**Daily Devotions**

**November 2023**

*11-01*

“Even after this event Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people; any who wanted to be priests he consecrated for the high places.”

— 1 Kings 13:33

I find this mysterious “Man of God” intriguing. Why is he not named? Clearly he’s a prophet. And his story is pretty bizarre (I highly recommend you read the entire passage for today). In the end, after all he does and says and goes through, we read that Jeroboam didn’t learn his lesson. He saw the unwavering wrath of God in action—it was not spared even from this “man of God” who was actually deceived into violating God’s command. But, alas, Jeroboam learned nothing.

How many times in our own lives do we see the obvious signs of God’s presence and action (not wrath, which frankly, I do not believe God visits upon anyone ever) and yet continue to doubt or turn away or act in the polar opposite way it seems so blatantly obvious God is calling us to act? I know I have had times in my life when I just didn’t trust God to take care of me, and stubbornly clung to my own agenda, trying to take or keep control of something which was completely beyond me. Only to find, in the end, that letting go completely and letting God be God was the only way to resolve what I was convinced was solely up to me. How many times in our own lives are we Jeroboam?

Luckily—mercifully—God is patient with us. God isn’t in any hurry to force us to follow God’s will. God just provide the opportunities and ample evidence of God’s grace-filled presence, and waits for us to take the indicated action. May God help me—and all of us—to let go sooner. Life is so much simpler when I do.

What signs of God’s presence in my life have I observed? Do I still turn away from God when I want outcomes to go a certain way?

*11-02*

“The Lord will strike Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water; he will root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their ancestors, and scatter them beyond the Euphrates, because they have made their sacred poles, provoking the Lord to anger. He will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and which he caused Israel to commit.”

— 1 Kings 14:15-16

Sacred poles were erected to honor the Canaanite goddess, Asherah. The historical fact is that polytheism was normal among the Jewish people until at least the Babylonian exile, and possibly even later. But as prophet after prophet warned, Yahweh had an issue with this. Israel and Judah’s long history of warring and being conquered was attributed almost entirely to their various kings turning to gods in addition to Yahweh and allowing all the people to do likewise.

The Old Testament establishes that God is a “jealous God,” but I’m skeptical. I really don’t think God needs to have God’s ego stroked. I can see that God might be unhappy because many religions at the time practiced human sacrifice (as did the Israelites for a significant portion of their history) and wanted that to stop. But really, it seems a bit overkill to punish Israel as harshly as happened (repeatedly) for worshipping Yahweh and other gods.

History aside, perhaps what we can take from this passage is that our actions have spiritual consequences. If we continue to turn away from God and in favor of our self-created idols, we punish ourselves. We starve our spirits of the connection God so deeply desires to have with us. We lose out on the peace that passes all understanding. Whatever our sacred poles happen to be, perhaps we ought to examine whether keeping them up is really worth it.

What actions can I take to move closer to God in my daily life?

*11-03*

“Now Rehoboam son of Solomon reigned in Judah. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city that the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, to put his name there. His mother’s name was Naamah the Ammonite.”

— 1 Kings 14:21

I wonder about this Naamah. 1 Kings calls her out specifically as Rehoboam’s mother not once, but twice in this passage. Possibly it’s because she’s an Ammonite—evidence that Solomon took wives who were not from the Israelites, something that he did later in life that undermined his legacy in a huge way. And after all, as we read, Rehoboam sins so egregiously against God (by worshipping other gods) that it says his actions provoked God to jealousy and anger “more than all their ancestors had done.” This sets the stage for the disastrous string of kings that followed David and Solomon, eventually leading Israel to split into two nations and then to be conquered repeatedly by other nations. Can it all be traced back to this poor Naamah? That’s giving her an awful lot of credit, when the decisions were ultimately to be made by her son, the king. Still, even in acutely patriarchal societies like this one, women can have a great deal of influence, especially over their sons. On the other hand, the records of such societies are often quick to blame women for the misdeeds of men, so there’s that. I suppose I don’t have anything particularly profound to say about this—it’s just a noticing and a wondering, and sometimes that’s the best thing that comes out of reading the Bible. It ought to make us think.

What scripture passages do I find curious? Why?

*11-04*

“Ahab son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Sidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshiped him.”

— 1 Kings 16:30-31

This kind of made me chuckle. To paraphrase: Ahab was a complete jerk, and if that wasn’t enough he married an absolutely horrid woman! As I touched on yesterday, women in scripture often come to bear more responsibility for the poor choices of men than they probably should. Here we are introduced to the single most notorious woman in the Bible. Even if you’ve never read a word of it, culturally you probably know that “Jezebel” is not a compliment. Jezebel’s big crime was that she worshipped Baal and got others to do likewise. Newsflash! Ahab and all the kings before him were already up to their eyeballs in the worship of other gods, including the Canaanite gods, e.g. Baal. Clearly this woman must have made a serious impression on the people of the day for her to have been recorded in this fashion!

This isn’t to say that once we’ve already gone down a not-so-great path we can’t be led further along by someone of less-than-stellar influence. We can’t blame them for our bad behavior—it’s our choice to follow after all—but we can be aware of their effects on us and take whatever action is needed to extricate ourselves from our entanglement. It doesn’t even need to be so obvious or sinister as a Jezebel leading us to egregious sin. I spent decades in a relationship that I didn’t even realize was dysfunctional. We truly brought out the worst behavior in each other. My behavior wasn’t his fault, but I had to come to the realization that continually subjecting myself to the way he triggered me was hindering me from my efforts to become healthy. Ultimately, I had to leave in order to finally heal.

Again, it can be super easy to blame the Jezebels in our lives for our issues. But real progress toward healing can’t be made until we’re honest with ourselves about our own choice.

When have I allowed someone to influence my behavior in negative ways? Am I still doing this in some area of my life?

*11-05*

“Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word.”

— 1 Kings 18:21

Main Idea: The realness of God lies in God’s people.

Have you ever heard someone joke, “God must be real!” when something convenient happens? Maybe you snag the perfect parking spot in a busy lot on a day when you’re already running late. Maybe your underdog of a football team finally wins a game they definitely shouldn’t have won. Maybe the test you only read one chapter for ends up asking you questions that are only from that one chapter. Maybe the plans that you were secretly dreading get cancelled last-minute, or maybe your ticket number gets called at a raffle. When it feels like the heavens have your back—when it feels like you’re somehow currying divine favor, the realness of God suddenly seems like a logical explanation for it all, if only for a moment.

This is a story about the realness of God. A story about people testing the realness God. This is a story about people asking God to show proof of power, proof of presence and, ultimately, proof of legitimacy. By Verse 39, God has done just that, raining down on a sacrificial altar in a pillar of fire and inspiring newfound reverence in God’s realness.

Why, then, do we get so much detail leading up to the fire? Why do we hear about the repair of the altar, the stacking of the twelve stones, the collection of the water and the recitation of the prayers? Why couldn’t God just one-up Baal by bursting into flame right after Baal’s prophets called on him and nothing happened?

The answer is simple: because, in this story, the realness of God has nothing to do with the fact that God showed up. The realness of God is about the fact that God showed up in community.

God isn’t interested in performing. God isn’t playing by the rules or the terms set out in this test, because God doesn’t care about comparison. God cares about God’s people. God demonstrates power, presence and legitimacy as a response to their invitation into a space they had prepared. God shows up because together, in faith, God’s people asked God to show up. In other words, God’s realness—God’s power, manifested on the sacrificial altar—transcends a surface-level idea of righteousness, goodness or authority and speaks, instead, to the righteousness, goodness and authority wrapped up in togetherness.

*11-06*

“Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.’”

— 1 Kings 17:1

Spiritual drought is real. Yes, Elijah was predicting a literal drought, one that would cause some serious suffering among God’s people for a long time. And this supposedly as a punishment because Ahab was such a lousy king. And while this drought may or may not have been historically accurate, I think it’s more fruitful to look at it allegorically.

God’s people had turned to other gods, because their king said it was cool. We, too, find ourselves continually enticed to follow other “gods” because our culture tells us we ought to. Wealth, technology, celebrity, fashion, sports—the list is endless of those things that we can find ourselves worshipping, only to find ourselves unhappy and unfulfilled and wondering why. That’s spiritual drought.

God is always calling us back into God’s loving arms, promising to quench our deepest thirsts with living water. To fill us to overflowing with everything we need. Let Elijah’s words be a reminder to us that spiritual drought doesn’t have to last, if we just seek the only one who can send us rain.

When have I felt spiritual drought in my life? How did God resolve it?

*11-07*

“When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, ‘Is it you, you troubler of Israel?’ He answered, ‘I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father’s house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals.’”

— 1 Kings 18:17-18

I love this exchange. Ahab cuts right to the chase, calling Elijah out as a rabble-rouser. Is it you, o thorn in my side? O pain in my backside? O speaker of truth that I don’t want to hear? To which Elijah responds, Nonsense. Any trouble around here is your own darn fault, and I’m holding you to it! It’s a no-holds-barred confrontation that turns spectacularly violent shortly afterwards. And while I don’t advocate the mass murder of the priests of Ba’al or anyone at all period, there is something to be said for this kind of direct communication. It lets everyone know exactly where they stand. No game-playing. From that starting point, it’s easier to work to some kind of resolution.

Personally I have a history of conflict avoidance. I don’t like when people get irritated or stressed out or ruffled. I’m a lifelong peacemaker—but not in the best sense of the word. My peacemaking was about making conflicts go away, not actually solving them. Solving conflicts means bringing them into the light, allowing people to have their feelings, listening to all sides, and taking action to actually change things. I would have been a lousy Old Testament prophet.

These days I work toward Elijah’s kind of clarity and honesty. If I witness something that needs confronting, I confront it, no matter how uncomfortable it makes me. It’s not easy. But it’s definitely worth it.

Do I avoid conflict? How can I become willing to step up to help solve problems?

*11-08*

“At the seventh time he said, ‘Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.’ Then he said, ‘Go say to Ahab, “Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.”’ In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was a heavy rain.”

— 1 Kings 18:44-45a

Sometimes it’s hard to see the signs. The drought had been going on for years. A tiny cloud would hardly have been cause for hope. But God tells Elijah that it doesn’t just mean rain is coming, but an absolute torrent, so large as to stop transportation.

There have been times of spiritual drought in my life that have seemed to drag on for long periods. Times when I couldn’t see how God was present and active. Times when it felt as though I would never find my way to where I was supposed to go. In the end, each time something happened to shift my circumstances—some awareness, some opportunity, some insight. In almost every case, when I looked back, I saw that there had been subtle signs I had failed to see. I’m so good at rationalizing things, at attempting to apply logic where faith is required. I could have spared myself hours, weeks, even years of difficulty if I had only been able to recognize the potential for drought-ending torrents in “little clouds no bigger than a person’s hand.” Sometimes, of course, I had to endure long-term difficulties in order to change in some vital way for the better, so I have no regrets for my obtuseness. Especially as I can share these things with others as a witness to the transformative power of God in my life—like in these devotions! Still, this is my pitch for trust that even the slightest indications of change can potentially turn everything on its head in the best possible ways.

When have I looked back and only then seen the obvious signs of God’s action in my life?

*11-09*

“I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

— 1 Kings 19:10

One could call Elijah a whiner. In fact, I, myself, have in the past. But today I want to look at his complaint a little differently. The truth is that he has done everything God has asked him to. He’s followed the rules, carried the message, demonstrated God’s power, and instead of rewarding him by giving him success in his endeavor to turn God’s people around, God has seemingly abandoned him to the consequences of his actions—Jezebel is out for blood. Elijah is a wanted man, his death warrant signed. In Elijah’s shoes, I would be just as upset, if not more so.

Sometimes I look at the world, at the people who are struggling to speak truth to power, working tirelessly to bring change to public policy and entire systems in order to do what I feel is the work Jesus has called us to—advocating for those who are oppressed, poor, suffering, persecuted, imprisoned, and so forth. These people give and give of themselves and yet the pace of positive change is glacial. Many of them suffer retaliatory threats, violence, and other forms of persecution. Where, in all of this, is God? Where is the one who declares that it is our divine call to care for the widow and the orphan, who declares that when we show compassion and love to the suffering, we are doing the same for Jesus?

I know those in the trenches often point to the successes they have achieved. There have been improvements over time. Things are far better in some areas than they were ten, twenty, fifty or more years ago. But some things are worse. And current reactionary thought and actions seem to be trying to undo any of the progress that has been made. It’s enough to make any prophet complain to God.

I have no deep insights about this. Only a word of compassion for Elijah and for all those who keep working for God’s justice in spite of all the obstacles thrown in their way, even to the potential harm to their own lives.

God, strengthen all who fight the good fight, get into good trouble, and carry your words of justice and compassion into the world. Amen.

*11-10*

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

— 1 Kings 19:11b-12

Sheer silence. I wonder how many of us have actually experienced this. Even at my cabin, there is the hum of the refrigerator, the rumble of passing boats, or the obnoxious roaring of jet skis. In Timeline, by Michael Chrichton, the first thing the people who go back in time to the medieval period notice is the utter lack of sound. Our modern lives are a constant din, whether it’s the quiet sound of appliances, the constant hissing of traffic, the incessant sound of conversation or media voices on phones, television, computers, or other technology. We often seek answers in those myriad voices, looking for people to tell us what to do in order to be happy, to get what we want, to “live our best lives.” I hate to break it to you, but those answers are not to be found in the din of our human society. They are to be found only in the sheer silence of communion with God.

God comes to us in unexpected ways, breaking through the wall of sound, surprising us with simplicity and grace. God meets us in the midst of our frustration and pain, our despair and despondency, and offers us a different path. Are we listening for God in the cacophony of mass media? Or are we willing to disconnect and know that the things that satisfy are not to be found on TikTok or Facebook or CNN?

Where do I look for solutions when I am unsatisfied with life and circumstances?

*11-11*

“He said, ‘Throw her down.’ So they threw her down; some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, which trampled on her.”

— 2 Kings 9:33

The Bible: Not for the weak of stomach. I worked with a pastor who told our youth group that the Bible was absolutely full of violence and sex, and they were astonished. But it’s true! The biblical writers did not shy away from the realities—the embodiedness—of human existence. We tend to downplay these things in our day-to-day church discourse. I once preached a sermon in which I asked how many people present knew the story of David and Bathsheeba. Only about six hands went up in a congregation of close to 90. I was flabbergasted. But our society doesn’t want to acknowledge that David slept with someone else’s wife (and even if it was consensual, the power imbalance was ridiculous, just one reason leading some scholars to name it as rape), got her pregnant, had her husband murdered, and then married her. It’s too uncomfortable to talk about, to try to unpack how this could be God’s chosen king and one of the most beloved figures in our history and the ancestor of Jesus. So we just sort of gloss over it.

Likewise, we all know that Jezebel wasn’t great. Even if we don’t know the Bible story, culturally we know that “a Jezebel” is a lousy woman of one kind or another. But we don’t often talk about her violent, gory death, nor stop to unpack whether it was justified (which I talked about last time I reflected on this portion of scripture).

The Bible is a work of incredibly beautiful, impossibly troubling, wonderfully thought-provoking literature, which calls us into conversation with our own humanity, and continually offers insight into who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Let’s not shy away from the nitty-gritty of our embodied mortality. We might have great things to learn from it.

Are there Bible passages I prefer not to read? Why or why not?

*11-12*

“I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.”

— Hosea 11:9

Main Idea: Because God has claimed us as children, we know that God will love us like a parent loves a child—unconditionally.

Children are portrayed very differently between these two passages. In Hosea, children operate with a very high level of autonomy, and they use that autonomy to subvert God’s expectations. To disobey God. To stray from God, even. In the Gospel of Mark, children seem to have no autonomy at all—they are passive throughout the story, completely subject to their parents, who are bringing them to Jesus, and the disciples, who are getting in their way. They aren’t trying to stray from God at all. In fact, they are very much trying to come closer.

What’s interesting is that God is not portrayed differently between these two passages. God is painted much the same in Mark as God is painted in Hosea, and in that consistency lies a promise for us: God will always lead with love.

For rebellious children and obedient children, alike, God advocates. For the fussy and the gentle children, the boisterous and the silent children, God wants only good things. God extends invitations to the ornery, the innocent and everybody in-between, exuding compassion where we might judge, instead, and tenderness where we might be tempted to go cold.

This leading love—unconditional love—scripture tells us, is unique to God. It is a love free from contingencies and expectations. It is a love that overcomes obstacles. It is a love that can balance disappointment, hurt and confusion without wanting to seek vengeance for any one of them. God’s love is all at once preemptive and reactive, which means that it doesn’t really have an identifiable beginning or end. It always has been, it is, and it always will be.

Jesus tells his disciples that the kingdom of God belongs to the children—to people like the children—because God’s love has always been, is, and always will be for God’s children. For us. No matter what kind of child you are, God will meet you with a love beyond your deepest understanding.

*11-13*

“I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy.”

— Hosea 2:18-19

God’s covenant is with all of creation. I love these little moments when the biblical writers look beyond the primacy of human place in God’s esteem and recognize that God, in fact, deeply cherishes and highly values every single thing that God has made. It hearkens back to God’s first command to humanity: be loving stewards of creation. As human beings we are only one component in the endless variety and mind-boggling complexity of interdependent life. God’s promises to love and redeem are not limited to humanity, but extend to worms and elephants, to ecosystems and biomes, to ferns and mountain ranges. Let us always think of the world as St. Francis did—of brother sun and sister moon and all our wild and beautiful natural siblings all around us.

What does it mean to me that God’s covenant is with all of creation?

*11-14*

“Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

— Hosea 4:3

Our actions have consequences beyond ourselves. Often we think that our decisions are about us, that we cause no harm to anyone but ourselves by our mistakes. While there are cases where this might be true, the fact is that we are all so completely interconnected and interdependent with others—other people, our communities, our world, our environment—that our decisions can have repercussions we aren’t even aware of. A friend of mine brought my attention to the fact that the fashion industry is one of the biggest (if not the biggest) polluter in the world. That the constant need to buy new clothing contributes to incalculable environmental harm (never mind the unethical clothing manufacturing practices all over the world). She is huge into purchasing used clothing, mending what she already has, and finding alternate and sustainable sources for textiles. As someone who loves to sew, I have become painfully aware of how even purchasing fabric and making my own clothing doesn’t help the situation, and I’m trying to be aware of ways I can lower my impact in this area.

God’s people’s flagrant disregard of God’s law has consequences far beyond just the people involved. The land mourns. The wild animals and birds languish. The fish of the sea perish. This is no different today. Our flagrant disregard of God’s call to be stewards of creation and to love our neighbors as ourselves leads to suffering we can’t even see.

Where do my daily practices have a negative impact on others or the environment? How can I make changes to those practices?

*11-15*

“Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-aven; look behind you, Benjamin! Ephraim shall become a desolation in the day of punishment; among the tribes of Israel I declare what is sure.”

— Hosea 5:8-9

For some reason I was just struck by this: “Look behind you, Benjamin!” Hosea is proclaiming God’s judgment and calling the people to send out warnings: horns, trumpets, alarms. But the tribe of Benjamin? Look out behind you! It’s like something out of a horror movie, honestly. Something terrible is coming. You don’t know when or where or how. And then, there it is, and it’s too late to do anything about it.

It makes me wonder about our human tendency to culture our own obliviousness to the damage we cause, so that we don’t have to think about consequences. The last two passages from Isaiah spoke to our interdependence with people and nature, and once again, this passage brings up that theme in my mind. How often are we the tribe of Benjamin, continuing to act in ways that we know—because we have been told a million different times!—will have serious consequences? Even as we see those consequences begin to happen (climate change, for example) we continue to rationalize them away. At what point will we “look behind” ourselves and come face to face with the monster we have created?

We would all do well to listen to the prophets of our time—the scientists, the justice-workers, all those calling out warnings—and continue to pray for the clarity we need to change before the point of no return.

Do I fear the future? Why or why not?

*11-16*

“But they do not consider that I remember all their wickedness. Now their deeds surround them, they are before my face. By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the officials by their treachery.”

— Hosea 7:2-3

Maybe no one will notice… As a young person, I was a teacher’s pet. I followed the rules, excelled academically, demonstrated responsibility, and was generally seen as one of the “good kids.” While there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, what it did in my case was lead to a raging case of entitlement (though I wouldn’t be aware of it until years later in retrospect.) I figured as one of the “good kids” that the rules didn’t really apply to me. They were to keep the “bad kids” in line. And while I followed them when necessary to maintain my good standing, I disregarded them any time I thought I could get away with it. And anytime I was called out on this, I was adept at deflecting, spinning, or if pushed, outright lying to not get in trouble. One time—only once in all of elementary, junior high, and high school—I actually had to face the consequences of my entitlement. A teacher caught me breaking his rule and gave me detention. Me! How dare he? Who did he think he was? Didn’t he know who I was? I can laugh about it now, having done the 12-Step recovery work known as a “fearless and thorough moral inventory” and its subsequent amends-making process, but at the time I was incensed, humiliated, and deeply resentful. Like the folks Hosea is calling out in this passage, my wickedness didn’t go unnoticed—my deeds surrounded me and were before this teacher’s face. He knew all about my entitlement and he wasn’t about to put up with it. Yikes!

I don’t think God just lies in wait for us to mess up and act on our character defects. I think we create all kinds of our own misery, which is plenty punishment for such things. But let’s not be fooled: God knows exactly what is in our minds and hearts, even the things we would rather hide from God. Luckily, God loves and forgives us even if and when we have to accept the worldly consequences of our actions.

Have I ever done anything I’m not proud of? Were there consequences? How do I feel about these events at this point in my life?

*11-17*

“The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come; Israel cries, ‘The prophet is a fool, the man of the spirit is mad!’ Because of your great iniquity, your hostility is great.”

— Hosea 9:7

This line, though: “Because of your great iniquity, your hostility is great.” Human beings have a tendency to be defensive. No one likes being called out on sub-par behavior. We are gifted at justifying and rationalizing. We build communities of like-minded people who agree with us so we can feel okay about doing things that, just maybe, aren’t really okay.

The people of Israel were not pleased with the things Hosea had to tell them about their egregious actions against God. So unwilling were they to even consider the man might actually be right, they just shouted that Hosea was a fool, or mad. They tried to discredit him so they didn’t have to be accountable. Does that sound like anything happening in our modern context?

Hosea isn’t having it. He calls a spade a spade. You’re only screaming because you know I’m right. The things you have done are so horrible—and you know it!—that the only way for you to live with them is to somehow prove to yourself that those same things are, in fact, perfectly acceptable.

But before we smugly say, “Yeah, I’m looking at you [fill-in-the-blank-political-figure-we-don’t-like]!” maybe we ought to look a little more closely at ourselves. Where have we, when confronted by truth, sought to discredit the speaker of said truth in our own minds (or with our friends) in order to allow ourselves to deny it? We have to be careful, of course. There are times when what appears to be truth is spoken by unreliable sources and is not, actually, truth. In those cases, it is often us who are accused of being “a fool” or “mad” by those with whom we don’t agree.

Ultimately, I suppose, it is about discernment. It’s about being scrupulously honest with ourselves about our own behavior and willing to make things right when we have been wrong, so that if and when such things are pointed out by credible witnesses, we can have the humility to accept the truth.

Have I ever been in a position where my reputation was attacked because I spoke the truth?

*11-18*

“You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed.”

— Hosea 10:13-14a

I used to trust in my own power. I grew up with the bizarre narrative in my head that God had gifted me with everything I was going to get from God at birth, and it was subsequently up to me to take those gifts and carve out the life I wanted. Frankly, I had a lot of gifts: a good intellect, some clear skills and talents, a happy childhood, etc. So why, when I was 33 years old, was I so desperate to be out of my own life that I considered driving my car into the ditch and, too scared to actually do it, self-medicated with food to the point of obesity and diminished health? Why, when I had convinced myself I had this perfect, charmed life, was I so miserable?

I wandered into 12-step recovery for food addiction in November of 2004, with absolutely no clue as to what the 12 steps were or whether food addiction was actually a real thing. Within a very short time (a matter of weeks) the error of my thinking was laid bare: I was trusting in my own power. I was trying to be God in my own life (and the life of everyone around me, by the way) and it just does not work.

I am grateful (beyond grateful, actually) that I was so quickly convinced and was able to surrender to God the things that were God’s. My life was utterly transformed (not overnight—I am still on a one-day-at-a-time spiritual journey) and not only am I a normal body weight and in excellent health, I experience true serenity and joy even in the midst of very real challenges in my life.

God didn’t have to punish me with the tumult of war for my insistence on trusting my own power. I punished myself plenty. God was right there, like the father of the prodigal son, arms open and grinning wide when I stumbled back into God’s arms. Sooooooo grateful…

Do I trust in my own power sometimes? What are the results?

*11-19*

“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

Main Idea: Our God is uniquely persistent and intentional in giving us every possible chance to bear fruit.

It’s hard not to cringe as we read this portion of Mark 12. The tenants overseeing the vineyard are clearly exploitative and violent people—terrible stewards of the trust that the vineyard owner extended to them and hoarders of the wealth that stems from it.

If we read past Verse 3, we learn that the vineyard owner sent many of his slaves to collect his share of the produce. Each time, they were unsuccessful, because each time, the tenants met them with a different kind of abuse. At a certain point, the tenants started killing the slaves who showed up. So, the vineyard owner changed his strategy yet again. He sent his son to retrieve what was owed to him, assuming that the tenants would show his child a different level of respect. The vineyard owner was wrong—the tenants killed his son, too, figuring that they could somehow get their hands on a portion of his inheritance.

At this point, we as readers are tempted to ask one question: Why doesn’t this vineyard owner close up shop and reevaluate? He has sunk so much time, so many relationships and so much emotional investment into something that has only brought him loss—and serious loss, at that. All of us would understand if he needed to take a beat and go back to the drawing board.

But Jesus tells us that the vineyard owner has every intention to keep going. Not with these tenants—Jesus says he “will destroy” the people who did him such harm—but that he will find someone new to take their places. Someone who will honor the land and the work and the agreement between the two parties. So while the pieces of his plan will look different from chapter to chapter, the vineyard owner doesn’t change the plan, itself. He is determined to get the land to bear fruit and to get the community he forms to share it. Even the brutal murder of his own son can’t rip him away from that vision.

This is a pretty obvious allegory for the way that God loves us. That is, with steadfast, unceasing persistence. God has a vision for our flourishing and will send us messenger after messenger to communicate it; reminder after reminder to surrender to it. No matter how we respond, God will not give up. Even if God needs to return portions of the vineyard to nature so that we feel the consequences—even if God needs to work through different people from time to time—there is nothing God will not do in pursuit of God’s vision of shalom. God’s intention is for all of creation to thrive, together, and nothing we do can sabotage that.

Our text from Isaiah uses beautiful language to speak to the intentionalityof God—the painstaking care God takes in cultivating and preparing the vineyard for us. Our text from Mark highlights the persistenceof God—the absurd depth of patience that God possesses and channels toward us. Our promise is that our God will stop at nothing to show us grace and mercy, and our call to action is to be the best, most receptive tenants we can possibly be.

*11-20*

“When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.”

— Isaiah 1:15

What a visceral image. Very Lady Macbeth. Hands folded in prayer but when the camera pans back, we see blood dripping from between the fingers. I don’t think God ignores the prayers of even the worst offenders—if that were so, we’d all be in big trouble. But we have to know when there is metaphorical blood on our hands, when we have caused harm to others, and I can’t help but think it would diminish the quality of our prayers.

I love the practice of the “greeting of peace” in my congregation. It comes from the biblical idea that we need to make peace with our neighbors before bringing our gifts to the altar of God. We can’t make our sacrifices and hope to be forgiven if we have harmed our neighbors or are harboring a grudge against them. Of course, the way we practice it isn’t specifically as it was originally intended. I can’t think of a single time I’ve had to make an amends to someone before the offering was collected. But since I know the origin of the practice, every time we do it, it brings me into a state of compassion for everyone in my community and I can make my offering (which I do by blessing the plate, since I give electronically) with a clear heart.

I practice this beyond my church community, too. I have a daily practice of inventory-taking in which I am clear and deliberate about where I have been resentful, selfish, dishonest, or fearful during my day. Before I go to bed at night, I recognize where I have fallen short, and if necessary, I make an amends right away if possible, clearing the air. There are plenty of opportunities we have every day to be honest with ourselves and name the ways we have caused harm. Nipping them in the bud and making a sincere commitment to doing better helps to wipe the blood from our hands, that we might commune with our God knowing we have done our part, and trusting that God forgives us no matter what.

Do I have a daily practice of recognizing my errors and seeking to correct them? What might such a practice look like?

*11-21*

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

— Isaiah 2:3b

For a while, I didn’t go to church. I was very active in a congregation for almost fifteen years, about five of those years as the Director of Children, Youth, and Family Ministry. When I made the decision to leave, it took me a while to be ready to get involved in a new community. For a while I enjoyed sleeping in on Sundays and going nowhere. But it wasn’t long before I felt at loose ends. It wasn’t as though I couldn’t read my Bible or pray or sing hymns on my own. It wasn’t as though I couldn’t read the insights of pastors I particularly enjoyed online, or discuss theology with my then-husband or friends. (Full disclosure: I did none of those things.) I just craved a community of people who would gather together “on the mountain of the Lord” to be taught God’s ways and how to walk in God’s paths.

A pastor friend of mine suggested my current faith community, and when I walked in the door in late August of 2019 I immediately thought, “I’m home.” I love the people, the music, the preaching, the social justice work, the commitment to the neighborhood, the incredible love and grace and compassion that seems to flow incessantly from font to rafters, from pulpit to hospitality center, from classroom to backyard pizza oven.

We are, each of us, on our own journeys, and not everyone belongs to a particular church. But whatever your practice and path, I hope you can experience the joy and wonder of going up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that God might teach you God’s ways and that you might walk in God’s paths.

In what ways do I go up to the mountain of God?

*11-22*

“Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made.”

— Isaiah 5:8

I make things. I sew. I craft. I paint. I love color and texture and seeing the fruits of my labors. They are seldom perfect, but that’s part of the charm. At no point would I ever pretend that anything I have created is worthy of worship.

In early history, human society was generally polytheistic—even the Israelites. God was principle among the deities, but frequently worshipped alongside the semitic gods of co-located tribes. Those semitic gods were represented by statues or sacred poles—things built by human hands, to which people prayed. Isaiah calls this out as ridiculous. You might as well worship a loaf of bread or a cloak or a pair of shoes. They’re just stuff you made. How can they have the power of God or even a minor deity?

But don’t we still do that now? Aren’t we constantly bombarded with messages telling us that what really matters is a certain fashion label or car or job or piece of technology? Don’t we have a tendency to worship the works of human hands with as much reverence as we do God on a Sunday morning? Don’t we limit our worship of God to Sunday morning (or Saturday night, or Wednesday night as the case might be)? Is that any different than me taking a picture frame I’ve crafted out of lake stones and mod podge and praying to it to make me happy? Okay maybe that’s a little silly. But maybe not.

The bottom line is that God transcends all of creation, cannot be limited by anything made by human hands. And only God is worthy of our undivided praise and prayer. Only a relationship with God can give us the satisfaction we crave and fruitlessly seek in material things.

What worldly creations do I have a tendency to hold more sacred than they perhaps ought to be?

*11-23*

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and ”

— Isaiah 6:1-4

Revelation wasn’t all that original. The Bible contains lots of examples of so-called apocalyptic literature—visions of God being worshipped by angels, of great fiery wheels in the sky, of God descending to visit judgment upon the world. These visions must have been terrifying—I can’t quite bring into focus what a seraph would actually look like, though I imagine their voices would be so beautiful as to instill both a joy and a fear so deep it would cause the listener to immediately weep. Many artists have tried to capture these images, though I have yet to see any painting or drawing that elicits the kind of emotional response an actual seraph would. Our mortal minds simply cannot conceive of the kind of glory God would actually convey if we could see God.

Visions of the divine are found in all forms of religion and spirituality. Many people have profound and unexplainable experiences of God’s immediate presence in their lives. Some cultures foster these images with mind-altering substances, recognizing the need to let go of control of the conscious mind in order to touch the holy. Skeptics in all times and places write these things off as delusions—bizarre combinations of brain chemicals creating something out of nothing. I don’t hold with that, personally, having had my own low-key vision at one point, along with any number of profound dreams that were a little too insightful for me to give myself all the credit.

Whatever you believe about such revelations—visions, dreams, encounters—they certainly present some of the most fascinating and provocative passages of scripture to unpack. In this particular case, the vision sets up the moment that God calls Isaiah to be a prophet, in itself a profound occurrence. Even if we never experience such a thing, we can always remember that God calls us to be prophets, too—to speak God’s words to the people in compassion and love.

What do I believe about apocalyptic visions? Have I ever had a vision? How do I know?

*11-24*

“Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, ‘I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.’ Then Isaiah said: ‘Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?’”

— Isaiah 7:10-13

This is one of the Bible’s many comedic moments. God straight up tells Isaiah to tell Ahaz to ask God for a sign. Ahaz, not wanting to offend, wanting to make sure he is following God’s commandments to a “T” essentially says, as Jesus did in the wilderness, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” Which, under the circumstances of a prophet of God coming to your door and spouting off, you kind of have to admit isn’t a bad course of action.

Isaiah, at this point, basically facepalms. “For crying out loud. Is it not enough that you drive everyone around you crazy so you feel like you have to try to drive God crazy, too? God just asked you to ask for a sign. ASK for as SIGN!”

I have to admit I’m guilty of being Ahaz a lot of the time. I don’t want to come out and say whether I believe God gives clear directions or directly intervenes in things—there are too many unknowns, too many things that go wrong, too many tragedies. And yet I’ve also experienced moments of serendipity so profound I honestly can’t come up with any rational explanation. But I don’t want to claim them as God’s action. Not when my friend’s baby died, or when there’s war in Israel and Gaza.

God is probably facepalming in these moments. Laughing, but facepalming nonetheless. Sometimes I just need to get over myself and my need to control the narrative and just accept the gift. I don’t have to be able to explain anything. I can be grateful to God for any good thing in my life always.

Do I believe God directly acts in my life? Why or why not? How?

*11-25*

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

— Isaiah 9:2

I remember the New York City blackout of 1977. I was six years old and living in suburban New York. We were watching home movies in the living room during a thunderstorm. And then… everything went dark. And I mean dark. It was unlike anything I had experienced before. It wasn’t like when I went to bed at night and there was a night light in the bathroom or street lights shining through the windows. There was absolutely no light—it almost felt like a physical thing, this darkness, resting on me. My parents sprang to action, feeling their way through the house, finding a flashlight, then pulling out candles and lighting them in every room. They brought a cheerful glow and a sense of fun to the whole thing, chasing away any fear of the total lack of visual sensation.

I think this is the kind of spiritual darkness Isaiah is talking about. Not a dimness or grayness, but a total loss of sensation, of connection to God. Not through any fault or design of God’s, but because of the perverse human need to be God, cutting ourselves off from God and visiting violence and oppression on ourselves and everyone around us. It is into this darkness that God shines God’s light of hope, like my parents lighting candles, taking away the fear, illuminating the way to the bathroom and then up to bed. Now and then, many of us still experience this sense of being cut off for any number of reasons in our lives. We live in the hope that God can, will, and does provide the light we need to lead us home.

What is the darkest I have ever felt? How did I find the light again?

*11-26*

“The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant.”

— 2 Kings 23:3

Main Idea: Our God is accountable in consequences and in reimagination.

We are supposed to expect great things from King Josiah. It’s possible that we are supposed to consider him something of a role model in a life of faith, too. The author of this text is very intentional and very constant in building Josiah’s credibility – he comes from an important and noble lineage, his moral character is notably high, he cares about the state of the Temple (and the well-being of the laborers who will restore it to its fullest glory), and in fear of judgment for Israel’s transgressions, he calls his entire nation to a kind of repentance. A return to life in and by the law of God.

Ultimately, Josiah’s efforts are not enough to deliver Jerusalem and Judah from judgment. The prophetess Huldah informs a team of leaders working alongside King Josiah that God is planning to hold God’s people accountable for years of betrayal, infidelity and transgression. While this should sound discouraging to us, we need to remember that all of Josiah’s efforts were not in vain. We also learn from Huldah that God notices the devotion and the love stemming from Josiah. God sees the Josiah’s devotion; God recognizes that Josiah has internalized the law and the love of God. So, God wants to be just as accountable to that love—that devotion—as God is to the lack of it.

Sometimes, in a life of faith, seasons of struggle are inevitable. No matter how hard we try to fend them off and no matter how purely rooted in love our intentions may be, there are major pieces of our circumstance that lie outside of our control. (Here is a good tie-in to our secondary text, the story of the Road to Emmaus. So much of the good news that the apostles stumble upon is good news after-the-fact. Their recognition of Jesus among them happened what feels like a bit too late.) But what the Spirit is telling us this morning is that no effort and no intention in faith is ever wasted. The love we feel for and show God moves God and shapes our relationships with God. It is valuable in its own right, but it also extends beyond itself and grows goodness, even in times of hardship.

*11-27*

“Go, inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.”

— 2 Kings 22:13

Does God punish us for our ignorance? I honestly don’t think so. I do think ignorance has its consequences, but they’re not divine punishment. King Josiah had no idea this book—likely Deuteronomy—even existed, much less was supposed to be guiding the actions of his entire nation. When he heard about all the things the people were doing that they shouldn’t and all the things they weren’t doing that they should, he was understandably flabbergasted. Of course, attributing all the bad luck his kingdom had had for generations to God’s punishment for their ignorance might have been a leap. On the other hand, finding the book must have given him incredible hope. Here was a guide for how to be God’s people! Here were the laws to follow spelled out in excruciating detail! He was already a “good king” in God’s eyes, but now he could offer his people a new way of being in the world, of being in relationship with God and with one another. I can only imagine the excitement and joy he must have felt.

I’ve had many such “aha” moments in my life, when I’ve come across some text or resource or scrap of profound wisdom in a sermon or song or something I’ve read. I’ve had my eyes opened to new possibilities, when I’d been convinced everything was stuck the way it was. It’s powerful to suddenly be moved beyond ignorance to clarity, and I believe God is fully present in those moments, cheering me on.

When have I had an “aha” moment that has moved me from ignorance to action?

*11-28*

“Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the Lord.”

— 2 Kings 22:19

Making amends is a powerful experience. I’m still not convinced God needed to be assuaged because Josiah’s kingdom was operating out of complete ignorance of what God wanted from them. But, laying that aside, it is true that the action of recognizing our errors—seeing and assessing them honestly—and committing ourselves to taking action to make things right is utterly liberating. Even if the person to whom we are making the amends does not receive it—refuses to listen, becomes angry, won’t forgive—the act of making the amends is what heals us.

King Josiah and his people saw the ways in which their actions as a society were harming them. They saw the opportunity to live by principles God had laid out of them. And they did what they had to do to show their contrition to God and, probably, to one another. In the story, God takes back God’s curse on them. In reality, the curse was probably lifted by simply the act of changing their ways, as so often happens for me when I am willing to clean up my side of the street.

When have I had to make an amends for something? What was the experience like?

*11-29*

“The king defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, to the south of the Mount of Destruction, which King Solomon of Israel had built for Astarte the abomination of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. He broke the pillars in pieces, cut down the sacred poles, and covered the sites with human bones.”

— 2 Kings 23:13-14

Josiah went the extra mile. He didn’t just promise to stop worshipping other gods, he deliberately destroyed anything associated with said worship, making it so distasteful to his people that they wouldn’t be tempted to try it again any time soon. (Spreading human bones over those formerly sacred sites was a nice—if macabre—touch… I don’t actually know the significance, but I imagine it made the places seriously unclean.)

When we make significant life changes, it’s often not enough to just do things a little differently. Sometimes our old habits or patterns of behavior are so deeply ingrained, we need to take drastic action to root out their triggers. For some, like me, that’s involved therapy, recovery work, and lots and lots of writing. Still there are moments when someone can push my buttons in just the right way to kick up the old, grooved reactions, and I might find myself having to make an amends (see yesterday for more on that).

It takes work to tear down the old altars and pillars and sacred poles. It takes continued commitment to keep them torn down. But it’s worth it, and no matter what, God is right in the midst of it.

How have I addressed old patterns of negative behavior in my life?

*11-30*

“Then he said, ‘What is that monument that I see?’ The people of the city told him, ‘It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel.’ He said, ‘Let him rest; let no one move his bones.’ So they let his bones alone, with the bones of the prophet who came out of Samaria.”

— 2 Kings 23:17-18

I feel like this month of devotions has been a comedy show. You know how comedians will often come back at the very end of their show to something hilarious they said at the very beginning of their show? It’s one of my favorite tropes, honestly. So (appropriately or not) I think it’s funny that the devotion for November 1 (1 Kings 13:1-34) tells this long, drawn-out and kind of weird story about an unnamed “man of God from Judah” who dies and is laid to rest in Jerusalem and now here, on November 30, in 2 Kings (and 15 kings of Judah later in history) we are brought full circle to the resting place of this unnamed “man of God from Judah.” I don’t know that it has any deep, spiritual or hidden meaning. I just can’t stop giggling about it.

Sometimes things bear repeating, not just for comedic effect, but because they don’t sink in the first time. They say a person has to hear things a minimum of seven times (and in different ways) for that information to become internalized. Sometimes I think it must be more than that! Honestly, this is why we need to study scripture and discuss it with members of our community, hear it preached, sing it, and maybe even act or dance or craft it. We need to fully experience it if we hope to make it part of ourselves, to have it ”written on our hearts” as God’s covenant promise says. As we move into December and toward the beginning of a new church year, I encourage you to encounter God’s word repeatedly, that you might grow in trust and faithfulness one day at a time.

Which scriptures are most familiar to me? Is it because of repetition? How can I expand my connection with the Bible?