**Daily Devotions**

**September 2024**

*01*

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.”

— Daniel 12:1

Main Idea: It’s okay if we don’t understand all of the things we hear in a life of faith—the important thing is that we keep on listening.

As we enter into this passage today, we see Daniel in the middle of a conversation with a celestial comforter. This comforter is relaying a string of visions to Daniel about Daniel’s people and about the guardian, Michael, who is actively working on their behalf. Two other beings appear suddenly to speak to the urgency of these visions—to tell Daniel when he can expect the end of the world to take place. But their words didn’t make sense to Daniel. “I heard,” he says, “but could not understand.”

Rather than digging in deeper to something he isn’t getting, Daniel changes the subject. Instead, he asks, “What shall be the outcome of these things?” In other words, “What does all of this mean for the here and the now? And maybe even the soon-to-be?” Daniel pivots to the significance of the visions. We might even say the theology of them. And it isn’t because the question of timing is unimportant. It’s because the question of timing isn’t the most important.

Even if none of them is clear to us, resurrection, judgment, purification, violence, rescue, wisdom and the shot at everlasting life mean something for us. They tell us that we live in a world destined to be different than it is today. They tell us that our suffering matters. That it moves things and changes things. They tell us that the universe bends toward justice, and that we have advocates everywhere who won’t stop disrupting the status quo until every inch of the cosmos has been transformed, and we can fall into it, restful and peaceful and loved.

In Jesus, we know what Daniel was meant to know in the figure of Michael. A prince. A deliverer. A friend destined for us. If we keep listening for Jesus—and for his visions—we will keep asking questions. We might not understand every answer that meets us, but we will become wiser in the asking. We will shift our focus and our orientation. We will experiment with how to apply the things we dounderstand to the people, places and things around us. Even to ourselves. Hearing can be its own kind of understanding. And it’s the kind of understanding we are being called to today.

*02*

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book.”

— Daniel 12:1

What book is that, exactly? There are plenty of folks who’ve tried to figure this out. Some actually have a specific number of people who are going to make it into heaven, and it’s not all that big. Why would anyone want to practice a religion that gives them tiny, tiny odds of not being sent to an eternity in hell?

I don’t mean to be snarky. Well, maybe just a little. But the God I believe in is absolutely unlimited. Unlimited in time and space and in mercy and grace and in love you can trace through a boundless embrace. Imagine the most ridiculously large dictionary you can, containing more words than you can comprehend, and then know that God’s “book” is incomprehensibly larger. The God I believe in lovingly writes (in the most beautiful calligraphy, I would imagine) each and every human being ever brought into being, every living creature, every iota of creation in her “book.”

Life is hard. For everyone. For some it’s unbearable. And all will be enfolded into God’s loving arms for eternity, without exception.

What do I believe about who will or will not be together with God forever?

*03*

“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”

— Daniel 12:2-3

We all shine like the brightness of the sky. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Not just in some distant future we can’t really comprehend, but here and now. Heaven, in fact, is here and now. There is no shame and everlasting contempt, only this eternal life that is already and not yet.

I mean, I look at my daughter (pictured)—twenty-five years old and working at the Minnesota Renaissance Festival—and I am astonished at the way she shines. Absolutely like the brightness of the sky. Has she earned her glory in some way? No. It is 100% gift from God. A gift to me and to the world.

This is true of me. And it’s true of you. And it’s true of every person and created being—everything. It’s there to bask in, that shining brightness, if only we look. It’s there to shine on others, if only we show up.

Where is God calling me to shine like the sun today?

*04*

“But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.”

— Daniel 12:4

I love this image: “Many shall be running back and forth.” It’s so evocative of the insanity of most of our lives in this era. We are relentlessly bombarded with the idea that we’re not doing enough. Not enough work, not enough self-care, not enough care for others and the world, not enough to get our kids into prestigious colleges, not enough, not enough, not enough. And so we run back and forth and, as Daniel says, evil increases. We grasp and grope for more material possessions in the belief it will make our life easier, and that’s a lie. Our possessions own us, and drive us even further into this running back and forth.

But you, Daniel (and us), can keep things on the low-down. We can choose to step outside of this frenetic activity (really, we can—it’s not easy at first, but the rewards are unbelievable) and trust that God has our back now and at the end of time.

How am I doing with balance in my life?

*05*

“And I heard him swear by the one who lives for ever that it would be for a time, two times, and half a time, and that when the shattering of the power of the holy people comes to an end, all these things would be accomplished.”

— Daniel 12:7b

For some reason this makes me think of giving directions. I’m incredibly concrete where that’s concerned. I want street names and ordinal directions. I don’t even use the GPS on my phone. I look at a map ahead of time, know exactly where I’m going (I’ll even memorize street names on the fly) and off I go. I know someone who absolutely does not, can not, will not function this way. He navigates exclusively by landmarks and it drives me nuts. He can’t tell me how to get anywhere that doesn’t involve turning right past some church and being aware of a winding road and—oh! There’s the rock he was talking about! Turn left!) This is what it feels like when this person tells Daniel the time of the end. It actually makes me laugh, honestly.

Suffice it to say that maybe it’s just best that we don’t know when “the end” will be. Not the end of all time, not our own individual ends. When we don’t know for sure, we don’t have to stress about it. We can just go about our lives in the moment and trust that God’s got the rest of it. For some people, not knowing is stressful (certainly this person’s directions are!) and I totally get that, because I’m one of those people who wants to know everything. What helps me is the intentional, deliberate turning over of things I cannot control to God each and every day. It’s a spiritual practices that has given me a great deal of peace. And whatever the writer of Daniel meant to convey by this oblique statement of time, we can trust it’s just not up to us to know.

Do I find myself worried about things I can’t control? How do I release them?

*06*

“None of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand.”

— Daniel 12:10b

We’re all in trouble then, aren’t we. Because anyone who claims to understand the timing of the end of the world or even what, exactly, the end of the world will be is… well… completely full of it. So does that make us all wicked? Well, in some ways, yes. At least, if “wicked” means imperfect. (Also, I love how “wicked” in New England means “going beyond reasonable or predictable limits : of exceptional quality or degree.” Like, you are wicked cool. (I’m talking to you, reader, because you are.)

But I digress (as I so often do).

As I said yesterday, none of us knows the day or the hour. Jesus was pretty clear on that. It doesn’t matter how wise I am, there are things in life that I am just never going to understand. And honestly? I kind of love that. I adore the idea of God as mystery. Of life as mystery. Of creation as mystery. If we already understood everything, I think things would be terribly boring. I’ve acquired a fair amount of wisdom in my almost 53 years, but I have no illusions that I’ll ever arrive at point where I am “wise.” Thank God for walking with me on this mysterious journey, and for all the joy I get out of delving deeper and deeper as I go.

Do I feel as if I have some wisdom? What does that mean to me?

*07*

“But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days.”

— Daniel 12:13

Fuggeddaboudit. (He seemed to say). Don’t worry about the exact timing of the end or what it will look like. You’ll be dead a long time by then so it’s nothing you need to be concerned with. Live your life, die in your time, and leave the rest to God and the resurrection.

And so the message is for us. Those who become obsessed with apocalyptic literature or attempt to determine who the “in” people and the “out” people are or will be are wasting any chance they have to live this incredible, miraculous life God has gifted each of us with. It’s just that simple.

How will I focus on the here-and-now today?

*08*

“They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.”

— Genesis 3:8

Main Idea: Our actions have consequences that we don’t always like.

I don’t know how many times I’ve reminded my almost two-year-old that what he is doing with his body maybe isn’t the safest of activities. And nearly every time he falls or hits his head, he is reminded of the consequence by the tears that pour from his eyes and the bump, bruise, or scratch that is left upon his body. Sure, he was having fun in the moment climbing and running all over everything in the living room. But with actions come consequences, some of which we don’t see coming, or like at all.

Our reading for today is a look at one of the first actions that had a negative consequence in the Bible. The serpent convinced the woman that God really wasn’t going to hold to God’s promise, even though, that is what Adam was told by God. The woman and the serpent didn’t like the sound of what might happen if they went against God’s instruction.

Was the serpent there when Adam was told not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Probably not. Did the serpent hear what God told Adam, who then passed the message onto Eve? Again, probably not. But yet, the serpent convinces Eve of a different narrative than the one she’s been told. A narrative where she is loved so deeply that God really wouldn’t keep God’s promised negative consequence. But all throughout the Bible we see all the ways in which God keeps God’s promises.

This mistake is often placed entirely on Eve, when in fact Adam ate of the fruit too. And as a result of both of them eating, they both have to face the consequence—knowing there is something not right about what they are seeing when they look at their bodies. How different would the world we live in be if the serpent had not been so convincing?

Would there still be sin? I’m sure of it. If this serpent didn’t succeed another one days, months, or years later likely would have, and we would still be living with those consequences. When we do something against or in spite of our better judgment we are reminded that every action has some kind of consequence.

*09*

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

— Genesis 4:10

Why do we kill each other? Yesterday, at this writing, a fourteen-year-old murdered two fellow students and two teachers at a school in Georgia. Another senseless killing in a string of so many school shootings I’m afraid I’m becoming desensitized. Clearly there are multiple things in play. I don’t think healthy people just casually kill other people. Cain killed Abel out of jealousy (and let’s be honest: God kind of set it up by playing favorites) but I have to believe there was something wrong in Cain’s heart of hearts for him to have done such a thing. Something deep and broken.

As a society we have so much love and compassion and joy. But we are also, like Cain, suffering from something deep and broken within us. And every time something like this happens, or any sort of killing, or the inflicting of harm of any kind, God grieves and shouts, “What have you done? Listen; your siblings’ blood is crying out to me from the ground!” May we, too, grieve, and then ask God for the power to work to change ourselves and our society.

How is God calling me to respond to killings in our communities?

*10*

“Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence.”

— Genesis 6:11

God regretted making human beings. Cain’s pain-fueled act of violence toward his brother was only the beginning of our violence toward our siblings throughout history. In fact, when I think back to my high school history classes, what I remember is an endless string of wars. Civilizations rise, people do some really cool things, then someone else conquers and destroys them. Rinse and repeat. And, of course, there is so much more to history than violence—so much beauty and wonder and compassion and creativity and joy. Yet we keep going back there. In fact, it never goes away. Somewhere, right now—multiple somewheres—someone is acting in violence toward their fellow human being. Let’s be honest. Sometimes, don’t we all just look at the state of things and feel God’s pain and regret? I’m not advocating for another world-ending flood (God did promise not to do that again, after all, thank goodness). But it takes effort to live in hope in the midst of all of this. To be, in a sense, a Noah—not that we are the only “good” ones, but that we can be called out (made holy) to work for peace and justice, and maybe, just maybe, we can be part of a renewal and rebirth of all that is beautiful.

How do I reconcile my faith in God and the endless violence of our world?

*11*

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.’”

— Genesis 11:4

OOH! Look at me! Look at me! Look at me! Yet again, a Bible story calls out some of the deepest human foibles. And it’s absolutely applicable to our society today. We are obsessed with being famous, wealthy, notable, and otherwise externally validated. We hope to go viral on TikTok or YouTube. We live by the number of “likes” or reshares we receive on our various social media platforms. The only thing about this story that does not apply is the idea that since we all speak the same language, we’re cooperating with one another to reach the heights. Nope. We’re all in it for ourselves! God scattering us and changing up our languages didn’t prevent us from trying to be gods in our own lives. (Or maybe it’s because England’s imperialism made English the most commonly spoken language worldwide and that’s fueled a lot of this. Maybe.)

Anyway, while this is a folk tale about why there are so many languages and cultures out there when God created everyone in one place, it still stands as an object lesson for us. We ought not to seek to “make a name for ourselves” but instead live (and take joy) in the humility that leads us to love and serve God and our neighbors.

When am I tempted to seek after notoriety?

*12*

“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ”

— Genesis 12:2

Blessed to be a blessing. This is not a gift, but a covenant. A calling. God will give Abram children and grandchildren and descendants who will become a culture and society that persists to this very day. I remember singing the song “Father Abraham” and learning all about how I’m one of his “sons” and it was cool. But Abram had a part to play, too. If he was to be “blessed”—cared for by God in all ways—then he had to turn around and bless others. That means that we, who are still part of this covenant (yes, I know there have been a bunch of them since then, but that doesn’t necessarily make previous covenants null and void), are called to be a blessing to the world. That means, in its simplest terms, loving God, our neighbors, and ourselves. Or doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. We ought not be concerned about being “a great nation” or having “a great name.” That’s not our part of this deal. We ought only be concerned about love and service and leave the rest to God.

What does it mean to me that I am to be a blessing to the world?

*13*

“When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife”; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.’”

— Genesis 12:11-13

Sarai must have been a saint. We get this story pretty much exclusively from Abram’s point of view. We don’t know what Sarai thought about it, only that she obviously complied because as the story plays out, Pharaoh thinks, “Whoa, this is a hot babe,” and marries her. Which means she slept with him. Which means that Abram prostituted his wife to save his own skin. And this is… well it’s just wrong. And, sure, God punished Pharaoh (which, frankly, isn’t fair. God should have punished Abram, in my opinion) and when Pharaoh figured out what had happened, he let Sarai go back to Abram (and why he didn’t kill Abram at that point to legitimize his marriage to Sarai I will never know). And Sarai went. That poor voiceless woman.

Abram pulls this stunt a second time (Gen 20:1-16), though in the latter case the ruler, Abimelech, doesn’t actually lay a hand on Sarai. And then it happens again with Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26:1-33), this time with the ruler (also named Abimelech) figuring it out before anyone can make advances on her.

Supposedly the point of these stories is to show off the beauty and desirability of the women (probably to reflect well on the men) and to show off that the men are protected by God. Through modern eyes (which I can’t help but having) I would have to find hope in these stories by uplifting the strength of the women, who endured the oppressive patriarchal system that made it okay for their husbands to use them as a kind of social meat shield, and still (we can hope) love these men in all their imperfections.

I’m not advocating a “Stand By Your Man” attitude by any means! But, man, Biblical women were incredible examples of both beauty (interior and exterior) and grit, shining out from the mire of their oppression.

Is it possible to read Bible stories without the lens of our modern context?

*14*

“Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together.”

— Genesis 13:5-6

I’m doing it again. I’m looking at this through the lens of my modern context, and I’m sighing at the accumulation of wealth as a sign of God’s blessing. Abram and his nephew, Lot, had been nomads together for some time, sojourning side by side “by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel…between Bethel and Ai.” (v. 3) But they had so much “stuff”—flocks and silver and gold—that the land couldn’t support them. And rather than, you know, give it away and live simply, the solution is that they part company and each go off on his own to continue to accumulate wealth at a respectful (but not acrimonious) distance.

I know this story is about God’s abundance and promise to make Abram a great nation (in which Lot, apparently, has no share?). And I know that without these events (metaphorical though they are) the Israelites would not have become a powerful nation, Judaism would not have been established, Jesus would not have been born under Roman rule, and I would not be here writing this devotion.

And yet.

I have experienced blessing upon blessing in my life, and they are far more often about immaterial things than material. I have experienced God’s action in my life in profound and transformational ways, and they have nothing to do with accumulating wealth. Abundance, as I see it, is about the things of life—relationships, nature, creativity, service—things we can never accumulate so much of that we can’t share space with our fellow human beings. Just sayin’.

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

*15*

“But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.’”

— Genesis 5:2-3

Main Idea: God’s promises are hard to fathom.

It doesn’t seem as if it could be remotely possible for God to pull off some of the things God does. But that is what makes God…well…God. God’s promise seems way too good to be true, especially since Abram knew his lineage would end if there wasn’t a child to carry on the family name.

But picture this—you’re going about your day, getting your groceries, and returning the Amazon order that wasn’t what you were hoping it would be. The grocery bill ends up being much less than you anticipated given your pantry was out of all the staple items. and the Amazon return not only goes well, but ends with you getting a coupon so that sweater you’ve been eyeing for months, is now more than affordable. It doesn’t seem possible that two great “adult” things like this could happen in the same day, let alone to the same person. But they do.

This is likely how Abram felt as those promises were being fulfilled. No way could it be possible to have that many descendants especially since there wasn’t even one in his old age. No way would God really make that happen. After all, Sarai was barren, and couldn’t have children. What could God do about that?

So, he and Sarai take things into their own hands, trying to make the descendants happen. Abram sleeps with their slaves, who become pregnant, which must be what God was referring to when God said there would be descendants. After all there is no other way. But just a few chapters later Sarai, now Sarah becomes pregnant with Isaac, who will be the first in their many biological descendants.

Who would have guessed that a woman could bear a child at ninety years old, and a man, at the age of one hundred, have enough energy to be a new parent? God did. Because God wrote their story and writes our story too, even when it doesn’t seem possible.

*16*

“He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’”

— Genesis 22:12

Nothing we have belongs to us. You can take this story as a horrific example of God’s capricious testing of people, and a bewildering demand for human sacrifice if you want to. You can see God as cruel and nothing like the loving God you believe in. And that’s fine. Sometimes I look at it that way, too.

But these days, I’m far more likely to look at it metaphorically and ask myself what I’m hanging onto that gets in the way of my relationship with God. Early in recovery, I was challenged to respond to the writing prompt “Abstinence is the most important thing in my life.” Lots of people balk at this, horrified that we should put anything before our loved ones or even God. But the point is that if I am abusing my substance of choice (in my case food), I am making that substance my god, and I have zero chance of a relationship with God whatsoever. I had to sacrifice the “drug” that I’d been using to numb the pain of my chaotic, unmanageable life. As long as I held onto it, I wasn’t capable of fully showing up for my loved ones, or my employers, or my friends.

Anything that we put before God becomes our god. And I will tell you in no uncertain terms that the moment I became willing to sacrifice compulsive eating through working a rigorous recovery program, and at the same time sacrifice everything else in my life that wasn’t God, God showed up and gave me back everything good I was willing to stop worshipping and more. My relationships with my children, my friends, my colleagues, my family, even my then-husband vastly improved—flourished. God knew that I had not withheld from her the thing I was clinging to most tightly, the thing I was using to cope with my crazy life. God knew that I was willing to let go of my need to control and trust her with absolutely everything. And that was the beginning.

What am I holding onto that needs to get out of the way of my relationship with God?

*17*

“When the camels had finished drinking, the man took a gold nose-ring weighing a half-shekel, and two bracelets for her arms weighing ten gold shekels, and said, ‘Tell me whose daughter you are. Is there room in your father’s house for us to spend the night?’”

— Genesis 24:22-23

I chose this verse because of the nose ring. Seriously. Well, okay that is why I chose it, but not literally seriously. The fact is that on May 22, 2023, I got my nose pierced. On one hand, I wondered if I wasn’t just too old to do something so audacious (I was 51 at the time). But, you know what? My namesake in the bible, when Abraham’s servant recognized by her kindness and generosity that she was the one he’d been looking for to marry Isaac, was given a gold nose-ring. It weighed about five grams, which is probably a bit heavier than the one I have. When Rebekah went back to her house, her brother took one look at the nose-ring and knew something big was going down. In a way, this little piece of jewelry was a proclamation of God’s favor. God had something in store for this young woman—she would become, literally, the mother of Israel.

Perhaps coincidentally (or perhaps God found this all quite hilarious), I met the love of my life on July 1, 2023, not six weeks after getting my nose pierced. God had something in store for this not-quite-young woman, too.

I guess my message for today is just to be open to whatever gifts life and the people in it offer you. You just don’t know where and how God is going to show up.

What story in the Bible most makes me think about my own life story in some way?

*18*

“He said, ‘Are you really my son Esau?’ He answered, ‘I am.’”

— Genesis 27:24

And this is God’s chosen. This liar and cheat who, spurred on by his mother (but you can’t blame her—he did not once question the morality of her plan to fool her husband), dressed up like his brother and stole what belonged to him.

If I can find anything redeeming about this with my modern eyes, I can point to the fact that primogeniture is entirely unjust. Why should Esau, by accident of birth, get the largest portion of the inheritance, and the (apparently only one-time) blessing of his father? Why should anyone, by accident of birth, be given inexhaustible resources while others have to settle for less, or even not enough?

I’m not advocating theft, dishonesty, or cheating, of course. Only that it’s okay—in fact it’s essential—to step back and critically examine cultural practices that unfairly favor one person or group of people over another. At the time, this was probably Jacob’s only option, and Rebekah knew it, especially because, as a woman, she knew that she herself had even fewer. Let’s keep our eyes open for the things around us that need to change so that everyone has an opportunity to flourish.

What privileges do I enjoy based on factors of my life I have no control over?

*19*

“When morning came, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, ‘What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?’”

— Genesis 29:25

I sort of think Jacob deserved this. As a continuation of yesterday’s devotional observations, we can look at how Jacob lied and cheated and stole to get his brother’s inheritance and blessing and now Jacob’s uncle lied and cheated to force Jacob to marry his older daughter, Leah, before his younger daughter, Rachel, whom Jacob loved. First of all, does this sort of conniving run in the family or what? But secondly, just as Rebekah and Jacob figured they had no other option in the face of an unjust system than to cheat for Jacob’s advantage, perhaps Laban, on behalf of his daughter, Leah, felt he had no other option to make sure she was given a good, upstanding husband who would protect and provide for her all the days of her life. Obviously she was not as attractive (at least to Jacob) as her younger sister. Perhaps Laban would have had trouble marrying her off in her best interests otherwise. Perhaps this was really an act of love on Laban’s part. Yeah, let’s go with that.

Have I ever had to work around challenging or unjust systems in order to help someone?

*20*

“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’”

— Genesis 32:30

Who was that man, really? In my translation (NRSV) it just says, “and a man wrestled with him until daybreak.” It doesn’t say “angel.” And when the man changes Jacob’s name, he says it’s because Jacob has “striven with God.” Does he mean literally at that moment? Jacob seemed to think so—that he’d actually seen God face to face. But, um, how does one get into a physical altercation with God and walk away with just a messed up hip?

Yes, it’s metaphorical. But how does one even get into a metaphorical altercation with God and walk away with a minor, chronic ailment? When I argued with God about anything, I lose. It’s a foregone conclusion. A couple decades ago when my life was unmanageable and I wasn’t on speaking terms with God, I wound up deep in food addiction, miserable in my relationships, unhappy with the universe, and generally not a super pleasant person to be around. Unlike Jacob, though, I gave up the fight, and it was in the giving up and letting God be God that the total transformation of my life happened. In the years since, I have learned to be as tenacious as Jacob about the things that matter, but in those things, I’m working with God, rather than against God. (God doesn’t fight my battles for me, but definitely fights them with me while at the same time standing on the sidelines and cheering like crazy).

I still don’t know what God (if it actually was God) intended by tackling Jacob by the river in the middle of the night. All I know is that Jacob was transformed by his striving, just as we all can be.

When have I struggled in my life and come out changed for the better? Where was God in the process?

*21*

“Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force.”

— Genesis 34:1-2

Shechem gets his in the end. The spectacular revenge that Dinah’s brothers take on her behalf, not just on Shechem, but on his entire city, leaves me a little breathless. Rape is wrong, and clearly has been recognized as such for millennia, or it wouldn’t be in this story. Shechem needed to be held accountable. He was absolutely not justified because he subsequently fell in love with Dinah and asked to marry her legitimately.

But Dinah’s angry brothers tricked him and his father and all the men in the city into getting circumcised in order to make them eligible to intermarry with Israel’s people, and then when they were all recovering from what is extremely painful surgery in adult men, the brothers swept in and killed them all in their weakened state. And stole all their things. And took their women and children as slaves (and probably did to those women the same and worse as was done to Dinah). So… um… was that okay?

Jacob was mad at his sons but only because of the negative impact on their relations with the other neighboring nations.

I guess you can admire how much Dinah’s brothers loved her. And their ingenuity in using their cultural requirement of circumcision to trick her rapist and his people. It makes for a dramatic story where the “good guys” win and justice (?) is done. But a little part of me wonders whether our societal obsession with revenge can’t be traced back to this and similar ancient stories. Does this mean it’s just a part of human makeup? Or something we’ve learned? I’d like to think the latter, because then maybe there’s a shot at unlearning it.

When have I felt the need to get even with someone? How did it turn out?

*22*

“But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.’”

— Genesis 50:19-20

Main Idea: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.”

Sometimes being the smartest person in the room, isn’t the best thing. People look at you a little funny. Maybe not as many people choose to sit close to you or talk to you. But in that loneliness there is deeper wisdom that you hold onto—that the material doesn’t matter. And that things will all work out as they are supposed to, even if they don’t make sense at the time.

Joseph’s brothers didn’t like the idea that if anyone in the family would have power and influence that it would be Joseph. After all he was the youngest, and their father’s favorite. So instead of being okay with that, knowing that parents love all their children, and root for them all equally, they made their own plan to make it so that Joseph wasn’t in the way any longer.

Years later when Joseph’s brothers had to interact with him again due to the famine, they weren’t so sure how they would be treated. After all, they hadn’t exactly been kind to Joseph. Why would he treat them any differently than they had treated him? But Joseph, proves to be the bigger man and offers to set all of what happened before aside so he can help his brothers.

Joseph no doubt learned a lot while he was in his position of power, and definitely could have used that to his advantage. In fact, the brothers anticipate having to be his slaves after what they did to him. But instead, Joseph treats them with kindness, and decides to put the past in the past. While Joseph may have been angry at his brothers immediately after they threw him into the pit, he had a deeper knowledge that what happened was part of what got him into the position he was in now.

While Joseph could have taken advantage of his brothers’ embarrassment and had them serve as slaves, he showed them there is a different way, even when it doesn’t make sense.

*23*

“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.’ But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.”

— Exodus 1:15-17

Shiphrah and Puah are heroes! When the king of the nation who is oppressing your people gives you an order, you can only assume that if you don’t follow through, your life is forfeit. Yet these two women trusted God to such an extent that they just refused to follow that order. They came up with an ingenious excuse to cover their own backsides and it worked. The Hebrews kept right on having beautiful baby boys, including one Moses, who became the greatest prophet in the Jewish faith. In other words, the fate of the entire Israelite people came down to the bravery of two women

The Bible—and history—is full of stories of brave women who took action on behalf of others in the face of individuals, groups, or even entire societies that tried to stop them. We would not be who are where we are without them. We would do well to know their stories and celebrate the often unsung things they did to make the world a better place.

Who are the women in the Bible or history I am most grateful to?

*24*

“When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, ‘because’, she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’”

— Exodus 2:10

Water is important in two parts of this story. First, Moses is saved from infanticide by being hidden on a river and then found and adopted by an Egyptian princess. Then, after fleeing Egypt for Midian, Moses sits by a well where a group of women is attacked while trying to draw water. He not only drives their attackers away, but helps water their flocks at the well. As a result, the women’s father takes him in and gives him one of his daughters for a wife. He is drawn out of the water, and then he draws water, and in each case, the result is his life and livelihood.

Water is life, literally and metaphorically. It is Spirit. It is rebirth. It is flourishing. As you read and reflect on this story today, take some time to think about where and how water has played a part in your own life.

Do I see water as a generally mundane thing? Or as something miraculous?

*25*

“But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’”

— Exodus 3:11

Who do you think you are? Such a nasty set of words meant to put someone “in their place” when they have the audacity to take a stand about something important. Such a nasty set of words we tell ourselves when we feel inadequate or undeserving. No matter how they are used, there is a sure retort that will wipe away the arbitrary societal barriers we try to throw up: Who do you think you are? You are a beloved child of God, absolutely equal in every way to every other beloved child of God, deserving of dignity, and capable of feats far in excess of what we think possible.

Moses, a slow-speaking shepherd, would do great acts of God’s power and liberate his entire nation from oppression. Jeremiah, “only a boy,” would speak God’s scathing words to the same nation. Mary, an unwed girl, would carry God’s incarnation in her womb. If they could work with God (and God was with them the whole time) to do what probably felt impossible, then we can work with God to accomplish whatever it is that God is calling us to do, since God is with us the whole time, too.

Don’t believe anyone’s assessment (including your own) of yourself that diminishes you in any way. Who do you think you are? You are God’s.

When have I felt inadequate to a particular task? Did I ask God for help?

*26*

“If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. The river shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, and into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your officials.”

— Exodus 8:2-4

I’m sorry but I can’t see this as a bad thing. Notwithstanding my brother’s horrific (and hilarious) illustration of this plague when he was eleven (above), I’ll be honest. Frogs are my absolute favorite animal in the whole world. Every time I catch sight of one out in the wild, I am filled with elated gratitude. The idea of them being absolutely everywhere is… well… kind of amazing.

I don’t mean to make light. (Well, maybe I do.) These plagues were supposed to be horrible and convince Pharaoh that it was just too costly to hang onto the Israelite slaves. That it would be far better for everyone to just let them go, regardless of what impact it might have on the Egyptian economy, etc. And many of them were truly harrowing (and they got worse as they went). After all, in order for people to make a change, it has to be less painful than keeping things the same. I’m just saying that if you wanted to motivate me to do something difficult, threatening me with frogs wouldn’t cut it

Which plagues do I see as the least scary? The most?

*27*

“The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted the magicians as well as all the Egyptians.”

— Exodus 9:11
Those poor magicians. They’d tried to tell Pharaoh was back after the third plague that this was more than they could replicate. They told him it was the “finger of God” but he wouldn’t hear it. I’m sure, having truly understood the power that we being exhibited here, that they would have loved to have gotten out of town before things got horribly worse. But where could they have gone? They had attached themselves to the ruling elite and probably enjoyed all sorts of privileges through their magic. So faced with the undeniable fact of their own inadequacy and possibly chicanery, they were forced to stand there and be stricken with horrible, painful skin lesions all over their bodies, to the point where they couldn’t even show up to face off with Moses anymore. They were in too much pain.

Let this be a lesson to us to be aware who we associate ourselves with. Are we in genuine relationships with estimable people? Or are we hangers on to those with more prestige and clout, hoping to catch the edge of the limelight? And what happens, then, when those folks run into real trouble and we’re caught in the crossfire?

I gotta be honest. I kind of feel bad for the guys.

Have I ever chosen a friend based on something less than genuine? How did it turn out?

*28*

“But the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he was unwilling to let them go.”

— Exodus 10:27

I’ve never liked this idea. I don’t think God has to harden anyone’s heart to make them too stubborn to give up what they want even if they don’t deserve it. I think that’s just people. Pharaoh’s society was based on slave labor. The Israelites provided service for the economy. And it could be justified more easily because they were not Egyptians themselves. The plagues were unpleasant, to be sure. Painful even. People were sick and sometimes dying. Livestock was dying. Bugs and frogs were everywhere (although I have to imagine the frog plague would’ve been invaluable in getting rid of the locust and gnat plagues… Yep, still making light of that one). But clearly Pharaoh himself wasn’t suffering enough to want to give up what he believed was his right to own and use as he saw fit.

Can you think of other examples of people in our modern context who refuse to let go of wealth or power even to the point of threatening the very essence of democracy in this country? Is God hardening their hearts? I think not.

Can you think of examples in your own life of where you might be refusing to let go of something that is causing harm to another person or yourself? Do you think God is hardening your heart?

No. God is calling each of us, always, to let go of everything except trust that God has our back and desires our flourishing. God is calling us to let go of our fear and open our hearts to love and service to God, neighbor, and self in healthy and affirming ways. God does not harden hearts, only softens them.

When has God softened my heart?

*29*

“You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’”

— Exodus 13:8

Main Idea: Even when scripture makes God sound vengeful, God is also full of grace and mercy.

Having to slaughter an unblemished lamb in order to save your first-born child from death is something any parent would do. No matter how long it took to find the unblemished lamb, they would do everything in their power to save their child’s life. They would likely even give their own lives to save their child’s. That is what it is to be a parent. And while we may not always think that way, God is a parent too.

God watches over all of God’s children. God protects them from all harm when possible. God makes a way when it seems there is no way. God doesn’t tell the Israelites to figure it out and then leave them on their own. No, God gives them the exact directions of how to avoid the firstborn’s death. And if we don’t see that as gracious, we’re not seeing the whole picture.

Sure, we can stop at the question, “Why would God do such a thing in the first place?” But then we miss the next part. Even when we don’t understand, God still walks with us, and ensures we will not be alone. Throughout our life bad things are going to happen. In fact, they’re happening around you as you read this. These events usually don’t make sense because they are horrific, unnecessary, and as if God wanted this kind of thing to happen.

But we have to keep reading. There is more to the story. And while we might grapple with the reality that this event is happening, in the midst of it God is doing a new thing. God is writing a new story, taking the pain and the hurt and the confusion and using it to write our stories and impact others in a way we might have never imagined.

*30*

“When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, ‘If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.’ So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness towards the Red Sea.”

— Exodus 13:17-18a

Sometimes you need to take the scenic route. I’d love it if everything in my life was straightforward. I’m a highly organized, competent person. I have streamlined processes for most of the activities I need to do in my life. I can get irritated when there are unexpected roadblocks, delays, and side quests that slow me down.

You would think, in rescuing an entire nation from slavery, the shortest distance, the quickest route, would be the best idea. But God knew better. He knew that that route could lead them past another potentially hostile nation and that the people might panic and go back to Egypt rather than trust God to take them through the Philistine lands unharmed. God knew God’s people all too well.

God knows us that well, too. Sometimes, in spite of our irritation of plans going sideways, we find that it really was the best thing for us. Sometimes it’s important that we take a more roundabout way. We might encounter someone who changes our life. We might come across an opportunity that makes the delay far more valuable than the original plan. We would do well to go with the flow.

When has an unwelcome change in plans actually turned out to be the best thing that could have happened?