



Peace Church United Methodist



The English-Speaking Methodist Congregation in Munich

The Lockdown Collection of Sermons & Meditations



*Sermons, meditations and reflections
shared at Peace Church during the Corona-virus pandemic*

VOLUME II

May 2020 – February 2021

Contents

			Page
1.	Genesis 37 & Psalm 105	Peacemakers	4
2.	2 Kings 11	Jehosheba	6
3.	2 Chron 34: 22-28 & 2 Kings 22: 1-13	The prophet Huldah	9
4.	Psalm 46	Be still and know that I am God	12
5.	Psalm 121	God is close to you, wherever you are	15
6.	Isaiah 40: 3-5 & Mark 1: 1-8	Wilderness	17
7.	Matt 4: 1-11	Bread and stones	21
8.	Matt 10: 34-36	Stand up and speak out for what is right	24
9.	Matt 11: 16-19, 25-30	Finding the third way	25
10.	Matt 13:2-9	God sowing joy	28
11.	Matt 13: 33	This woman is adding the yeast of God's Kingdom to the flour of earthly life	30
12.	Matt 14	Blessing comes only in sharing	33
13.	Mark 1-10	“Follow me”	34
14.	Luke 2: 22-38	Revealing the thoughts of our hearts	37
15.	Luke 5: 1-11	Jesus calls the first disciples	40
16.	Luke 14: 16-24	God's invitation to us	42
17.	Luke 15: 8-10	Tidying up	45
18.	Luke 15	The lost son	47
19.	John 2	Jesus first miracle	50
20.	John 8:12 & Psalm 139: 12	Darkness and light	52
21.	Romans 12: 9-21	Dealing with feelings of revenge	54
22.	Philippians 4: 8	Faith in an age of distraction	57

Foreword

It is my pleasure to share with you the Second Volume of sermons and meditations which have been collated from Peace Church services during these many months of lockdown and restrictions.

For us at Peace Church, one of the positive consequences of these unusual times was the creation of an extra service on Sunday evenings (in order to offer two in-person services with fewer people at each gathering). With this came the necessary widening of the circle of people involved in leading worship and sharing Bible reflections. This booklet is therefore filled with reflections from many Peace Church sisters and brothers.

While these meditations come from many different people, there is often a common thread weaving through the texts: messages about meeting God in whatever our challenging life situations are, of drawing from deep wells of hope, and seeing our value as beloved and invited people.

As you read the words in this booklet, hear the voices of your Peace Church family...

...let Megan take you into the wilderness with Isaiah.

...imagine climbing a mountain with Izzy, while reflection in Psalm 121.

...experience Jesus first miracle with Nico.

...let Pastor Christine introduce you to hidden Old Testament women heroes.

Enjoy delving into the Bible passages. And may these words, images and prayers encourage you to continue trusting in our loving God and working for a more peaceful world.

With love and hope,
Kat Wagner



1. Peacemakers

*A meditation on Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-24 & Psalm 105: 1-6, 16-22, 45,
by Megan Bedford-Strohm*



Jonas and I just celebrated our anniversary on August 27th. An anniversary is always a time when you think back on your wedding, the original hopes and dreams you had, the shared vision you began with. We wear our rings all the time, but I often go for a long period of time without thinking about them or the Scripture reference carved inside.

We chose as our wedding verse, **Matthew 5:9 : ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.’** We liked how this short verse contains both a challenge and a promise.

The challenge to MAKE PEACE, to CREATE PEACE, in a world that seems so prone to its opposite.

And the promise to be children of God. As two first-children who tend to have a strong sense of responsibility... this is a good reminder, because if we are children, we are not the ones who are ULTIMATELY in charge. We are not God, thank God.

We try to do our part in making peace, and then must trust God with the rest.

...

So let us look at how this applies to today’s lectionary reading from the Old Testament that Erika read for us. The story of Joseph, ‘the dreamer’, the boy with the coat of many colors.

He was a human trafficking victim, sold into slavery by his own brothers, his own family (which is by the way, sadly how it happens in modern day human trafficking)... He went from being the beloved son, to being a slave, then a prisoner, framed in a foreign land for a crime he didn’t commit... all because of the jealousy and greed of his brothers. One can only imagine the terrible things he would have experienced in the years following his brothers’ betrayal.

But probably many of you know how the story continues from there. Due to his gift of interpreting dreams, he ends up being promoted to a high position, an advisor to the ruler in Egypt, then a governor. He is able to foresee, and therefore advise, that there is going to be a famine and they were

able to prepare by storing away grain and provisions during the preceding time of abundance. Then when famine was happening throughout the land, people in surrounding regions were getting very hungry, because of Joseph, Egypt could sell the stored-away grain.

And what happened? Joseph's family make the journey to Egypt to buy food. And lo and behold, look who stands before them: Joseph. They don't even recognize him, though he knows who they are immediately. Now Joseph is the one in the position of power. He could have easily let them go hungry, or even probably had them imprisoned or executed... He had the power of the empire backing him now..

He does put them to the test, to see whether they would sell out his mother's other son, Benjamin, or protect him even at their own expense. They choose to protect him, even if it meant sacrificing themselves. He sees that they have changed.

Joseph finally reveals his identity to them and Genesis says:

"14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them."

He tells them of the good God worked through their evil, using it to put him in a position of being able to save many people from starvation, even them!

So ultimately, instead of using the power he had obtained it to hurt them, to pay them back for what they had done to him, he uses it to help them, feed them, care for them.

He turns the story around. Instead of continuing the chain of violence, which one could argue he may have even been justified in doing, he ends it.

He reconciles the family.

Joseph returns evil for good.

It is so radical, it is hard to imagine.

That instead of harboring bitterness all those years, he managed to turn his heart towards forgiveness, he managed to soften the soil of his heart and allow tender shoots of compassion and empathy grow...

I had never thought about it in this way before, but Joseph was a **peacemaker**.

—

What does it mean for us to be peacemakers?

In some ways the topic is both simple and complex, more than could be covered in one short sermon... because

Peace tends to sound like this gentle word. We picture someone who pacifies, who mediates, who makes compromises. Maybe this is sometimes the case

But let's not forget the scene of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, knocking down tables of money and driving out people and animals from the temple.

And these days, especially in the context of addressing racism and the violence of the supposed-justice system in the US and elsewhere, an important phrase that is repeated is:

"No Justice, No Peace."

Can one have real peace where justice does not exist?

at the same time:

Is it possible to pursue justice in peaceful ways?

Can we imagine a concept of JUST PEACE and/or PEACEFUL JUSTICE
Is that what we see in Christ?

—

Part of what led me to talk about this today is that it just so happens that in this devotional book I love, the month of August begins with a reflection on **'Peacemaking'**. Which didn't just feel like a random coincidence to me.

So to finish this reflection on peacemaking, I want to read to you now a couple pages written by the American author and activist, Shane Claiborne, in the book, **COMMON PRAYER: a Liturgy for ORDINARY RADICALS**.

2. Jehosheba

Sermon on 2 Kings 11, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



We are in old Israel with our text today. 200 years or so after the great kings David and Solomon. The once striving kingdom had been separated into North and South. One king was more wicked than the other. Injustice, war and violence were on the agenda.

And what perhaps weighed even harder: people, and especially their leaders, had lost their faith in the living God.

Revolution here... protest there... crises, decay, and constantly changing inner and outer enemies. Threats and lies, mistrust, greed and murder...

And in all that, we meet a woman with a breath-taking story of murder and mystery. She was a princess in Judah during the time

of the Divided Kingdom, a devoted aunt to her brother's children, and the wife of the high priest in Jerusalem.

Jehosheba...

She grew up in a household full of selfishness and evil. Her stepmother, Athalia was the daughter of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, fierce enemies of Elijah, the prophet, if you remember. Queen Athalia and the king had several children. One son of them was Ahazia. The king however had several wives, and therefore more children, one of whom was Jehosheba.

The kingly court was a mess of intrigue and injustice. For the ordinary people in Israel this was one of the darkest times ever. Not a good time to live...

Jehosheba stands out as the heroic daughter of a ruthless king.

Ahazia, Jehosheba's brother, only rules one year and then gets killed in battle. He leaves several children. After his death, his mother Athalia, sees the chance to grab the throne and rule the country.

She has all her grandchildren killed to save her position. No heir, no claim to the throne, she thinks.

But like all the best heroes, Jehosheba does what she can. She takes the youngest child, a tiny baby boy, smuggles him out of the palace and hides with him in the temple, over which Athalia has no control. Church asylum, if you like...

Jehosheba saves one life. Probably all she could do. Saving all the children would have been obvious fight and rebellion. But stealing the youngest one away, may well go unnoticed...

And here Shiphrah and Puah come to my mind, those brave midwives who opposed the Pharaoh, when he wants them to kill all the new born baby boys of the Israelite people.

And Jochebeth comes to my mind – with smart young Miriam, who hid baby Moses in the reeds... And the Egyptian princess and her maids come to mind, as they take Moses into the Pharaoh's palace...

And last but not least, the kings of the Christmas story are to be remembered. After their visit in the stable with new born Jesus, they return home on a different road. They do not let Herod know where the new king had been born.

And Joseph, of course, mindful Joseph, who listens to the angel in his dream, and leads Mary and Jesus into exile in Egypt, and thus saves Jesus' life.

All these courageous role models stand up and step out to save innocent children's lives...

But back to Jehosheba. We don't know the details of her saving deed. We don't know how she managed to get Joash, the little boy, - whether she had his nurse to help her...

Jehosheba feared God. And she knew that the safest place for her little nephew would be the house of God, the temple in which her husband was the high priest.

The Bible lets us assume that Athalia did not find out what happened. She supposed that the whole of her son's family had been killed.

Jehosheba does what she can. She gives up personal freedom and liberty to protect the baby in the bedrooms of the temple.

I wonder what fears may have gone through her mind. What worries? What if Joash cried? What if Athalia's spies found out? What if the little boy grew up and wanted to move about? What about the trustworthiness of the temple people? Of her own husband, the priest?

Had they been caught, had the secret been found out, no doubt, Athalia would have been merciless.

For 6 years Jehosheba kept the child Joash in the temple, teaching him about the living God. And her husband, Jehoiada, the high priest, too, may have had a positive influence on the little prince.

When Joash turned 7, Jehoiada was able to organize a rebellion against Athalia and have her wiped out. Young Joash was crowned the rightful king.

The high priest helped the young king reign. Instead of terror and uncertainty, the narrator reports that all the people rejoice,

and that the city is quiet. Quiet after 200 years of war and violence.

“Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord, because the high priest instructed him,” we read in 2 Kings 12.

Jehosheba saved the life of Joash. By rescuing the little prince, she rescued the hope of Israel. She made sure that the royal line of King David could be continued, as promised, and centuries later Jesus would be born... a descendant of King David. But to me today that is a side issue...

The real point to pay attention to, is Jehosheba's courage, her fearlessness and her humanity. With these attributes she may have influenced men and women around her, and her husband too.

They all surely wanted to end Athalia's cruel reign, but did not dare to stand up against her.

It took 7 years until Jehoiada and the resistance group around him saw the chance to end this dark episode in the history of Judah and initiate an overthrow.

Jehosheba teaches us to stand up for God, to be unafraid even when times are dangerous. To preserve our humanity and our faith in a loving God in the face of terror and evil.

I would like to think that I would be like her. ...that I would stand up and step out for God's ways... that I would be brave in the face of hostility and cruel injustice...

Jehosheba could not save all her nieces and nephews. She could only sneak away with little Joash.

Let's stay with this image: we too, cannot save the whole world. We can only do what we do in the places where we live and work. We can be advocates, supporters, encouragers, even rescuers, influencers, enablers...

And by the end of the day, with lots of us doing the same, save the hope of the world.

Global transformation through thousands or millions of Jehoshebas? ...doing the right thing in countless places and situations? Yes, we can!

Amen.

3. The prophet Huldah

*A meditation on 2 Chronicles 34: 22-28 & 2 Kings 22: 1-13
by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*



While doing research on Achsah last autumn (Judges 1) and Jehoshiba this summer (2 Kings 11), I met Huldah, the prophet. Unannounced she crossed my path, and I got very impressed with her.

Today I would like to let her speak to you. Lean back, relax, enjoy. Hear Huldah's clear dark voice...

I had just seen off the last of my students that day. I locked the door of the classroom and went across the yard with the little garden where we grew some vegetables and beautiful flowers. I picked some on my way to our little house behind the school. In the kitchen I put them in a jug and placed it on the windowsill.

I was alone. Shallum had taken the children to court. They loved to play with the children of the king. Our kids were a bit older than King Josiah's; Naomi already a teenager... so she was a mix of both to the king's little kids: a playmate and a babysitter.

Shallum was the keeper of the king's wardrobe. He and the children would come home late because the king had ordered some new clothes and Shallum had appointed some tailors to come and make sure the new garments fitted the king well. Shallum knew that the king preferred various tailors – not so much for the variety of the clothes but because it was fairer to employ several people and make sure they had work. That day an old man from the countryside would come and for the first time bring along his two sons.

But the king had no idea that this day would end completely different from what he had planned...

I was going to warm up a bit of leftover lentil stew and sit in the yard with my bowl, when I heard a knock at the door.

Five of the king's most important ministers stood in front of my house and asked me to let them in. Now – to explain that: I am one

of the prophets at the king's court. I get called when the king needed help understanding God's word. I am to King Josiah what Nathan was to King David.

So, I put my bowl aside and asked the delegation to take a seat in our yard. We sat there in a circle and they told me their amazing story:

In the course of the repairs at the temple, the contents of the temple must have been turned upside down, cleaned and rearranged. One item caught the attention of the high priest Hilkiah. It was the book of the law.

This book had been there for a long time but had been ignored and forgotten during the 55 years of Manasseh's – Josiah's grandfather's - reign.

Hilkiah and the temple secretary read the book and found that the content challenged their entire lives and the attitude of the whole people of Judah. They informed Josiah of the discovery and took the book to him.

On hearing its contents, Josiah was greatly shocked and tore his clothes. Pain and fear took hold of him. Fear not just for himself but for us all...

And he had done right.
I was shocked too.

The book condemned the religious life of Judah and the presences of the foreign gods that were worshipped in the temple. God's anger was burning against the king and all of Judah, because our forefathers had not obeyed God.

Since the period of Manasseh and throughout his long reign, and during the short reign of Amon, King Josiah's father, our people had been living in disobedience to God's ways. They had acted against the word of God and the judgement was already clear.

Josiah had instructed his officials to go "and inquire of the Lord..." so they went to consult me.

But what could I say? Prophets often had to interpret & explain things that did not really please the king. Jeremiah and Isaiah were in that role too.

The situation was: Israel had gone through hell.

Way after the great kings David and Solomon, bad kings broke the covenant with God and ruined country and people. Good kings, kind of "repaired" the relationship with God at times, but they never reigned long enough.

Josiah was one of the good kings. His grandfather though was Manasseh. He reigned 53 years in Jerusalem. He built altars for the wrong gods, and he misled his people to do one evil after the other.

Josiah's father was Amon. He was 22 years when he began to reign. He reigned for 2 years. He disobeyed God, and got in deep conflict with his servants. They conspired against him and killed him in his house. But then came the people from outside Jerusalem, the "people of the land" and killed all those who had conspired against Amon.

Out of this mess came the coronation of King Josiah who at this point was just 8 years old. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord...

Since Josiah was only 8 years old when he was enthroned, the reign was in the hands of his mother Jedida of Bozkat. She had enormous influence on both: the king and the state affairs. For the people of Jerusalem and the people of the land around Jedida was a bearer of hope for change and reform. And: she fulfilled their hopes.

Josiah grew up with a God-fearing mother who helped him reign justly. He was used to listen to wise women. So, it was not surprising, that on that crucial day after finding God's book he sent his ministers to me.

I let them know that my message comes from God!

The message I gave about the impending judgement of Judah confirmed what other prophets had been saying before. I had no comfort for the king and the people. I told them that the sin of Judah had reached a point that the fate of Judah could not be reversed. I did though speak of God's mercy because of the king's humble cry of repentance and his great efforts for transformation and change. The disasters of the future would not come during the lifetime of Josiah. He would be saved of the sorrow of having to see downfall and disaster.

Josiah then assembled all the elders of the whole land, and all people to come and meet in the temple. He read the Book of the Covenant to them. He renewed his covenant with God and encouraged the people to do so too. For all the years of his reign, Josiah required that people respect and honour God's ways.

Believe me, it was a hard job to not be able to speak of a bright future for Judah. Josiah in a way would have deserved it. And we often spoke about my two prophecies in the years which followed.

What should we do with this?

I admit, I felt a little bit betrayed at this point. And so did Josiah.

Here is Josiah with his God-fearing mother, his faith in the living God, his trustworthy co-workers, his reforms and political and religious efforts, his willingness to listen to me – and none of all that could save the future of his people.

There is this long history of failing and ruthless kings and the need for repentance and reform. Now, that we had the ideal king who initiated all-compassing reforms, his efforts came too late. The sins of the past weighed more than the righteousness of Josiah. He could not save the future of his people from devastation and downfall.

I often asked myself: Where was the redeeming and liberating word of God in this?

Josiah and I figured that the faithful response of one good leader does not gain salvation for all. Josiah was spared because he was pious and humble. But his nation was not saved on his account. And when we turned this round, we saw that God expects responsibility of the people? Responsibility of the ordinary peasants, traders, priests, temple servants, gardeners, crafts people, bakers, teachers, - men and women!

One corrupt, wicked and insane leader does not necessary cause a whole nation become corrupt, wicked and insane. God expects the ordinary people to observe clearly, judge wisely and fear him alone. He wants them to stand up for their rights and against perverse leadership. A nation must not hide behind a ruthless, egocentric and foolish leader, who is exploiting the people and ruining the land!

The story of King Josiah implies that we have to give our own independent responses to a graceful and loving God? ...give our own responses with our very lives.

I admired Josiah for carrying out the reforms despite the word of doom for Judah. He led us all in covenant renewal, repentance and reform. He had understood that it is the responsibility of the individual acting out what faith calls one to do.

He understood enough of the flow of history to see that the Babylonians and their oppressing rule were already at the horizon? He in the end knew that he could not prevent what was coming?

He instead trusted in a God, who would be there in the catastrophe with the people. With my help he foresaw that God would walk at the side of his people and suffer with them through destruction and disaster.

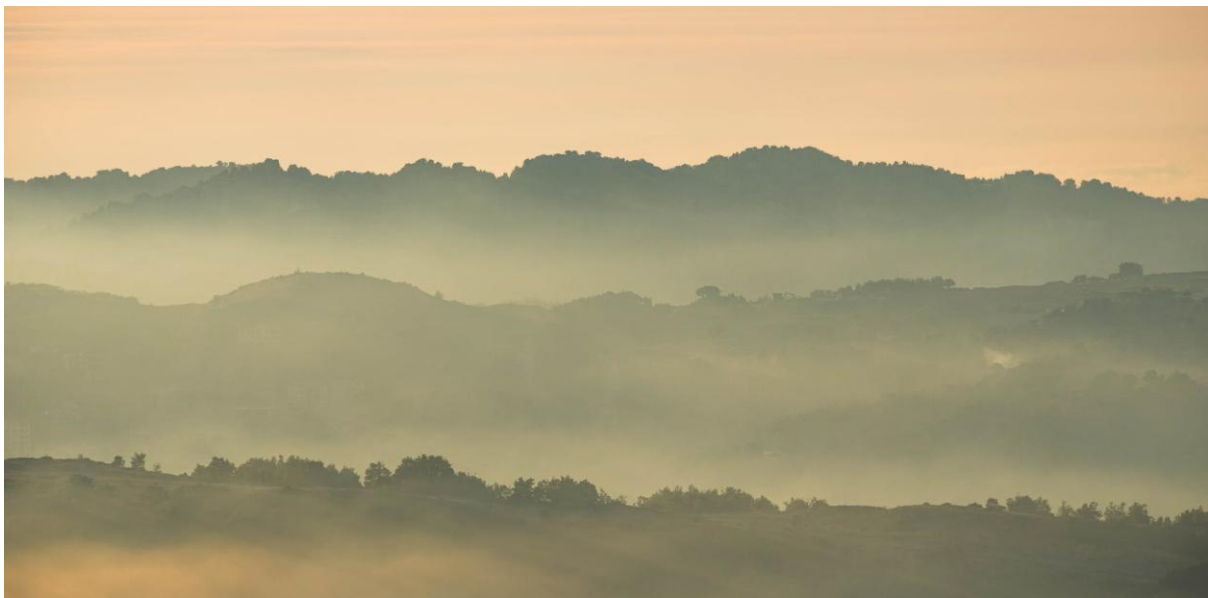
Josiah gave us all one great gift: A movement back to the living God.

He could not undo the mistakes of the past. He could not influence the immediate future. But what he could do was giving us an idea of a good, God-pleasing life.

I know that he hoped that this would carry the people through... and lead them some time, somewhere into freedom, justice and peace.

4. “Be still and know that I am God”

A New Year reflection on Psalm 46, by Kat Wagner



As we walk over the threshold of a new year, we often take time to reflect on what has happened in the previous year, and to make resolutions for the next.

The year 2020 was certainly full of many significant and world-altering events:

- a pandemic which caused unprecedented implications on all our lives;
- the election of a new president in the United States;
- worldwide protests against racism
- A Brexit agreement finally in place.

For me personally, 2020 also brought a lot of changes. Actually, 10th January marks the start of my time living in Germany, exactly one year ago. And for you, I’m sure this last year has also included many significant moments.

One word that could be used to describe 2020 is ‘tumultuous’. Like a storm that rages around you: unpredictable, scary, exciting, wreaking havoc, moving things, leaving our world altered.

And that is why Psalm 46 seems so relevant:

*(...) though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*
(Ps 46: 2-3)

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall. (Ps 46: 6)

This year has sometimes felt like an earthquake with never-ending aftershocks, like a storm that threatens to rip off the roof, like the bitter taste of trouble that we cannot avoid.

Some time ago I was visiting a friend in Beirut in Lebanon. I was a slightly naïve traveler, and arrived just as the political environment was moving towards what is politely called ‘civil unrest’. The day after I arrived, we heard the first unusual sounds in the distance, and as the political speeches continued to be broadcast, the sounds got louder and nearer. Echoing rounds of gunfire. Occasional booms that shook the walls. Until our apartment building was surrounded by the sound of constant machine-gun fire. We hunkered down for the night with nowhere else to go, pulling mattresses into the living room so we could sleep away from the windows. As nighttime approached, the shooting continued. Until the sound of gunfire was drowned out by the sound of the wind. A storm had come. Winds that were strong enough to blow the plastic furniture along the balcony; driving rain that lashed against the windows. A storm strong enough to dissuade the people from firing their weapons at each other. We slept in the relative peace of the storm. The next morning, the wind had gone. The guns started again, until ... eventually ... quiet. Then the scariest sound of all. A bang at the door. Men in combat clothing, carrying their rifles. Nervous men, quiet and suspicious. And then the words, “Come with us.”

...They had my full attention. I was fully alert. Waiting to see what would happen...

The psalmist says: in times of trouble, God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present

help. Though everything changes, though dangers threaten our very existence, we will not fear. The Lord Almighty is with us. God is our fortress.

We may not feel it, we may not even believe it, especially when we’re in the midst of it. But Psalm 46 indicates that the Lord is very active: bringing desolation, yes, but also making wars cease, destroying weapons, lifting his voice so that the earth melts, bringing help at break of day, speaking words of reassurance to us.

During those tumultuous 24 hours in Beirut, in my state of heightened senses, in my fear of what might happen to me, I somehow knew that there was more of life to be lived before my death, that I was not going to die then, that this was not the end of my story.

You may be wondering what happened next, and I don’t want to leave you in suspense... After the men said “Come with us”, we were led downstairs to the lobby, which was full of more combatants milling around. Thankfully, we weren’t the focus of their search, and after some nerve-wracking minutes were told we could go back up to our apartment. And after a few more hours of waiting for the gunfire to completely stop, we could leave the apartment and find somewhere safe to stay.

If during this last year *you* have felt like you were living in the middle of a raging storm, if you’ve felt the tension and pressure bearing down on you, if you felt overwhelming fear, I wonder whether *you* have had a sense of knowing something important deeply within yourself? Was there a small voice that told you something of your story? Did you feel surprisingly reassured, despite the difficult situation going on around you?

During 2020, we saw just how connected the world is, and we realized how vital those relationships are for our well-being. We learned that prejudice and bias is deep-set and takes a long time to change. And we

witnessed that seemingly impossible changes are possible if we really want things to be different. To me it feels like God has been shaking things up and speaking to us, just like in Psalm 46.

We have invested much hope in 2021 already. But let us not lose the precious gifts that were given to us in the secret, intimate spaces of our experiences of last year.

What did *you* see God doing this last year? What has God been whispering or shouting to you?

Let us use this moment to hear the words of our God, who says: “Be still, and know that I am God”.

I invite you now to join me in a short meditative practice, using these words from Psalm 46. I will say the words several times, shortening the sentence each time. As I

speak the words, let each part sink into your consciousness. You may like to repeat each line quietly in your head.

So, I invite you now to let a space open up within you to hear...

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am

Be still and know

Be still

Be

Amen.

5. God is close to you, wherever you are

A meditation on Psalm 121, by Israel Pereira



On a six-day mountain tour in the Alps, the words “I lift up my eyes to the mountains - where does my help come from?” were on my mind

What is it about mountains that drives the imagination of people?

That fuels the romantic wish of adventure?
That empowers the instincts of fear and survival?

And, as in the book of Psalms Chapter 121, awakens the promise of hope and protection?

In today’s passage, we need to see it with a traveller’s glasses. Someone, who has embarked on a Journey and looks towards the challenges ahead. He lifts up his eyes, looks towards the mountains and asks a rhetorical question: Where does my help come from?

Have you ever asked yourself this question?

1: Confidence in God’s Help

Some interpreters have suggested that mountains in this context have a negative connotation. Mountains have dangerous paths. Mountains can be treacherous: Good Weather at a journey’s start, then ends up in

a storm. Mountains can be a place of loneliness.

Others, have suggested a rather positive connotation. Mountains serve as a stronghold, a natural wall protection for a city. They are a source of freshwater. Mountains are also beautiful, a reminder of the true forces of nature.

In the bible, mountains are a place to experience God. Where Moses received the 10 Commandments. Where God’s presence came as a cloud for six days (Mount Sinai). Mount Zion, Jerusalem’s stronghold. But mountains are also a place where false gods were worshiped.

But if we look into the Hebrew meaning behind the words “to lift up my eyes”, it rather brings the meaning of longing, or to desire something

Regardless of both positive and negative connotations associated with the mountains, the focus in this chapter goes rather beyond the mountains. It goes beyond the dangers and the beauty of these majestic formations.

The thought of this verse leaps beyond the hills to the universe; beyond the universe to

its Maker. It is about confidence in God's help within the Journey.

The rest of the Psalm develops into an expanding circle of promises and prayer of God's watchful care. Of a God, who is not fixed on top of mountains, not far into the Universe, but a personal God, who is close and is watchful

2: The Watchful Care of God

3 He will not let your foot slip — he who watches over you will not slumber; 4 indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

In verses 3-4 for we have the imagery of a God, who does not sleep. A God who is close watching and may not let your foot to slip

In the larger near east ancient tradition gods were frequently depicted sleeping. Atrahasis Epic (1800 BCE): God Enlil is awoken by humans. Enuma Elish: god Apsu complains on the lack of sleep.

And here the Psalmist emphasizes in verses 3 and 4, multiple times that not only God does not sleep, but He doesn't even dozes or nods off. Rather, He remains attentive and keeps continual watch over his people so that not even a foot of theirs will slip from the path (v. 3a).

In verses 5-6 the Psalmist talks about God being your shade at your right hand. God and shadow are constant imagery of God's watchfulness. Because the soldier carried his shield on the left hand, the right hand was usually exposed. The imagery of God standing at the right hand is that of one, who provides an extra shield in your vulnerability

And so, God is not only portrayed as the creator, One who is greater than the adversaries, but also One who walks with you in the midst of adversaries

Conclusion

This chapter is not a mere confidence boost, neither an assurance that the journey of life will be without slips, falls, sorrow, worries.

It is rather a reminder that in life's Journey, either walking towards the mountain, or away from it, God will remain watchful, will remain not on top of a mountain, but close.

Either in your slips or in your vulnerability, God will be close to you as a shadow. As a pastor has said, God is closer than your own breath.

It is the same God, who came down from the mountain, who became man, who cried with us, who experienced in Jesus the same vulnerabilities and sorrows we experience.

On my journey in the alps, I had the opportunity to try to go on top of a mountain alone. I initiated my journey, a journey full of rocky grounds and treacherous corners.

It would be very fitting to say that I made into the top, due to my courage and persistence. Yet the truth is, that I felt raindrops, I looked into the horizon and saw clouds of rains, and being merely 200 meters away from the mountain top, I turned around and went back down.

The potential adversaries raised my alarm.

God is not only in the mountain top, but with you. Not only in your success, but in your failures.

In the six days I also fell, hurt my back, my knee. The journey in the mountains was not easy, yet God is not fixed on top of the mountain

You must not reach the mountain top to experience God. God came down. And is present in every slip, fear, failure of life's journey

In His help we find confidence to face adversaries, and in our weakness, we know He walks with us

And so the Psalmist ends the chapter not in the end of his journey, yet lists the promise of God's care towards eternity.

7 The LORD will keep you from all harm— he will watch over your life; 8 the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

6. Wilderness

An Advent reflection on Isaiah 40: 3-5 & Mark 1: 1-8, by Megan Bedford-Strohm



Good evening, everyone. And happy second Advent.

As we heard in the rich readings for today, second Advent is all about *preparing* the way for the Lord. The second Sunday Advent, in the Methodist tradition and others, calls us to meditate on John the Baptist, that iconic figure in his camel fur, eating locusts and honey. A voice crying out in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

Anybody who has listened to or seen the musical Godspell, that line is changed forever by the song, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'. It's such a strong image: this one man, standing on the stage in the spotlight, surrounded by darkness, one voice, *acapella*, singing that line over and over: 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

I don't know about you, but for me, this year, it has felt harder to quiet my mind and get into the spirit of Advent. And it's almost ironic because there is actually less going on this year: without as many events, Christmas markets, all the Christmas concerts, very few places to go physically. And I've tried: I've got my Advent candles, Advent books and devotional books. I've got it all there, and yet, I have struggled to find that quiet place in my mind, in my heart, to prepare for the coming Christ-child.

My mind is in so many different places, I find myself being fueled mostly by caffeine and anxious energy. Even when I do have moments to myself, I turn to distractions right away: grab my phone, turn on the TV, mind never still, never quiet.

And yet somehow, when I picture this image: this lone voice, this strange, scraggly man, crying out from the wilderness, something shifts a little in me, something calms a little. And reading these passages this year, the word 'wilderness' stood out to me especially. Wilderness is a rich theological concept, a word that comes up so many times in Scripture, a place where in the Old Testament and the New Testament, we see *encounter* happening, encounter with God: through the burning bush, through the fiery cloud, through the crossing of the Red Sea. Or in the New Testament, Jesus going out in the wilderness, facing temptation, fasting, preparing to do his Father's work. And of course, John the Baptist: a ministry out of the wilderness. Or rather drawing people into the wilderness to prepare themselves, to prepare their hearts.

This image, this idea of wilderness has been an allure for Christians for centuries, millennia. We see stories of the desert fathers and mothers: monks, nuns, living out in the wilderness these lives of asceticism, of prayer, often sacrifice, often solitude. We see a lot of monasteries that were built out in the desert on, you know, lone cliffs, in the middle of nowhere. And so many of these monasteries have an icon of John the Baptist out there. He is almost like this figure from another universe, which was, *is* always part of his allure. He is like a guide, standing between the spheres, between the worlds. And that is so often what prophets are, right?

People can't quite be sure if they are just completely off-their-rocker crazy, or if they are you know, a voice for God. And clearly, don't care what people think, or they've had to sacrifice that, have had to train that out of themselves. Because you can't be a guy out there wearing camel fur, eating locusts and care a lot what people think.

So I spent some time thinking about this topic of *wilderness*, thinking about all the saints, ancestors of faith who have gone before us, who have continued to go to the

wilderness, seeking and desiring encounter with God. And then I thought about myself and my life right now...It would take something quite radical and very unrealistic for me to physically go to the wilderness.

Maybe it is even impossible in COVID times. But just even without COVID it would not be a very plausible or ever responsible choice in my life right now. So the question becomes: 'What does wilderness in this sense even mean for me in my life right now, is this something I can do work with?'

The reality is that the concept of *wilderness* is actually not *so* much about the physical space. I could go camping out in a desert somewhere for days, weeks, all alone. And what would still be with me? My own mind, my own problems, my own worries. I could go out there and not actually experience wilderness or encounter.

Conversely, then, I need to ask: well, is it possible for me, in my little apartment, with crayon and lipstick drawn on the walls, with crumbs on the floor, with unmade beds, unwrapped gifts, half-packed bags...Can I go to the wilderness there? What would that even look like? Because I believe that as this rich theological concept, it is possible. And I think it is what I *need*.

It's what *we* need. Because we are a chronically distracted and distractable species. I mean, maybe every generation says, 'especially in this day and age', but I feel like 'especially in this day and age!'. I can go the whole day without really being alone with my own thoughts. Even if I am cleaning or washing dishes, I can listen to a podcast, I can listen to music, every time I am sitting down, I can pull up an article on my phone: whatever it is!

Those things are great, but where is the wilderness? And is that something I maybe need? In order to *prepare* the way for the Lord. First of all, in my own heart! Because if I can't even prepare in my own heart, *how*

am I going to go out and start doing that in other ways, in the world? So today, this reflection, is first about: how am I going to prepare the way for the Lord in my own life, my own heart, my own *home*, my own mind?

So, let's spend a few more minutes with this concept wilderness. *Why* did the desert fathers and mothers go out there? Well, think about what happens when you go into the wilderness: a vast, solitary landscape, all alone. Well, first of all: nobody cares about you. Woah, that sounds kind of harsh. Let me say it again: *Nobody* cares about you.

Megan, what are you talking about? Why are you saying this from the pulpit? Well, there is nobody out there to give you praise and approval. There is nobody out there to give you complaints or critiques either. If you want or need that, if you want somebody to tell you that you are doing a good job in life, to comment on your appearance, your performance: go on social media, walk down a city street, *don't* go to the wilderness. Because the wilderness is where you go to *lay aside your ego*.

Of course, we are still held in the loving hands of God, and that should always be the foundation and the basis. Yes, you are loved. You never leave that no matter where you go. But you certainly will need to put ego aside--because if you need approval from other people: on your performance, on your successes, on your appearances, on whatever you said or did or looked like--you are not going to find it out there. And *that is part of the point*. And that is also why it is hard for us. It is hard for us to be alone in that way.

Also, the saints, the desert fathers and mothers, John the Baptist, JESUS, they did not go out into the wilderness because it was an easy place. They went to a place where you also face temptation: think of the golden calf, of Jesus being told to jump off the high cliff and put God to the test, these iconic stories that also happened out there. Temptation is strong in the wilderness, partly because there are less distractions there.

Part of why I think it is easy to get so frenzied in our lives, filling it up with busyness and distractions, is because we don't want to go there. We don't want to face the temptations that our own minds present to us. And I don't mean temptation in this excessively *pious* way, like You in the paintings we see of St. Anthony lusting after these voluptuous women in his visions. I'm thinking more about: temptations of the ego, temptations of worry, temptations of spinning your wheels for all the wrong things...

And actually, it is OK to face those temptations: those doubts, those worries, that self-questioning? It is part of the deal. You know that you are going to face temptation when you go into the wilderness, even Jesus did. But you have to face those things if you are going to come through them and come past them, and come to a point where, there is actually space within you to *prepare* the way of the Lord.

But it *requires* turning off some of the other things, leaving the ego, leaving the distractions. It requires finding real stillness, and letting those things come, but facing them. Facing them with God's help, with God's angels by your side. So, what we are talking about when we talk about wilderness is a spiritual discipline. I think. And that is something I know I have often lose sight of at this point in my life.

Discipline sounds like this harsh word, but the spiritual discipline of wilderness is part of what creates space within us to *love*. And you might ask: how do you go out all alone in the wilderness to learn love? Well, I believe you also need community to learn love, but that is a different conversation, a different spiritual discipline.

The part about love that wilderness teaches us is to not constantly need others and their approval. In order to have true, sacrificial love, there is a lot of letting go that needs to happen: letting go of the approval we so

desperately seek from the world in order to love people in the ways that they actually need to be loved. Letting go of the expectations we have of them, in order to let people be who they are and love them in an *unconditional* kind of way.

When you go to the wilderness, you let go a little bit. You get lost. You lose your footing. That is scary for us. But how are we going to meet the Holy Spirit, how are we going to meet Christ, if the only thing we have time and space for is being in control, is our own to-do lists? Our own ideas and plans and goals for our own lives? We have to get lost a little bit. And it is something we need to set aside time for.

I know that sounds a little strange: to block time in your calendar, especially in busy seasons to "get lost in the metaphorical wilderness", but it is something we have to do, because it is something that most of us, at least as adults, don't tend to do naturally anymore. But if we don't get lost in this way sometimes, we could lose much more: lose years of our lives chasing the wrong things and missing the main thing. Which is Christ. In all, *all* the vastness that Christ encompasses: the wonder, the awe, the joy, the justice, the sacrificial love. It is

something, or rather someone, you could spend your whole life meeting and getting to know.

But not if you don't get lost a little bit. Whatever that looks like for you and only you can find out: maybe you are able to go out in nature, and that is what it looks like for you. And that's amazing because you get to encounter God's Creation which is so massive and so beyond our comprehension. But maybe it is also something else: painting, reading the Psalms, or even Lamentations out loud, before God. Maybe it is just sitting for half an hour, in the quiet, alone, turning off your phone, and letting whatever comes just come. And that will feel so long and so hard at first... I don't think I could do it at this point (laughing), but we could get there. And maybe we need to. Maybe we need to this Advent.

So, take this picture of John the Baptist, this voice crying out in the wilderness 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord' and channel some of that. Take time, set aside time, to channel some John the Baptist energy into your heart, your mind, your soul, this week. Let's challenge each other to do that. Let's seek Christ in the wilderness in our own lives.

7. Bread and stones

A meditation on Matthew 4: 1-11, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



The story of Jesus in the desert is an attempt to answer human questions about the basics and the seriousness of our faith.

To begin with, we find a simple description of time: "Then – Jesus was led up by the spirit into the wilderness"... And before this, something else important had happened: Jesus had had himself baptised by John the Baptist. An act to show the public which life Jesus would want to lead and which God he believed in. And the public understood: this was totally and entirely the Son of God. "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Now in the story of the temptations this is to be found out: whether Jesus is really the Son of God according to God's will. And it is not only Jesus who is focused on but you and me as well.

Are we daughters and sons of God? And if so: What lives are we living? And which role is God playing in these lives?

In Jesus we are asked to look at our lives and at ourselves. We are asked to think about decisions we make, and conflicts and temptations which we face.

In Jesus and the story of his temptations we are urged to reflect on our individual approach towards questions of bread, trust and power.

How would we decide?

In Jesus and in his decisions, we realise, who we are meant to be. Free and independent human beings; children of God allowing freedom and dignity to ourselves and to others.

Bread – trust – and power...

Three basic decisions which from the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew influence Jesus' entire way of acting and living. His journey does not lead to standard heights of human success and career but goes right through the depths of earthly life, where suffering, pain and fear must be experienced.

Not the golden age of joy and well-being is lying ahead of Jesus but the path of suffering and powerlessness towards the cross. Not human wishing and longing is satisfied, but freedom is presented that lies way beyond our human striving.

The figure of the devil in the story of course offers another way to Jesus: wealth, honour and power... The path of suffering and sympathy could be exchanged for a life of triumph and might. Jesus then would no longer spread the good news of the Kingdom of God; he would no longer represent God's inviting love and attracting modesty; he would no longer represent non-violence, but could function as a role model for those with strong fists, and obsessed with power.

The temptation of Jesus in the desert takes place after a long time of fasting... Why are you hesitating? the devil asks. If you really are what you believe, the Son of God, why don't you just make and take what you need to live on? Just look after yourself and take these stones and make yourself some loaves of bread! You can do it! Do what is good for you.

This is what devils say – not only in Jesus time...

But we have heard Jesus answer: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." One does not live by bread alone... We need more: we need the closeness to God, the touch of friends, the love and comfort of others and the encouragement of our fellow Christians. Such can satisfy our hunger in life!

Jesus' second temptation on the pinnacle of the temple faces another basic aspect of human life, a nerve where we are open to be attacked.

Offer an impressive performance to people, then they will believe in you, the devil suggests. And by doing so he approaches everybody's secret desire for outstanding excellence. Jesus was asked to prove that he is the man according to God's will by throwing himself down from the temple without hurting himself, without damage or pain. Again, Jesus resists. Jesus refuses to

join the competition of the strongest, greatest and best, who can only win their victories because the losers pay the price. His way of humbleness, powerlessness and suffering is so different from the obsessive wish to be brilliant, outstanding and free of pain. Even when he is asked to climb down from the cross, to free himself and end his own and God's pain he refuses to do so. Right to the end Jesus remains on the path of powerless love.

After all that one would think, he has gone through enough. But nevertheless: devils don't stop here. Jesus is challenged by a third temptation. It is the question about power and influence.

Even if we are willing to share our bread and trust our God... Let's be honest: what happens when it comes to giving up and renouncing personal power and important influence? Wouldn't we all love to be a little bit more important and have slightly more to say? Hardly any of us like to leave decisions to others, step back or even withdraw from a position we have already achieved.

How do we deal with power and influence? In church? In society... in politics? In our jobs and with our families?

"All this I will give you, if you fall down and worship me." That is the devil speaking. The evil is revealed in its total claim to destroy. And we are waiting, holding our breath and listening to Jesus' answer: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him." Only him... Again Jesus resists.

Jesus denies all power that makes others into servants. He denies richness that makes others poor and control that makes others powerless! Jesus' entire living and talking of the Kingdom of God is aiming towards human life in freedom and fullness. His power can only be shown in taking people seriously, in reconciling and healing, in showing sympathy and allowing closeness, in helping people to live upright and in

dignity – as daughters and sons of God. To serve only God... Jesus himself is the best role model of a son of God who took on the challenge: who did not turn stones into bread, who trusted God only and who chose the way of service rather than power!

If we do the same, we might stand there with empty hands, powerless but open to really meet our fellow human beings and the living God.

Such a decision is always a risk. It can make life uncomfortable and lonely, but it can add clarity and hope to our lives, that make us feel ever so close to God.

Desert times always wait, ready for those who come, ready to let us know who we are. And while we fear the loneliness, the emptiness and harshness we must never forget the angels, who come when God sees that we need their help. Amen.

Let us pray:

Thank you, Jesus:
for not turning stones into bread,
for not jumping off the temple roof,

for not being the wonder boy.

Thank you, Jesus:
for not accepting the golden crown,
for not taking authority over earthly kingdoms.

Thank you, Jesus:
for choosing the way of service
rather than domination,
for choosing the long, slow road
rather than that of instant solutions,
for choosing loyalty
to your Father's Kingdom
rather than personal acclaim and approval.

Thank you, Jesus:
for facing hot and cold,
good and evil,
life and death,
yes and no,
forty days and forty nights.

Thank you, Jesus:
for showing the evil the door
and make us free to face our wilderness
decisions
with greater vision and courage.
Amen.

8. Stand up and speak out for what is right

A reflection on Matthew 10: 34-36, by Konrad Heidler



Reading today's bible passage, this one verse immediately stood out to me. *"I did not come to bring peace but a sword"*.

That doesn't sound like the Jesus who I know. It's really odd, the prince of peace has come to bring a sword?

It kind of reminds you of that time where Jesus got angry with all the commerce happening at the temple and started shouting and flipping over tables. But still, this is different. This time, Jesus is giving instructions to his disciples on how to continue his work. Is he telling them to use violence to spread faith? Thinking about the crusades some hundred years ago, some people sure think that's what Jesus meant here.

But what about that other time a sword is mentioned in the gospel? The time Peter raises his sword in Gethsemane to defend Jesus? Jesus says "Put your sword back in its place". He clearly condones violence in so many situations. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God"

So what is this sword Jesus is talking about now?

Another verse in this passage sparks an image of what Jesus is trying to say: "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs." So he wants his disciples to speak up for what they believe in and not be quiet about it. He wants them to spread his message, even though many people may not like it.

And this doesn't just apply to talking about your own faith. Standing up for what you think is right is hard. Publicly taking a position leaves you open to criticism and mockery. It is so much easier to simply follow the crowd, and not stand out. I must admit this is something I myself am not good at.

For example back in school, sharing an unpopular opinion could mean becoming the target of everyone's jokes. Keeping a low profile and going with the flow seemed like the only option.

And to this day I find it hard to stand up for something I believe is right when I know others won't agree. This "staying quiet" becomes a habit.

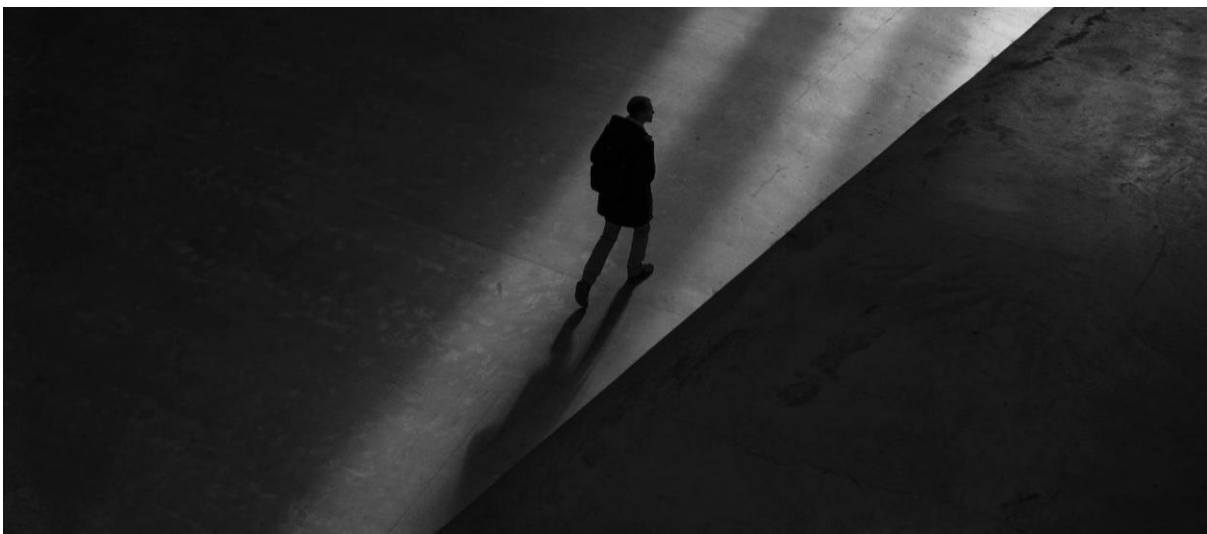
I know I'm not the only one feeling this way. Looking left and right, there are so many examples of getting their way just because the others keep quiet. These few, very vocal people often overshadow the majority which may think differently but is too comfortable to raise their voice.

Jesus wants us to do just that though. He wants us to stand up for what we think is right, even when others may not like what we have to say.

And I too believe, that this is something worth working on.

9. Finding a third way

A reflection on Matthew 11: 16–19, 25–30, by Kat Wagner



Do you know the fairytale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears?

Goldilocks is walking through the woods when she sees a lovely cottage. She's very hungry, and smells breakfast cooking. There doesn't seem to be anyone home, so she sneaks in and takes a seat at the table. On the table are three bowls full of porridge. She tries a bowl of porridge, but it's too hot. So she tries another, but that one is too cold. **The third one is 'just right'**. She's feeling tired so she sneaks upstairs to find somewhere to have a nap. She tries one of the beds, but it's too hard. So she tries another, but it's too soft. **The third one is 'just right'**. And so on. (Goldilocks is eventually discovered by the three bears who live in the house and who are not best pleased to find an intruder.)

Back to the real world... There is now such a thing as **'The Goldilocks Principle'** whereby conditions are *just right* to support a certain desired result. For instance, in astronomy, a planet orbiting its sun at just the right distance for liquid water to exist on its surface – neither too hot nor too cold – is referred to as being in the 'Goldilocks zone'.

But why am I telling you about the Goldilocks Principle and this powerful use of threes in storytelling? In our passage, Jesus doesn't present *three* options, he uses two. He describes a marketplace scene where children are playing music, hoping to get a reaction from the crowds and passers-by. They play a fun piece of music, but no-one starts to dance. So the children play a

sad song instead, but no one notices that either.

These two options are contrasts: happy or sad. Jesus often used opposites in his teaching, flipping the order and **turning our cultural biases and assumptions up-side-down**. The first shall be last (?!). So what was his point here?

This marketplace musical scene was the picture in Jesus' mind as he was teaching the crowds in Galilee who had gathered to see him. This tiny parable is Jesus' description of **their generation**.

That generation had judged John the Baptist to be too **pious**, and Jesus to be too **frivolous**. Neither man fitted to their expectations of the type of prophet or messiah they wanted. **Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus conformed to their expectations, to their music, to their tune**. They didn't want to hear John's message of repentance, nor Jesus' message that the kingdom of heaven is near.

They had ears, but did not hear. They had eyes, but did not see. **They were present, but unaware**. Little did they know who was in their midst! Little did they know that what was happening under their noses would shape the rest of history!

Is **our generation** any different?

We're often so busy making plans for the future, or thinking of the past, and forming our own expectations of what God should be doing. And **sometimes we fail to notice and appreciate what God *is* doing in the present. In the messy here-and-now**.

What is going on under *our* noses?
What is happening right now that we hadn't noticed?

For these last few months, we have been living in a time of **huge global significance**. Of global disruption. Of collective experience and suffering. Of

routines and norms being changed. Of inequalities being exposed.

In all this suffering and difficulty, what could Jesus be showing us? What has Jesus, our teacher, been drawing our attention to recently? What things in the world or within ourselves does he want us to notice and bring before him.

In our passage, Jesus goes on to say that the Father has hidden these things from the wise and learned, but revealed them to little children. Little children have the ability to **live in the moment, to live in the now**. That is what I hope to re-learn: to be present to this moment, to this time, right now.

Here are 9 things I have noticed in these times of lockdown:

1. We need to better appreciate people who care for others, but who are often paid little or nothing.
2. It's important to value our friendships, and not take those connections for granted.
3. We don't really have that much control over our lives. Most control we think we have is an illusion.
4. We humans are able to adapt to big changes, often beyond what we thought possible.
5. It appears that there is in fact enough resource and funding in the world to solve seemingly impossible challenges, such as providing accommodation for homeless people, and enabling people with disabilities or care responsibilities to work from home.
6. The earth has been struggling under the pressure of our modern, consumer lifestyles. And when we stopped our travelling and constructing and polluting, miraculous healing happened for nature.
7. Our local area actually has a lot to enjoy and appreciate, if we slow down to notice the small things. Like beautiful wild flowers growing in the tram tracks.

8. Even though its a global situation, we're not all impacted in the same way. Our inequalities have always been there, but the pandemic has made some of them more obvious.
9. Another thing that I have noticed recently is that there is a strong desire to get back to 'normal', **but also** a strong desire for things to be different.

Is there a Goldilocks Principle at play here? Is there a third way? A third bowl of porridge that is 'just right'? Somewhere between 'back to normal' and 'changed forever'?

Sometimes it feels like we live in a **polarised world** made up of extremes and opposites: east or west, rich or poor, good or bad, black or white, faith or doubt, republican or democrat, leave or remain.

But actually the world is full of grey-areas, of diversity, of difficult decisions to make. Most of our life is about negotiating this 'middle bit'. I believe our life is about trying to follow the way of Christ through this difficult terrain. Of **holding the tension** as we are pulled in different directions.

And here is Jesus. In the middle. Arms stretched out between two sides. And there he stayed. Holding the tension. And there he died.

Is this also our cross to bear? To live in this in-between space? To have a hand

connected to the past, and a hand connected to the future, but living in the present. To be the reconciling hand holding both the perpetrator and the victim. To be reaching out to those who feel on the edges.

This is the tension that we must hold as we walk into the future. **This is the paradox that we must live in.** But in this tension **we** are not there on our own.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Like oxen, yoked and pulling the plough together, we tread the path **with Christ alongside us.**

In a moment we will enter a time of silence, and I would encourage you to use that time to **be present to this moment.** To be aware of your own body sitting on that seat. To be aware of the other people sharing this space with you. To be aware of God's presence here with us. To breathe.

Reflections for prayer:

What do you want to go back to normal / to be the same?

What do you want to be different / to change?

10. God sowing joy

A meditation on Matthew 13: 2-9, by Rahel Pereira



(This reflection is inspired by thoughts from Nadia Bolz-Weber.)

“To act lovingly is to begin to feel loving, and certainly to act joyfully brings joy to others which in turn makes one feel joyful. I believe we are called to the duty of delight.” - Dorothy Day

Like many others, my life has taken down a different way the last 6 months. I used to do a lot of stuff, sing my heart out in a choir, go out and have fun with groups of friends and people and putting on my mascara every day. I used to meet people to talk about my PhD, travel to conferences to get inspirational thoughts and not pass all the time in front of my laptop. I used to enjoy hugging people.

Now I basically just work in my apartment, talk on the phone, sometimes, if I get one of the limited places, I go to the library. Buying groceries or getting something from the post office became more exciting than ever, giving the day some more structure. Going for a run in the forest gives me a little time out to breathe and let my thoughts flow outside my own four walls.

And in all this time, I fear that I have felt less joy. Less joy and more judgement. I judge

myself for being lazy, for not having a hobby without purpose, for not cleaning the apartment, for not being mindful to myself or attentive enough to others. I judge others for not caring enough about this and that. From my little place in Giesing, basically I hold court every day.

But this week I became aware that feeling self-satisfied is not the same as feeling joy. Remember the trees in the Garden Eden: The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And human sin was choosing knowledge of good and evil over knowledge of God – we could choose to know God and have life, or we could choose to try and be like God by constantly judging good and evil. It seems that often we choose poorly.

Let me show you what I mean by that. Our Gospel reading today is about the Sower. Usually we may read this parable quickly as the parable of the judgement of the soil and not first as the parable of the Sower. But look, maybe the central thing about this parable isn't judgement at all, maybe it is joy – because again and again in the midst of this thorny and rocky and good world, God is sowing a life-giving Word. Just

indiscriminately scattering it everywhere like God doesn't understand our rules.

The Word of the Lord brings good news to the poor, and comforts those who mourn. Whatever heals the brokenhearted, whatever opens prisons. The Word is whatever brings freedom to slaves, to former slaves and to the descendants of former slaves. God's Word liberates the world from the spiritual bondage of human bondage. God's Word is scattered all around us... joyfully scrawled on protest signs and seen in city streets and shopping stores. The Word of the Lord shines out of the corners of our broken hearts, it is spread in the laughter of the children.

And all this happens without our soil management, because we saw that it's not the parable of the judgement of the soil, but of the Sower. So maybe to focus on the playful and even ridiculous image of how God extravagantly sows the Word of the Kingdom, is to read the parable in joy instead of judgement. And isn't life just too short, too sacred and too important to leave joy out? Isn't the world too right all the time to forgo joy? Yet joy can so often be the thing I give up when being right seems more important. When the grief of what I lost seems so much bigger than the hope of what might happen in the future. We live in such a serious and a fearful time. A time when we wonder what place there is for joy.

Listen to some Words of the prophet Isaiah as he says: "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off." (Isaiah 55,12-13)

What a fantastical joyful image! And imagine, Isaiah wrote these words to the people in Babylonian exile – a people in a situation where they had lost everything they had ever known. So, it's not that Isaiah lacked analysis or did not perceive the gravity of this situation. It's not that Isaiah didn't see right and wrong... after all, he was a prophet. But sometimes it's not the job of the prophet to judge right and wrong, but to point God's people to joy. To remind us that our God delights in us. To remind us of our true home.

What would it be like to rather than judging the supposed imperfection of your body and mind, to experience the joy of being a beautiful perfect creation, made in the image of God? What would it be like, rather than judging the unhealthy grocery cart contents of the guy behind me at Aldi who also isn't wearing his mask up to his nose, to instead experience the joy of seeing Christ's own face in his face? What would it be like to, rather than judging the weakness of every person or institution, and instead become aware to the joy of God's kingdom imperfectly and unevenly breaking in on all of us? I'm not sure. But I'm in to find out and learn. Today I want to choose joy. And leave being right to God alone.

Amen.

11. This woman is adding the yeast of God's Kingdom to the flour of earthly life

A meditation on Matthew 13: 33, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



³³ He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God was a complete reversal of the thinking of nearly everyone in Israel in his days.

And therefore he told people stories of farmers and seeds and women and baking. "To what should I compare the kingdom of God?" he said.

"It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

This is a comparison that comes from everyday domestic life: preparing a dough and baking bread were the classical everyday tasks of every woman in Old and New Testament times. And women were supposed to see themselves in Jesus' talking of the kingdom of God.

While he talked, and while they listened and understood, he'd upgraded the reality of women's lives.

Female tasks and talents were thought worthy to be an image for the kingdom of God!

That was new, and good and liberating news in Jesus' time, because religion and worship had always exclusively been exercised by men using images of the men's world to talk about their faith and their God.

From then on this could be different... Jesus had made all the difference!

Stanley Hauerwas, an American theology professor, who has influenced my theological thinking, once wrote:

"Jesus' concept of the kingdom of God was a right-side-up kingdom in an upside-down world."

What he means is:

Jesus' kingdom would not come with an outward show of power and success.

It would never be a military victory or a political kingdom.

Jesus' kingdom was an interior kingdom of the ordinary people.

A kingdom of the heart.

Jesus never sat on a king's throne, but he's always ruled the world in ways that most kings never dreamed of.

Jesus is ruling the world by winning and ruling the hearts of people.

And he has reigned over more people than any king who has ever lived or ever will live.
The problem for many is – at all times – that it seems to be an invisible kingdom. It does not come about with signs of power and prestige.
It can only be described in simple words of everyday life and tasks.
Some people might not even notice it.
But Christ is changing the world by changing the people...
far beyond military and political kingdoms of this world.

Yeast hidden in a lump of dough became an image for the kingdom of God.
It started ever so small in the person of Jesus.
But there was a lot of power and energy in this small beginning.
And eventually it released unspeakable creativity and strength.
In the end everything would be penetrated; everything would be filled by God's creation living God's kingdom...
...and we will all enjoy the blessing of his reign.

The kingdom of God is not, first of all a "call to duty", but an invitation to enjoyment!
It promises joy and peace for those who enter...
...and membership of a subversive movement.

To understand what that means please, listen again to a thought from Stanley Hauerwas:

"We who are part of the kingdom of God," he writes, **"live in a parallel kingdom with the kingdoms of this world..., the kingdoms of time and fashion, society and public opinion. These kingdoms are in conflict. And all who believe are facing a spiritual challenge."**

But the means we work with, says the Bible, are not the means of the world. The means we work with are prayer, righteousness and joy in the Holy Spirit. And as God changes us, he changes the world.
As things begin to change in us, they also change around us.
We begin to influence the world and win others to the kingdom and help to make them free.

The kingdom of God, Jesus said, was like yeast in a lump of dough.
It was worked into the dough and caused tremendous change.
The little bit of yeast affects all of the dough.
It does its work while hidden and almost unseen.
But somebody of course needs to mix it in and knead it,
to store it in a warm place, cover it with a cloth, watch it, wait for it, care...

And that again is an image for God's choosing us:
us all with our little, individual lives to make an eternal difference.
We are God's partners in this world..., messengers..., witnesses...,
co-creators to mix yeast into the flour and plant the seed in the ground.
People can work for and help God to establish his kingdom.
They don't do God's share, but they spend much energy and effort in that which can only be done by human beings with hands and hearts and skills.

God can't knead the dough, form the bread, heat the oven, plant the seed and water it.
God asks his human beings, God asks us to quietly and faithfully work until his kingdom comes, and his will is done, on earth as it is in heaven.
God gives us power and patience, trust and persistence,
because he knows how hard it can be at times:
he knows how often we think we work in vain,

how strongly we fear that our actions are without success,
and how much we'd love to see our commitment contributing to improve life in God's world.
God knows... And he expects us to carry on and persevere – just as he expected Jesus to do so. God is full of irrepressible hope, and he shares this hope with us.

We can take the message of Jesus, his stories and teachings as yeast for us. We can bake the bread of life and feed and nourish many with it...

...so that all of us – just as Jesus did – can work for justice and stand up for the truth.

...so that we can all be open for others and accept different opinions and beliefs.

...so that we can all support sisters and brothers from different nations and cultural backgrounds, no matter what they eat or drink or look like, no matter how they

celebrate communion and in which language they read their Bible or any other religious book.

With small steps and with a smile on our faces, we can work for God's kingdom to come true.

Some might say, it costs too much.
Others may be suspicious.
Still others might not want to take the trouble to change...

...but, as long as only one person says the truth,
relinquishes power,
takes time for a friend,
invites a stranger,
speaks words of love,
puts trust and faith in others,
as long as only one person does that,
God's kingdom is here and is waiting for us.

Amen.

12. Blessing comes only in sharing

A meditation on the feeding of the 5,000, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



I'd like to share my thoughts on a story with you. A story of daily bread, of power and money. A story of trust. A story of a miracle. A story of hunger of many. A story of poverty and the fullness of life. A story of relationships and communication, of hunger for life and the blessing of sharing.

I am sure you all remember the story of the feeding of the 5000. You can read it in the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. (Mark 6:30f; Matthew 14:13f; Luke 9:10f; John 6:1f).

Try to see the scene of the story in front of your inner eye:

These people were the poor fishing population of the Sea of Galilee; and they had developed their significant hopes for a Messiah to come and change what no other ruler over the decades had been able or wanting to change. Simple people – full of expectation and hope. 5000 the story tells us – and we all know that in those times women and children were not counted. They followed Jesus, because they had seen him

taking notice of their sick and other poor folk. They were surprised and curious. And they had nothing to lose. They were hungry folk.

Hungry in a very real physical way as well as hungry for independence, power and dignity. They were hungry for the smallest rights of human existence. And they experienced what happened in our story with a growling stomach and a weakened, will-less and worn-out body.

Believe it or not: bread and the experience of God lie very close at hand!

Hunger for bread in our story has got to do with the miracle of community. In one of Ernesto Cardenal's publications on the poor population in Nicaragua and their theology of liberation one can read: "The feeding of the 5000 is a miracle because Jesus does not turn up as the great magician who lets bread rain from heaven, but asks the people around him what they think they can contribute against the hunger and towards the community..."

In other words: the miracle is that the disciples start to think of possibilities, ask questions and state their opinion. The miracle is that in a situation of helplessness somebody begins to share what is his. A miracle is that an order comes onto a huge crowd of people, that a new quality of relationships can grow – among human beings, and also with God.

What we have, may it be ever so little, is a gift, which we may thank for. And it will become more, when we dare to share. Just invest a moment: What could that mean to you? What could it mean for me? The little I

have especially in these unreal times of Corona? It doesn't matter what: money, talents, gifts, dreams and ideas, food, hope, beauty, etc. The little I have will become more, when I share.

What can I offer, if I dare to open my basket of time and talent and resources in life? Bread? Financial resources? The wisdom of life experience? Social involvement? Political commitment? Solidarity with the underprivileged? Confidence? Hope? Dreams and visions?

May our sharing always be blessed.

13. “Follow me”

Readings and meditations from Mark, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



This is a bit different today. We have 5 short Bible readings, and 5 mini-meditations to go with them...

Five biblical stories of people meeting Jesus...

Follow Me – the meditations are called.

Reading I Mark 1:19-20

Jesus saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

I
"Follow me",
he said – and we did.
We let go the heavy wet nets,
the tough strands of tarred rope:
our strong hands
were empty – we let go
of all we knew how to do,
our livelihood, our identity –
to follow a dream,
a job description
that no one in their senses
would take seriously.
"Follow me",
he said – and we did.

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

Reading II Mark 2:14

As Jesus was walking along, he saw Levi sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, 'Follow me.'
And he got up and followed him.

II
"Follow me",
he said – and I did.
Tax collecting never made me popular,
but it put a roof over my head
and bread on my table –
bitter bread, because grabbed and grudging.
He invited me to become
no longer dog in the manger
but host at the feast.
He came right under my roof
sharing my bread
and showing me how to share
with all the rest.
"Follow me",
he said – and I did.

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

Reading III Mark 7:26-30

She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.' But she answered him, 'Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs.' Then he said to her, 'For saying that, you

may go—the demon has left your daughter.' So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

III
"Go", he said.
"Let the children be fed first –
why should the dogs eat their bread?"
But I would not be turned away:
hoping for healing,
hungry for justice,
I stood my ground and argued:
"In God's household
even the dogs are fed."
Seeing my faith,
he told me to go home
and find my daughter healed.
"Go", he said – and I did.

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

Reading IV Mark 10:21-22

Jesus, looking at the man, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

IV
"Follow me",
he said, for I had asked him
the next step on a journey
of personal salvation.
He reminded me
of all the good things
I already knew and did.
So nothing was left to do –
I was ready to go.
"Now sell all you have",
he said. "Give it away to the poor".
How could I let go just like that –
lighten the load,
shed my responsibilities,
become someone I did not know?
What would be left?
"Follow me", he said
but with heavy heart
I shook my head.

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

Reading V Mark 10:50-52

So, throwing off his cloak, Bartimaeus sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?' The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

V
"Come",
he said – and I did,
following his voice
through the crowd on the edge of town.
I needed wait no longer:
my voice had been heard
calling for change,
crying out for a fresh start –
even though it meant
casting off old ways,
no longer the needy person everybody
knew.
"Come", he said
and I saw what God could do.

"Your faith has healed you",
he told me. "Now go".
He never said, "Follow me" –
but, as I could see, there was no other way.

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

Five voices. Five people whose lives were
changed.
We all, too, must have heard this call at
some point.
Can you remember?
When was it? Where was it... that you heard
Jesus? Felt him touch your life.
Made you leave – whatever it was – behind
and go on differently?

Follow me as you hear it today – what can it
mean for you? Just at this moment, on this
day and in this strange time our world is
going through?

Music - *We have come to meet you O God; just as we are we come...*

14. Revealing the thoughts of our hearts

A Candlemass meditation on Luke 2: 22-38, by Kat Wagner



Last Tuesday, 2nd February, was an important date in the Christian calendar of festivals: it was Candlemass!

The name Candlemass comes from the church tradition of blessing the candles that will burn throughout the coming year. As the winter days remain cold and short and as we yearn for the longer, brighter days of Spring, it is a moment to celebrate Jesus, the Light of the World.

Candlemass is celebrated exactly 40 days after Christmas. It marks the time when Mary, Joseph and Jesus came to the temple 40 days after the birth, in accordance with the Jewish law and customs.

I thought it was therefore appropriate for us to reflect on this Bible passage today. As we bask in the light of these candles, I pray the words of Simeon, that we would also see God's salvation, glory and revelation.

Let me take you back in time to the place where it happened. The scene is Jerusalem.

Busy people are going about their normal lives: buying groceries, trading, visiting relatives. A small family of three has just arrived in the city, heading for the temple along with many others.

Mary and Joseph are following the instructions originally given to Moses that any first-born child must be consecrated to God (Exodus 13:2). And they are also adhering to the law of the Lord concerning the purification of a woman after she has given birth: they must sacrifice a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon for a sin offering (Leviticus 12).

They stop at the traders stalls to buy the animals required for the offerings. But the money they have is not enough to buy a lamb, so instead they purchase what is legally allowable for poorer folk: just two pigeons (Lev 12: 8).

Meanwhile, a local man called Simeon has sensed God's Spirit stirring in him. He remembers the promise he had received from God that he wouldn't die before seeing the Christ. Excitedly, Simeon walks quickly

to the temple, and awaits the longed-for encounter...

At the same time, the prophetess Anna walks into the temple courtyard. In the distance, she notices the devout man called Simeon bouncing on the balls of his feet, his gaze fixed on the doorway, eyes darting back and forth at the streams of people coming in. Suddenly, something captures his attention. His feet are now still. His body straightens. His face beams. And he strides off towards a young woman holding her baby. Opening his arms wide in welcome, he tenderly lifts the baby from the hold of the astonished mother and cradles him closely in his arms. Words of blessing and relief and thankfulness flow from his mouth as his eyes take in the child's face:

“Now, Lord, I can die in peace, as you promised me. For my eyes have seen Your salvation: he is a light for revelation for the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.”

The child's parents are amazed at what they hear. Can these words be true?

Turning to them, Simeon casts his eyes on the bewildered Mary and Joseph and blesses them too. But he has more truth to share, important words on the tip of his tongue, placed there by the Spirit, that he must speak.

Turning directly to Mary, he says to her: “This child will cause both the fall and the recovery of many in Israel. He will be a sign that is misunderstood and contradicted. And a sword will pierce your own soul, so that the thoughts from many other hearts will be revealed.”

Mary's gaze shifts from Simeon down to the eyes of her child. And she quickly recalls the response she had given the angel some ten months ago: “Let it be to me according to your word”.

Mary's anguish and her desperate attempt to cling on to some hope of a brighter future are somehow calmed as she becomes aware of a new noise in the temple. The quiet but confident sound of someone singing. Its just one voice. She looks around to see where it is coming from. The sound is mesmerizing, beautiful, soothing. And she can feel that tiny seed of hope embed solidly within her. And there is Anna, elderly in posture but vibrant in faith, praising and praying her thanks to God.

We leave the scene, exit the temple, depart Jerusalem, and find ourselves here in our seats in Peace Church in February 2021.

We know the story of this Christ child. How, as a man, he returned to that same temple and drove out the money changers and livestock sellers. The animals were scattered and everyone was in uproar. He may have spoken to the very same people who sold the pigeons to his parents all those years ago, saying to them “Take these things away! Do not make my Father's house a house of trade” (John 2: 16). It was over: the system of paying for blessings and buying purity was no longer needed.

Jesus' message and his actions contradicted many of the age-old customs. He highlighted the hypocrisy of the powerful, and he raised up those who had been stamped down. As Simeon had prophesied, he was a misunderstood figure, he was a sign that was spoken against and opposed. He was rejected by many.

But the words that intrigue me most of all are the words of Simeon's address to Mary in verse 35:

“a sword will pierce your own soul—to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

or as The Message puts it: *the rejection will force honesty, as God reveals who they really are.*

To me, this message that was delivered to Mary is a timeless message that we can hear too.

Mary loved her child very much, and she suffered very much too. Many artistic depictions of Mary show her as a woman of sorrow, sometimes with a dagger stuck in her heart, or with seven swords piercing a heart that bleeds. Mary's heart must have broken when she cradled the body of her crucified adult son. When you love someone deeply, you will probably suffer at some point too.

"The sword will pierce your heart, and the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." (v 35)

But this heartbreak has some consequence: something is revealed in *other* people.

Mary is an example of the truly broken-hearted. As we reflect on Mary's suffering, something inside us can connect with her experience and her emotions, and the thoughts of our own hearts are revealed. And so through Mary's agony, many people have come to cling onto Christ in their own sorrows and suffering, and to know Jesus Christ as saviour.

Simeon's words can also be a lesson for us too. It often takes one brave person to open up and share something of their pain or grief or suffering that then encourages others to reveal their own honest feelings and struggles. If we all just appear nice and 'sorted', then our interactions don't go very deep. A broken-hearted person sharing their pain can bless others by enabling others to also humbly reveal and share something honest and real.

I have certainly found that when I have been open about my heart-aches and struggles, I have been amazed by how others have opened up in response and shared something of their story with me. And we are then both blessed by realising we are not alone.

We are living in a time of much heart-break, suffering and struggles. And I believe this pandemic and the various challenges we are facing are revealing much about what is really under the surface of our lives and also our societies. The wounding reveals something.

And so I'd like to lead us in some questions, for self-reflection and prayer:

The suffering of this present time is revealing something.

What is it revealing about the Earth?

What is it revealing about our systems of government?

What is it revealing about our human strengths and values?

What is it revealing about our prejudices and short-sightedness?

What is it revealing about the thoughts of our hearts?

What is it revealing about who we really are?

I will pray to close:

God, we join our prayers with Simeon and Anna and say "our eyes have seen your salvation". We thank you for Jesus and all that he revealed about you, God, and your kingdom. We thank you for Mary and all that she teaches us through her faith, love and sorrow. We pray that you would sustain us through this pandemic. But we also ask that this suffering would reveal much to us about ourselves and our world for which we can then seek healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, peace and justice... for your glory. Amen

15. Jesus calls the first disciples

A meditation on Luke 5: 1-11, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



This story comes from the Gospel of Luke chapter 5. Jesus calls his very first disciples. At this point Jesus is beginning his public ministry.

He has overcome the temptation in the desert, he has been rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, and so he travels around the towns and villages sharing a very new message of good news.

The disciples weren't the disciples yet, they were just fishermen...

All the things Jesus had done up to now, he'd done on his own.
But from now on friends will be with him, companions, supporters...

God is calling us to be his family. And he's called all of us into church and to this service.

We welcome each other, we greet old friends, we celebrate the family of God in which we are growing together, and in which we share what we have and who we are...

We sing and pray and give each other strength.

Our story about the first disciples is in the first place a story of trust.

This is something, we all have to admit, that doesn't always come easily.

Trust.

For many of us this is a topic that we find hard to deal with.

And for many of us it is even easier to mistrust, than to trust.

But it is a fact: without trust we cannot really live a good life.

It is trust, our ability to trust, that I would like to reflect upon with you, as we look at this story.

Luke tells us how Jesus called the first disciples.

And I must say, I regard the end of the story as the most important part of it:

The fishermen left everything and followed him.

This is a report of the first apostles starting to follow Jesus.

An important part of the faith story for Peter and the early church in Jerusalem. It helped Jesus' disciples to remember that

following Jesus had a lot to do with simply trusting in Jesus.

This is what the early Christians did, and it is fascinating to read in the book of Acts how much strength, courage and perseverance they got from of this.

The individual elements of our story touch us of course, because they could just as well be taken from our own life stories: elements like the worries, joys, hopes and fears of those fishermen. They'd been fishing all night and had caught nothing. Discouraged they must have thought that they might as well go home. It just wasn't their day.

But: disappointment is part of life, part of our faith even. The fishermen were discouraged by their disappointing experience. And, so would we be. We often don't easily overcome disappointment. We question and worry... What was it that we did wrong? What was missing? What could I have done differently? Better? It makes me despair when I know that I've done my best, and still the outcome is as frustrating as the empty fishing nets in our story.

I can only imagine what the fishermen must have thought when Jesus said to them: Put out into the deep water & let down your nets for a catch. What a waste of time? Honestly! They were the professionals. They knew exactly that the right time for fishing was in the night. Fishing at daytime was no good... it was even silly.

What Jesus asked them to do was not only unusual.

It was crazy and against all logic and experience.

Mind you: this is something that would challenge us a lot.

Living in the 21st century and being brought up in a world in which almost everything is controllable, we have to admit, we'd find it awfully hard to just trust and believe – and do something that sounded so silly...

Nevertheless: the disciples (all experienced fishermen) dared to trust and believe in the unpredictable.

They took the risk of faith. Only because they believed in Jesus' words. Only because they believed that what he said might be true.

True words, not just a silly idea...

They took the risk.

They took the first steps.

They took a leap in the dark, trusting only that wherever they landed, God would be already expecting and holding them. No matter what.

What gave them assurance must have been their trust... and only then could they see the chances and opportunities. Only then could they see hidden resources and undiscovered skills – talents and gifts they hadn't known they had.

It all only happened through the challenge Jesus gave these men.

He urged them to trust.

He suggested they would take the risk. Regardless of what reality had taught them...

And then they all learned that once you step beyond the mere facts of reality, you can have new experiences and widen your horizon beyond what you could ever have imagined...

Yet if you say so, Peter speaks for all of them, I will let down the nets.

They did it...

And then they must have experienced one of the greatest days of their lives.
What an amazing thing to happen.
They would have a great story to tell!
And on top of that they truly found “their saviour”, the person who would from now on make all the difference in their lives.

And what did Peter do?
He fell down on his knees and expressed his fear.
And Jesus only told them, not to be afraid, but to come with him and be fishing men and women. “You will be catching people for God,” Desmond Tutu writes. You will love and serve as God’s people in this world.

And this is what he tells us, too.
Do not be afraid.

Come now with me and heal and preach and make people free.

I am not going to suggest what exactly the nets and boats are that you may have to leave behind in your individual lives to start and follow something new.

But I am suggesting that we all try to learn a lesson
of trust and letting go,
of leaving the comfortable for the unfamiliar,
and follow God’s call,
not all alone as an individual,
but as a member of the worldwide family of God
that can change the world
and help God’s dreams come true.
Amen.

16. God’s invitation to us

A meditation on Luke 14: 16-24, by Reiner Kanzleiter



I know that it is not allowed right now, but: I would like to invite all of you to a nice dinner at my home tonight. A long table wonderfully set, home-cooked food, good wine, coffee... other guests with whom you will certainly have interesting conversations...music of course.

Would you like to come? Tonight at 7p.m.? Spontaneously? That would be great, wouldn't it?

I have to admit, we had been inviting quite a number of friends, theologians like us, musicians, computer experts, journalists... We had already done the shopping and done

the pre-cooking, when the first cancellations came in. And they got more and more until yesterday. Now we are in a somehow delicate situation. We don't want to throw away the food and above all: we were really looking forward to a nice evening. We don't want to blow it in the wind too quickly. That's why I would like to invite you now - would you come?

Although it is at short notice... but please, do remember: The great food...!
Don't worry - you don't have to answer now. Even though it would be interesting!

Maybe you have already experienced something similar... this unbelievable disappointment when you have been abandoned by other people, friends, colleagues... left alone with your pleasant anticipation, with the longing for a cheerful community, which at least for one evening lets you feel that you are not alone, that you are important to others... an experience from which you can live on for a while. Food for the soul. We were not born to be lone wolves and hermits. We are born to live together in community and share our lives.

Then the first person comes and says that he has to see his recently bought field. Now. Exactly now. As if someone would buy a field, which he had not surveyed and measured before.

The next person has to examine his recently bought oxen. Now. Exactly now. Honestly: Who will buy livestock without having seen it before?

The third one misuses his newlywed wife as an excuse...

The text tells nothing more. Everything else is left to our imagination.

These three persons respond to the invitation in an unmistakable way: You are not important to us, dear friend. "Friend" in quotation marks. My field, my oxen, my

intimate togetherness tonight are always more important. Your kindness – I don't care. Your longing for a common celebration - I don't care. Your shopping, the money you have already spent, the preparations, your time, your creativity - I don't care. Deep inside they are not interested at all.

What a frustration... The owner of the house became angry...

Maybe it was a good decision, that the three didn't come. Otherwise they would have talked all evening about how great they were. Or how clever they were to snatch someone else's field or oxen or even someone else's wife. What important men they were!

How happy they were - about something that connects them to themselves alone. About something that they do not share. The field has only one owner. The oxen have only one master. The woman has only one man. But the invitation is meant to bring about shared joy! A feast wants to bring many people together. A feast expects only a little something - besides accepting the invitation, of course: That we bring along our willingness to celebrate together - and also the willingness not to be the center of attention, that we bring along our willingness to share the pleasure of being noticed, to share the pleasure of celebrating with others, to celebrate with people who are not necessarily on the same wavelength, from whom many things separate us. To celebrate the richness of diversity.

But now this unbelievable disappointment, when you have been abandoned in the truest sense of the word... abandoned with your own anticipation, with your longing for a happy community, which at least for one evening lets you feel that you are not alone, that you do matter to others ... an experience which nourishes your will for life for a while.

Such an experience is soul food. We were not born to be lone wolves and hermits. We are born to live together in community and share our lives.

Just as God does.
It is God's story.
It is God's invitation to us!
It is God's deepest disappointment.

How God would love it if we did not say:
Deep inside we are not interested in you at all, dear friend. "Friend" in quotation marks.

How God would love it if instead we said:
We are invited? Are you serious? No joke?
My pleasure. I'd love to come! Can we bring something? No, of course not. We are invited.

We are invited to come from the roads and lanes of our lives. We are invited to come with our worries and questions. We are invited to come with our spiritual damages and our darkness. We are invited to come

with our illnesses which exclude us from festivals because nobody wants to risk that we talk about it and spoil the atmosphere.

We are invited ... just as we are.

My pleasure to make you happy, God says. Therefore: Let us celebrate, celebrate in advance, share in advance, sing and dance, laugh and get to know each other, carry and guide each other, admonish and encourage each other, be silent together and talk with each other.

Let us raise our glass in a toast to each other.

To our life and to our love.

À votre santé! Cheers.

It is God's gift. God's invitation to us. For 70 years or 80, maybe a little more or a little less.

With our lives, we give the answer...

17. Tidying up

A meditation on Luke 15: 8-10, by Reiner Kanzleiter



Tidying up is a must! The desk in the office - there are piles of papers. And the mail that urgently needs to be done for 10 days. And the cellar! What's lying around, standing around, gathering dust. The attic! The garage! The garden!

The bigger the mess, the bigger the bow I make around it. I feel how such a mess messes myself up and blocks me more from day to day. So: Tidying up is a must!

**A thought for the beginning of the year?
Yes, of course a thought for the
beginning of the year!**

At times my life seems to me like a house with untidy rooms. The jumble of my wishes, my intentions and plans. What I intend to do and what I don't manage to do. What I long for and do not allow myself.

I should - but can I?

I would like to - but may I?

I could - but should I really?

Who will help me tidy up? Who helps to create order?

Clear words would have to be exchanged. Letters written, e-mails sent. Silence would have to be shared. But: what shall I share with whom? And who at what time? The many people, the many contacts and relationships. Who helps me to create order?

With all that let's look again at the passage of this woman, who tidies up, who sweeps the top to the bottom in her whole house, and by doing so finds, what she was searching for –

⁸Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.' (Luke 15: 8-10)

Three times cleaning up, three times finding, three times rejoicing.

First, of course, rejoicing over the coin the woman finds again. A silver penny sounds little. But it was a lot. The 10 pennies that

the woman possessed was what she had saved during her lifetime in order to be able to live on it when she is old.

Three times cleaning up, three times finding, three times joy.

Secondly, finding myself.

When I take time to tidy up, not only do my shelves get in order, my thoughts get in order as well.

Tidying up is memory work. In the basement, a bicycle bell falls into my hands. It comes from our family's first child's bike and I think, my goodness, what have you experienced and forgotten again...?

While cleaning up, I put together pieces of biography. Whoever cleans up, sweeps the lowest to the top, finds himself. Tidying up puts myself in order. It also brings to light finds, that remind me of difficult times - but perhaps also bring thoughts of where God's help was experienced. "Do not forget all his benefits!"

Three times cleaning up, three times finding, three times joy.

Finally: people who have fallen out of order.

With swindlers, criminals, and harlots, Jesus sits down at a table. The pious turn up their noses. Then Jesus tells the parable of the silver coin that was found again, in order to pass on something of the joy, the rejoicing that breaks out in heaven when a person is restored to order.

That is, when a person returns to the order that God has given to life on earth right from the beginning. "You have wisely ordered all things ... «

From being a workaholic to becoming a person who comes to rest, from a complainer to one who gives praise and recognition to others,

From being a small-minded person to becoming a generous one who relies on God's generosity.

The world becomes tidier when a person who had lost himself finds his way back to himself, to his purpose. Tidying up is necessary!

Thoughts for the beginning of the year? Yes, of course thoughts for the beginning of the year!

Looking back and cleaning up. Remove what hinders, paralyzes, drills and stands in the way. Finding a yes to what can't be changed anyway, what has been as it had been. Let it be.

Tidying up and making room for something new, not using our energies in vain by looking backward, but gathering them for the path ahead.

Dismantling an old bridge that lies behind me, which I no longer need and which is also no longer strong enough - and using the material for a new bridge.

Finally: What is the goal?

Paul once wrote: God is not a God of disorder, but... (1 Cor 14:35) No - not of order, it would have continued like that if Paul had been a German. Not a God of disorder, but a God of peace. The opposite of disorder is not pedantic order, but: Peace!

Tidying up not for the sake of tidying up. Drawing a balance not for the sake of drawing a balance.

Looking back not for the sake of looking back.

But doing so to find peace. That we can make peace with our past. Giving back to God what has been - with thanks, with sorrow, with a song of praise, with a psalm of lament - why not!

But giving back to God, and then with free hands and a free heart, with peace, inwardly reordered, we will head towards the new that awaits us. Accepting the paths to come with calm and in peace, because we know:

"It is you, God, who is coming towards me. You, God, you are and you will remain with me."

18. The lost son

A meditation on Luke 15: 11-32, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



Our story today is through and through a love story which tells us of seeking, losing and finding.

Jesus tells it as an answer to his critics who take offence at him. They criticize his relationship to what they think are the wrong people. They don't like to see his compassion and love for those who they think don't have the right to be close to a teacher of God.

A teacher of God should be able to distinguish between clean and unclean, the Pharisees and scribes claimed. And the folk Jesus made friends with, definitely were unclean.

Jesus' relationship to the poor, the outcast, the wretched, was a thorn in the Pharisees' eyes. How could he shamelessly eat and

drink with them, celebrate and discuss with them?

To answer this question, Luke, the evangelist, presents to us a Jesus who tells the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and of the father and the two sons. He tells his story in a culture of poverty. The major part of the population was starving and being enslaved.

The story of the lost son takes place on a prosperous farm, which employed slaves and day labourers who were without rights and protection.

As usual the older son was the heir of the farm. He would inherit the whole estate. And as usual the younger son had his legacy paid out in advance as cash. He didn't have a choice...

This information actually corrected my long-preserved image of the prodigal son: I always thought of him as being bored and greedy and wanting to leave home for fun and distraction.

Now I see that what he did, was just the usual thing to do: leave your home. This is what younger brothers had to do.

They got their part of the inheritance and left home in the hope that they could buy themselves some land somewhere, and maybe marry into a family.

This wasn't all that easy. And unfortunately not all younger sons succeeded in doing this, either because, as in the parable, they dealt carelessly with their money, or because one of the constantly happening famines drove up the price of corn and bread, and in a flash those who didn't own property found themselves beggars.

Studying the text carefully and seeing the time and the context in which it was told, shows us that the departure of the younger son from home was normal in village life, and was not a break with the family.

Don't you think, too, that this puts the young man in quite a different position from what over the centuries has been interpreted and composed and painted about him?

When it comes to the worst in the story, he hires himself out as a swineherd. He falls into the hands of a man who exploits him and cheats him. He is not given the daily portion of food that is usual for herdsmen. He is not even allowed to touch the pigs' food.

The first dramatic turning point in the story is the desperate young man's decision to go home, hoping that he'd be paid at least the wage of a day labourer there. He knows that unlike his older brother, he no longer has any right to live on the farm.

A second important turning in the story is, when the father in the story shows himself as somebody not thinking in clearly and logically legalistic terms.

He seems to be thinking in terms of loving care rather than in what is officially right or wrong.

When he recognises the starving man in rags as his son, we are told that "his heart contracted within him". He is in pain. He feels for this returning family member.

And then this elderly Middle Eastern farmer runs out to meet his son "as fast as he could" – not at all minding all the rules of custom and respectability. The joy is so great, there is no time to reflect or weigh up.

The old father hugs and kisses his son.

He doesn't ask the awkward questions we could imagine: the "What on earth have you been up to?" the "How could you...?" "How dare you...?" "What have you done with all that money?" "Why weren't you more careful?"

He doesn't ask any of these.

Losing and finding are the words the father uses later; and they stand for "being dead and being alive". And then he shows his son what being alive means: a fatted calf, music and dance, new clothes, a ring with a seal, new rights to the property, singing and rejoicing.

The joy and happiness of being together have the first and the last word.

"For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found," is what the father says when he holds the returning son in his arms.

Let's come back to Jesus, the narrator of the story of the father with the two sons.

His interest is not to make people feel small, helpless and broken!

The returning son's confession "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." is nothing he has to say in order to regain his father's love. The love of the father shown in this story is absolutely unconditional. It is simply what it is.

The forgiveness has no connection with the conditions of repentance and confessing sins. The father's forgiveness simply raises up someone who has been humiliated enough by life.

The many abundances in the story, the hugs and kisses, the joy, the feast, the food, the drink, the music, the dancing – they all point towards beauty, happiness and the joy of life which God has always wanted for his people.

What happens here is grace – nothing more and nothing less.

What became of the older son is not told in the story. Was he able to agree with his father? Did he manage to accept the return of his younger brother? Could the two reconcile with each other?

Questions which Jesus leaves open.

Jesus, the storyteller and teacher leaves it open to his audience to answer, and he leaves it open to us...

The father's behaviour towards his two sons also reflects Jesus' behaviour towards the people around him.

It is a matter of seeking and lacking and meeting.

Remember: the father comes also to meet the older brother. He leaves the feast and invites the brother, who is standing outside,

to also come in. He asks him "to make merry and be glad."

Joy is the theme - not sin!

Joy is what we are invited to look at, not concentrating on the sins of ourselves or others.

The theological statement of Jesus' story, is what the father says about his son in his last sentence: "He was dead and he is alive."

While being away from the father, the land, the sources of life, the company of friends and family, the younger son could not live. He was dead. Back within his "community" he finds new life...

Here the story does not speak of earthly fathers and families of origin. It speaks of our relationship to God and our human longing for companions and friends.

The story of the prodigal son is a love story between God and his people.

The relationship between the two brothers in the story is open...

It invites us to imagine what could have happened. It lets us hope that the two brothers became real and true friends – understanding each other, respecting each other, forgiving and loving each other...

In the response of the waiting parent we discover God's love for his human beings: God runs to meet us, God does not need our confession, God's response to us is far more loving and welcoming than we can imagine, God is filling our lives with nothing else other than sheer grace.

Amen.

19. Jesus' first miracle

A reflection on John 2: 1-11, by Nico Kanzleiter & Israel Periera



Today's thought focuses on an important episode in Jesus' ministry, his first miracle. Although this miracle is very known today, even in the secular world, almost no one noticed when it happened. As a matter of fact, not even the main protagonists of the event that Jesus was attending: the bride and the groom of a wedding, where Jesus turned water into wine. The wedding takes place in the small village of Cana, in the north of Nazareth. If you don't know where it is, don't worry, that is exactly the point.

Some would expect Jesus to perform his first miracle in Rome, the center of the empire at that time. Perhaps in Jerusalem, in the center of the Jewish culture. There were political problems, there were religious problems, there was a national identity problem, and so there were different expectations to how God was to fix all that. Moreover, a shortage of "solutions".

And THE solution that Jesus is to provide is foretold, in a small hidden village in the beginning of his ministry. Where for the moment, all what people care about, is the shortage of wine and its taste...

- **Nico:** I must say, if I am in a wedding, I really need my wine to be white, sweet and crisp

- **Izzy:** I must say I really like red dry wine with a strong flavor intensity

- **Nico:** A rather weak yet smokey flavor in my way to go

- **Izzy:** A good wine for me is never a sweet wine, neither fruity, but oaky and firm

- **Nico:** Hmm, I disagree, the fruity scent is a must have, especially if it's also there in the aftertaste. Something rather astringent.

- **Izzy:** white wine, only if the meal demands it. I don't like the off-dry

- **Nico:** Not really, make sure to rather match the meal with the delicious white wine. Not the other way around

When it comes to individual taste, there will always be differences, especially when it comes to drinks. No matter which party or dinner you attend, there will always be someone who thinks that the beer is too bitter, the whiskey too peaty, the wine too

sweet... and there will always be someone who likes it!

When Jesus turned water to wine and had it served to the guests, as far as we know no one complained. That seems unlikely, right? There can't be such a thing as a wine that has a taste that everyone likes. We're way too different in all kinds of ways and that is a good thing! Obviously, there was something special about that wine and it can't be the taste.

Let's change perspective and see the wine as a metaphor: Let's see the wine as a solution to whatever kind of problem. There're hundreds of problems out there and you can't solve every problem the same way. If someone is always tired you can tell that person to sleep more, that might work. But if that person has problems with being on time or taking care of a relationship, sleeping a lot might not necessarily help. Every problem needs an individual solution, every taste needs an individual bottle of wine.

And here's where Jesus' wine gets important again. Because I think that that wine didn't have a specific taste, but that it tasted different to every single guest, each one tasting it the way it pleased them most. Jesus' wine is that infamous individual

solution I mentioned. Had he served the exact same wine to every person there was bound to be someone who wouldn't like it. Had he offered the exact same solution to every single person's problem, there was bound to be some problems he couldn't solve. But he served a wine that hit the right spot with every single person, served a solution, that suited every single person's problem. Jesus respected the individuality of every guest, accepted that we are all different, with different stories and concerns. He left no one behind.

He wouldn't say: "This is the perfect wine; you have to like it!"

I think he would say: "This is the perfect wine for YOU, I think you'll like it."

And in using wine as a metaphor, there is another thing that might be worth thinking about. Wine is something most people enjoy. Jesus served something everyone could enjoy. We can enjoy Gods wonders, enjoy Gods solutions. Trust that it will be good for every single one of us!

So, let us enjoy Jesus wine. Let us enjoy each other!

Amen!

20. Darkness and light

An All Saints Day meditation on John 8: 12 & Psalm 139: 12, by Kat Wagner



Good evening, sisters and brothers, on this All Saints Day!

On this day many churches celebrate the lives of Christian martyrs and saints and people important to us who have helped to shape and grow our faith. So on this day, it is good for us to remember and honour those who have inspired us and shown us how to live life well.

All Saints Day is of course preceded by All Hallows Eve, or Halloween. The traditions of Halloween and All Saints Day have evolved over the centuries, and I thought it would be interesting to research the history.

Halloween can be traced back to the ancient Celts who marked the end of summer and harvest time, and the beginning of the dark and cold winter, the season when people were more likely to die. They believed that at this time of the year the ghosts of the dead returned to earth, and so the Celts would light bonfires and make sacrifices on the fire to ward off the spirits. And in the morning, they would take the burning embers of the sacred bonfire to re-light their own fires at home, to help protect them during the coming winter. When these lands were conquered by the ancient Romans, the festival was merged with a Roman festival

commemorating the passing of the dead. And by the 9th century, the Church also used this time to honour those who had died.

And so here we are reflecting on the reality of death, commemorating those who have died, and praying for protection to survive another year. And as summer turns to winter, and the days become darker, I would also like to reflect on how we understand these 'dark' days in relation to our faith in God, who is often described as 'light'.

Jesus said: "*I am the **light** of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*"

When we hear this we of course associate light, or The Light, with goodness. Light is necessary for seeing clearly, for defining one object from another, for growth, for safety. We live in an era dominated by ways of thinking from the Enlightenment: that science and reason shed light on what is real and true and reliable and knowable. In the Christian tradition we love to claim that we *know* the truth, and we love to demonstrate and debate the *evidence* of God's existence.

If the *light* is good, it is therefore tempting to associate the *darkness* with the bad. In the culture I grew up in, Halloween was a time

to stay indoors, close the curtains and pretend we weren't in. It was the scary evening of ghosts and witches, full of darkness, that was to be avoided, and many churches would instead host 'Light Parties' for the kids. It was part of the view that anything spiritually questionable, anything that wasn't objectively 'good', should be avoided or converted. Experiences like doubt, fear of the unknown, illness; people who follow other religions, and questions which have no answers. Is this what it means to walk in darkness?

The Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, gives us a helpful hint. He says:

*Remember, light is not so much **what** you directly see as that **by which** you see everything else.*

I find this distinction very helpful in understanding Jesus as the Light of the World. If Jesus provides us with **a way by which to see everything**, then nothing is outside of this scope, nothing is outside of the light, nothing is outside of love.

Psalm 139: 12 says: even the darkness is not dark for you, and night shines as the day. Darkness and light are but one.

So if the darkness is not something to be feared or avoided, what can it teach us? If we have been so focussed on the light, what have we missed about the dark?

When words and rationality no longer answer our questions, we are left with silence and not-knowing. These 'dark' and 'negative' ways, according to Richard Rohr, are also "good and necessary" for creating faith.

Rohr illustrates this idea by looking to art, which often portrays the sun *and* moon *together* as sacred symbols. The sun gives bright light, providing stark clarity. But there is a warning that this often leads to an arrogance about that order and clarity, as the sun can also blind us and dehydrate us if we get too much of it. In contrast, the light from the moon is much weaker and more

subtle. It clarifies only indirectly, and is therefore not so quickly conclusive.

Rohr describes Jesus as a "*lunar* teacher, patient with darkness and slow growth". In Mark 4:27, Jesus says, "The seed is sprouting and growing but we do not know how". In Matthew 13:30, Jesus even says to let the good and bad seeds grow together until the harvest. Jesus seems to be willing to live with non-perfection, to welcome both good and bad to the table, to live by sun and moon together.

And so from the example of Jesus, let's look to how this can be lived out in our everyday lives. Sister Joan Chittister (an American Benedictine nun and theologian) speaks of the light which comes from the lived reality of our dark and difficult experiences. She says:

The light we gain in darkness is the awareness that, however bleak the place of darkness was for us, we did not die there. We know now that life begins again on the other side of the darkness. Another life. A new life. After the death, the loss, the rejection, the failure, life does go on. Differently, but on. Having been sunk into the cold night of despair—and having survived it—we rise to new light, calm and clear and confident that what will be, will be enough for us.

In dark times, when there are no easy answers and no clear way forward, we can be confident that Jesus is with us. And that our faith is growing deeper roots into the darkness of the earth: roots that can draw on water from deep below when the surface of life is dry.

I pray that my perception of the world continues to change as I follow Jesus, as I learn to look at the world with the light of Christ illuminating everything. I pray that I would accept people around me who have different opinions to myself, that I would love people who live their lives differently to me. I pray that my eyes would be opened to

see better in the dark, to become aware of things that so far I have been blind to. Help me to be open to reconsider my priorities; to change my attitudes and take different actions. Help me to accept that I cannot know everything, and that life will not necessarily be easy. Thank you for being our guide, our light, our illuminating presence. We remind ourselves that light and darkness

are as one to you, and that the whole world is bathed in your light and your love. And we thank you for those people who have gone before us and have shown us the way, even in the darkness.

Amen

21. Dealing with feelings of revenge

A reflection on Romans 12: 9-21, by Rahel Pereira & Nico Kanzleiter



(Translated and adapted from a sermon by Pfarrerin Susanne Joos, Stuttgart)

Feelings of revenge are strong feelings.

Taking revenge on someone who, in some way or another humiliated me, seems to be part of human nature since the early days.

Kain hates Abel, because he feels treated unfairly.
Then he kills him.

Acts of revenge seem to promise a way out of helplessness and powerlessness.
Not be a victim anymore.

Reestablish balance.
Equal exchange.

Yes, it can be a real temptation to let someone pay for what he did to me. Or what I think he did to me. Call it sweet revenge. It doesn't have to be the big thing, like killing someone. There are many ways to pay back someone who treated you unfairly. Ignore the person, be unfriendly, not help out if he asks for your help.

Even God, says the Tora, wants to take revenge on those of his people who have betrayed him, mocked him, forgotten him.
Revenge out of a disappointed hope.

Revenge out of disappointed love.

The line between striving for something and being obsessed is sometimes very narrow. And revenge is a strong feeling.

Right from the beginning, humans living in communities have tried to find ways to limit the destructive power of revenge. The Bible is one way to prove that.

God seals Cain with a sign so no one else may kill him. Cain, the murderer is protected by God. He is not supposed to be outlawed.

From the Old Testament we know the rule "Eye for an eye": One counter is allowed, but that must be enough.

And also the Old Testament already tells us to feed the enemy when he's hungry. We should not withhold the most necessary to any humankind.

And then Jesus comes and tops it all by telling us to love our enemies.

Now let's be honest. Even if we all agree that Jesus' ultimate commandment may help to prevent bad actions, phantasies and longing for revenge most often times still will stay with us for a while. The feelings are there. You will also find them, molded in language, in the psalm prayers against the enemies. And even if we like to hide and ignore such feelings, they still often show themselves in subtle or very obvious ways.

One might react to an insult with impatience, with little provocations or by withholding important information. With little mean acts.

They sometime can be harmless or they can become very destructive in our relationships.

And then we hear Pauls words from today's reading: „Do not repay anyone evil for evil,

but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

Sounds nice and easy at first sight. Just break the cycle of action and reaction and take a positive stance. Think positive! Focus on what is good and noble.

In a way Paul asks you not to stay a victim if you became one. He asks you to turn things around. React, but in a good way. Not suppress the destructive energy, but *use* it and create some *beauty* out of it.

The longer I kept thinking about it, the question arose: How is that possible? Paul will look at us, with a witty and gentle smile, saying: If it was that easy, our congregations and communities would be a Garden Eden!

And then, Paul thankfully has a very sober way to continue by saying: „If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

It's not always possible. It doesn't only depend on us. Some things can't be solved. Some relationships end. Sometimes what it needs is distance.

I am only responsible for my actions.

This seems to be our task: stop focusing too much on the others.

Instead of an „Eye for an eye”: Do what is right. And beautiful. And then let go.

To keep distance, this seems to be addressed in yet another way: „Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God!”

Make room!

If we keep focusing on our enemy and his wrongdoings: Could it be that by doing that we stand in the way of change? If we urge someone to change: Could it be that by doing that we block the room where he could get in contact with himself?

Or is it about making room in ourselves?
Feeling what we are drawn to? Where do we
want to go?

Paul motivates us to act self-determined.
Follow the Tora, the Bible or your own
values and then take a stance, regardless of
what everyone else is doing. Act even
without knowing if God will intervene.

It requires strength and inner maturity to
stop being a victim. But at the same time
not being the one who simply endures any
kind of insult and humiliation – which in the
end would make us accomplices of evil. And
of course, look for others who have been
harmed and fight for their rights, especially
when they can't help themselves.

We can and should stand up for ourselves.
But not by repeating the wrongs of our
enemies. Not by strengthening the cycle of
violence and counterviolence. But by

breaking it and finding a new way, a fruitful
perspective.

It could be, says Paul, that our enemy gets
startled and leaves in shame. That is what
Paul refers to when he says: When you care
for your enemies “you will heap burning
coals on their heads.” (Rm 12,20)

Enemies with a red face like in old Egypt.
Where people who knew about their guilt
would walk the streets with a bowl of
burning coals on their head.

*„Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with
good.” (Rm 12,21)*

What could this mean for us, for you in the
coming week?

God help us, and the Spirit of God be with
us all.

Amen.

22. Faith in an age of distraction

A meditation on Philippians 4: 8, by Jonas Bedford-Strohm



Good evening, church!

It took me a while to figure out what to talk about today... The lectionary gave me a hint.

This quote from Paul's letter to the Phillipians is selected:

*“Finally, brothers and sisters,
whatever is true,
whatever is noble,
whatever is right,
whatever is pure,
whatever is lovely,
whatever is admirable—
if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—
think about such things.” (Phil. 4:8)*

It was quite the process wrestling myself through what that actually means... But by the end of writing this at a coffee shop yesterday... this George Michael song was playing:

*„'Cause I gotta have faith
I gotta' have faith
Because I gotta have faith, faith, faith
I got to have faith, faith, faith“*

You're welcome... this song will not leave you all night!

In fact, I do hope by the end of this meditation... that's exactly what you'll be wanting to sing!

—

Let's talk about how to get to what Paul asks of us: „think about such things“: „whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable

“ How do you do that?

How do you do that today?

With all the distractions... all the demands, requirements... just trying to keep track of the basics seems exhausting...

Or maybe it's just me? ;-)

I don't know... Amos might have something to do with it..

But my sense is: there's a speed to modern life - a distractedness – that makes it exhausting sometimes.

—

The other day, Megan and I watched „The Social Dilemma“ on Netflix. If you haven't seen it, I very much recommend it.

So you see: the cards are stacked against you finding peace, finding quiet, finding focus ...

simply because that's not very profitable for anyone else.

So in this environment, how do we do that?
Finding peace, finding quiet, finding focus...

—

How do we unclutter our minds to make space for what is actually important?
What truly matters.
How do we keep focus on what matters?

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Honestly, I don't know. If you have ideas, let me know. That's not what I want to share about today.

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Rather, I want to take a shot at the following question: Even if we'd actually managed to make space in our lives and in our minds... what actually is that space for?

Say, we achieved space, peace, calm, quiet, focus... what then?
What should we focus on?
What should we find peace for?

I looked for a few pointers in the Bible and came up with these...

Matthew 6 talks about the „treasures in heaven“:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

I love that line... “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

This idea can even translate to other areas of life... Its wisdom isn't limited to religion or

theology in the narrow sense. It's just plain good advice generally.

Stephen Covey had this saying:

„The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.“

That's it. That's the key. To life, to God... to everything.

More philosophically... theologian Paul Tillich made a similar point. He thought of our image of God, or rather: our faith, as our „ultimate concern“.

Of course, it's not easy to distinguish the ultimate from the penultimate. Cause we're sooooo caught up in the penultimate. We're sooooo distracted by it. We give it so much presence in our lives that we can't even tell the difference at times.

But that's our job as Christians: to commit to prayer over and over again, in order to figure out: what exactly is the ultimate and what's just a side show?

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Practically... what might the penultimate be? Earthly treasures. Personal pride. Our power. Our vanity. Our things. Our stuff. Our performance. Our looks. Our skills. Our money. Our car. Our jobs. Our... whatever... you get the point!

So what, then, might be the ultimate?

In German, Tillich says:

„Das, was uns unbedingt angeht“

... that which touches us at our utmost core, that which we are never immune from, that we are affected by in all areas of life ... in the deepest way possible.

So if faith is a matter of „ultimate concern“ – we oughta make God the center of this concern.

Tillich also thought of faith as the integrating center of our personhood. And he considered faith an action.

"Faith as ultimate concern is an act of the total personality. It happens in the center of the personal life and includes all its elements" (Tillich, 4).

In that sense, faith is „perfect“ - not in our modern sense of „without flaw“ ... but rather in the original meaning of the Greek and Latin word: „complete, without parts or division, wholesome“

So I think of „perfect faith“ as: „wholesome, wholehearted, holistic concern with God as the integrative center of our personality“.

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I think that hits exactly on what the first commandment is about:

„I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.“

Your attention shouldn't be divided.
You shouldn't be too distracted.
Sure, you're always imperfect in the modern sense, but you can, in fact, be perfect in the ancient sense of wholesome, wholehearted, holistic.
So it's worth a try.

Which makes me think of Luther. In his take on the first commandment, Luther puts it this way:

“A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we take refuge in all distress. To have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe from the whole heart. If your faith and trust is right, then your god is true. If your trust is wrong, then you have not the true God. For these two belong together: faith and God. Whatever your heart clings to and confides in is really your god.“

The metaphor of the heart makes clear: this is not just a rational project.

It's not just a theoretical exercise.
Rather, It's a lived reality.
It's embodied reality.

Luther creates a link of the mind and the body.

Making space in your mind for God doesn't pull you away from reality into some alternative universe. On the contrary: It helps you live fully human in our earthly reality... precisely because you do not mistake it for the ultimate reality.

That's why the third commandment goes on to say:

“You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them“

It focuses on embodied experience.
And that's appropriate:
We need rituals...
we need visual representation to understand ourselves.
But we cannot mistake our representations for gods.
They become idols the moment you hang your heart on them.

This fits with what we call the „Greatest Commandment“ in the New Testament:

„Love God and your neighbor as yourself“

Mark relays the story like this:

„One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him: “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ And: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

Loving God can never be divorced from loving your neighbor and loving yourself. It's a triple commandment of love. It forces us to recognize the interconnectedness of all three. They're dimensions of the very same thing: love. And as John points out: God is Love. And hence: Love is God. So loving God, loving your neighbor, loving yourself... They're all dimensions of the same integrated reality, the same interwoven practice, the same integrated Christian life and experience.

Megan and I got married in a Lutheran Church in Kansas City. Back then, I spent some time getting to know the ELCA... the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Their church motto is: „God's work, our hands“ When I read Tillich talking about faith as action... When I read the Commandments connecting heavenly and earthly reality... When I hear Jesus equating love of neighbor with love of God... Then this motto comes as a kind of conclusion for me: „God's work, our hands.“

I think, this motto summarizes the triple commandment of love perfectly. In one of their hymns I found these lines:

*God's work, our feet: trav'ling together,
following Jesus to places unknown,
walking as friends, marching for freedom,
running the race with God's future the goal.*

*Bless, God, our feet as we follow your way,
sharing the good news of your Gospel.*

That's what it's about. A lived reality. Walking, marching, running the race together... in Christ. God's work, our hands.

For the work of our hands to be God's work, we need to put God at the center of our person. Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.

So make sure, what your heart clings to and confides in – make sure that it, in fact, really is God. And not a distraction. Telling the difference can be hard at times.

But that's why we have prayer. I think of as the great „windshield wiper of life.“

When it's all rainy and hazy and foggy and you can't see the road... You're running on faith, hoping not to crash your car. At this point, you don't even know if you're on a path at all anymore. That's when you need a windshield wiper to figure out what on earth the main thing is. What to hang your heart on.

So please join me in prayer:

God, We come to meet you. We come searching, longing, yearning for your presence. Be with us here tonight. Help us focus on what matters. Help us figure out what is right, what is pure, what is commendable, as Paul says. When we get lost, bring us home. In Jesus name, we pray.

Amen.