**Daily Devotions**

**September 2023**

*09-01*

“So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.”

— Hebrews 4:9

Sabbath is not reserved only for the Jews. Paul is clear that gentiles, too—latecomers to God’s beloved community—can and should observe this blessed rest in God. No matter who we are or what we believe (or don’t believe) we are created in God’s image, and as such, we are invited—commanded!—to rest as God rested. We, as a society, are not very good at this. We are led to believe that our success and happiness are wholly up to us to make happen. We don’t allow ourselves to rest because we are terrified that if we let down even for a moment, we will miss an opportunity to get more, do more, have more.

Sabbath rest is an act of trust. It’s letting go of our need to control outcomes, knowing that God is our source and sustainer and that we will have what we need even if we allow ourselves to stop.

When do I find myself resisting the need to rest in God? How can I let go of my need to control?

*09-02*

“They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’”

— Mark 14:32

I am not sure where this passage fits in the theme of sabbath rest. Jesus’ state of mind is anything but restful. He is agitated and grieving, frustrated that his friends cannot manage to stay awake even for short periods of time. And yet, as Jesus prays, “yet, not what I want, but what you want,” we see a clear and beautiful surrender to the will of God which, as I see it, is a proclamation of sabbath rest. Jesus is letting go of outcomes and putting his entire trust in God, even as he faces his death.

We are called into this complete surrender to God in the form of sabbath rest. Total trust that God is holding and sustaining us in all things, and that we can let go and rest in God’s loving arms, even in the midst of our most painful challenges. What an incredible gift.

How do I observe sabbath rest even when I am struggling?

*09-03*

“Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.”

— Deuteronomy 15:10

Main Idea: God’s grace transforms giving from an obligation to a joy—from a chore to a deep and very true delight.

Verse 11 of Deuteronomy Chapter 7 hits the reader like a ton of bricks: “There will never cease to be some need on the earth.” It feels exhausting, doesn’t it? No matter what we do—no matter how well we serve others and how preemptive we push ourselves to be in doing good—someone will still be missing something at the end of every day. Someone will still need something.

A crucial part of our continued reflection on sabbath rest is reframing this view of need. What would happen if we looked at the fact that need is a constant as an opportunity instead of an obligation? As an outlet instead of another checkbox on our to-do lists? As a joy and a relief instead of an additional stressor?

That is what God is encouraging us to do by naming need as a part of the context for God’s law. After all, if need is a constant, then grace must a constant, too. Mercy must be a constant, too. Connection and security must be constants, too. Instead of feeling overwhelmed knowing that we are swimming in need, we can feel relieved understanding that we will always have a chance to bring God’s grace to life in our day to day. We will always be able to identify places where we can unclench our fists and soften our hearts. Where we can grow closer to God by growing closer to God’s people in their most vulnerable moments.

Perhaps we can also feel relieved knowing that if the people around us are also doing this reframing work, we will be safe in our inevitable moments of need. When things don’t go the way we planned them; when we make mistakes or bad decisions; when we find ourselves lacking in scary ways; we will be able to lean on our community to have our needs met. To get back on track—or maybe to start on an entirely different track.

Our thesis today has to be that generosity is just as much a learned skill as it is an instinct. We can practice the things that this portion of Deuteronomy is calling us to. We can flex them like we can flex muscles. Liberal giving. Ungrudging giving. As we serve others and push ourselves to be preemptive in doing good, we will get better and better—more and more natural—at both. This is the vision God has for our individual and collective postures of faith.

*09-04*

“For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.”

— Exodus 23:10-11

God knows what the land needs. Modern farming practices have moved away from nurturing the land toward using whatever chemical means necessary to force it to produce constantly. The results have been devastating to the environment, including being a major contributor to climate change. There is a movement to change this, returning to earlier practices of nurturing the land through a variety of means so that it can rest, and then produce in a sustainable way. Not everyone is on board, of course. Our economic system demands constant production and growth, to the detriment of… well everyone and everything.

God calls us to examine our ways of dealing with the land, and commands us to give it rest.

How do my patterns of food consumption contribute to unhealthy farming practices? How might I change this?

*09-05*

“So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.”

— Joshua 11:23

This “rest from war” was not proactive. It wasn’t as though the people decided to stop making war for any good reason. This rest only happened after Joshua led his armies to obliterate any and all opposition to the Israelite occupation of Canaan. They rested from war because there was literally no more war to be made.

Looking at the world around me, I despair of every reaching that point. Nations will always find reasons to be hostile to their neighbors. The only way we will ever find rest from war will be through collective commitment to the flourishing of all people, so that there is no reason for anyone to have to fight for what they need or want. It’s idealistic, I know. The cynic in me believes it impossible. But with God all things are possible.

When do my fears drive me to be in conflict with others? How do I move away from the need to fight?

*09-06*

“‘So perish all your enemies, O Lord! But may your friends be like the sun as it rises in its might.’ And the land had rest forty years.”

— Judges 5:31

This is the end of the story of Deborah and Jael. In the days of the Judges, God’s people faced the threat of Sisera, the general of King Jabin of Canaan. Deborah, a judge and prophetess, summoned Barak to raise an army of 10,000 soldiers to fight Sisera, but in the end, it was not Barak who defeated Sisera. Instead, it was Jael, a Kenite, who lulled Sisera into complacency and then killed him. God chose a woman and a gentile to bring low the great general who threatened God’s people. Because of her bravery and heroism, God’s people enjoyed forty years of freedom for conflict.

I, for one, would love to prevent conflict in the first place, rather than having to subdue and destroy my enemies in order to bring peace. I believe that is God’s will for us as God’s beloved humanity, created in God’s image. But—as cynical as this sounds—I probably have to accept that such a state will only happen at the end of time, when God brings all things to fruition.

Do I believe we will ever achieve world peace? How do I reconcile my thoughts about this with my faith?

*09-07*

“Asa did what was good and right in the sight of the Lord his God. He took away the foreign altars and the high places, broke down the pillars, hewed down the sacred poles, and commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their ancestors, and to keep the law and the commandment. He also removed from all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars. And the kingdom had rest under him.”

— 2 Chronicles 14:2-5

Everyone experiences strife. Inevitably, we come into conflict with those around us, whether for good and just reasons or for minor, self-serving ones. The Kingdom of Israel was in almost constant strife—kings chasing after the gods of neighboring kingdoms, forgetting about God, engaging in warfare. Kings and Chronicles are basically a long list of all the ways Israel’s and Judah’s kings screwed up again and again, punctuated with the occasional king like Asa, who “did what was good and right in the sight of the Lord his God.”

What was “good and right” was removing the sources of conflict and returning to a state of surrender to God. This is our call, as well. We can go a long way toward lessening the strife in our lives by letting go of our need to be right; to control people, places, and situations. Our attempts to take control are the same as having idols—the pillars and sacred poles and incense altars. These need to be broken and hewed down and removed in order for us to be open to accept the freedom from strife God wills for us. It takes work, of course. But the results are worth it.

What idols do I need to remove from my life in order to be free from strife?

*09-08*

“The whole earth is at rest and quiet; they break forth into singing.”

— Isaiah 14:7

Life is often painful. Through no fault of our own, bad things happen to us. Or we cause ourselves pain by harboring resentments, jealousies, and self-pity. God holds us in our pain, experiencing it with us, aching for our healing and wholeness, and offering us whatever we need to relinquish it. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” This is God’s promise to us.

I love the idea that when “the whole earth is at rest and quiet” everything will burst into song. Music is so healing, compelling, powerful, exultant, calming, and more. When we do find, even for a moment, that deep rest from our pain, how can we keep from singing?

When have I experienced rest from the pains of my life?

*09-09*

“When it began to be dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the sabbath. And I set some of my servants over the gates, to prevent any burden from being brought in on the sabbath day.”

— Nehemiah 13:19

This was to prevent merchants from coming and going on the sabbath. Before this action was taken, Nehemiah laments, “In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day.” (Nehemiah 13:15) In order to combat this, and hold the sabbath sacred, the gates were shut tight and anyone who complained was told to go away and come back after the sabbath. It wasn’t long before the merchants gave up trying, and the sabbath was reclaimed.

We, too, can set boundaries in our lives in order to hold sabbath rest sacred. It takes work—it’s so easy to be caught up in our need to go go go, or our fears of losing out in some way because we stopped striving. We can make a concerted effort to shut the doors on our constant comings and goings, even setting guards on the gates—perhaps friends to hold us accountable?—so that we are not tempted to try to sneak through. When I do this, I find such reward in rest, and I am renewed to go forward after the sabbath and do whatever is needed for the rest of my life.

How do I set boundaries around rest to ensure I get what I need?

*09-10*

“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.’”

— Genesis 2:18

Main Idea: The story about where we came from is really the story about where God continues to call us: into connection with our people, our planet and our creator.

This passage from Genesis Chapter 2 is the second of two origin stories. The creation account in Genesis 1, which starts with “In the beginning,” was written by a source which Bible scholars call the Priestly hand. It is highly structured—moving from abstract, overarching ideas to smaller, detailed ideas in a linear fashion—and uses sophisticated grammar and syntax. The Priestly hand style mirrors and strengthens two, major claims about God: that God is the ultimate instigator and that God’s plans are perfect enough from the outset to be final. In essence, our first creation narrative is one where God draws up a blueprint for the cosmos and then gets to work executing it without any hiccups, obstacles or changes.

The creation account in Genesis 2 feels a lot more fluid than structured—a lot more random than linear. It seems here that God has a spirit of play as creation is unfolding—that God’s defining characteristic is reactivity instead of proactivity and that God is more likely to experiment with questions than lead with answers. That is because this creation account was written by a source known as the Yahwist hand, which is meant for a broader and more lay-level audience than the Priestly hand. The Yahwist hand style is experiential and almost poetic. It is intended to speak to the parts of God that humans recognize not only in the divine, but also in themselves.

So how are we supposed to think about God, then? If in our very own scripture we have two contradictory accounts about how the world came into being—about how we came into being—how are we supposed to know which version is the right one? The true one? What can we say is true about our creator?

The simple answer is this: that our God is a God of connection. Nothing in this story was brought into being for its own sake. Nothing in this story existed without touching or influencing something else. Did you notice the intentionality the author has here in calling out names for the garden and the rivers and the animals and the people we encounter? These names were decided in partnership between God and man, and were given based on how all of the beings functioned, together. Every inch of this story is a witness to the fact that God delights in togetherness, that God provides multiple ways out of loneliness, isolation and the feeling like something isn’t quite right or doesn’t quite fit.

When God came into the world as one of us, God could have chosen to live, travel, teach, perform miracles and take the journey to the cross alone. But as our secondary text from Mark tells us, that’s not what happened, because aloneness is not what our God is about. Instead, God called disciples into God’s work and told them from the outset that their charge was to call even more people in, themselves.

Our promise today is that everything God does—preemptive or after-the-fact, curious or knowing—God does for the sake of rooting us, grounding us, and connecting us to our world, to each other, and ultimately, back to the divine.

*09-11*

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

— Genesis 1:31a

It was very good. Up until then, God saw what God had made and said it was good. But when all was said and done, and creation complete, and human beings created in God’s image, God looked back over the whole of it and was moved to declare it very good. And so it is—and more. “Very good” doesn’t begin to do justice to the mind-blowing beauty and variety of all that God has made. I marvel daily at the intricacies of nature, the fascinating consistency of scientific laws, the never-ending individuality of human beings, and how all of it fits together in such perfect harmony.

God continues to create and re-create daily, and invites us into that process, into being co-creators with God. We get to be a part of bringing beauty and variety into the world, and are called to care for it as we would care for our own child, in the same way that God cares for us and all that has come into being. What a beautiful partnership we have with our God and all of creation. And it is very good!

How does God’s creation inspire me? Where do I see opportunities to be a ‘co-creator’ with God each day?

*09-12*

“Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.”

— Genesis 3:23

Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. Having utterly blown it with God—deciding not to trust God to take care of them, but instead trying to become their own gods—humans are forced to leave the place of their innocence. And in a beautiful example of poetic justice, the humans who God made from the dirt now have to toil in the dirt from which they were made in order to survive.

It is, of course, allegorical. But there is much to take away from this story for us today. We are so often our own worst enemies. We are so consumed with trying to control our world in order to feel secure that we completely miss out on God’s promise to provide us with all that we really need. It is not God who punishes us by expelling us from the garden, but we who punish ourselves by refusing to recognize the garden all around us. The truth is that God continues to invite us back into the garden every day and promises to sustain us in all things. If only we could let go long enough to accept the invitation!

What cares and worries have caused me to banish myself from the Garden of Eden? How can I heed God’s invitation to let God care for me?

*09-13*

“And the Lord said, ‘What have you done? Listen; your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!’”

— Genesis 4:10

A friend recently shared a personal story with me about this passage. He was visiting the holocaust museum in Washington D.C. years ago, and when he saw this verse written on the monument, it moved him to tears (even in the re-telling). The complete horror of what was done to so many millions of innocent people and the realization that God felt every bit of that pain and terror with those innocents, and heard their blood crying out from the ground—it overwhelmed him.

Genocide is still happening in our world. Darfur. Myanmar. South Sudan. Ukraine. The list goes on. Add to this the ongoing wars and conflicts killing thousands around the world, and the rampant gun violence and state violence in the U.S., and one can’t help but hear God’s anguished cries of “What have you done?” We, too, should be crying out “injustice!” and doing whatever it takes to work for peace.

What is my role in working to end the violence in our world?

*09-14*

“Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth, for she said, ‘God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, because Cain killed him.’ To Seth also a son was born, and he named him Enosh. At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord.”

— Genesis 4:25-26

“At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord.” I find that interesting. Adam and Eve and their first generation somehow didn’t need to do this. Perhaps it was because they were so close to their creator, they accepted God’s presence as a foregone conclusion. But the further away from the garden the generations got, the more they needed to be deliberate about staying connected to God. And here we are countless generations later, two millennia after God’s incarnation in Jesus, invoking the name of God in our congregations and (hopefully) in every area of our lives. We need to constantly remind ourselves who we are and whose we are, lest we forget that God is not still back in some distant past at the beginning of creation, but is here in our midst, vital, visceral, sharing every intimate aspect of our existence. Thus we invoke the name of God in prayer, meditation, acts of service, participation in community, and in any way that helps recenter us in the fact of God’s presence with us.

How do I stay connected to the God who created me on a daily basis?

*09-15*

“And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.”

— Genesis 6:6

That’s powerful. Think about it. A few short chapters prior to this, God looked upon all God had made—especially those beloved humans created in God’s image—and proclaimed them “very good.” And already, humans had made such a mess of their civilization—starting with Cain’s murder of Abel, I imagine—that God is questioning the wisdom of having created humanity in the first place. The disappointment is palpable—God grieved the creation of humans, or of their utter failure to remember the beautiful communion God had called them into.

Everyone experiences regret at times in their lives. We look back on decisions we made or didn’t make which may have seemed like the absolutely right things to do at the time, and when we see how nothing has turned out the way we originally thought or hoped or predicted, we are sent into a tailspin of self-recrimination or anger at God. We spent decades in dysfunctional relationships, having convinced ourselves it was genuine love. We took jobs that seemed to be the perfect fit at the perfect time only to find ourselves miserable. We invested incalculable time and energy into a business that had everything going for it only to watch it slowly fail. These things and countless others are simply part of the human experience. It should give us comfort to know that God, too, experienced this kind of regret. The good news is that God had and has the power to transform even the most bleak and hopeless-seeming circumstances into opportunities for indescribable joy, satisfaction, meaning, purpose and, yes, healing from regret.

Are there decisions I have made or not made in my life that I have regretted? How have I moved past my regret?

*09-16*

“These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.”

— Genesis 6:9

Noah walked with God. That’s it. This echoes the sentiment of Micah 6:8, which asks, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” When all the world was a morass of evil that grieved God to God’s very heart and made God regret creating humanity at all, this one man, Noah, gets it. And that’s all God needs to completely change God’s tune about those created in God’s image.

Sometimes it’s the littlest thing—a kind word, a gesture, an act of service—that can stop me in my downward spiral of frustration with my life, and remind me that I am not doing this alone. The people in my life—those who know me deeply and always have my back, but also sometimes complete strangers—can shift my entire outlook, change my mood, and move me toward positive, forward action rather than simply staying mired in self-pity and regret. It’s God who is showing up in those moment, God who is inviting me to walk with God, and promising that God is always right there to walk with me. What a gift!

In what ways do I walk with God on a daily basis?

*09-17*

“So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?’”

— Genesis 18:12

Main Idea: God will deliver on God’s promises—even the promises that make us laugh at first

An interesting twist in this story from Genesis Chapters 18 and 21 is that God appears in the form of multiple people all at once—the text mentions three men. It is unclear to us as readers how this breakdown works. Is one of the three men actually God and the other two are somehow along for the ride? Did God split God’s self into three, distinct beings? And if that’s the case, what would God use to differentiate those beings? What would be the benefit of drawing divisions? Would the message God is carrying mean more to Abraham coming from a group of people instead of just one? Is Abraham losing his mind and seeing people who aren’t there? Or is he perfectly in tune with reality? Just a handful of sentences in this passage bring many more questions than they do answers.

Similarly, God speaks to multiple people all at once in this story. Did you notice the layering in God’s prophesying here? It’s clear that God’s questions and promises are intended for Sarah. But he relays them to Abraham even though he gives us readers a few hints that he knows Sarah is listening. At the end, he even addresses Sarah directly.

What is the significance of God appearing and communicating in this multifaceted way? If this passage is a testament to something God is continuing to do in our lives today, then what might it mean for us?

Our secondary text from Mark implies that our promise today revolves around the limitlessness of God—the idea that, for God and according to God, nothing is truly impossible. A helpful way to interpret the Genesis story through this lens might be to say that God will meet us with things better and more absurd than we can imagine in more than one way, more than one time, drawing on many more people than just us, until that time when we internalize those good and absurd things—until we realize that they are coming true.

Doesn’t it make sense that something impossible might need to present itself to us in a few different forms before we can begin to imagine it for ourselves? Doesn’t it stand to reason that if something reality-defying presented itself to us on a few different occasions we might begin to anticipate it? To expect it, even?

God will give us chance after chance after chance to hear what is interesting in the mundane; what is true in the noise; what is needed without us even necessarily knowing it. In fact, God embodiedthese chances in the person of Jesus. In God, something divine took the form of something divine. In God, salvation for the whole world took the form of one man’s eclectic journey. Teaching. Preaching. Healing. Walking from city to city. Washing feet. God makes the impossible, possible by putting things into our lives—into our terms—again and again and again.

*09-18*

“Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.”

— Genesis 16:15

There are so many challenging things about this story. The fact that Hagar was a sex slave. The fact that she flaunted her pregnancy in Sarai’s face. The fact that Sarai treated her harshly (she was Sarai’s slave to do with as she pleased, after all). The fact that God told Hagar to go home and submit to Sarai’s mistreatment. And ultimately the fact that Ishmael was Abraham’s first born son, but was utterly excluded from God’s promise to Abraham. Sure, Ishmael got his own nation (and from him, the Muslim community traces their origin). But the events leading up to that point are a cluster of everything wrong with slavery and patriarchal society. I suppose one could just chalk it up to the fact that “that’s just how things worked then.” And they wouldn’t be wrong. But with our modern eyes, how are we to reconcile God’s love with the series of wrongs done to Hagar?

I don’t suppose we can. All we can do is bless Hagar and Ishmael and turn them over to God’s loving care, and then be very clear with ourselves about how we, in this day and age, contribute to systems which perpetuate the kind of injustice that Hagar faced. How can we continue to dismantle white supremacy, patriarch, modern slavery in the American prison system, systemic racism, state violence… the list goes on. We owe it to Hagar and Ishmael to work to bring God’s reign of justice into the world.

Where do I see myself in this story? How does that inform my thoughts about modern injustices?

*09-19*

“When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.’”

— Genesis 17:1-2

I hadn’t realized that Sarai wasn’t the only one who laughed at God’s promise. In verse 17, before Sarai laughs in chapter 18, it says “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” Is there any other appropriate response to being told you’re going to be a dad at 100 years old when your wife is 90? It’s not like Abram wasn’t a man of faith. He’d listened to God with incredible trust and obedience from the moment God told him to leave everything he knew and set out for Canaan in Genesis 12. Through several misadventures, God had sustained him and Sarai and their household. But this… well this was just too ridiculous to contemplate, and so Abram busted out laughing. And in spite of this, God delivered.

I recently asked God for something I knew was impossible. Something that I believed absolutely didn’t exist. I put it out there, because my friends and recovery fellows encouraged me to, but I told God point blank, “I know this will never happen for me. It’s not possible.” And God just grinned at me and said, “Watch me.” Within a month, I received the most incredible, precious gift of exactly what I had been hoping for. Now, I’m not saying that you automatically get whatever you pray for. Absolutely not. I’m just saying that when God makes a promise—even a ridiculous one—you’d better believe God is going to keep it one way or another.

When has God shown up in my life with a gift I hadn’t believed possible?

*09-20*

“Now Sarah said, ‘God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.’”

— Genesis 21:6

Laughter is such a beautiful thing. I grew up in a home absolutely full of laughter. We shared a bizarre, absurdist sense of humor, a love of puns, an arsenal of references from movies, memories of hilarious things had that happened to us—we spoke of and shared these things with one another regularly. Family dinners often dissolved into helpless laughter to the point of tears. As we added to our family with spouses and grandchildren, the laughter grew exponentially. Even in my own home, which is just myself and my two adult kids, we laugh so hard we cry on a regular basis. I wouldn’t trade it for anything!

When God told Abram Sarai would have a child, Abram laughed. When Sarai heard the angels tell Abram she would have a child, Sarai laughed. And when that child was born, Sarai named him “laughter,” in honor of her own laughter, but also in an acknowledgment of the utter joy a child brings into the world, and a lifetime of laughter at their antics as they grow and develop.

I believe God has an incredible sense of humor, and that being created in God’s image means that we do, too. I believe God finds human beings hilarious and laughs heartily with us, even to the point of wiping tears. This laughter is for you today. May you find it and enjoy it to the fullest.

What makes me laugh the hardest? When did I last laugh so hard I cried?

*09-21*

“And they called Rebekah, and said to her, ‘Will you go with this man?’ She said, ‘I will.’”

— Genesis 24:58

I’ve always been partial to Rebekah. And not just because my name is Rebekah, although that does play into it, I suppose.

When Abraham’s servant goes looking for a wife for Isaac, he’s looking for someone who is kind and of service—someone who will offer him water and then offer to water his camels. Rebekah shows up, sets aside what it is she had come to do, and works to make sure this stranger has what he needs. I aspire to that kind of openness and kind service.

When the servant insists that Rebekah not delay a few days, but return with him immediately to meet and marry Isaac, and her parents give her the option, she has the strength of spirit to say, “Yes. I will go.” She is the one who decides. She is secure enough in herself to take action and trust God with the outcome. I aspire to that kind of trust and willingness.

When Isaac takes Rebekah into his mother’s tent, he “loves her.” I think this is the first time in the Bible where it talks about one person loving another person. And while the marriage is still pre-arranged without the bride and groom having seen each other (or even known of each other) until almost the moment of the wedding, Isaac at once loves Rebekah, and, I am sure, she loves him. She is kind, resourceful, willing, smart, and above all, loveable. That is one aspect of Rebekah I do not need to aspire to. I know I am loveable, that I deserve love, and that I am loved. And so are you.

What biblical person do I most relate to? Why?

*09-22*

“And the Lord said to her, ‘Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.’”

— Genesis 25:23

Having one child in my womb was painful enough. Not my first born. But my second, my son, kicked and moved in ways that actually hurt me. He would plant his head down in the bottom of my pelvis, and his feet against my ribcage and stretch! Honestly, I was grateful when the kid was finally born!

Now imagine not just two children in your womb, but two nations, already at war before they are even born. Talk about a burden to bear! But Rebekah seems to have taken it in stride. She listened to God and internalized the message that the younger and weaker of the twins would eventually rule over the older and stronger one. She took it so to heart that, years later, when the boys had come of age, she orchestrated a great deception to ensure that what she had been told by God actually came to pass. Once again, Rebekah—while one might judge her for being manipulative and dishonest—is a willing instrument of God’s intentions, and faithfully does whatever is necessary to bring them about.

I wonder, though, whether it grieved her at all to know of the strife that would one day come between her children, to know that she would be forced to choose one over the other. As an expectant mother, I wanted only the best for my children. It would have saddened me to know in advance that they would hate each other or be pitted against one another in any way. To think that Rebekah didn’t have these feelings is to make her less human. So I, for one, believe that she did feel sorrow over the whole situation, even as she prepared to accept and even help it along.

Do all of my children or family members get along? How does family strife affect me in my life today?

*09-23*

“May God give you of the dew of heaven, and of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!’”

— Genesis 27:28-29

One wonders whether Isaac really has this much power. If a blessing such as this is so powerful that it can’t be transferred to Esau when he comes in later, or another, similar blessing drawn together for the wronged son, it is clear that these aren’t just well-meaning words spoken to Jacob. This blessing is far removed from the simple, overused idea of “I’m blessed” or #blessed or “have a blessed day” that so many people bandy about as though blessings were nothing more than banal well-wishes. It is life-changing, world-changing, reality-changing. Can Isaac really confer this kind of blessing?

Obviously he does. And it’s entirely irrevocable and binding. By saying these words to Jacob, he speaks into reality a future in which Esau will bow down to Jacob and, even further into the future, a reality in which Jacob will become Israel and entire nations—not just the nation of Edom, which Esau founds—will pay homage to Israel, God’s chosen people in all the earth.

Whether we are to believe that any human being has the power to speak such things into reality the way God spoke creation into existence, the fact remains that words are incredibly powerful and self-fulfilling prophecies are a genuine phenomenon. God does invite us into the creative process every day, and that creative process always entails some kind of communication, spoken or otherwise. We ought always be mindful of the words of our mouths, that we speak only blessing upon those around us, and then act to bring those blessings to fruition for the flourishing of all creation.

What are my feelings about giving “blessings?” Do they have power? How so?

*09-24*

“Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.”

— Genesis 32:24

Main Idea: It is precisely during the times we feel furthest from God when God gives us the chance to experience God’s presence and God’s grace.

Both of these texts tell a story about a “dark night of the soul,”—explicit struggle and deep suffering that manifest in one, tangible and identifiable moment of crisis. For Jacob and for Jesus alike, the struggle can be boiled down to fear, and the solution to deliverance. For Jacob and for Jesus, alike, the suffering seems to be something that only they understand. (You’ll notice that both are surrounded by their loved ones to start, but end up fighting—grieving—without those loved ones present.) For Jacob and Jesus alike, conflict manifests with God, directly. Both of them know what they want from God. But both of them end up forced into a state of radical acceptance—into recognizing that what they want is not what they are going to get.

Often, not getting what we want feels like the end of the line. It feels like defeat—sometimes not getting what we want even makes us feel like God isn’t listening to us. But both of these stories make it clear that God does listen to us in our trials as much as in our successes and in our terror as much as in our comfort.

In fact, more than just listening, God engages with us in those trials. God shows up with praise, promises and blessings in our seasons of fear. God gives us the chance to experience God more authentically and more viscerally than we ever have before in times of struggle, because that’s when God knows we need that chance—that encounter—the most. This portion of Genesis tells us that Jacob “[saw] God face to face” in his wrestling. If we think about that in different words, we realize that Jacob had never sensed God so clearly or been so in touch with the person and essence of God as he was when he at his lowest. When he was lacking them, Jacob understood God’s promises of provision more deeply than he ever had before, and he held God accountable to those promises by demanding a blessing.

God took Jacob’s struggle seriously. While God might not have been the cause of Jacob’s fear, God recognized and legitimized it, and literally absorbed a portion of it on the ground with Jacob. And then God blessed him.

It’s harder to feel this satisfaction—this blessing—in our Gospel text, because we, as readers, know that Jesus is captured in the garden and taken to his death on the cross shortly after. But we also know that Jesus was resurrected on the third day and brought to heaven, defeating death itself and bringing blessings of redemption to the entire world.

Not getting what we want is hard. And sometimes, it involves very high stakes. But not getting what we want isn’t always the end of the line for us. Often, not getting what we want is just a part of our journey. Not getting what we want prompts foundational encounters with the God who made us and who continues to meet us with grace.

*09-25*

“Then you shall say, ‘They belong to your servant Jacob; they are a present sent to my lord Esau; and moreover he is behind us.’”

— Genesis 32:18

At no time does giving someone a gift make up for a harm done—the only thing that can heal that sort of thing is an amends, including humility, genuine remorse, and a commitment to changing the behavior in the future so as not to cause the same harm again. Jacob has a serious amends to make to his brother, and no gift is going to take away the pain he’s caused Esau by stealing all that belonged to him.

That being said, a gift can open the door to the opportunity to make an amends. It can be an expression of generosity, an acknowledgment that you know you caused harm to the other person, and a sign of willingness to begin a conversation. Whether the gift is accepted is not up to us. Just as whether the amends is accepted is not up to us. Sometimes we are received with skepticism, others with open arms, and still others with hostility or not received at all. Our gifts might be returned to us with a nasty note. All we can do is extend the olive branch and trust that whatever the outcome, God knows our heart and knows we want to make things right.

Thus Jacob sends gifts to his estranged brother in the hope that when they meet again, Esau might have softened his heart enough not to kill Jacob on sight, as he once planned to do. But ultimately, it is not the gift that will heal the wound, but the intentions behind it and the actions to follow it up.

When have I given someone a gift by way of an apology? How was it received?

*09-26*

“But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

— Genesis 33:4

All that worry for nothing. After all that Jacob had done to him, Esau proved himself the bigger person. When at last they meet after their years-long estrangement, Esau runs to his little bratty upstart thief of a brother and hugs him with all he has. It’s truly a beautiful thing. I wonder what softened Esau’s heart toward his brother in the time they were apart. Maybe he figured he didn’t want all the responsibility of Isaac’s blessing. Maybe he was content with this wives and his hunter’s life and grateful not to have the pressure of being the first born and carrying on some kind of legacy. Or maybe in Jacob’s absence, Esau remembered all the good times—all the laughter and fun of their childhood and how much he really did love Jacob, even if they never had much in common. Who knows. What I do know is that time has a way of wearing down the sharp edges of our resentments and griefs.

The best example I can think of from my own life is that of my 20-year high school reunion. I hated high school. I felt alienated and disliked by the majority of my peers. When my best friend suggested to me that we put together a multi-year reunion (we were in different classes) I looked at her like she’d grown a second head. But the idea took root and we reached out to some folks who were still back in our hometown, and they put the whole thing together. When I showed up, I saw all those people I thought disliked me and whom I disliked at the time and my heart just melted. These were my siblings. Of course we’d had conflict and strife—we’d grown up together through our adolescence, which isn’t easy for any of us! I loved these people in a way I couldn’t not describe, and I was incredibly grateful I went to the reunion, so I could experience this kind of healing and re-framing of my past. I think maybe that’s what it was like for Jacob and Esau.

How has time changed my perception of past events for the better? Where have I found healing through the passing of time?

*09-27*

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

— Genesis 37:3-4

Sibling rivalry is real. We saw it happen with Jacob and Esau, when Rebekah played favorites. And while that turned out for the best, Jacob seems to have learned nothing from his own childhood experience and blatantly calls out Joseph as his favorite, even going so far as to distinguish him by a gift of extravagant clothing. No wonder his brothers hated him. And no wonder Joseph didn’t seem to develop appropriate boundaries around bragging to his brothers about his dreams in which they would all one day bow down to him. Everyone in this story was completely caught up in himself, utterly oblivious to the emotional needs of anyone else. It was a recipe for a perfect storm of jealousy and revenge.

What can we learn from this? Other than the obvious of not acting in ways to set our children against one another by playing favorites (the truth of the matter is that we do have favorites, no matter what we say, but we absolutely cannot make that known!), I think the takeaway is about letting go of self-absorption. It’s about recognizing injustice in relationships and working to restore balance and mutuality. No one person is more important than any other. Any community is only as strong as its most vulnerable member. When we grab for wealth and security at the expense of others, because we can’t see the interconnectedness of all God’s creation, we set up a perfect storm of jealousy and revenge, which plays out in violence, poverty, environmental destruction, and every societal evil. Instead of choosing someone (usually ourselves) to satisfy with every good gift, God calls us to look beyond ourselves to the flourishing of the world.

What is my experience with sibling rivalry in my own family? What were the results?

*09-28*

“When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.”

— Genesis 37:28

I had moments in which I would have loved to sell my little brother. We fought constantly. But we were also inseparable—we drew together, played together, did everything together. There was no middle ground. We were either thick as thieves in mutual creativity or beating the tar out of each other. I like to joke that we bonded like wolf cubs. (He is one of my best friends to this day). And no matter how many times I wish he would just go away with some Ishmaelites to far-away Egypt, the truth was that I would have missed him inconsolably. So I’m glad I never came across and Ishmaelites to sell him to.

Joseph’s brothers had no such compunction (other than Reuben, who only wanted to preserve Joseph so that he—Reuben—could be hailed by his father as a hero for bringing Joseph home safely). They were so jealous of Joseph and hated him so thoroughly that they didn’t think twice about shunting their brother into slavery in a distant country and never seeing him again. How much do you have to hate someone in order to do something like that?

Of course, God made it all turn out for the best. Joseph had to be sold into slavery in Egypt in order to rise to power and ultimately save his own family from a future famine. No one could have predicted this at the time, but it just goes to show that God can take even the most miserable situation and use it to bring love, healing, and reconciliation into the world.

When has something that seemed terrible at the time turned out to be a positive in my life?

*09-29*

“So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.’”

— Genesis 41:39-40

The same dream interpretation that made Joseph’s brothers hate him so much now made Joseph the second most powerful man in Egypt. It just goes to show that while God gives each of us diverse and wonderful gifts, how we use those gifts in the world can bring strife or peace. A financial genius could spend all their time amassing incomprehensible wealth or work toward creating economic systems that raise people out of poverty. A gifted orator could inspire people to acts of selfless love or stir up division and hatred. Our gifts can be self-serving, as when Joseph bragged to his brothers about how his dreams meant they would one day bow down to him, or other-serving, as when Joseph warned Pharaoh about the coming famine and then offered a way to get around it. Mind you, Joseph was richly rewarded for using his gift for others—he gained incredible power. But it is worth noting that he did not use it except to follow through on saving Egypt from the famine. We ought to examine our own gifts, of which we all have many, and allow ourselves to wonder and be creative about how we might use them in ways pleasing to God for the sake of others.

What things am I good at? How can I (or do I) use them to bring love into the world?

*09-30*

“God spoke to Israel in visions of the night, and said, ‘Jacob, Jacob.’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there.’”

— Genesis 46:2-3

Change is scary. Jacob/Israel had been living in one place for a long, long time. Now the promise of seeing his son, long believed to be dead, and surviving the famine drove him from all he had known into another country with different customs, beliefs, gods, and more. In the passage just before this one, the moment Jacob hears that Joseph is still alive, he is ready to just pick up and go. But it is telling that as they stop along the way, God calls out to him and says, “Don’t be afraid.” God knows that Jacob is afraid, and encourages Jacob to trust God that all will be for the best in the end. Jacob doesn’t need to know that God is playing a long game—that yes, Israel will grow and flourish and become a great nation within Egypt, but then it will all go south and that same nation will have to flee four hundred years later. All Jacob needs to know is that this God is the God of Jacob’s father, Isaac, and that Jacob can trust God to take care of him and all that he holds dear.

Sometimes we can be given an opportunity for an exciting change in our lives—a new relationship or job or a relocation to a new place. We might be absolutely certain about it, ready to do whatever it takes to make it happen. But that doesn’t mean we aren’t going to be scared about it. Change—even positive change—involves loss: loss of what is familiar. Thus excitement might be accompanied by grief. Joy by sorrow. But in the midst of it, God calls us to trust God, promising us that no matter what happens, God’s got it.

When have I had to make a huge change in my life? How did I feel about it? How did my faith help me navigate these feelings?