed to death at Black Friday sales. I remember my experience trying to get out of Trafalgar Square in London in the minutes after the new year of 1995, along with thousands of others all rushing to get to the tube station before the trains stopped running.

Massive crowds are dangerous things, especially when whipped into a frenzy. Jesus had been healing people, and so many more were now “pressing upon him” to have their own infirmities removed. Jesus had thought ahead, thankfully, so that his disciples had a boat ready for him to keep him from getting crushed. But what about the crowds themselves? I can’t imagine the precariousness of so many desperate people all trying to reach Jesus at once. Did people die for their efforts to be cured?

The world still cries out for healing. Thousands upon thousands of people struggle in body, mind, and/or spirit, desperate for healing and wholeness. Jesus is not off in some boat watching from a distance, but in the midst of them, wherever they are, experiencing their pain. Some will receive healing in this life; others will not. But none are left to be crushed by the crowds of hurting souls around them. Jesus creates a space and shares it with them.

When have I felt crushed by the challenges in my life? Where and how did I feel the presence of Jesus with me? Or did I?

*01-19*

“And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.”

— Mark 3:14-15

Jesus had waaaaay more than twelve apostles. And they certainly weren’t all men. Twelve was a significant number because it was the number of the original tribes of Israel, God’s supposedly chosen people. It seems kind of exclusive. Anyone could follow Jesus, but somehow only these few were qualified to “proclaim the message” and “cast out demons.” Surely there were more among Jesus’ followers who fit the bill. Surely there were women who were as if not more qualified than some of the men—though there might have been a practical reason not to give them authority, in that they were far less likely to be listened to. Yet there are many women named “prophetess” in Israel’s history, all the way back to Miriam, the sister of Moses.

Regardless of whether or not Jesus took this decisive action to name a specific number of men to somehow act on his behalf, the fact remains that today, every single one of us is so called. We may not drop everything (like fishing nets) and wander off into the world to proclaim the Word. But we can all, in everything we do and say, all our interactions, and through our daily work, whatever it is, proclaim Jesus’ radical welcome and healing love.

How do I live my call to discipleship in my daily life?

*01-20*

“And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.”

— Mark 3:23-24

It’s a common media trope. Some mysterious character shows up with Christ-like powers and convinces a growing number of people that he (or she) is a force for good and light and love. Then as the story goes on, more and more evidence is revealed of this person’s evil nature. The utopian future they promised becomes starkly dystopian. The people who question mysteriously disappear or turn up dead. In the end, it’s terribly obvious that this messiah-figure never did anything good—only created illusions of goodness.

The people who had it out for Jesus were accusing him of just such a thing. They saw his power and rather than seeing it as evidence of his God-sent goodness, they proclaim that he must be possessed by Satan—that the evil one is giving him the power to cast out demons.

Jesus isn’t having it. He’s not a pretender. He’s the real deal. He argues with a simple logic. If Satan attacks himself, how does it strengthen him? If Satan was a kingdom, and the kingdom was divided against itself, it would fall, just as any divided kingdom does. Nothing Jesus does in the entirety of his ministry causes harm. It’s all love and healing and wholeness, things Satan must be incapable of.

As human beings, we have a tendency to hide a bad motive (something self-serving) under a good one, even if we’re not aware of it. Our acts of goodness and love can be undercut by our need to take credit or control a situation or work for our own security at the expense of others. Despite our best intentions we might wind up like that media trope creator of dystopian chaos on some microcosmic level. But if we humbly ask, Jesus can help us act out of genuine love and service, and we can be his hands and feet bringing healing and wholeness to the world.

Have I ever done something “good” only to realize later my motives weren’t so great?

*01-21*

“He began to teach them many things in parables.”

— Mark 4:2a

Main Idea: God calls us to be sowers.

This stretch of Mark, Chapter 4 is packed full of imagery that tries to capture the essence of the kingdom of God. The most detail—the most nuance—lies in Verses 1 through 20, as Jesus draws a parallel between a sower and God. Between seeds and God’s Word. What does this parallel mean for us, today? What can it tell us about the reign of God that we are seeking, in this time and this place?

In a life of faith our tendency is to define grace as a gift, and to name God as the giver of that gift. Together, we profess that God gives the gift of grace not because we deserve it, but because we need it—because God loves us and wants us to have it. This is a beautiful idea. But at the same time, it’s dangerous. It can cause us to think of ourselves as passive. It can trick us into believing that faith happens to us and not with us. Around us and not through us.

Interpreting grace as a gift and emphasizing God’s role as the active agent can make it tempting to read this passage wondering which seed category we fit into. How deep could our roots go? Are we finding fertile soil every time we need to? Will we be able to take what God gives us and nurture it into something beautiful? Or will we fall away? Dry up? Get carried off? Which fate are we destined for? Where will the chips—or in this case, the seeds—fall?

This morning, the Holy Spirit is reminding us to find balance in our thinking and our reflecting. This morning, God is calling us to celebrate the efficacy we have in a life of faith—in a relationship with the divine. We know that God invites us to participate in the spreading of God’s word and the building of God’s reign. Long story short, we need to think of ourselves as sowers just as much as we think about ourselves as seeds. God’s kingdom is the one place where both can be true! In God’s vision of shalom that ensures flourishing for every single one of us, we receive and we give. We lead and we follow. We exert and we rest; we talk and we listen; we instigate and we react; we get it and we miss it. In God’s vision of shalom where justice is a shared reality for all of creation, there is no way we, as God’s trusted stewards, can be passive.

Reading ourselves as the sower in this story can help us imagine what leaning into the active side of grace might look like. And most of it revolves around humility. If we know what it means to be a seed—if we know that we might not always bear good fruit because we don’t understand what Jesus is trying to tell us every single time—we will be patient and persistent sowers. We will not let the seeds that get lost discourage us. We will not stop spreading what we know can thrive when the conditions are right. If we know what it means to be a seed, we will extend love and show mercy to other people when they don’t understand what Jesus is telling them every single time. When they don’t understand what we’re telling them on behalf of Jesus every single time. When they don’t take what we give them and grow it.

Building the kingdom of God means building empathy. Building the kingdom of God means building resilience. Building the kingdom of God means working our hardest to make an impact where we can, using the very grace of God that we’ve convinced ourselves means we can’t make an impact on at all. Our good news this morning is that we have a lot to do in the kingdom of God. And we have a God who will remind us to keep doing it.

*01-22*

“Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”

— Psalm 126:6

Coming through challenges is exhilarating. We all face them. Big or small, minor inconveniences or life-threatening disasters, short-term hiccups or chronic miseries. We meet them as they come, and with God’s help and the help of our friends, families, communities, professionals, and more, we endure them, sometimes with good spirits, sometimes on the verge of total collapse.

But then, if we are lucky, there comes that moment of release—that single event or sudden realization that the problem has been solved, the pain relieved, and a new life opens in front of us. We are like the Israelites being told they could go home from the Babylonian exile, their fortunes restored. They are overwhelmed with joy. Those who left in misery, bearing the seeds of their lives and shared identity, came home rejoicing, bearing the fruits of their faith and commitment. In those moments, it feels like anything is possible.

Then, of course, life settles back to normal, and new challenges arise. But may we always remember those times of joy at the overcoming of adversity, so that we might meet the next one with patience and serenity, trusting in God’s love for us and desire for our flourishing.

What’s the greatest challenge I have overcome in my life?

*01-23*

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

— Mark 3:35

The family of Jesus is, in fact, Jesus’ own body in the world. We are to be the hands and feet of Jesus, carrying out Jesus’ work. Membership in Jesus’ family is not contingent upon us doing the will of God, as this passage implies, but knowing that we are Jesus’ siblings, Jesus’ family, Jesus’ body, we are called to respond with gratitude to Jesus’ call to action. We are to happily do “the will of God.” But what is God’s will? Many people just look at the world as it is, at random happenings, at freak accidents or injustices or illnesses or oppression, and throw up their hands and say, “It’s God’s will.” I disagree vehemently. Life is random. Bad things happen to good people. People do evil to one another. God’s will is not about accepting the unacceptable, but about responding in love and service to our neighbors. Jesus never looked at a blind man or a leper or a sick woman and said, “Eh. It’s just God’s will. You just need to suck it up.” No. Jesus responded to their need. He saw them, healed them, restored them to membership in society. This is the “will of God.”

Life is generally more nuanced than the encountering of lepers and blind men. None of us can know for certain what the will of God is in any given situation. So often we act as if we know, but if we’re honest, we see our own ulterior motives—we do “good” to benefit ourselves in some way. Other times we are dealing with highly complex issues—for example, what is “God’s will” in dealing with a child who is an addict? What is helping and what is enabling? It isn’t always so clear.

As Jesus’ siblings, Jesus’ body, we are always invited into conversation with him in prayer, in conversations with others, in seeking resources. Discernment is a process. But however we discern it, we need always seek to know and do God’s will on behalf of all creation.

How do I discern whether a given action is in alignment with God’s will for me?

*01-24*

“He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.”

— Mark 4:39

I’ve experienced dead calm. I used to live in a situation in which my partner had regular health crises requiring my intervention. As soon as I would recognize the signs of an impending crash, my emotions disappeared. I moved immediately into action. The calm got me through the crisis and back to a state of normalcy. The only problem was that later—sometimes two and even three days later—the emotions would come back and I would crash. Hard.

That’s not exactly the kind of calm Jesus promises us in the storms of our lives. In Jesus we can find the kind of enduring peace that carries us through whatever challenges we face. Then again, Jesus has unbelievable grace for our humanness. Trauma is trauma. Grief is Grief. These things are nonlinear. They aren’t once and done experiences. Jesus’ love and presence may help us weather a moment of intense storminess, but he doesn’t expect that we’re “all better” permanently and be disappointed in us for lack of faith. Jesus continues to walk with us, continues to help sooth the wind and the waves that recur and recur and recur, with eternal patience, grace, and compassion.

When have I experienced Jesus’ calm in the midst of a storm in my life?

*01-25*

“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

— Matthew 13:8

Am I good soil? Of course we all want to believe we are—that we hear and understand God’s word, internalize it, and grow it in our lives, bearing fruit for the world. But there are times when I just don’t get it, times when I feel my faith withering in the face of adversity, times when the daily “have-tos” and distractions choke out the time for my spiritual practice. Does this mean the birds will eat my faith, my roots will die, or I’ll finally succumb to the cares and worries of life?

No.

Nothing is once and done in this life. It’s not like we achieve some perfect state of “good soil”-ness and from then on faith is easy for us. Faith is a process, not an event. And every time I find myself questioning the state of my “soil” is another opportunity for me to turn to God and ask for help infusing me with nutrients, water, aeration, and all the things I need to be ready to receive the guidance I need to address whatever is before me. We never have to be ashamed to find ourselves less than good soil for God’s word in any given moment.

When have I found my faith lacking? How has God helped me restore it?

*01-26*

“Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’”

— Matthew 13:10-11

I’ve never gotten this, if I’m honest. It seems kind of mean and capricious. I hear Jack Nicholson in A Few Good Men shouting, “The truth? You can’t handle the truth!” Did Jesus think so little of the crowds who were coming to him for held and guidance that he would tell them things in a code they couldn’t possible decipher? As a kid, I was always taught that Jesus used parables to make his teachings about the reign of God more relatable and understandable, not less. So why make the claim that the parables are to prevent them from understanding the secrets of God’s reign? The part of me that thinks Jesus had an extreme sassy and sarcastic streak wants to believe that Jesus just said this to his disciples because they were the ones who were too obtuse to understand the obvious meaning of the parables and that’s why they required his direct explanations. The fact remains that in our modern era, while there are a few parables we don’t get simply because we don’t get the cultural references of the time, we find the majority of parables fairly clear in what they’re trying to convey about God’s reign.

Even so, do we truly understand “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven?” No. God and God’s workings remain a mystery to us finite humans. We can get inklings, hints, and ideas. We can dig and discuss and discern. We are invited by God over and over again into sacred conversation. And we can find great joy in the not-quite-understanding, knowing that this is just an opportunity to stay in a covenant dialog with our God one day at a time.

Which Bible passages do I find the most confusing? How do I find meaning in them?

*01-27*

“For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.”

— Matthew 13:15

Jesus offers a little bit more of an explanation of his comment in yesterday’s text. And I’m still not quite buying the logic. “I speak in parables because they’re not able to understand the truth and I would heal them so that they can understand but first I’m going to confuse them by saying things they can’t possibly understand.” Are they supposed to suddenly understand when he is crucified and resurrected? Will they have this collective “aha” moment that make everything come clear? Because… well that didn’t happen. Or maybe it did for some of them, but even Jesus’ disciples were utterly confused by his death even after everything he told them to prepare them for it.

That being said, this is actually the state most of us are in most of the time. We’re so overwhelmed by and desensitized to messages due to intensive media saturation, that even if Jesus came and stood among us in the flesh right now and explained in precise language the “secrets of the kingdom” we would probably just stare blankly at him. Or think he’s crazy. We’ve experienced so much pain, witnessed so much injustice, lived with so much fear of the future that our hearts tend to be dull, our hears deaf, and our eyes closed as a basic survival mechanism.

May we take the time to practice surrender, to practice opening ourselves to Jesus’ presence in this painful and broken world, so that when he speaks to us, we might find hope and inspiration in the beautiful things he has to say.

How can I practice openness to Jesus’ words in my life?

*01-28*

“Then Jesus asked him, ‘What is your name?’ He replied, ‘My name is Legion; for we are many.’”

— Mark 5:9

Main Idea: God names us and claims us as children so that no other name—no other claim—can separate us from God or from each other.

This passage can be boiled down to a name game. Jesus starts us off. He instantly recognizes an unclean spirit in this stranger he encounters off the boat. But knowing what the unclean spirit is, or what it does, or what it’s about, isn’t enough for Jesus. He decides to go the extra mile and ask, “What is your name?” Legion answers and gives us an explanation. “My name is Legion, for we are many.” This Legion, on the other hand, doesn’t feel the need to ask anything about Jesus’ name, or what it means, because he already knows both, and he knows that none of it is good for him. “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?”

Ironically enough, the man living in the tombs is the most important part of the name game, because he doesn’t really have a name. Unlike Legion, this man is never given the opportunity to introduce or identify himself. Unlike they do with Jesus, nobody refers to this man in terms of his connections, his strengths, or his purpose. No, this man is named and claimed completely by his many, many demons. Even after Jesus expels Legion, the narrator and the townspeople in this story still refer to this man as “the demoniac.” He never ceases to be the “man who had the legion.”

Each of us has probably seen our fair share of this name game in the world. We’ve met people, and sometimes we’ve been people whose names, and eventually, whose realities stem from their vulnerabilities, their susceptibilities and their shortcomings. We’ve met and been people whose communities decide for them not only who or what they are, but also that because of it, they should be shackled and chained. And then, when that doesn’t work, that they should be cast out—unsolvable, unlovable and, ultimately, intolerable.

But the good news this morning is that God doesn’t work like that—God is taking chances on every single one of us, every day, staking an unfailing claim on each of our lives. Our Psalmist sings about this in our passage from Chapter 89. God’s love for us is a love established forever. God’s love for us is love that comes with ancestry. Paul says in Romans 8 that, “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, no, you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” In Christ, then, God has promised us an identity free from demons and transcendent in the face of rejection; of expulsion. Legion might be many, but Legion isn’t holding all the cards.

It’s not that demons are unimportant, or that we should ignore just how much of our lives can end up in their hands. After all, demons are very real, and terrifying for a whole mess of reasons. They have the power to speak with our voices, to bruise us and make us bleed, to cut us out of our communities and to drive us instead to places of isolation and death. This demon, Legion, even has the audacity to ask Jesus, whom he mysteriously recognizes as the Son of the Most High God and completely able to torture and defeat him, a favor. And Jesus grants it! So really, demons even have the power to establish relationships with our Lord and Savior. But demons do not have the power to name us. Only God can do that. And God has done that. From the beginning of time we have been intentional reflections of the creator of the cosmos. Made in the image of God. Each of us has the same name, the same true identity: joint heir with Christ and beloved child of God. And we are many.

*01-29*

“I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.”

— Psalm 89:1

How are we at proclamation? I’m perfectly comfortable singing of God’s steadfast love in worship, or with my recovery fellows, or my family and those I know have something in common with my belief system. I’m far less comfortable being open about my faith in mixed company or with strangers. That being said, if someone asks me directly why it is that I have so much joy or serenity in the midst of challenging circumstances, I don’t hesitate to give credit where credit is due. It is God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to me that allows me to weather the storms of life and also to enjoy to the fullest those moments of wonder and happiness. The person who asked may regret it, but in general I find people are receptive to my frankness about my faith, whether or not they share it. And who knows. Maybe when I proclaim God’s steadfast love and faithfulness to me, others might just realize that love and faithfulness is there for them, too.

In what situations am I most and least comfortable sharing about my faith?

*01-30*

“The demons begged him, “If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” And he said to them, “Go!” So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water.”

— Matthew 8:31-32

Why send the demons into pigs? Jesus had cast out plenty of demons by this point in his ministry and they never had to go any particular place. They just disappeared. Yet in this case, the demons beg Jesus for a different treatment. Was it that they didn’t want to go back to wherever they’d come from and would rather have the oblivion of death with the pigs? Whatever the explanation, I find it astonishing that Jesus took pity on demons. Think about that. These supposed evil spirits that wreak havoc in the lives of those they possess seem as though they deserve the worst of punishment, the most profound rejection by God. And yet Jesus sees them as beings worthy of love. This is maybe the most stark example of Jesus crossing boundaries in all of the gospels. What’s reaching out to a Samaritan woman or a tax collector compared to having mercy on demons?

Bottom line: there is nothing—nothing—you or anyone can do that will keep God, in Christ, from loving you.

Have I ever done something I thought was truly irredeemable?

*01-31*

“Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.”

— Luke 8:35

Even positive change can be frightening. Of. course the people were afraid of this demoniac who wandered around naked and out of his mind, shouting and doing who-knows-what-else. But they were pretty much used to it, I imagine.

Then along comes Jesus and cures the demoniac, putting him back in his right mind. He cleans up and gets dressed, and when the people come out see him, instead of being relieved or joyful, they’re still afraid. Maybe even more afraid. Because they can’t explain it. This guy has been this way for some undetermined length of time—I assume a long time, maybe always. And now he’s better. They hadn’t believed it was possible.

I spent a lot of years stuck. Stuck in addictive behavior. Stuck in a dysfunctional relationship. Through recovery and therapy and lots and lots of spiritual disciplines I experienced huge transformational experiences. And they were exhilarating and wonderful .But also terrifying. I remember when I started working my food addiction recovery program wondering if I was going to lose who I was at the core. I didn’t—recovery re-connected me to who I really was, the person I had buried under compulsive eating. But before that reality became clear, I was definitely afraid. Likewise when I left my relationship after thirty years. It was so necessary, and I was so glad I did it, but it came with a lot of fear. I’m so grateful to have felt in a very real, vital way that God was walking with me through all of it. I could put my trust in God that whatever happened, it would be okay. And it has been. Better than okay. Amazing, in fact.

I hope that once the people around this newly healed demoniac realized that he was permanently cured, they could let go of their fear and welcome him back into society with love.

When have I been afraid of a big change in my life? How did it turn out?