**Daily Devotions**

**December 2024**

*01*

“Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open towards Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously.”

— Daniel 6:10

Main Idea: Prayer can be an act of resistance, and such resistance is built upon our faith and hope in God’s salvation.

Often, we applaud Daniel’s faith and hope in God at the end of this story when Daniel was found alive in the lion’s den and when he proclaimed to King Darius his trust in God’s deliverance. While it is indeed a moment that shows how Daniel’s faith and hope in God have been proven strong and sound, it is not the first or the only moment we witness Daniel’s faith. In fact, Daniel’s faith is manifested in his defiance of the King’s ordinance, the very act that soon put him into the lion’s den. When the governors in the palace urged the King to establish an interdict that prohibited anyone from praying to any god or human, they were having Daniel in mind as the person they wished to entrap with this new interdict. The intent of the interdict is clear: they wanted to set up something that they could complain against Daniel in relation to the law of his God (v.5). However, there is not a law in the Hebrew Bible that directly commands believers to pray daily to God. So, actually, Daniel was not placed within a strict dilemma where he had to break the law of God or the law of King Darius.

Yet, due to his obedience to God’s command to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5), Daniel decided to break the law of King Darius. And he did not break it secretly, but he chose to pray to God in a way that was visible to others – praying in the upper room with windows open facing toward Jerusalem (vv.10-11). While the text says that it was his usual way of praying, it was not any less of an act of resistance. Considering that the act of praying is not limited to any specific space, Daniel’s insistence to pray in a way that could threaten his life in his context was an intentional gesture of resistance. He was determined to resist against anything that attempted to restrict or confine his way of loving his God. And this bold act of resistance was not possible if it was not built upon his strong faith and hope in God’s deliverance.

*02*

“The king said to Daniel, ‘Truly, your God is God of gods and Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this mystery!’”

— Daniel 2:47

Give credit where it’s due. Nebuchadnezzar brought his people a ridiculous conundrum. He had this terrible nightmare that he insisted his wise men not only interpret for him, but tell him what the dream had been in the first place. I’ve analyzed my friends’ dreams for them for years, but they had to, you know, tell me the dream first.

I suppose greater’s the proof that Daniel’s God actually had the necessary power, since none of Nebuchadnezzar’s own wise men could do it. And, in appropriate fashion, Daniel makes it clear that this power came from God and not from Daniel himself, so that the king would then turn around and proclaim that Daniel’s God was the one and only, to be worshipped above all others.

I’ve had people comment to me about some aspect of my demeanor or other over the past twenty years. How calm I am in the middle of chaos. How serene and accepting of truly challenging situations. How I can find joy even when life isn’t going my way as I’d like. In every case, I point up. I reference my work in 12-Step Recovery and the life-transforming relationship with God that I’ve experienced through the daily spiritual disciplines of my program. Frankly, it’s because that’s where the credit belongs. But also, it’s a word of hope to anyone who might be struggling with addiction of any kind. That change for the better is possible. That a life of sane and happy usefulness is possible for anyone, no matter what is going on around us. From there, it’s up to those around me to decide whether it’s something they need, just as Nebuchadnezzar changed (at least for this story) his tune.

When and how have I inspired others with hope?

*03*

“Nebuchadnezzar said, ‘Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants who trusted in him. They disobeyed the king’s command and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God.’”

— Daniel 3:28

“Integrity is everything.” So says a friend of mine’s dad, and he’s not wrong. In this case, it almost got Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego burned alive. But, thankfully, God showed up to prevent it, because those three had refused to worship anyone other than God.

In our day-to-day lives, sometimes it feels like we get left hanging when we choose to act based on integrity rather than by following the crowd. As adolescents, we get ostracized from the “in crowd.” As adults, we get passed over for promotion at work, or lose our positions on committees, or lose friendships, or lose elections. And we’re angry because we’re doing “what’s right” and where is God?

I’ll be honest. It doesn’t always make sense. In fact sometimes it feels like it seldom does. All I can do is trust that God is in the midst of whatever challenges I’m facing, and God is integrity, so that when I act with integrity, I am allowing God to be God, and getting on with my own next right action. It might not always turn out in a way that I think is “fair.” But I will never wonder about my own conduct in the situation.

When has acting with integrity worked against me? How do I reconcile this in my world view?

*04*

“Then Belshazzar gave the command, and Daniel was clothed in purple, a chain of gold was put around his neck, and a proclamation was made concerning him that he should rank third in the kingdom.

That very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed.”

— Daniel 5:29-30

Honestly, this is just weird. Daniel has just translated a supernatural message that Belshazzar’s kingdom is about to go down in flames, and Belshazzar is like, “Wow! Thanks, dude! You’re amazing.” And then he’s dead. Does anyone, when they receive dire news, thank the bringer of said news? Maybe sometimes.

I had breast reduction surgery in 2020, and as part of the standard process, they sent a large sampling of the removed tissue to pathology. And they discovered that the majority of the tissue was “carcinoma in situ” or, basically, “cancer waiting to happen.” Not something I was expecting, nor something I was particularly happy to hear. But, unlike Daniel’s message to Belshazzar, it wasn’t a death sentence. It was an opportunity to do some serious prevention. And so yes, I was incredibly grateful for what could be seriously bad news. And I continue to be grateful for the doctors who are working with me.

I also know there are plenty of people who find out something far worse. Stage four inoperable cancer. A one-in-a-million terminal disorder. Mass layoffs. Scams resulting in the loss of life savings. How do we greet the bearers of news such as this? Just as Daniel did not create the situation resulting in Belshazzar’s death, those who bring us this kind of devastating news are not to be blamed. But embraced? Bedecked with finery? I think in those cases, we are more apt to set them aside and move on to working with those who can actually help us through whatever our crisis means is coming next. And that’s plenty. Perhaps we can, at least, recognize that God is speaking through those bearers of bad news—shining light upon the truth, however hard to face. Then we an recognize that God is working in and through those who walk with us on the journey ahead.

When have I received truly bad news? Who gave it to me? How did I receive it?

*05*

“This is what he said: ‘As for the fourth beast, there shall be a fourth kingdom on earth that shall be different from all the other kingdoms; it shall devour the whole earth, and trample it down, and break it to pieces.’”

— Daniel 7:23

So this is nothing new. Empires have risen and fallen and wreaked destruction on people and lands throughout history. The Bible is full of stories of how Israel dealt with the large, devouring powers around it. Assyria. Babylon. Persia. Rome. Humanity seems bent on acquiring power and wealth at any cost to those around them.

And here we are, with the United States behaving in this same devouring manner. Only this time the stakes are immeasurably higher, as we don’t just have power and influence on our immediate surroundings. In a global society, what any country does has reverberations around the world. In the U.S., for example, with just 4% of the world’s population, we consume 25% of the world’s resources.

Looming over all of this is the horrific specter of climate change. Our devouring the whole earth, trampling it down, and breaking it into pieces is literal. We are destroying God’s creation wholesale, and will leave nothing behind for future generations if we do not take drastic—and I mean drastic—action NOW.

What is to be taken away from Daniel’s divine vision? Perhaps hope. Because in his vision, this final beast is utterly destroyed by God, and all is restored to justice and righteousness. As Christians, we are called into this work for justice. How are we living out our Christian faith in ways that bring about God’s promise, and bring hope to those around us?

What can I do right now to answer God’s call to this work of justice?

*06*

“He came and said to me, ‘Daniel, I have now come out to give you wisdom and understanding. At the beginning of your supplications a word went out, and I have come to declare it, for you are greatly beloved.’”

— Daniel 9:22-23

You are greatly beloved. I’ll say it again: you are greatly beloved. It’s true. You don’t have to have great dreams and visions like Daniel. You just have to be. Because God made you and sees you as precious. If we ask for it and seek for it, God will give us wisdom and understanding. Not because we deserve it. But because we need it and God wants us to have it. Because we are greatly beloved.

Loving God, grant me the wisdom and understanding to make sense of my life, so that I might discern and answer your call. Amen.

*07*

“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 forever and ever.”

— Daniel 12:2-3

Shame is worse than death. Seriously, I find it fascinating that Daniel’s vision doesn’t say those who are somehow unworthy and unwise will suffer eternal hellfire and torture, but shame. Leaving aside the rambling explanation of how Israel was an honor-shame culture and shame carried different connotations than it does now, I can’t help but look at this in a modern context.

Shame is paralyzing. Demoralizing. Dehumanizing. We live in a new kind of honor-shame culture in which we get constant messages that if we don’t look a certain way, make a certain amount of money, make a certain kind of impact, “succeed” in a narrowly defined manner, we are failures. Less than. Purposeless and pointless. A life lived in shame is a diminished life. Can you imagine living eternally in that state? That would be hell.

God loves us exactly as and how we are. Period. There is not measuring stick. The “meaning of life” that so many find elusive and pursue down rabbit holes that lead to excess, misery, and, often, addiction, is not difficult to understand at all. In fact, it’s laid out succinctly in Micah 6:8. “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?” My modern translation? God has told you the meaning of life: to love and serve God and others, while honoring yourself with good self care (okay, I added that last part, but I think it’s implicit.) When I measure everything I do against that measuring stick, I find that my small, simple, unassuming life is filled with meaning, and I am free of shame for what I have not accomplished in the eyes of the world.

What do I think is the meaning of life?

*08*

“Then afterwards

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;

your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

your old men shall dream dreams,

and your young men shall see visions.”

— Joel 2:28

Main Idea: God’s vision can shift the hearts of a community willing to be transformed.

In the midst of a plague of locusts and drought, Joel wrote to a people suffering from the devastation. For an agricultural community, such a calamity would have struck to the heart of who they were. They were God’s people. They were farmers and tradespeople. They were daughters and sons, old and young, slave and free. Their very survival depended on their ability to nurture the land and its people.

Joel implored the people to “return to [God],” as if their own actions could shape the outcome of their situation. Yet, plagues, droughts, war—these were all things that originated outside of them. How could their repentance lead to the calming of the locusts, and a drenching of a dry land?

On the other hand, maybe such things were not as far beyond their control as it seemed. God’s creation is intricately intertwined. When God’s people are living and acting in harmony with God’s will, there is a power there that can transcend the things that come crashing in from outside of themselves.

For a people suffering from famine, starvation, and threats from neighboring countries, repentance would require more than a changing set of behaviors. What Joel proclaimed required more. It required an internal shift. “Rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Moving toward a community that is more fully self-sufficient, just, and peaceful would require looking at things in a brand-new way. What Joel asked was a willingness to have that internal sight transformed. It was God who would provide the vision. And in the naming of the ones to receive the sight, we glimpse a hint of the type of shift God was asking. God’s visions were all-inclusive: "sons and daughters; old men; young men; male and female slaves” would all be given a vision of a better way. Even in naming these, hearers would have to rethink the hierarchical structures they were operating by. They would have to see all people in their own community as worthy of God’s vision.

It has taken centuries, but humanity has made progress in reimagining the world toward God’s sight. Most countries have outlawed slavery, and many countries have begun to uplift their marginalized in a move toward equality and equity. There is still work to be done, but God’s vision continues to evolve and spread.

So, how does seeing through God’s eyes help with the external catastrophes like droughts or famine? Firstly, there is likely an unseen connection between the health of God’s human communities and the planet. Our negative practices toward each other and the environment do have a direct impact on the health of the planet. Secondly, even when global catastrophes cannot be prevented, a healthy human community will be equipped to support each other for a quicker recovery. The anguish over a lost house can be lessened by a community that comes together to rebuilt for those that have suffered. The devastation of hunger can be quelled by a community that comes together to distribute the abundance of the planet’s resources globally. The tragedy of war can be ceased when agents of peace work tirelessly to bring opposing forces to a bargaining table. None of this is possible, however, until humanity willingly shifts its heart-center away from self and toward God’s vision for a peaceful, abundant world.

*09*

“Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.”

— Ezra 1:3

What joyful news! At long last, after years of being forced to live far from home, God’s people are told they get to return, and rebuild the temple, the center of Jewish spiritual life. King Cyrus proclaims that their God “is the God who is in Jerusalem.”

Of course we know that God is not confined to a house built by human hands in a city built by human hands. We know that God had been with the Israelites no matter where in the world they happened to be living. Jeremiah had encouraged them to live their lives wherever they happened to be, and to not forget who they were.

But there is something about “home.” Something about a place you feel you belong, where you feel more able to encounter God. I’ve lived a few places in my life, and no matter where I’ve been, I’ve learned to “bloom where I’m planted.” But it’s always been nice to live in the city where most of my family is. It’s also nice to have a community of worship that I consider my spiritual home, where I can return again and again, and engage in the life of this Christian family. We always have to remember that our church is not God. That our home city is not the only place God dwells. But we can allow ourselves to let down and be ourselves in the places we feel most comfortable, and relax into the arms of our loving God.

What is “home” to me?

*10*

“The vine withers,

the fig tree droops.

Pomegranate, palm, and apple—

all the trees of the field are dried up;

surely, joy withers away

among the people.”

— Joel 1:12

I can’t even imagine what it is to live with the devastation of war. To have what is familiar, what I have loved, utterly destroyed. To have my livelihood rendered null and void. I know I am ridiculously privileged in this. Wars continue to rage worldwide. Some have been going on for decades. When Russia invaded Ukraine, there was outrage for weeks and even months. It’s been more than two years. I only occasionally hear about it. The latest iteration of the conflict in the Middle East, which has killed more than a thousand Israelis and tens of thousands of Palestinians (mostly civilians in both cases), was kicked off more than a year ago. Here, too, coverage has not kept pace with the death toll.

These are human beings. Beloved children of God. They are innocent victims of the lust for wealth and power of a small group of people. Those who have managed to flee must certainly lament, as the prophet Joel, over the destroyed place left behind.

Take a moment today to pray for the people in this situation. Then take a moment to find out how you can, even in the smallest way, contribute to decreasing violence in our world.

What is the worst loss I have ever experienced? Who helped me through it?

*11*

“Put on sackcloth and lament, you priests;

wail, you ministers of the altar.

Come, pass the night in sackcloth,

you ministers of my God!

Grain-offering and drink-offering

are withheld from the house of your God.”

— Joel 1:13

Yesterday I wrote about war. About the devastation wrought upon Palestine, Ukraine, and other places. I want to say unequivocally that at no point are such situations punishment by God for the failure of the people to be “good enough.” Israel’s sins of failing to do justice for those who were poor and powerless are what multiple prophets warned them would result in their destruction by other empires. In our modern context, these same failures do lead to war, but not as God’s punishment. Instead they are a natural consequence of the ridiculous concentration of wealth and power into the hands of a tiny portion of the population. Those wealthy and powerful who are ultimately causing wars to happen are the least likely to be adversely affected by those wars. So it’s ridiculous to say that they’re being punished for the actions or failure to act. They’re actually being rewarded for it. And yet, how to make them own their culpability? Why won’t God punish them in some way? Honestly, it is something I do not understand, and it makes me so very sad. I appreciate those who are working for justice—and there are many. I try not to be overly cynical or drift into despair. Perhaps we all ought to be putting on sackcloth and lamenting on behalf of those who suffer. I don’t know. May God help us discern how we might bring about God’s justice in our world.

Do I believe there will ever be an end to massive wealth and power inequality and all the horrible outcomes it creates? Where do I see God in this?

*12*

“With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel.”

— Ezra 6:22

I love my traditional festivals! Here we are deep in the middle of Advent, lighting candles over time to show the brightening of the world culminating in the coming of the One Light into the world. Then it’s on to the festivities of Christmas—observing our festivals, digging into our faith traditions, and celebrating God’s incredible gift of Jesus.

Can you imagine being the people of Israel, who spent years unable to practice their holiest festival while they were in exile under foreign rule? Then can you imagine the joy they must have felt when their new overlords gave them the freedom to resume their ways? I don’t think this verse does justice to what it must have been like. Joyful? Ecstatic! Euphoric!

May this year’s celebrations open our eyes to the ways in which our traditions deepen and enrich our faith.

How can I bring real joy into my Advent and Christmas celebrations this year?

*13*

“So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

— Nehemiah 8:8

Scripture is a living, breathing thing. It’s not like it was written down, accepted into canon and frozen in time forever. The Holy Spirit lives and moves through the interpretation of the Bible in community. Even the original recipients of God’s law, who still lived in the same society and spoke the same language, required interpretation by their leaders in order to understand it. How much more so do we, far removed in culture and language, need to interpret scripture in light of who and how we are now?

Bottom line: read the Bible with other people. Invite the Holy Spirit into the conversation. Listen to others’ experiences in encountering God’s word in their actual lives. And be open to the idea that the enduring and eternal truth the bible holds may not be what you think it is.

Gracious God, encourage me to invite others into conversation so that I might get a better sense of what your holy scriptures might be saying to me here and now. Amen.

*14*

“In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah all Israel gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers.”

— Nehemiah 12:47a

Yeah! Support for musicians! Yep, that’s what jumped out at me in this long description of the dedication of the rebuilt Jerusalem. People were called to bring their tithes and offerings not just to the priests, but to support their local singers. Israel understood the importance of music in their spiritual and cultural lives. We, too, in our modern context, are aware of the powerful impact music has on us in all areas of our lives. Not many folks can make an actual living writing and performing music. Maybe we can see supporting musicians as a God-given call and be more willing to appropriately compensate the many wonderful music-makers out there!

What impact does music have on my life? Do I value it as I ought to?

*15*

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the broken-hearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners.”

— Isaiah 61:1

Main Idea: Isaiah invited people to invest their energy not in what they are against, but in what they are for.

Isaiah spoke to the Hebrew people at a time of great loss, oppression, exile. For thousands of years, it has been sport to ridicule, discriminate, persecute, and even attempt genocide against the Jewish people. At the writing of this section, this iteration of the war in Israel is fairly fresh. While it can be tempting to spend today’s sermon speaking in generalities about God’s promises, it may be an opportunity to speak to what is going on today in a land still dripping in blood.

Yes, this is a tricky business, discussing what can seem like highly charged political events from the pulpit. But perhaps there is a way to address the issue from a more neutral political standpoint, while emphasizing the very palpable, timely, and promising perspective of a loving God.

To begin, position your conversation from a place of what your congregation’s community is for, rather than what it is against. Instead of standing against war, be for peace. Instead of standing against one side or the other, be for the citizens and innocents in all involved countries. Instead of standing against a political party in your own country, be for the ideologies you believe protect, nurture, and uplift people.

Isaiah invited us into this proactivity, beginning with the positive gifts of God who has, “clothed me with the garments of salvation… [and] covered me with the robe of righteousness.” God’s actions push us to act not against, but for. “What is sown… [will] spring up.” Consider what you will present to your congregation as the proactive and productive seeds that your community can sow to support what you are for.

*16*

“It was no messenger or angel

but his presence that saved them;

in his love and in his pity he redeemed them;

he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

— Isaiah 63:9b

God is active, working in the world. Sure the Bible is full of angels—messengers—bearing news of one kind or another. Just as our lives are full of people who bear God’s word of love to us. But it’s more than just messages and words. God acts through us. God is present in us. We are not simply angels to one another—we are God to one another. I don’t mean that we are God, or gods in our own right. But I do think that when we show up in love for each other, God is in the midst of it, fully present in us.

In Jesus this was far more true. In Jesus—no messenger or angel—God’s presence showed up and saved us. In God’s love, God redeemed us, lifted us, and now carries us through life and all eternity. Let us continue to make this manifest in all that we do for one another.

How, exactly, have I witnessed God showing up and acting in the world?

*17*

“Do not be exceedingly angry, O Lord,

and do not remember iniquity for ever.

Now consider, we are all your people.”

— Isaiah 64:9

“We all make mistakes.” It’s said so often it’s a complete cliché. Yet it warrants looking at more deeply. On the one hand, it can be hard to accept this is actually true. Our perfectionism can, upon having a mistake brought to our attention, send us into shame. And this isn’t productive. It can keep us from owning our error and genuinely working to make it right. On the other hand, if we’re too quick to shrug and chalk up our mistake to a natural human propensity for which we are somehow not responsible, we also undermine any good that might come out of it.

The prophet Isaiah claims the error—does not seek to dodge or minimize it. But at the same time, he asks God’s understanding and appeals to God’s love for God’s people. This is the middle ground on which we can meet our mistakes—one on which we can accept our imperfection without shame, and work to amend our actions going forward. It’s not always easy. But God is more than willing to walk with us through the process.

When did I last have to make an amends for something I did that hurt someone else? How did it go?

*18*

“No more shall there be in it

an infant that lives but a few days,

or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,

and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.”

— Isaiah 65:20

I know women who have lost infants. Miscarried. Stillborn. Alive a matter of hours. Alive for almost three years before succumbing to a birth defect. There is a grief so deep it cannot be measured. And it never goes. Every year on the anniversaries, they struggle.

I know people who have lost parents way too young. Cancer. Accidents. Seemingly random and catastrophic medical occurrences. The mark on these people—sometimes children, sometimes young adults when their parents died—is profound. And it never goes. Every year on the anniversaries, they struggle.

One can only marvel at these words of promise from Isaiah, that there will come a time when such natural conditions, so devastating, will no longer happen. Is it a literal time? An earthly time? A post-end-of-time time? I’m sure I won’t know in my own lifetime. But I trust that it is God’s desire that we live fully and joyfully, and I will live in that hope for all my days.

What griefs have I experienced or witnessed? What does this promise of Isaiah mean to me?

*19*

“But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress.”

— Obadiah 1:12

As much as I like to joke about schadenfreude, it’s not cool to enjoy the misfortunes of others. No matter how much we think they deserve it.

The people of Judah are the Israelites, the descendants of Jacob. The people of Edom are the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s twin brother, from whom Jacob stole his birthright and their father’s blessing. Edom had good reason to hate Judah. Why not celebrate when Judah was destroyed by invaders? Can you blame them? Well, God can. And God holds them accountable for their gloating.

Whether or not we think we have good reason to feel smugly satisfied when others get their come-uppance, it’s not cool. God calls us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. (Note that we’re not supposed to accept persecution, just pray for our persecutors.) Easier said that done, of course, but with God, all things are possible.

Who do I dislike or disagree with that I can pray for?

*20*

“And on that day I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn.”

— Zechariah 12:9-10

This is mind blowing to me. God says that Israel will fight its enemies, yet have compassion on anyone who dies in the conflict, and truly grieve their loss. The message to me? We cannot take any such conflict lightly. Violence is never—never!—the first and best option. We are called to see our enemies as precious and beloved, no matter how they have harmed us. This does not mean that we accept harm; there are times action must be taken in self-defense. But when others are hurt, we should see this as deeply grieving. Can you imagine? Recognizing the humanity of those we are in conflict with? Loving them and seeing them as precious? Would there ever be war?

Are there ways in which I characterize those I disagree with as less than fully loved and precious human beings?

*21*

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”

— Malachi 3:5

This is mind blowing to me. God says that Israel will fight its enemies, yet have compassion on anyone who dies in the conflict, and truly grieve their loss. The message to me? We cannot take any such conflict lightly. Violence is never—never!—the first and best option. We are called to see our enemies as precious and beloved, no matter how they have harmed us. This does not mean that we accept harm; there are times action must be taken in self-defense. But when others are hurt, we should see this as deeply grieving. Can you imagine? Recognizing the humanity of those we are in conflict with? Loving them and seeing them as precious? Would there ever be war?

Are there ways in which I characterize those I disagree with as less than fully loved and precious human beings?

*22*

“When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’”

— Luke 1:41-42

Main Idea: Faith comprises our trust in God’s deliverance as well as our willingness to accept the pain and suffering that follow from our belief.

From this passage, we see the great faith of two women, Mary and Elizabeth, who had been chosen to be the vessels of divinely ordained births. Generally, however, their faith is only read as their unwavering trust in God’s promises of the impossible births—the birth by a virgin and the birth by a barren old woman. Truly, Mary and Elizabeth did exhibit an unimaginable amount of faith by believing that God could make possible what seemed impossible and rejoicing even before the births were delivered, but this is far from all that their faith was about. What is often overlooked about their faith (especially by male readers) is the pain that these two women had embraced along the way as they chose to place their trust in God. Their faith was not only about believing that God would fulfill the promise of two impossible births, but also about accepting the pain and hardship that shall follow from that belief, including the mental stress coming from others’ suspicion, jeers, and accusation as well as the physical pain of bearing and giving birth to a child. (For men: to imagine the pain that Elizabeth as an old woman would experience in birthing, think of the pain Abraham felt from being circumcised in his old age and multiply that!)

Nevertheless, this is not to justify pain or suffering, but rather to acknowledge that persevering through pain is the inherent rhythm of faith in the lives of God's people who reside in a fallen world. And while pain and suffering are integral to the Christmas story (and to Christ’s salvation on the cross), Luke 1 reminds us that joy can be discovered amidst afflictions. While the faith of Mary and Elizabeth was accompanied by great pain, it also brought them great joy, a joy that stemmed from their connection with God; a joy that united them in fellowship with one another. It was a joy shared communally, even by the unborn baby John (v.41). Although such joy does not numb the pain, the pain intensifies the joy and one’s hopeful anticipation of divine deliverance. In the darkest night, with faith, we hold fast to the knowledge that light will soon emerge. Following the pangs of labor, we are assured of the eternal joy that awaits us, when heaven and earth will experience rebirth and life will abound with exultation in God’s motherly love.

*23*

“I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

— Luke 1:3-4

We are all that most excellent Theophilus. Lovers of God. Coming to this holy text with open curiosity, to learn all we can about God’s love for God’s mind-boggling creation, no clearer than in the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection. The writer of Luke continues his account in the Acts of the Apostles, giving even more perspective on Jesus from the vantage of what happened afterward. As we dwell in the Gospel of Luke this year, may we all find “the truth” of this profound story and live into it in our daily lives.

What is my favorite story from the Gospel of Luke?

*24*

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

— Luke 2:7

Main Idea: The birth of Jesus is a Kairos moment that God has initiated to break the oppressive cycle that subjugates all God’s beloved children in the world.

What his passage reveals is the oppressive reality that many Jewish people were living in under the rule of the Roman Empire. The decree issued by Emperor Augustus was not a benign population census, but a way to systemically perform economic exploitation over the subjugated by registering them for the purpose of tax collection. As political exiles, Jewish people like Joseph and Mary were required to pay taxes to the Roman empire, usually in the form of crops, to feed the Roman military and cities. The irony is stark: the subjugated were forced to pay to sustain the army and system that subjugated them. And as their economic power was weakened, their ability to overturn the empire was also blunted. As a result, they continued to suffer in the cycle of subjugation.

The birth of Jesus is set within this context. While it appears to be nothing unusual for a poor family of the subjugated to not get a proper place for childbirth, Jesus’ birth is nothing but extra-ordinary. It is a Kairos moment that God has initiated to break the oppressive cycle that subjugates all God’s beloved children. That the birth of this eternal king took place in a manger and was first announced to those who were deemed lowly in society (the shepherds) signifies a subversion of the existing hegemonic hierarchy. Today, as the church celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, are we heeding and proclaiming the subversive nature of the coming of our Messiah? This Christmas, let us reflect on how we should live out our faith by participating in the transformative work that God has initiated through Jesus, challenging and overturning the oppressive system in society that continues to subjugate and marginalize the poor, the refugees, the colonized, the queer, and the racialized.

*25*

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

— Luke 2:20

Main Idea: God brings light to those whom society has put in the dark and makes them into the light of the world that proclaims the good news of God’s salvation.

Luke 2:9 depicts a vivid picture of the shepherds’ encounter with God’s glory, illuminating the darkness of the night, long before the advent of electricity. The divine radiance does not envelop just the manger where Jesus Christ was born, but as the celestial angel meets the shepherds in the fields, the glory of God also shines around this group of workers who were often the unseen and the voiceless in society. The shepherds, who were toiling in the dark night, are at first taken aback by the arrival of God's messenger. The unexpected appearance of an angel and the brightness of the light startles and terrifies them. Not only is their routine disrupted, but their eyes which had been accustomed to the darkness also need to adjust to the bright light. However, as the angel assures them, this message from God is one that would ultimately bring them peace and joy.

For this Savior, Jesus Christ, was born specifically “to you [them],” the lowly and the unseen in the world (v.11); and he, who was wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger, would understand the plight of being the poor and the marginalized. God saw these shepherds when the world had placed them in the dark, and God met them right at where they stood and shed light into their lives. And not only did God bring light to their lives through the angelic announcement of Jesus’ birth, but God also made them into the light of world as they went on to share this good news with others (vv.17-18). Though these shepherds were unlikely to have received much education, it was through their mouths that God had chosen to share the salvific news with many. Today, God continues to speak through different communities. The message of Christ is not confined to the pulpit or the lecture hall, delivered by famous preachers and Christian scholars, but it can be found in the lowly and the unseen in society who have witnessed the light of God and experienced transformation in their lives.

26

“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.”

— Luke 1:13

I wonder what it would be like to meet an angel. Judging from the various biblical texts in which they appear, I would have to assume they’re frightening. But other than the accounts of them in apocalyptic literature, with multiple wings and multiple eyes and resounding voices, they are usually described just as young men, sometimes with shining clothes. Is it context? I imagine it would be a little frightening to encounter a stranger in the Temple, as Zechariah did. Or to see men sitting in Jesus’ empty tomb. Or a strange man suddenly standing in the fields with you and your sheep. A couple millennia of art depicts them with wings and halos, high above the earth, shining like the stars. But that’s not how they’re actually described. I wonder if I’d even know that I encountered an angel. We talk a lot today about other people being angels in our lives, carrying God’s messages of hope just when we need to hear them. But I don’t find those encounters scary to the point where I would need to be told “do not be afraid.” Actually, if a total stranger came up to me and started an unsolicited conversation with my by saying, “Do not be afraid,” that is what would freak me out.

Part of me wishes I could have an encounter like this. Something inexplicable to the point of making me uneasy. Something indicating the raw power of God to show up and act. But maybe I’m just not open enough to the truly unusual. Maybe it would be good for me to stop trying to explain everything away instantly, to categorize and file it away neatly. Maybe then I would see angels and experience the awe of Zechariah.

Have I ever had an experience like Zechariah’s? What are my thoughts about angels?

*27*

“And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me.”

— Luke 1:46-49

Gratitude is powerful. Here is a young, out-of-wedlock woman in a culture in which becoming pregnant in such a state could result in her death. She’s run off to the country to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, and maybe it was because she needed to disappear for a while to hide her condition? She was with Elizabeth for three months, though which three months we’re not told. Possible the last, in which her pregnancy would be hardest to hide. Did she go home just in time for the census?

But I digress. The fact is that God has given her a dangerous burden to bear. And she is grateful. Grateful because she trusts God to do as God promises. Grateful because God’s decision to choose her—a poor woman—to bear God’s child is proof that God’s favors the oppressed. Grateful that God is at last acting to fulfill God’s promise of a Messiah.

We all face challenges. Some of them devastatingly difficult. I know that when I have been able to find at least something to be grateful for, the enormity of my situation lessens. When I can tease out even a hint of a positive spin, I begin to see possible solutions, and my trust in God increases.

The truth is that some challenges are just too much, and we can never spout off hollow advice to “always look on the bright side” or claim that anything is “God’s will” or that “God has a plan” or other such patronizing banality. If the problem isn’t ours, we ought best to keep our mouths shut and our arms open. But when it’s me, I get to ask God for help in finding gratitude, in weathering the challenge, and in looking back and seeing the good that’s come out of it.

Has the practice of gratitude ever lessened a burden for me? How?

*28*

“All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.”

— Luke 1:66

I think all new parents ask this question. Not just the ones whose birth seems to be supernatural, as John’s did. The births of both of my children felt miraculous and wondrous to me, and the unbelievable potential in those enormous eyes delighted me.

What would John become? An iconoclast. An odd duck who dressed funny and ate bugs. A prophet whose words terrified the establishment. And ultimately, a martyr for his beliefs. Was this what Elizabeth and Zachariah hoped for their son when he was born?

My children are their own people. At twenty-five and twenty-three, they are not what I would have expected. With developmental disabilities and mental health challenges, they struggle in ways I would not have wanted for them. Yet they are wholly and amazingly wonderful human beings. They surprise and delight me. They bring amazing things to the world by their very existence. The hand of God is with them, and a lifetime of becoming lies ahead.

What do I hope to become, with God’s help?

*29*

“Simeon took him in his arms and praised God.”

— Luke 2:28

Main Idea: You too hold a treasure as great as Simeon and Anna once did, the treasure of a promise fulfilled. How can we keep from singing?

A friend once remarked to me that they find musicals too unrealistic. “People just start singing out of nowhere,” they complained. “When does that ever happen in real life?” My retort was that, if you read the Bible, it happens all the time! Scripture is filled with moments of spontaneous song, from Miriam’s hymn of praise following the passage through the Red Sea to Mary’s rejoicing in the promise that she would bear the savior of the world, there are moments where what God has done is so amazing that mere words will not do. There must be music and song.

While Luke does not say that Simeon and Anna sang, the church certainly thought they did. Simeon’s words became the basis for the text of the Canticle of Simeon, a fixture of evening worship and a traditional post-communion hymn, used to praise God as Anna did for what God has done. Like those who came before them, their songs were not rehearsed. They were spontaneous outbursts that came when God broke into their lives with the fulfilment of the promise of salvation. Moments so overwhelming with joy that song sprung forth.

I doubt either preacher or hearer will need to be persuaded about the power of music and song to bring words to a level of meaning they could not attain without it. What God is doing among us should be the cause for the sort of joy that begins in words but cannot be contained by them alone. As we heard on Christmas day, the incarnation of the Word is a promise of salvation, and what we see today is that this promise can’t be held by us merely as an idea or speech. It is the sort of joy that brings us from speech to song and dance, into a larger chorus that is rebirth into a new creation.

Where is the joy of Emmanuel—God with us—surging to break forth in your community? Where does it elicit joy in you? Helping your hearers connect this news to a place where it springs forth as joy is key to translating the Christmas news into a Christmas life, where our proclamation carries from speech to a life lived with joy for the world. Opening our ears to hear the song will help us find our harmony. How can we keep from singing?

*30*

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me.

O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and forevermore.”

— Psalm 131

I remember those precious moments. When one of my very young children would crawl into my lap, curl up against me, and sleep. The warmth and weight of their little bodies, the rise and fall of their little chests, the sound of their soft breathing… pure joy.

I have needed to crawl into God’s lap in this way. I have needed to be freed of my hectic life, my racing brain, my gnawing fears. And God has always been there with open arms. Sometimes her arms are that of another human being. Sometimes they are the arms of a great tree in a beautiful nature park. Sometimes she is the hammock on the shore of the lake by my cabin. Sometimes she is one of the many stuffed frogs in my room. Her arms are always there to receive me, so that I might calm and quiet my soul in her presence.

How do I experience peace and serenity with God?

*31*

“When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

— Luke 2:39-40

Jesus was just a kid. He was born. He was named and circumcised. Then his parents went home and raised him. He had to get to the point where he slept through the night. He had to learn to feed himself. Had to be potty trained, learn to dress himself, do all the things kids learn to do. He probably played with the neighbor kids, helped out with his younger siblings when they came along, all these normal, mundane things about being a human being few of us remember. The next we hear of him, he’s twelve—not quite the age of bar mitzvah, which would make him a legal adult. His entire childhood his assumed to be simply that: childhood.

How beautiful is that, really, when you think about it? How much of Jesus’ childhood experiences did he bring into his ministry? How and when did his heart become tender and full of compassion for his neighbor? One could argue, “Well, he was God, of course he knew!” But I think it’s more than that. He was fully human. He had parents. Experiences. At some point, something turned his heart from himself—a right and psychologically normal selfishness of young children—to the plight of others in his world and ours

When I reflect on my own childhood, I see all the ways in which the pains of growing up that I experienced made me compassionate toward others. The hurts of unfaithful friends, the trials of being a smart, nerdy kid in a very, very small school—these things helped me see the loneliness and deep desire to connect in other human beings, even and especially adults! Jesus went through it all, and it opened his heart to all those in pain and need. To you and to me.

What formative experiences in my childhood gave me compassion for others?