**November devotions**

*01*

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

— 1 Kings 18:21

“Make a decision and go with it!” I often mutter this under my breath when I’m driving on the freeway and another driver seems unable to choose which lane they need to be in, or what speed they should be going, or whether they’re actually going to go in the direction their turn signal indicates. It’s a silly example, but it’s indicative of the natural human tendency to want a guaranteed outcome to any decision we make. I feel like that’s what was happening in this story—the people wanted to follow the God of their ancestors, on the one hand. But on the other, how could they be entirely sure that Baal wasn’t more powerful, better able to care for them, a more politically wise choice? King Ahab and Queen Jezebel came out strong for Baal. Could the people not trust their leaders?

Elijah isn’t having it. “Look, people, it’s really not that hard. You know that God is God and Baal is an idol. Make a decision and go with it!” They don’t, of course, until he demonstrates unequivocally who has the power, by calling down God’s fire to consume a completely soaked sacrifice. Maybe shockingly, even then the people don’t believe. Or won’t make the right decision. The truth is absolutely crystal clear, but they stubbornly persist in following the wrong god. It’s a little bewildering. But how often do we do the same thing today? Stay with what’s comfortable and familiar, even when it’s so clear that it’s causing us harm?

Am I clinging to something against logic? How can I open my mind and heart to something different God might be calling me to?

*02*

“He said to his servant, ‘Go up now, look towards the sea.’ He went up and looked, and said, ‘There is nothing.’ Then he said, ‘Go again seven times.’ At the seventh time he said, ‘Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.’”

— 1 Kings 18:43-44a

It’s a strange little story. Elijah asks his servant to keep checking to see if there’s any sign the drought might be ending. The servant goes and sees nothing, and then Elijah says, “Well, do it again, but seven times.” I wonder if he just walked up and down the mountain, starting up again as soon as he got back to the bottom, or if it happened over time. I wonder if he thought Elijah was nuts for having him do such an odd thing, or wondered why Elijah couldn’t do it himself. All we know is that he does it, and on the seventh trip, he sees a tiny cloud forming over the ocean.

It remind me of the impatience of children—this checking and checking and checking again, hoping that this time will be the time when whatever it is we’re waiting for will happen. But in this case, it’s rewarded. Somehow Elijah knew the weather would be changing, but he needed confirmation, and he got it.

I don’t imagine God wants us to be obsessively looking for outcomes in our day-to-day lives. So much of a life of faith is about being patient, content with what is, open to whatever the journey brings one day at a time. Yet maybe it’s okay to be excited about some anticipated good thing or other, especially when we’re certain its coming, as Elijah was sure the drought would end. I suppose it’s just a matter of faith.

What am I anticipating in my life today? Can I be patient? Is it okay to keep checking in with God or others?

*03*

“She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.”

— 1 Kings 17:15-16

Main Idea: God’s word is not like our word. Whereas our speech merely describes, God’s speech creates. Our promise can fail, but God’s promise carries fulfillment with it.

A year after his career as a reformer took off with his 95 Theses in 1517, Martin Luther came out with another set of theses. Rather than posted, these were argued at a disputation in Heidelberg. While some might consider the Heidelberg Disputation a sophomore slump, these theses pack some serious theological heft. One in particular, Thesis 28, gives us something to chew on. There, he writes that, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of [humankind] comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.”[1] Luther’s point is that God’s love is not simply a greater version of our love or even the greatest possible version of our love. It is something wholly different. Whereas you and I love something because it is lovable, God loves what is unlovable in order to make it lovable. “This is the love of the cross, born of the cross” Luther writes, “which turns in the direction where it does not find good which it may enjoy, but where it may confer good upon the bad and needy person.”[2]

What is true about God’s love is also true about God’s word, and we see both on display in this episode from the ministry of the prophet Elijah. At every beat in these events, everything hinges on God’s word, because when God speaks, reality conforms. There will be no rain “except by my word.” God commands the ravens to feed, and lo! the prophet eats. God says the jar of meal and jug of oil will not empty, and they endure until the rains return, again by God’s word. It can even raise the dead, as with the widow’s son.

At first, these descriptions of God’s word may cause us to despair, for the gap between our speech and God’s feels like it creates an incredible distance between us and God. But remember: just as God’s love drew near to us and remains with us in Jesus Christ, so too as Moses says, God’s word is very near to us, in our mouth and in our heart (Deut 30:14). For though the word belongs to God, it is ours to speak, just as Elijah speaks God’s promise to the widow. Rather than creating distance between us and God, these events from Elijah’s ministry remind us of the power that comes when we boldly proclaim God’s promises to one another and our world. Through the proclaimed Word, the Spirit moves and acts, echoing the widow’s faith when she declares, “the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

*04*

“…and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

— 1 Kings 19:12b

I’m comfortable with silence. I didn’t used to be. When a teacher would ask a question of the class and no one would answer, I would hold out as long as I could, so the other kids wouldn’t think I was a know-it-all. But eventually, I had to raise my hand. I had to keep the conversation and lesson moving. As I grew up, I was similarly uncomfortable in social situations. If there was any sort of awkward silence between people, I filled it, nattering on about whatever, and probably making an idiot of myself. Even into adulthood, I would sometimes walk away from a social engagement wondering if I had talked way too much.

If I were Elijah, I would be expecting to hear God in the whirlwind, the earthquake, the fire. And when I didn’t and was left with silence, I probably wouldn’t have known what, exactly, I was supposed to do.

Today I’m different. For one thing, I’m a far better listener. I’m comfortable leaving space for others to speak. There are still times I have to bite my tongue to keep from jumping in and talking about myself as it relates to something someone else has said. I need to remind myself that if I’m formulating my response while the other person is talking, I’m not really listening.

Elijah was listening. And the silence was an invitation to listen even more deeply. He left the cave and stepped onto the mountainside, knowing God was about to impart wisdom he simply could not miss. May we, likewise, approach God in the silence with open ears and hearts.

Does silence make me uncomfortable? How do I respond to it?

*05*

“When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.’ They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.”

— 2 Kings 2:15

Elisha had big shoes to fill. It’s helpful that his first act after picking up Elijah’s dropped mantle was to part a river and cross it. Not something the average Joe can just do. So the other prophets knew at a glance that Elisha was the next one to follow. And follow they did.

In our lives it’s not always so simple. The various leaders at the various levels in our lives change over time. There might be folks out there who have led with integrity and been good for our communities, and whom we’d just as soon have continue to lead forever. But they retire, or die, or have a term limit of some sort, and we wonder, a little fearfully, whether the person who replaces them will be as good. We have to just do our best to make a good choice, and then see what happens, whether it’s in the election booth or the pastoral call committee or just picking someone to lead our book club for the week.

Unlike with Elisha’s definitive selection and subsequent leadership, with the other prophets literally bowing down to him, we get more of a say in the processes of life even after a new leader is selected. We are called to continue to support our leaders, sometimes even calling them out if we need to, offering our opinions and insights. It’s a participatory thing. And it definitely involves prayer for discernment and insight.

How do I know which potential leader is the right one at the time? What is my role following their selection?

*06*

“Then Naaman said, ‘If not, please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt-offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord.”

— 2 Kings 5:17

This passage is about gratitude. When Elisha heals Naaman, Naaman’s first instinct is to shower gifts on Elisha—material goods. His instinct is good. We should definitely show our thanks when we’ve been helped. But his idea of exactly how to express gratitude in this case were way off base. Elisha didn’t want money. For one thing, any power he used to heal Naaman wasn’t his own, but God’s. And God had no need of material possessions. Nor did Elisha want them, obviously, because he refused to accept them.

Naaman was at a loss. How, then, to appropriately show his appreciation for his healing? Then he hits on it. He realizes that the God who had done for him what no one else was able to deserves his loyalty and devotion. Instead of insisting on giving Elisha something, he instead asks him for something—soil from the land of God’s people—so that he can bring it to his own home and create holy ground on which to worship God. It’s a little over the top, maybe, at least by our standards. But there is definitely a lesson in it for us.

Sure, we can show our appreciation for someone’s help by giving them a card or baking them some cookies or giving them a little gift. But the best expression of gratitude is turning around and paying it forward. Finding opportunities to be of love and service to God—the ultimate source of all good things—through being of love and service to our neighbors.

How do I express my gratitude when someone does something kind for me?

*07*

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”

— Amos 5:21, 24

I love a good worship service. The music, the message, the praying with others. Sometimes festive, sometimes solemn. Does God really despise these things? When we feel God’s presence so keenly in such conditions?

I would say not. God loves nothing more than to witness God’s children learning, growing, praising, and celebrating together. But that’s not what God is seeing here. God’s people are engaging in these festivals and solemn assemblies for their own sake. Going through the motions in the hopes that it will garner them favor in God’s eyes. And God sees right through their BS. Outside of their pomp and circumstance, God’s people were ignoring the commands to take care of the widow, orphan, and stranger. They trampled on the least and lost and then turned around and proclaimed God’s name as if they owned it. Total hypocrisy.

God sees it now, too. Sees it in a nation that proclaims itself Christian, yet enacts laws and policies that victimize the most vulnerable among us; perpetuate poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia; prevent the sick and suffering from receiving adequate medical care. Next time we are standing in worship together (or sitting together on Zoom for Facebook Live) let us remember that if we are not actively working for justice, God wants nothing to do with our festivals and solemn assemblies. Period.

Where do I find myself acting in hypocritical ways?

*08*

“I will punish her for the festival days of the Baals, when she offered incense to them and decked herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers, and forgot me, says the Lord.”

— Hosea 2:13

I’m not a fan of Hosea’s metaphor here. He goes on and on with deeply problematic patriarchal language carrying on the covert and overt attitudes in the Bible that allow unfaithfulness in men, but condemn any unfaithful woman as whore.

Of course, that’s not the point. But, unfortunately, you have to dance around the problematic language to get to what Hosea is saying in his prophecy against Israel. Maybe a modern take is in order? Perhaps Wall Street capitalists going to the market and taking money as a lover at the expense of justice? That about sums it up.

But will God ever really punish them for their festival days of the god Mammon, when they offer stock options and deck themselves with expensive suits and Rolexes, and go after their dividends and forget God? Sadly, I haven’t seen it yet.

What do I worship that isn’t God?

*09*

“He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

— Micah 6:8

This is my favorite verse in all of the Bible. I honestly believe that if every human being truly strived for this ideal, the world would resemble the reign of God far more than most of us think possible. Justice. Kindness. Humility. Simple words, but not easy ones. They take effort, more specifically, the concerted effort of putting the needs of others above our own selfish self-interests. Acting against so-called human nature. It’s not something that comes naturally. You have to want it. To know that the rewards of this kind of living far exceed the rewards of the accumulation of wealth and the phantom security we think it buys us. I won’t pretend I’ve achieved anything like this ideal, but I will say that I actively work toward it every day. And even that is its own reward.

How am I seeking to do justice, love kindness, and develop the humility needed to surrender to God’s will for my life?

*10*

“And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’”

— Jonah 4:3-4

Main Idea: The story of Jonah’s ministry exposes our selective taste for mercy and challenges why we believe in “forgiveness for me but not for thee.”

The adage “You should quit while you’re ahead” is nowhere better applied than to Jonah. If we stopped the story of his ministry at Chapter 3, he would easily go down as the most successful prophet in history. While Abraham is off failing to drum up even ten righteous people to spare Sodom, Jonah has even the animals of Nineveh fasting and donning sack cloth. Talk about success!

And yet somehow, Jonah is not merely disappointed but dismayed by this result. “That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning,” Jonah cries, “for I knew that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment.” This last-minute revelation of Jonah’s heart redefines the story. This book isn’t about the successful call for Nineveh to repentance but the failed conversion of the one person who really needed it: Jonah. Every step of the way Jonah is fleeing the mercy of God, incurring God’s wrath in the process only to receive the mercy he so desperately wants to see the Ninevites denied.

Jonah celebrates his own salvation but resents God’s extension of the same mercy to Nineveh. His hypocrisy calls out our own when it comes to the mercy of God. We love that God is merciful… at least as far as we are concerned. At our best, we might be grateful that God has mercy toward those we love—so long as they have done us no personal wrong—but that’s about where it ends. We love the mercy of God, but like Jonah, we don’t like where it takes us: straight to the doors of the ones we don’t think deserve it, forcing us to confront the reality that God truly is abounding in steadfast love for all, calling into question the selectivity of our own love.

You do not deserve the mercy of God, and you will never preach to someone who does. The mercy of God is only ever a gift, and as it turns out, that gift is a Greek one. Like the wooden horse given to Troy, we realize only too late that in receiving the mercy of God, the fortress of righteousness we’ve built in ourselves from which to judge and condemn others has been felled in the night. Even when we flee it, God’s mercy is relenting in its pursuit of us, resting only when it has dragged us like Jonah to the door of the one we refuse to love in order to show us that God’s mercy is for them too. If you struggle like Jonah, hear a final good word: Jonah’s contempt for Nineveh does not stop God from working through him, and even after the work for Nineveh is done, stays with Jonah and continues to work on him, hoping to bring him around to God’s way of doing things. God will continue to work through you and your people no matter how you struggle, and will stay until the work in you is done.

*11*

“Neither their silver nor their gold

will be able to save them

on the day of the Lord’s wrath.”

— Zephaniah 1:18a

We are obsessed with money in the U.S. From infancy we are inundated with messages telling us our ultimate goal in life ought to be to accumulate wealth. Not as a means to an end, like doing good in some way, or even enjoying life, but as an end unto itself. And we have this bizarre delusion that if we have enough wealth, we are—or ought to be—exempt from pain. But experience (and a great deal of social science research) shows that no amount of money can insulate us from tragedy or misfortune of any kind, nor does it guarantee us happiness in our relationships or lives in general.

Of course I don’t believe that God inflicts “wrath” on any individual, group, or even society. Frankly I think we do a pretty good job of that ourselves. And sometimes bad things just happen. Silver and gold won’t save us from these things. Nor will they help us through them. What does help us through them is trust in God and the lovingkindness of others. What helps us through them is allowing ourselves to feel our feelings, being patient with our grief, and leaning in to our support networks knowing that God is at the center of all things. These are things money can’t buy.

Does the accumulation of wealth keep me from trusting God?

*12*

“The Lord is good,

a stronghold on a day of trouble;

he protects those who take refuge in him,

even in a rushing flood.”

— Nahum 1:7-8a

This word of comfort comes in the middle of a long diatribe about God’s vengeance. A jealous and wrathful God promises to visit fire and rage on “the guilty” and those who plot against God. I suppose one could take comfort just in the idea that “Well, I’m not one of those people!” But the fact is that we all sin and fall short. We all do what we know on some level is wrong. We all wander away from God and put our trust in worldly things.

Even so, we can “take refuge” in God simply by turning back and doing our best to do better. God always takes us back, (God, in fact, never actually lets us go), and promises solace no matter what is going on around us.

Where do I find comfort in the midst of hard times?

*13*

“Though the fig tree does not blossom,

and no fruit is on the vines;

though the produce of the olive fails

and the fields yield no food;

though the flock is cut off from the fold

and there is no herd in the stalls,

yet I will rejoice in the Lord;

I will exult in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;

he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,

and makes me tread upon the heights.”

— Habakkuk 3:17-19

Not just trust, but joy. This passage has always struck me because of this. It’s not just “well, things are hard but I can endure until it gets better.” No, it’s more like, “Things are awful and I will rejoice in God’s love!” I’m the first to admit it’s hard to be joyful when things are going wrong. Especially when they seem to have been going consistently wrong for a long, long time. I get tired. And when one more thing gets piled on the rest, I’m far more likely to say in anger, “Hey, God. What gives?!?” than I am to say “Thank you, God, for all the wonderful things I do have.”

Yet, when I do take the time to spend in gratitude, when I see all the ways God has shown up and continues to show up in my life, I find that joy somehow creeps in, and the challenges seem more bearable.

How can I find a state of gratitude even when things are going wrong for me?

*14*

“But the Lord said to me, ‘Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.’”

— Jeremiah 1:7-8

Sometimes speaking up is terrifying. My daughter struggles with mental health issues that sometimes affect her ability to show up and “adult.” She’s had lots of great support over the years, but is now striving for greater independence, and she’s keeps running up against her own fear of advocating for herself. She is terrified of getting in trouble, being shamed for her limitations, ultimately failing. So, more often than not, she keeps quiet until things blow up, which almost never works in her favor.

God calls us not just to advocate for ourselves, but to advocate for others—people whose challenges we might not be able to fathom. For example, as a white, middle-class, cisgendered, heterosexual, Christian woman, I am still called to work for justice for BIPOC, people living in poverty, people in the LGBTQ+ community, and non-Christians. On the one hand, I’m going to stick my foot in my mouth and need to ask for forgiveness and work to learn better. On the other hand, I’m going to piss off people who are bent on working against justice for these communities. In either case, I can’t let fear keep me from speaking up. Jeremiah had some seriously dark words for God’s people, and no one liked him. Of course he was afraid. But God was with him—and is with us—when he spoke truth to power.

Loving God, keep your promise to be with me to deliver me when my work for justice is met with hostility. Amen.

*15*

“Like the bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.”

— Ezekiel 1:28

Whoa, duuuude… Ezekiel’s vision is extremely trippy. And honestly, I have no idea what it is supposed to convey except that God is mind-blowingly awesome. What’s with the four-faced, six-winged seraphs? I’m not seeing the splendor, to be honest. More like total freaky monster vibes. Not my vision of beauty and power. But then again, I’m living in the 21st century in a completely different culture. What does seem to be universal is the rainbow—much beauty and splendor in one of those. How often, when we see one, do we remember God’s promise to Noah, and the fact that the rainbow is a sign of God’s presence? Probably not often, or maybe I’m just speaking for myself.

What does God’s beauty, splendor, and power look like to me?

*16*

“Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them… I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,’ says the Lord.”

— Ezekiel 37: 11-12a, 14

I need these words of hope. The world is just a messed up place. Always has been. But living in the midst of a pandemic and other unrest, it’s easy to feel ‘cut off completely’ from God and my fellow human beings, to want to curl up in a corner and wait for it to go away.

God’s prophets say to us that God’s spirit lives within us, and because of that, we shall live. God’s prophets tell us that God will act. Does act. Is acting now. I don’t need to live as if I’m a heap of bones. In God I have everything I need to live into the call to serve God and my neighbor no matter what is going on around me.

What refreshes my spirit and sustains me in God’s work?

*17*

“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’”

— Isaiah 6:8

Main Idea: Being faithful in our proclamation of the word of God does not always look like success, at least as the world measures it. It may mean rejection for us, but our rejection does not frustrate God’s plan of salvation.

Measured in terms of complicatedness, our society has reached a new high. The more information we have access to, the more information we want in order to do even the most basic things, making a smart phone all but required for daily living. Looking for a restaurant while traveling? Don’t ask the concierge; spend an hour combing through reviews online. Oh, the menu? Just scan the QR code. Cash? Sorry, we only accept Bitcoin. Even fast food needs an app! If I sound like a Luddite, then so be it.

Yet despite all this complexity, some things about our society have remained astonishingly simple. Taking our prize for least changed would be our notion of success. However much the Internet of Things has changed about our world, we still think of what it means to do well in crude terms of “number-go-up.” Success on the internet is measured by more clicks, longer engagement, a greater number of unique hits. Success in the church is often measured the same way. Growth in our congregation’s membership, increase in our budget, maybe even a new building addition.

How disappointing it must have been for Isaiah to answer a call to proclaim the word of God only to learn that it would mean making the minds of the people dull, shutting their eyes and stopping their ears. He is called to proclaim not an excellent fiscal quarter but exile, not a gathering together of the people but a scattering. A painful message indeed, one that would probably see any modern pastor driven from the pulpit.

The vision of Isaiah is a somber reminder that the word God has called us to proclaim will not always be well received or yield the sort of response from people that our world would call successful. But this does not mean that the word of God will return to us empty. Quite the contrary—the challenge the word of God brings to our world carries with it the good news that God is doing something different, something new. For our world’s notion of success is at its heart cold and cruel. For some to succeed by our world’s standards, others must fail. Resources are finite, and so we play a zero-sum game. But not with God. With God there is something the world cannot and will not offer: the departing of guilt and the blotting out of sin. God calls us to face the painful parts of ourselves and our world so that we could see where God is at work to bring new life. Redefining success, we see God at work on a new creation.

*18*

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see,

or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

— Isaiah 11:3b-4a

Our senses can be deceived. Eyewitness evidence is the weakest form. The vast majority of what we “see” is actually the interpretation of our brains based on a minimum of input. Yet every day we make judgements based on what, to us, seems absolutely real and solid evidence.

God judges with the heart. God comes from a place of unconditional, unmerited love, and has that love for every one of us, no matter what value we or our peers might assign to one another based on what we see and hear.

In American society, we are perversely conditioned to blame the unfortunate for their misfortune, rather than recognizing corrupt and oppressive systems we ourselves have created that cause those misfortunes. We judge based on what we see and hear (in usually biased, misrepresenting stories and images in the media) and condemn accordingly.

God does no such thing. God sees each and every human being as worthy of love, worthy of health, worthy of stable housing, good nutrition, gainful employment, safe neighborhoods, good relationships, appropriate healthcare, and the enjoyment of recreation. Without exception. What can we learn from God’s example?

When do I find myself judging those in need for creating their own problem?

*19*

“The earth lies polluted

under its inhabitants;

for they have transgressed laws,

violated the statutes,

broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore a curse devours the earth,

and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;

therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,

and few people are left.”

— Isaiah 24:5-6

We do it to ourselves. So many people lament “Where are you, God?” when our world is a mess. But we’re the ones who made the mess. Is it okay to act horribly toward our fellow human beings in the pursuit of wealth and material comfort and the illusion of security, and then complain to God when our society breaks down? It’s as if a kid completely trashes their room and then insists their mom should clean it up because they can’t find anything.

I’m not saying God is just standing by going, “Figure it out,” as if she doesn’t care. God grieves so deeply for each of us for the problems we’ve created for ourselves, others, and all of creation. God holds us in our anger and confusion. And God inspires us to take action to make right what we have made wrong. There is so much work to do, and while God will be right there in whatever work we do, the fact remains that it’s our work.

What work am I doing to address the challenges of this world?

*20*

“The grass withers, the flower fades;

but the word of our God will stand for ever.”

— Isaiah 40:8

Remember you are dust, and to dust you will return. My dad is in his eighties, now, and is absolutely on top of end-of-life details. When I first noticed—really noticed—that he had become “old,” I grieved a little. I can’t imagine a world without my dad. He’s always been my hero in so many ways. But in the last year or so, I have become so grateful for his frank openness about the fact that he probably won’t be around much longer (his dad lived to be 88, his mom to 84). We can talk business about it without it feeling cold. We can reminisce without it seeming gratuitous. And we can acknowledge the fact that “the word of our God will stand forever.” My dad’s faith has been a guide and an inspiration and a beacon for me for fifty-three years now. He will continue to exist in and with and through God, who was and is and is to come. I have no doubts about this, even as I have no idea what this will look like, practically speaking. I hope everyone is able to communicate about aging and dying and death with at least someone in their life, that we might always be reminded of the beauty of this word of comfort from Isaiah.

Am I comfortable talking about end-of-life details with my loved ones?

*21*

“They shall be turned back and utterly put to shame—

those who trust in carved images,

who say to cast images,

‘You are our gods.’”

— Isaiah 42:17

God is promising to show up at last! God’s people have been languishing in exile, living under the rule of those who serve other gods—cast images they created and then worshipped. And now, Isaiah promises, all will be made right with the world.

Most of us live in a spiritual exile, under the rule of mistaken ideas about who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Societies and cultures create norms around appearances—what we have to do or say, how we have to act or look, what we have to believe in (or at least profess to believe in) in order to be acceptable. We seek after these carved and cast images for our comfort. Yet when we do so, we cannot help but be aware that something is “off” somehow. That something is missing. We try to fill that hole with things, with substances, with people, when the only thing that will actually fill it is deep and humble communion with God as God is found in all of creation.

When we seek after that communion, we find that it’s right there. That it wasn’t God who had left us languishing in exile until God decided to show up, but that it was us who had chosen to go after what the world said we were supposed to go after, and didn’t really believe God was the answer. It’s a comfort to know that we don’t have to wait around to be rescued. We’ve already been rescued, if we will only realize that fact.

What distracts me from a close communion with God in my day to day life?

*22*

“Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.

When you make his life an offering for sin,

he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;

through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.”

— Isaiah 53:10

So much nope. I do not believe for one moment that God inflicts suffering on anyone. Not even Jesus. Maybe especially not Jesus. I know that the doctrine of the atonement is a central one in the Christian faith and for centuries has come down hard on the idea that Jesus took on our all since, like a goat (or lamb) and was made to endure all the suffering—at God’s hands—that we deserved for being such miserable creatures. And I reject it out of hand. (Luckily there are several alternative interpretations to ponder).

That being said, sacrifice is central to practicing the Christian faith. Not that we seek out pain and suffering, but that we are willing to give up our dependence on worldly things in order to focus on being of love and service to our neighbors. We’re not supposed to be miserable. God created us in God’s image within the scope of an incomprehensibly beautiful creation that we might enjoy it to the fullest! But we are also not supposed to focus solely on the pursuit of our own comfort and security at the expense of our fellow creatures. There are times when we have to give up what we want for the benefit of others. And in these times, we need to remember that when we give up what we want, it doesn’t mean we are giving up what we need, or what is best for us. We can trust that God wants us to be joyful and free, even in the midst of challenges and even suffering.

When has a sacrifice I made turned out to be the greatest gift to me?

*23*

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,

and do not return there until they have watered the earth,

making it bring forth and sprout,

giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,

and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

— Isaiah 55:10-11

God’s word, when spoken and heard, produces abundant fruit. Israel was in exile, and it looked like it would be a long time before they might be restored, if ever. They had lost their homes, their land, their livelihoods, their stability, and even lives. But there was one thing that couldn’t be taken from them—their faith.

Through all of their hardships, God still sent prophets to proclaim words of hope. Nobody could take their worship, their relationship with God, or their faith. These things would have to be nurtured to be sustained, but with fairly little they could produce abundant fruit.

Isaiah said, “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” In other words, they could come to God empty (and their state of exile had emptied them pretty good), and still receive what they needed to survive. Just a word of faith could be spoken and it would return with abundance. God’s word would “accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” It would be up to the people to keep speaking God’s word throughout their exile so that one day it would be fulfilled—they would return to Israel and the journey and destination would be filled with abundant blessing. “Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.”

Sometimes all we have to give or to receive is God’s word. But even that word, when spoken and heard, can be enough to produce hope and anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s promise: one day you will be restored.

*24*

“As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier.”

— Jeremiah 36:23

Main Idea: God’s word is used to overcoming our resistance. Whatever obstacles we erect, God will still reach us with the word we need to hear.

Did you know that Martin Luther dabbled in art criticism? It’s true! Once when pressed to explain why the authors of scripture could be sparse with detail, he answered by referencing a famous depiction of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Scholars believe it to be a version done by Timanthes,[1] based on how Luther describes it:

“Among historical accounts there is one about a painter who painted the story of Iphigenia at the moment when she was about to be sacrificed. To each of the spectators he assigned his own particular demeanor, expressive of his sorrow and grief. But the head of the father, who was present at the scene, he covered up, because he held that the depth of the father’s feeling could not be expressed in a painting.”[2]

Luther’s point is that sometimes less is more. Leaving gaps in the story is a way to draw us in and ask the questions for ourselves. Where we find those spaces can be where the true meaning resides, a place where the Holy Spirit can speak to us in the way we need to hear God today.

We can see this at work in this moment from the ministry of Jeremiah. The reading provides us with a blow-by-blow account of events, but very little about the feelings and motives. What must it have been like for the people to have heard this prophecy? What was the king’s motive to suppress it? Why would he deny the people the opportunity to repent? Didn’t his advisors tell him that the cover-up is worse than the crime? You get the idea. The events play out like a political drama, but without the interpretation of the actors, we are left to imagine the scene.

We all have at times tried to escape a word from God we did not want to hear. Our motives may be our own, but where they’ve led us is not unique. The good news is that God is used to our resistance and is practiced at overcoming it.

*25*

“If a man divorces his wife

and she goes from him

and becomes another man’s wife,

will he return to her?

Would not such a land be greatly polluted?

You have played the whore with many lovers;

and would you return to me?

says the Lord.”

— Jeremiah 3:1

A spouse can be a husband or a wife. Yes, the imagery in this text (and most others) talks of God as the husband, the dominant role in a patriarchal marriage, and Israel as the wife, the submissive, dependent role. But indulge me as I refuse to accept such a view of marriage and maybe see it from a little different angle. While at no time do I believe that humans are equal to God, I do believe that we are in a covenant relationship with God and have responsibilities to one another. Thus can the husband fail to live up to his promises as much as the wife. And just as God has been long thought of as male, there has been a wonderful movement to recognize the femininity of God (in fact, I refer to God with female pronouns in my personal spiritual discourse, not because I believe God is female, but as an intentional practice of de-programming my 53-year-old brain from automatically envisioning God as male.) So imagine God as the wife in this diatribe, and Israel as the husband. Imagine God’s pain and grief in seeing the way her husband goes around after other women (gods) because they’re more attractive and seductive and promise an easier, softer way. Imagine all the ways in which God has sacrificed for this “man,” all the things she has given him, only to see over and over that it’s not enough. That he cannot be made to commit to a monogamous relationship. Can you blame her for her anger? Can you blame her for wanting to leave him to the consequences of his actions?

However you envision it, God loves God’s people (that is, all people) so terribly much that when we turn away, when we seek after money and material comforts, when we choose again and again to act in ways counter to God’s most simple command to love God, neighbor, and self (in a healthy way), God grieves. And at the same time, God will always be there ready to take us back.

How does patriarchal imagery affect my feelings about Biblical texts?

*26*

“They bend their tongues like bows;

they have grown strong in the land for falsehood, and not for truth;

for they proceed from evil to evil,

and they do not know me, says the Lord.”

— Jeremiah 9:3

Disinformation reigns. We, as a society, can no longer distinguish between truth and falsehood. It’s not an entirely new phenomenon. Clearly, as this passage is a couple thousand years old, we have always had a gift for “bending our tongues like bows” and growing strong in the land “for falsehood, and not for truth.” But in recent years, with the advent of electronic communication of all kinds, the proliferation of falsehood and the relentless undermining of science and reason, and especially the inundation of our outlets with AI-created content, it’s become almost impossible to distinguish reality from falsehood. And, quite frankly, it’s terrifying.

I don’t have a solution. But I do have an exhortation. That we would open our minds and our hearts to genuine self-sacrificial love and service to others. That we would hold every piece of information up to the benchmark of whether it is life-affirming for each and every person, animal, environment, and aspect of what God has created. If it can be used to denigrate, oppress, or diminish the life of what God has created, question it.

How do I discern what is and isn’t disinformation in our modern context?

*27*

“Can mortals make for themselves gods?

Such are no gods!

‘Therefore I am surely going to teach them, this time I am going to teach them my power and my might, and they shall know that my name is the Lord.’”

— Jeremiah 16:20-21

We can certainly worship the things of our own making. But they are no replacement for a vital connection to the God who is in and through all of creation.

How does God teach us who God is? Look around! This morning (late October as of this writing) I drove out of my garage as the sun was turning the clouds on the eastern horizon a gorgeous pink, and the pale light intensified the rich hues of the autumn trees all around me. The morning before I witnessed a crow effortlessly stepping off a branch just overhead and floating gracefully to a lower branch on a tree a little way off. A week prior I stood in Spearfish Canyon in South Dakota watching in wonder as a cascade of lustrous water roared past lush mats of moss and forget-me-nots. And that’s just nature!

What about the people in my life? Yesterday my adult daughter told me how much she appreciated me. My adult son spent time hanging out with me. A shopper on Instacart brought me the most beautiful produce (and I gave him an extra tip). Last week I spent time with my boyfriend’s delightful dad, uncles, aunts, brother, sister-in-law, nephew, and nephew’s girlfriend and felt welcomed and loved, and was able to show my love in return. I won’t start in about my recovery community or my church family or my own parents, siblings, nieces, nephew, great-nephew or any of the rest of it.

God is in and through all things. God shows up in my life in the most astonishingly beautiful ways again and again and again.

I could not make for myself “gods” that would come close to touching the real and vital presence of the one God who delights to give me life and give it abundantly.

Where and how does God show up in my life?

*28*

“The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.”

— Jeremiah 18:4

In Isaiah, this idea of the potter is gentler, I think. In Isaiah it just says that God is the potter, and we are the clay, the work of God’s hands (Is 64:8) But this passage is more about God recognizing that God’s creation has gone wrong in some way and crushing it back into a formless lump before making something else. That is, God giving up on the first attempt (which was irreparably flawed) and doing something different with it. It is, in a word, a threat. Yikes!

Personally, I like to think that God is more of a Japanese potter, who practices kintsugi, or the art of pottery repair. Broken pottery is joined back together with a special lacquer and then painted with gold or silver, actually highlighting the break and making its repair a thing of beauty. None of us is perfect. Not matter how well-constructed we are, we will all, at times, break. God does not toss us into the scrap heap, or re-form us into something fundamentally different from ourselves. God picks us up, dusts us off, and loves us back into usefulness. Our scars make us even more beautiful, especially when we see and acknowledge them in others, too, and know that we are all so terribly valuable to God that we are worth saving, no matter what.

How does God shape and heal my life?

*29*

“The Lord is in the right,

for I have rebelled against his word.”

— Lamentations 1:18a

God doesn’t punish us when we mess up. God doesn’t need to. There are plenty of natural consequences to rebelling against God. For me it was a slow descent into spiritual estrangement as I tried to run the universe on my own and wound up causing myself so much pain I started self-medicating with compulsive eating. I couldn’t see how my total lack of trust that God could and would take care of my and the people in my life had led me to live as if there was no God whatsoever, even as my lips professed what my childhood faith and intellect had told me—that God loved me and desired my good.

I lamented my “fallen city”, my completely unmanageable life, deep unhappiness, and misery with my body, without realizing I was in a state of rebellion. It was only when I found recovery for my food addiction that I discovered how I was the cause of my own misery. Not that the challenges I was facing weren’t real and truly difficult, but the way I was reacting to them wasn’t productive in the least, and actually made things quite a bit worse, at least for myself.

In the end, I found healing and wholeness, and while I can still be a rebel, the daily disciplines of recovery help keep front and center the truth that I’m not the one calling the shots. I’m woefully underqualified to run the universe, and when I let God be God, I no longer need to lament.

When have I made my own misery worse by rebelling against God?

*30*

“For I will restore health to you,

and your wounds I will heal,

says the Lord,

because they have called you an outcast:

‘It is Zion; no one cares for her!’”

— Jeremiah 30:17

God cares for the outcast. There is a special place in God’s heart for the least, the lost, the rejected, the oppressed, the injured, the broken-hearted, the poor in spirit. This seems to have been the lot of God’s people, the Israelites, for most of their history. The early Christians, too—the ones who followed in Jesus’ way of justice, equity, and love of God and neighbor, before Christianity became the religion of empire—were persecuted for their faith. Many who have faithfully spoken truth to power and stood up for the oppressed have likewise been outcast, persecuted, murdered. And still in our modern culture, many people are pointed to as less-than, as abominations, as deserving of contempt, harassment, violence, and worse. These are the ones God loves most dearly, the ones God calls us to embrace and work to include and empower. Our God is the God of the outcast. Can we extend God’s loving hand to practice radical welcome for all people without exception?

How can I practice radical welcome in my day-to-day life?