**Daily Devotions**

**March 2024**

*01*

“So I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

— Mark 11:24

I personally dislike the notion of “manifesting” things. It’s become so popular in modern culture. Envision what you want and live as if you already have it and you will somehow cause it to come into existence. It smacks of wishful thinking and, quite frankly, of a life with no need for God. After all, if you can just will something into being by behaving as if it’s there, what need is there for the one who created all that is?

Yet isn’t this what Jesus seems to be talking about here? Honestly, I’ve never registered this verse (which I must have read a hundred times or more in my life). Jesus says to pray for what we want, then believe we have already received it and, voila!, we’ll get it. It’s a head-scratcher for me. But, then again, prayer is in general if I’m honest. In the past couple decades I have been advised/instructed to go ahead and pray for people and situations, but in the end, really to pray only for the knowledge of what God’s will is for me going forward. And it’s really helped me to focus on what God is calling me to do and be in the world, and away from what other people should or shouldn’t be doing or how the world would be so much better if only everyone thought or did as I do.

That being said, I recently decided to start dating, and I didn’t want to repeat former patterns, mistakes in judgment, self-compromise, etc. With the guidance of others, I very prayerfully made a list of what I wanted in a partner. I found passages in scripture to guide my discernment. I prayed for the courage to put myself out there on a dating site. I was told I would be lucky to get 7/10 items on my list. I accepted that, turned it over to God, and jumped in… Second person I dated. 10/10. Honestly the love of my life. Did I “manifest” this? Did I ask for it in prayer and then act as if I already had it? No. I prayed only for the knowledge of what God’s will was for me and took the actions that I (with help) discerned were in alignment. It’s not a magic spell or a guaranteed recipe. It just happened. But I thank God every day for it anyway.

How do I feel about the concept of “manifesting” good things in my life? How does this resonate (or not) with my feelings about prayer?

*02*

“So they answered Jesus, ‘We do not know.’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.’”

— Mark 11:33

I do love when Jesus is sassy. So often when I write skits with/for kids, Jesus gets the best punchlines. I don’t think we appreciate how quick-witted the guy was. Charismatic? Yes. Powerful? Yes. Brilliant? Yes. But also right there with the comeback (the way I never am when I’m standing in my bathroom four hours later thinking, “I should have said that in response!”).

The usual suspects come pestering Jesus, trying to suss him out, get him to slip up, make him a spectacle. The demand to know “Just who do you think you are to be doing all this?” or “Who died and made you the boss?” And Jesus is just done with it. Done with their endless traps and schemes and attempts to undermine him. So he turns the tables on them and pulls their own tricks against them. “I’ll tell you by whose authority I do these things if you answer me one simple question.” And then he asks them a question which, no matter how they answer, will blow up in their faces. And they, clearly, are not as quick-witted as he (witness his response to the same tactic in the question about taxes (Mark 12:13-17)). They realize they can’t answer and say so. And Jesus says, “Well then I’m not going to answer your question either.” Insert raspberry sound here.

Had Jesus answered their question truthfully, that it was God’s authority he was acting on, it would have opened a whole kettle of worms (though, interestingly, in other places he does just that. It’s not consistent). And Jesus was probably a little tired of their kettles of worms at this point. Maybe he just needed a nap and a snack. Who knows. All I know is that this very human man was also wicked snappy, and I love that about him.

How do I envision Jesus’ personality? Have I ever considered it?

*03*

“He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally he sent him to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’”

— Mark 12:6

Main Idea: In God’s economy, stewardship is more important than ownership. In other words, our charge is more important than our being in charge.

The question the Pharisees and Herodians ask Jesus in the text just following this (Mark 12:13-17) seems a little funny at first. Why would they care what he thought about taxes? Well, the short answer is because they are trying to trick him into saying something incriminating no matter how he responds. If Jesus says it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, ordinary people who live in oppression under Roman rule will resent him and turn against him. And if he says it isn’t lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, he risks being accused of treason. It would seem here that Jesus can’t win.

In this exchange and in the parable Jesus tells about the vineyard owner, one central question is looming: Who’s really in charge here?

The tenants in the parable assume that they are in charge. They decide that they are entitled to both the people and production at the vineyard, going so far as to kill in the name of wealth. The crowds around Jesus assume that it is Caesar who is in charge. The rhetorical framework they impose on Jesus puts Caesar in the seat of power no matter how Jesus responds to the question at hand.

By refusing to answer the Pharisees and the Herodians directly, Jesus subverts everything they’re implying and cleverly reorients the crowd to his own rhetorical framework—a framework where the only true authority we can know and recognize is God. A framework that paints us as beloved children—the hands and feet of God’s love in the world and the builders of God’s kingdom.

In Jesus’s framework, we do not own God’s kingdom, because we don’t need to. We are not in charge of God’s kingdom, because that’s not our call in a life of faith. God wants us to tap into God’s power and to be transformed by it. To share it. To use it to secure safety and justice and thriving for everyone in our community. If we get bogged down or distracted by trying to own God’s kingdom, our attention and our intentions will stray and make it impossible for us to execute power in the way God envisions. Ironically, if we get too focused on power, we’ll end up either sabotaging it, like the vineyard tenants, or cutting ourselves off from it, like Caesar’s followers.

Who do you walk around assuming runs your day? Who informs your values and shapes your behavior? Whose image is in your pockets? Whose opinion matters most to you and whose worldview do you hold in the highest esteem? The Holy Spirit is telling us today that if we can’t answer any of those questions with “God,” we are running the risk of misunderstanding, confusing and misusing the precious power of God that we are called to steward every day.

*04*

“Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.”

— Psalm 86:11

We all have a divided heart sometimes. Or maybe I can only speak for myself. When faced with hard decisions, I can get pulled in more than one direction, and find myself wanting to make the decision that’s the easiest or most comfortable for me, rather than the one that’s best (if I even know what that is). I want to turn everything over to God and listen for my next right action, but I also want to take control of the situation and just fix it according to my own designs. This dissonance isn’t sustainable. It leaves me irritable—with the situation, with the people involved, with God for not making clear what I’m supposed to do. And that irritability can spill over into completely unrelated areas.

When those things happen, I know that God is calling me back into the classroom, so to speak. God is inviting me to sit with the discomfort, to listen for what God’s way might be, to open myself to the wise counsel of others in discerning God’s truth.

When do I find my heart most divided? How do I find my way back to God’s truth?

*05*

“Jesus said to them, ‘Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ And they were utterly amazed at him.”

— Mark 12:17

I’ve heard this a million times. Okay, I exaggerate. But it’s a lot. And when I’ve processed it, I’ve always focused on Jesus’ profound statement and the way he craftily worms his way out of an obvious trap. But this time when I read it, what jumped out at me was, “And they were utterly amazed at him.”

These people who tried time and again to get Jesus to slip up and offend the right person to get him removed from the scene are left “utterly amazed.” Completely surprised. Totally gobsmacked. Entirely filled with wonder. They literally had not seen his reply coming. And it makes me wonder exactly what was going through their heads at that point. It doesn’t seem to me as though they were angry about it. Like, “Oh, drat. Foiled again by that clever rabbi!” Frankly I imagine they were in awe of him. Deeply respectful. Thoughtful about what he had said and what it actually meant. Maybe more than one of them started to re-think their own ideas about who Jesus was or what he was about.

Having read these words of Jesus and many others “a million times”, am I still “utterly amazed”? Do they astound me and fill me with wonder? Do they make me question my ideas and inspire me to think differently? Sometimes yes. But I am a strong advocate for reading scripture with others, of digging into texts, discussing them and allowing ourselves to hear them as if for the first time, whether through the eyes and hearts of another person or for ourselves. God, please help me to be like the Pharisees and Herodians at the end of this story. Open my eyes to the wonder of Jesus’ words and all of your holy scripture. Amen.

How can I “keep it fresh” when reading the Bible?

*06*

“For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.”

— Mark 12:25

This concept used to bother me. When I was 19 and planning my wedding, I subscribed to the notion that I had found my one and only “soul mate” and that we would be together not only for the rest of our lives, but for all eternity. If there was no marriage in the resurrection, wouldn’t I be bereft of my “other half”? The one who “completed me”? What kind of heaven would that be???

Now I’m 52 and divorced, almost 20 years in 12-Step Recovery, and possibly even a little wise after all my life experience. My perspective has entirely shifted. No Hollywood (or religious) notions of perfect relationships in which the partners are predestined for eternal love from conception inform my ideas about what it means to love someone in a partnership relationship.

Jesus, too, seems to be trying to point out the chasm between human social norms and divine will. Marriage in his day was about generating offspring and social protection for women. Wives were property but also obligations and so would pass from brother to brother so they didn’t wind up on the street (as one of the many destitute “widows and orphans” God was constantly nagging everyone to take care of). For me now, this proclamation of his feels liberating for women. “Guess what? Someday it won’t be necessary for a woman to be defined in terms of her relationship with a man. She will be completely whole and loved for her own sake. Those seven brothers have no claim on her at all.” Oh and by the way, those brothers won’t be defined in terms of their wives or children or any social relationships either. They, too, will be whole and loved for their own sake. Does this mean we won’t love one another in the resurrection? I hardly think so. Will we choose to have romantic relationships? I have no idea. I am just grateful that we don’t have to wait for the resurrection for Jesus’ ideas to be true. Today in the here and now we are at a point where we, women and men, get to live as whole, beautiful, and beloved individuals regardless of our relationships.

How have my religious beliefs informed my ideas about marriage and relationships?

*07*

“For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!”

— Isaiah 5:7

I can understand God’s frustration. God did create us, give us everything, teach us, equip us. And stubbornly we have, as a society, almost always chosen the way of fear of scarcity and death and the resulting violence toward others who we fear will take our resources, and the oppression of others in order to enrich and prolong our own lives. It seems to be our default.

On the other hand, I don’t understand God’s frustration. After all, God created us and knows us intimately and completely. How can God be surprised at our frailties and the misguided ways we act on them?

On the other other hand, since God created and knows us, God also knows we can do better. Throughout human history, we have proven this. Individuals and groups and communities and sometimes even societies have chosen a different way—have chosen peace, compassion, the sharing of resources, and healthy interdependence. No matter how challenging any situation, we have clung to the hope that change is possible.

These days, I think God is frustrated not because we keep failing, but because God knows we can succeed. God’s heart hurts for us when we are hurt and when we hurt each other. No matter what, God continues to tend and nurture the vineyard that is humanity because now and then we do bear good fruit, and God sees our potential for a bountiful yield.

How can I “do better” in my communal life on a daily basis?

*08*

“I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come?

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

— Psalm 121:1-2

Where do we look for our help? Personally, my first instinct isn’t always to look to “the hills”. I’m good at pivoting, making quick decisions, assessing situations and gauging the appropriate response. I trust my gut. And while years of spiritual practice have helped get my gut into better alignment with God’s direction for me, there are still plenty of times I really ought to have paused and looked to the hills before acting. I still look to other people to solve my problems sometimes. I still look to myself to “figure it out” and then get angry with myself when I just can’t seem to do it.

No matter who we are, where we live, or what we have, there are times we are going to need help. Big time help. The psalmist reminds us that the first place we should look for that help—not the last resort—is in God. Not that God will wave a wand and miraculously make everything better. But God can and will guide us to the right response to any crisis, no matter how large, if we ask for that help.

What was the last crisis I had to face? Where did my help come from?

*09*

“But in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.”

— Hebrews 1:2

Worlds. Plural. I love this so much. Millennia before Star Trek put the idea of multiple universes into my impressionable mind, Paul names Jesus the word through which God created all that is, comprising, it would seem, more than one world. I’m sure there are plenty of ways to interpret this that don’t literally point to alternative universes, something I imagine Paul would have zero concept of. We could look at it as simply as this: each of us moves in multiple “worlds”—that of our family, our social obligations, our employment; or the visible world and the world of spirit and thought and emotion; or the temporal world and the eternal world. However you want to think about it, this pluralization of “world” that Paul invokes is an invitation to expand our curiosity about creation and know that God in Christ Jesus is the source and is over, around, and through all that is, whether we understand it or not.

What does it mean to me to imagine God creating multiple worlds?

*10*

“A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.”

— Mark 12:42

Main Idea: We are called as followers of Jesus to make our communities safe places for giving—places where the love of God and the love between neighbors can flourish.

Imagine taking your life savings—all of your cash, all of your retirement accounts and your investments—and dumping the lump sum in the offering plate at church. How would that make you feel? Probably terrified. Maybe even a little sick to your stomach.

And why is that? Most likely because you would be left wondering how you were going to make it through the rest of the day. And the next one. And the next one. How would you pay for groceries? Where would you go to pull your mortgage payments? What would you do if you had a medical emergency and needed to pay for something specialized? If you gave everything you had to your community of faith, would you trust them with it?

We aren’t told how the widow in this story feels when she puts what Jesus describes as “all she had to live on” into the treasury. We don’t know if she was terrified or sick to her stomach. But we do know that she believed so deeply in what she was contributing to that she gave quite literally her last penny to help the cause. We can infer from this text that this widow felt safe to give because she trusted that what she gave would eventually come back to her. She trusted that, because her community was living by the Greatest Commandment—the simultaneous love of God and neighbor—they would take everything she offered and use it to care for her.

When we read this story and we hear sermons preached on this story, we often focus in on this widow and ask ourselves how we can “go and do likewise.” How we can model faith-filled giving—that is, giving without reservation or worry. But maybe that means that what we should focus on, instead, is the metaphorical water this widow is swimming in. The assumptions she can make. The things she can take for granted. Maybe what we need to ask ourselves is how we can help to shape a community in which giving without reservation or worry is possible.

What are the things we can say and do to let our neighbors know that they can trust us to take care of them? What are the things we want to see in our congregations, our schools, our workplaces and our neighborhoods that reflect the love we have for God?

*11*

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

— Psalm 89:1

Songs stick in our heads the way spoken words just don’t. Maybe I’ve written about this before, but I always think about the episode of Happy Days in which Potsie Weber is on track to fail his test on the human circulatory system until he writes a song about it. He then aces the test by singing it back in his head. (I can still remember the chorus… how crazy is that?) And while I can’t remember much from my high school English classes, I know every word of Lewis Carroll’s nonsense poem, The Jabberwocky, because I sang a version of it in high school choir.

Likewise, when I come across certain passages of scripture, I immediately remember the various settings of them I’ve sung over the years. Singing of God’s steadfast love, as it were, is powerful. It adds a dimension to the words that draws me in deeper, awakens my senses, engages me with the text. I encourage you, whether you consider yourself musical or not, to try singing your gratitude for God’s gifts in your life every chance you get.

What sacred music do I find most memorable and moving?

*12*

“He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and will not despise their prayer.”

— Psalm 102:17

To despise something is to look down on it with disrespect or aversion. I can’t imagine God despising anything, least of all the prayers of those most in need of help. The psalmist confirms this: God cares for those facing the most challenges, dealing with the most suffering.

How well do we do at this? The metro area I live in experiences a great deal of homelessness. There are encampments in various places in the city. There are countless people standing in medians at traffic crossings with signs asking for help. How many of us, despite our desire to be compassionate, inwardly sigh in disgust, wondering why these people would choose to live this way? Wondering why they aren’t accessing the systems supposedly in place to help them? Even if we’re aware of the flaws in those systems (or the total lack of them) some small part of us still believes these folk wouldn’t have to be in this situation if they just tried harder. Some small part of us despises their need.

God models and calls us to greater compassion. We need to give up our judgment and be willing to love people exactly as and how they are in that moment. If we are really concerned about the issue (and not just annoyed by the panhandling) there are ample ways to learn more and get involved in addressing what is certainly a public health crisis in many of our cities. No, we can’t hope to aspire to the ideal, which is God, but we can sure do better in not despising the needs of the destitute.

How do I feel when I see people who are homeless?

*13*

“The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life.”

— Psalm 121:7

Can we really be kept from evil? Life can be pretty challenging. Maybe not evil, exactly, but bad things do happen. People get sick. Have freak accidents. Suffer abuse. Are generationally traumatized. Lose all their possessions and wind up homeless. Fall victim to addiction. Live in war zones. Starve to death. Probably most of these folks are praying. Probably most of these folks find themselves wondering how the sentiment in this Psalm can be true.

While I can’t speak to some of these extreme challenges, I’ve had plenty of things happen in my life that have shaken my faith. I’ve wondered where God is. But in the end, I’ve taken comfort in the idea that God doesn’t desire evil for us. Or do evil to us. God suffers with us, and acts in our lives directly and through those around us. Ultimately, no matter what happens to us, God is there, keeping our life, even in the midst of our death.

Where do I see evil in the world? How do I see God’s protection from it?

*14*

“What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?”

— Psalm 116:12

The practice of gratitude is healing. When I’m having a lousy day, nothing works better to shake me out of it than to sit down and write out a list of things I’m grateful for. It’s not enough to just think about them (although that’s helpful.) Something about the act of committing to paper the truth about just how much God has given me shakes loose the need to cling to grumpiness. What shall we return to God for all that God gives us? Probably the best thing would be to pay it forward—to give other people reasons to be grateful. Smile at someone. Hold a door. Pay for a stranger’s coffee. Clean up after yourself. Or do something bigger, if you can. And above all, love your neighbors as yourself. What better gift can we give the one who commanded us to do just that?

What ten things am I most grateful for right this minute?

*15*

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”

— Psalm 22:1

The summer of 2004 was horrible for me. I won’t bore you, but I could list at least six different major stressors wreaking havoc on my body, mind, and spirit. By September, I started to be semi-suicidal. I didn’t really want to die, per se, but I wanted out of my life so badly I semi-regularly considered driving my car into the ditch on the freeway. Without being so dramatic, I really did wonder, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” The pain was acute, the sense of abandonment devastating.

That fall, I got into 12-Step recovery for food addiction. That’s when God showed up. Except I realized the truth that God had never abandoned me. In fact, I was the one who had abandoned God, though it had been so subtle and gradual that I hadn’t even realized it. Once I opened my eyes and stepped into a true partnership with God, things began to change. Slowly but surely, I learned to accept those aspects of my life that I could not change, and gained the courage to change the things I could (mostly myself and my reactions to life). The pain eased and was replaced by gratitude.

I know this isn’t everyone’s story. I won’t give anyone advice. All I can say is that I believe in my heart of hearts that God never forsakes us, under any circumstances, even—and especially—when it most feels like it.

When have I felt forsaken by God? How did it resolve?

*16*

“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.”

— Deuteronomy 6:6-7

You have to keep practicing your skills, or you’ll eventually lose them. This is true regardless of your area of expertise, your innate ability, raw talent, or your accumulated wisdom. And it’s just as necessary when it comes to knowledge of scripture and the basic tenets of our faith. We might know on an intellectual level that the great commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We might even repeat these words regularly, when we are home and away, when we lie down and rise. But it’s not enough to say them. We have to live them.

What that looks like for each of us on a daily basis might vary. For me, it’s about working a disciplined spiritual program of recovery, including daily prayer and meditation. It’s making an effort to be of love and service to everyone I meet in small and big ways. It’s stopping at the end of every day to take stock of how it went, to acknowledge my failings and my successes, and listing out my gratitudes. Do I do this perfectly all the time? No. I just can’t let it slide too often, or I will start to lose the ability to keep God’s words in my heart.

How do I practice keeping God’s words in my heart each day?

*17*

“Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’”

— Mark 13:2

Main Idea: Our life of faith is about the journey and the destination.

Are you familiar with the term “mandala?” It’s a Sanskrit word that translates roughly to “circle,” and it usually refers to a round frame full of colorful and very intricate combination of shapes and patterns used to guide meditation. In some traditions, monks will create mandalas using colored sand. It is a painstaking venture whether you do it on your own or with a group, but the finished product is stunning.

A short time after he or she puts the finishing touches on the mandala, a monk will shake the sand loose and wipe the entire design away. When you first think about it, this doesn’t make sense! Why put all that time and energy into creating something so beautiful when your plan from the beginning was to destroy it? But this, too, lends itself to meditation: the disappearing of the mandala reminds us that impermanence plays a role in our lives. Just because the mandala isn’t here anymore doesn’t mean it wasn’t beautiful. The attention the monks paid to every curve, every line and every grain of sand made a difference not only for them, but for their community. And now that the mandala is gone, they can craft a new, different one with everything they have practiced and everything they have learned.

This is a helpful visual in framing the opening lines of our text this morning. As they disciples admire the grandeur of the buildings around them, Jesus begins prophesying about the end of the world as they know it—the eventual crumbling of those very same buildings, the onslaught of natural disasters, the inevitability of war, the shaking and passing of earth and the heavens and the Son of Man coming with power and glory and a host of celestial beings who will help him bring God’s word to life. Jesus is talking about the end of one thing and the beginning of something completely new.

If you were one of the disciples hearing all of this for the first time, you might be tempted to ask yourself, “Then what are we doing here? If the kingdom of God on earth is going to be destroyed, why are we working so hard to establish it and to build it up?” In fact, you might be tempted to ask that question as a modern-day believer, here and now. If we believe that Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead, then why are we trying to figure out how to live faithfully in this season—in this moment?

It's because the attention we pay to every curve, every line and every grain of sand in our mandalas makes a difference. The love we show our neighbors and the justices we fight for, big and small, grow into beautiful patterns that help us focus on what is most important—that help us learn and practice for the time of judgment we know is coming. In Jesus, the attention we pay to our present doesn’t have to be different from the attention we pay to our future.

*18*

“As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them. And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.”

— Mark 13:9-10

I marvel at the commitment and resilience of Jesus’ followers. He tells them that horrible things are going to happen to them and that the good news still has to be proclaimed, no matter what. And after he dies, they go off and do it! Would I welcome such a task? If I’m honest with myself, I would have to say probably not.

These days, I don’t expect to be beaten or dragged into court for sharing my faith, but that’s not all there is to “sharing the good news.” If it was just about spouting my opinion about who God is and what Jesus did, that’d be easy (although lots of people might be annoyed). But truly proclaiming the good news—Jesus’ words from Isaiah 61 (to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners)—is not for the faint of heart. There are plenty of folks out there living the gospel in social justice work who suffer threats, violence, or imprisonment for speaking truth to power.

We might not all be called into those positions, but we are certainly called to support those who are in whatever way we can. It’s always worth looking at these words of Jesus and wondering how they apply to us now, rather than simply going, “Wow! Those disciples had it tough!”

How do I see the command of Jesus that “the good news must…be proclaimed to all the nations?”

*19*

“And if anyone says to you at that time, ‘Look! Here is the Messiah!’ or ‘Look! There he is!’ —do not believe it.”

— Mark 13:21

I wonder what would happen if the Messiah came back today? There’s so much confusion and debate about who Jesus was and is and how we’re supposed to follow him in our present context would anyone even recognize Jesus? Anyone who didn’t like what the real Jesus had to say in our modern context could just point to this scripture and say, “Don’t believe it!” There have been dozens of works of fiction exploring this concept, either from the angle that Jesus has returned or the angle that someone who is seriously messiah-like (but is not Jesus) has stirred things up in a huge way. Ultimately these stories aren’t about the returning messiah at all, but about the way the very idea creates staggering upheaval in everything we believe or think we believe. It bears doing the thought experiment ourselves: what do we think the returning Jesus would be like? How would we recognize him?

Then think about this. What if (as I believe) Jesus, the Messiah, is already here, living among us now? How do we recognize him? How do we respond to him? Are there people claiming to be working in his name who really aren’t? Are there people disparaging and persecuting those who are?

Then, closer to home, I invite you to wonder about this:

Where is Jesus active in my life right now? What is he calling me to do? How can I discern the truth of his voice?

*20*

“It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, ‘Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people.’”

— Mark 14:1-2

Talk about insidious. In order to kill Jesus, the chief priests and scribes were going to have to bide their time and then whisk him away under cover of night (which they eventually did). Had they acted immediately upon his entering Jerusalem, or at any time “during the festival” they knew the crowds, still in a state of adulation and being utterly convinced Jesus was the messiah riding into town to overthrow Rome, would riot—not something the Jewish authorities wanted to have happen for a lot of reasons (including that there probably would have been a severe crackdown by the Roman military on Jewish life). It all goes to show just how calculated it was. The chief priests and scribes would do everything they could to make Jesus disappear and be quickly forgotten.

Of course that’s not what happened. I mean, yes, they did arrest him in the middle of the night surrounded by only a handful of followers. Yes, they did publicly execute him so that anyone who might have believed he was the conquering messiah would see they were quite wrong. But in spite of all their planning, Jesus would not simply go away and be forgotten. Not in a couple of days. Not in a couple of millennia. It’s a hopeful reminder that no matter what plotting and planning people might try to do to squash the movement toward justice and liberation for all God’s children, it simply will not be squashed.

What gives me hope that God’s will can be done in this world?

*21*

“Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.”

— Mark 14:10-11

What motivated Judas, then? It doesn’t sound like it was the money—he told the authorities he’d betray Jesus before they promised him any. In Andrew Lloyd Weber’s Jesus Christ Superstar, it was about Jesus’ failure to live up to what Judas thought he should be. And maybe there’s some truth to that. The Jews of the time were expecting a messiah who would sweep in and wipe away all their enemies using military might. Judas might have believed that Jesus would do this—in fact, I think most of his disciples did. So for whatever reason, maybe Judas just decided Jesus wasn’t the messiah after all, and this charade needed to stop. We can’t know for sure, of course. We aren’t Judas. We weren’t there.

What it causes me to wonder, though, is this: Do I have expectations about who Jesus should be or what Jesus should do for me? When these things don’t happen in my life, do I find myself ready to betray him by simply walking away from my faith? I suppose Judas could have just walked away, too. Have I felt it necessary to betray Jesus more forcefully, by letting others know of my disillusionment in an attempt to discredit Christianity? Could it ever get to that point?

I want to have a vital relationship with God in Christ Jesus. That kind of relationship requires honesty. Transparency. Now might be a good time to think about whether my expectations of Jesus are motivated by something other than love.

What do I expect of Jesus? Is it right to expect it? What if I perceive that Jesus fails me?

*22*

“Pilate asked him, ‘Are you the King of the Jews?’ He answered him, ‘You say so.’”

— Mark 15:2

I am intrigued by Jesus’ answer. So I want to riff on it a bit. When Pilate asks if he’s King of the Jews, I think he doesn’t answer because the answer is both “yes” and “no.” Yes, Jesus was and is God’s promised Messiah, the one who will rule Israel, though maybe not in the flesh. No, Jesus was not acknowledged by the Jewish people as their king. No, Jesus would never sit on an earthly throne. But most of all: No, Jesus was not the King of the Jews only. Jesus was and is the ruler of all creation, without political divisions. Jesus reigned as much over Rome as Jerusalem. As much over gentiles and Jews. As much over the entirety of created reality as over human beings.

When Jesus says, “You say so,” I think he is pointing to Pilate’s limitations. Saying, “You think you have power, you think you rule, you think what you do to me matters. You’re wrong. You say that I’m the king of the Jews. You don’t know anything about anything.” That’s way more powerful than simply answering “yes” or “no” or explaining himself. And so what if it left Pilate confused? That was irrelevant in the course of events. Ultimately, Pilate, was irrelevant in the course of events. Jesus knew who Jesus was. That was enough.

How do I interpret Jesus’ cryptic answer to Pilate’s question? How does his answer matter?

*23*

“Pilate spoke to them again, ‘Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?’ They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!”

— Mark 15:12-13

By now, Judas’ disillusionment has spread (see Thursday’s devotion). The crowds who were convinced Jesus would overthrow Rome then and there now saw that he had been arrested like any common criminal, and clearly had failed to carry out a coup. Probably they felt pretty stupid. Certain gospels say that the local Jewish authorities stirred up the crowd to demand Jesus’ execution. I don’t think it would have been hard to turn them—they were probably most of the way there themselves, and just needed someone to throw the first stone to loose their rage at Jesus’ failure to liberate them. If we put ourselves in their shoes it’s not hard to sympathize. I think most people, when confronted with their mistaken judgment, feel pretty stupid and ashamed about it, and a common response to this is to lash out in retaliation.

I know I’ve had moments when something I was so sure of—a choice I’ve made or action I’ve taken—proves to have been a mistake. As a recovering perfectionist, it’s so hard for me to accept the mistake. My first reaction is to feel shame and my second reaction is to try to spin or justify my action to try to prove that it wasn’t actually a mistake. And when said action was something I was so sure God was directing me to do, I feel doubly stupid, and it's tempting to blame God for letting me misread what appeared to be guidance.

It's critical in those moments to pause and process, to have grace and forgiveness for myself, and to ask God to relieve me of the need to blame. It does no one any good for me to turn around and shout “crucify!” just because things don’t look the way I think they should. Because often I discover that in spite of my mistakes, God does actually get me where I’m supposed to be, just as Jesus really was the messiah, even though it didn’t look like it to the people at the time.

When have I been angry at God for my own mistakes?

*24*

“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

— Mark 11:9b

Main Idea: God is never just one thing. And that means that a life of faith is a life spent dwelling in complexity and overlap.

In Mark, Chapter 11, the disciples are met with some questions (we might even say some resistance) as they untie a colt in a nearby village. They are strangers in this land, and probably come off a bit suspicious. But finally, the bystanders give into their plan, and because they do, the disciples take the colt back to Jesus. As he rides it into Jerusalem, people gather in front of him and behind him, shouting and singing songs of praise.

Then, in Chapter 14, a woman anoints Jesus with nard, an expensive and luxurious substance. She clearly does this to honor Jesus and to show reverence, but she draws criticism from everyone else in the room. They accuse her of being too lavish. Too indulgent. Wasteful, even. They point out that she could have used that nard differently, or that she could have sold it and given the proceeds away to someone in need.

Mashed together the way they are, these two passages create an interesting narrative pattern: skepticism to praise, then praise to skepticism. It seems that, when Jesus is involved, one doesn’t come without the other. It seems that, around Jesus, there is an oscillation of realities. And that’s really what the Easter story is about: the fact that life brings with it death, and that death brings with it new life.

So why do we celebrate Jesus’s arrival into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday? If we know how his time there ends—if we know that we won’t have praise without skepticism or life without death—then what is the point in rejoicing at all? Why wouldn’t we stay reserved and measured and wait for the other shoe to drop?

Maybe we celebrate because Jesus is so complex. Maybe we rejoice because our God is never just one thing, and that’s amazing. Maybe it’s okay to let ourselves go to the emotional and spiritual ends of the spectrum because God meets us there with what our Psalmist calls a steadfast love that endures forever. In the Christian life, we are constantly balancing what has been, what is, and what is to come. We’re used to oscillating realities, even if we don’t actively realize it during every minute of every day.

It would be boring to worship a God who only existed one way. That God wouldn’t reflect reality, and wouldn’t accompany us in our respective journeys, either. That God wouldn’t take on the body and the life of a human being. That God wouldn’t understand us. But Jesus does. In the deepest way possible, Jesus knows what it is like to live as one of us. While he might not be dwelling with us earthside at this point in history, he is dwelling with us in the complex and overlapping spaces that confuse us and push us and move us. And that’s good news.

*25*

“She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

— Mark 14:8-9

We can only do what we can. We know nothing about this woman, not even her name, but we can make some guesses. She must have been wealthy—she had expensive perfume and no one questioned where she’d gotten it. She must have been known to the host, or she probably wouldn’t have been let into the house during the meal, let alone have been allowed to simply walk up to Jesus. She must have known Jesus, or at least known who he was, and believed him to be the messiah, to have wanted to do this service for him. In fact, no one questions her at all until after she’s anointed him. It’s like it takes a minute to sink in before anyone thinks to be offended by her action.

And who were the host and the other guests? No two gospels tell this exact same story, though all four gospels have events with a few minor elements in common. We don’t know who Simon the Leper was. We don’t know who else was there. But we know they also knew Jesus—well enough to know that he was concerned with caring for the poor. Well enough to think, maybe, that they could score some points with Jesus by calling out the wastefulness of the woman’s action.

Regardless, Jesus wasn’t having it. He told them to just leave her alone and says, “She has done what she could.” Maybe she didn’t have the ability or the right to sell the ointment. Maybe she wasn’t allowed to follow Jesus as one of his disciples. There could be any number of things she “couldn’t” do and as many reasons why. But this one thing—this act of a literal outpouring of love—she could do. And she did. And Jesus would not despise it, but saw it as a beautiful act. Even a prophetic act, for he takes this opportunity to state again that he will die and be buried. Instead of saying, “shame on her” for not acting in the way the onlookers believed they would, Jesus shamed the onlookers for judging her out of their ignorance of the deeper meaning of her act.

We can only do what we can. It might be easy to judge others for not doing what we think ought to be done to follow the gospel, for doing things differently than we do or think we would, given the chance. But each of us is uniquely gifted to heed God’s call in our own particular way, and that way is between ourselves and God. In the same way we ought not be tempted to judge others for what they’re doing or not doing, we also need to avoid guilt, shame, or self-recrimination when we fall short of our own ideals for gospel work. Instead, let us open our minds and hearts to the ways in which we are uniquely called to serve, and commit to doing only what we can.

How can I show my love for Jesus and work for the gospel? Does it have to look like what anyone else is doing? Why or why not?

*26*

“Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, ‘The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.’”

— Mark 14:44

Why not just point? I’ve always wondered this. Judas leads a bunch of soldiers into the garden where Jesus is praying and his friends are dozing. It’s the middle of the night, but I imagine there would have been some kind of light source by which Jesus and his friends found their way there. Were they the only ones there? The city was jam packed with people. Surely they weren’t the only ones who ate the Passover, sang the hymn, and went out to pray. Were there dozens and dozens of people scattered about the garden? I honestly can’t envision it. Was there a reaction when the Romans showed up, probably carrying torches? Or was it really just Jesus’ snoozing friends, who wouldn’t have noticed?

Was it not enough to point? Maybe the common greeting of a kiss would assure the Romans that this was, in fact, someone who knew Judas rather than just some random guy he decided to point out. Maybe they were afraid he was going to give them the runaround and his sign to them would prove that they were getting the right target. Obviously they themselves had no idea who Jesus was, despite the rumors flying around Jerusalem. There was no social media circulating pictures of the guy cruising in on his donkey.

Regardless of the details, or the whys or hows, one of Jesus’ best friends and most ardent followers walks into the garden at the head of a bunch of troops, goes right up to Jesus, and greets him with a sign of affection. And this is Jesus’ death warrant. I’m left wondering whether Judas was as heartbroken in the moment as Jesus must have been.

Had Judas simply pointed, it would have been far less poignant.

What imagery around Holy Week do I find most moving?

*27*

“At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, ‘Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.’ And he broke down and wept.”

— Mark 14:72

Was Peter any better than Judas? I wonder how much of this terrible series of events Peter experienced was a way for him to learn the humility that would be required of him as the future leader of the church. I am certain that he was absolutely furious with Judas for what he had done. How dare Judas lead the Roman soldiers right to where they could arrest Jesus with the minimum of resistance! How dare he betray the one he had followed so zealously for so long! I am sure that in that moment, Peter though himself far superior to the traitor, Judas.

Yet a matter of hours later, he discovered that he, too, was a betrayer of the one he loved most dearly. He denied anything to do with Jesus in order to save his own skin. And while it was probably the wisest course—after all, it would have benefitted no one had Peter allowed himself to be arrested and killed along with Jesus—was it really any better than Judas’ actions, which Jesus had pointed out were inevitable and necessary for things to play out as intended?

Peter needed to accept that he was powerless over what happened to Jesus, and even, to an extent, over his own very human response to the danger at hand. His tears of guilt and shame were warranted, and probably necessary. But once he processed these, he had to let them go. Sooner or later, there was work to be done, and Jesus had told him that “on this foundation [Peter] I will build my church.”

Our faith is going to take some knocks. We are going to have to confront our own frailties and failings. It’s the only way for us to learn humility, which is critical to following in the way of Jesus.

What things in my life have taught me the most humility?

*28*

“While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, ‘Take; this is my body.’”

— Mark 14:22

Main Idea: Jesus’s promise to us in the Last Supper means something because it is a promise, embodied.

So often, we read Jesus as a wise, all-knowing kind of character. Especially in passages like this one from the Gospel of Mark, where he is laying out future events and leading not only the conversation with his disciples, but also their journey, it’s easy to lean into the divine side of Jesus’s “divine and human” nature. To see him as God walking among people instead of a God person walking among people.

But everything else in this story points to the most fundamentally human things imaginable. Food. Drink. Blood. Sleep. It’s clear that the Holy Spirit is pulling us back to center and asking us to consider the human side of Jesus’s “divine and human” nature.

So, what if we bend the way we normally read Jesus here? What if Jesus’s tone is more anxious than it is omniscient? What if he is projecting instead of predicting? He might have felt paranoid around the disciples. He might have been preempting some of their behavior and trying to get out ahead of it because he was on edge. The text tells us that Jesus grows agitated and distressed as he and his disciples get closer to the cross. It also tells us that Jesus has a sense of what is coming his way—death. What if something about Jesus’s divine/human essence kept him from knowing exactly how things were going to unfold? Wouldn’t that be terrifying?

Jesus did something that no one else in history has ever done before. No one could have understood his mission or his fate during his lifetime, because it had never been conceived of or modeled. It would make sense if Jesus was fully human that he had moments where he didn’t understand his mission or his fate. It would make sense if Jesus was fully human that he couldn’t conceive of either one—at least not in full.

It is so much more precious and so much more meaningful to have a savior who can empathize with us than one who remains detached; a savior who knows our hearts because he has our heart instead of a savior who isn’t in any way human. When we feel anxious; when we feel confused or misunderstood or lonely or isolated or so, so scared—we can draw a deep and holy comfort remembering that Jesus has been there. That Jesus sits with usthere. That Jesus made us a promise there—a new covenant in his blood. The “Last Supper Jesus” could very well have been an anxious Jesus. And that only makes his promise more powerful for us today.

*29*

“Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last.”

— Mark 15:37

Main Idea: It is because we have seen Jesus in his full personhood that we can profess faith in his full divinity.

Throughout this entire passage, the author of the Gospel of Mark is teasing at the idea of needing to see to believe. He describes how intensely the crowd around Jesus taunts him, challenging him to save himself. Using plays on words and references to Jesus’s prophecies and ministerial works, these people almost dare Jesus outright to show them something miraculous. Something that proves that the divine identity he has been claiming all this time is legitimate. While the majority of these onlookers are probably taunting Jesus rhetorically—convinced already that he is a fraud and not truly open to the idea that he could, actually be the son of God—it seems that they want to see Jesus do something that will help them know what to walk away believing. They want to be convinced.

But all Jesus does is wither. On the cross, he gives in and gives up, succumbing to the cruelty of the crowd and accusing God of abandoning him in the form of a question quoted from Psalm 22: “My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?” Only then do the people gathered around him get what they were asking for—a demonstration of the supernatural: a sudden darkening of the sky and a splitting of the temple curtain. As Jesus’s life comes to an end, it’s clear to everyone that something cosmically significant is unfolding. In fact, a Roman centurion (which is another word for a high-ranking military leader) comes right out and says, “Surely, this man was God’s son.” In other words, he saw. And now he believes.

But maybe it wasn’t the sudden darkening of the sky or the splitting of the temple curtain that moved the centurion. Maybe it was Jesus’s lament that made him stop and think. Maybe the raw despair, anguish, exhaustion and hurt he witnessed Jesus enduring was what the centurion considered miraculous. What kind of a God would love so deeply that they would take on that kind of pain? Why would the creator of the cosmos pursue this empathy in this gritty, bloody way? The centurion was marveling at the personhood of Jesus that came through in the crucifixion, and not in the periphery. He was floored by the substance and not by the flash. He realized that belief isn’t a game of convincing. It’s a matter of revelation. Belief isn’t being pushed toward this idea or that. It’s discovering or uncovering what’s been in front of you all along.

Can you remember a moment in which you really saw someone for who they are? Or maybe a moment in which someone really saw you for who you are? It’s a kind of vision that makes so many things make more sense than they did before, that ties you together in a new and special way. It’s a kind of vision that spurs belief.

Again and again and again, we have seen Jesus for who he really is. We are tied to him in new and special ways every day. So as we enter into the grief of his crucifixion, we can hold fast to hope for the miracle of his resurrection.

*30*

“Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.”

— Mark 15:46

Stop here and dwell a moment. While this account neatly tees up the resurrection story (Joseph buried Jesus without anointing the body first, leaving it open to the necessity of the women coming to the tomb on the third day, once the Sabbath was over) we are not there yet.

Jesus is dead.

Not hiding out. Not pretending. Dead. The fully human man that was Jesus has ceased to breathe. His heart has stopped beating. His brain no longer functions. The fully divine God who was mysteriously and miraculously embodied in the person of Jesus was dead, too. It wasn’t as though the divine aspect of Jesus got to be transported safely to some other dimension. God—actual God—loved us so much that God would experience that which humans fear above all else in solidarity with us.

I have to believe that in that moment the very essence of reality was fundamentally altered. But we cannot know that yet. We are not there yet.

Today, let us dwell in subdued awe of what God gave up out of love for us.

How does it feel to fully acknowledge that God, in Jesus, died?

*31*

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

— Mark 16:8

Main Idea: Fear plays a huge part in our story of faith—but because we know Jesus, fear does not get to cut our stories short.

The ten verses of Mark’s Gospel that follow today’s text (v.9-19) tell the story of Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and to the disciples, casting out their demons and charging them to spread the good news of his resurrection far and wide. These verses are considered by many scholars to be an optional, or “long,” ending to the book. They are thought to have been authored later, added mostly for the sake of softening Mark’s already choppy tone and retroactively fitting his testimony in more smoothly with the other gospels.

Our passage this morning is the original ending to the Gospel of Mark. Verse 8 is the last line, and it reads, “…they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” What if we stuck to this passage, just like the lectionary lays it out? What if we read only this version every year (or every few years)? How would that make us feel about the leaders of the earliest church? Probably a bit confused. And probably not very confident, either. Where is their curiosity? Where is their faith? Why were these the people trusted with spreading the good news of Jesus in those crucial, early days? How can fear have the final word in a central, biblical text? The way the original Gospel of Mark reads is that because Mary, Mary, and Salome felt afraid, their narratives just stop. There’s no growth past that point. No development. They were afraid, and so the story is over.

That’s what fear does. It tries to end things for us. To shut things off and shut things down and cut our stories short. And because of this, a life of faith necessarily entails trying our best to keep fear at bay. The man sitting in the tomb in this passage tells Mary, Mary, and Salome, “Do not be alarmed,” because he wants them to hear what he is saying. He wants them to give themselves the opportunity to react in a way that fear would stifle.

But in this story, Mary, Mary, and Salome are alarmed. Faithful as they are and fresh as the man’s imperative is in their ears, they cannot keep their fear at bay. And what the Holy Spirit promises us on this Easter Sunday is that that’s okay. Our good news this morning is that when we find ourselves in a similar position, we don’t have to worry about fear having the last word and bringing our stories to premature ends.

Because Jesus defeated death itself, we can conquer any fear through him. If a life of faith involves trying to keep fear at bay, it also entails liberation from this fear when all our efforts fail us. When, for any number of reasons, we can’t muster enough energy or courage or trust or leverage to rise above our anxieties, Jesus is there to give us something new to work with. When we are scared into silence, Jesus is there to remind us what our voice sounds like—and that he needs us to use it to build up God’s reign. When we are overwhelmed into oblivion, Jesus is there to carry us back to center and fortify us. To rejuvenate us. To inspire us once again. This is the promise of Easter Sunday: the new life on the other side of death.