

The Not So Minor Prophets

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Introduction:

When I told a friend I was going to write and teach about the Minor Prophets, she laughed and said, “I might sit this one out.” But Amos and Jonah, Micah, and Malachi all have a lot to teach us. I hope that by reading and studying these ancient writings, you might be inspired anew to live a life that honors the Lord in every way.

The minor prophets shared the common experience of living in difficult times. They saw upheaval, injustice, poverty, and chaos. Their goal was to help the people of Israel to see God, pointing them away from personal gain, nationalistic pride, racism, and worship of the idols of the day to lives centered on holiness, obedience, and love.

The twelve “minor” prophets are given the descriptive based on the length of the writings they left behind. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, the “major” prophets, wrote more, but it is impossible to know whether their ministries were any more affecting at the time of their delivery or not. The minor prophets may have been major forces for transformation in their day, and their writings continue to move us today.

The order in which the minor prophets are listed is not chronological, and the reason they are listed as they are is not clear—whatever prompted this particular arrangement has been lost to time. In this book we will look at them in chronological order, attempting to discover some thematic threads as we move forward on the timeline.

We find ourselves, as the minor prophets did, in a time of confusion and chaos. Our tendency is to focus on our own self-centered lives, to live in a place of fear and self-protection, but these Scriptures invite us to see ourselves and the world around us with a broader lens of compassion. We are also called to remember disobedience in-

volves consequences from a Holy God who will not tolerate ongoing rebellion but will call us back with every means necessary, including discipline, if we persist in our disobedience.

Let's face the facts. The Minor Prophets have some real roadblocks as invitational material for Bible study. There are twelve of them. The material blends together because it feels like they cover some of the same ground repeatedly. And aside from Hosea—bless his heart—and Jonah, we don't get a lot of storytelling. But don't lose heart! Help is at hand. I hope that together we can engage with these books in ways that will make them memorable. I hope that at the end of the study, you will be able to say, "The Minor Prophets? Oh yes, I would love to tell you about them!"

This study will work best for a small group, but it is for anyone who wants to learn more and who is ready to experience God's invitation to transformation in new ways. Get ready for a grand adventure!

Remembering the Order of the 12 in the Bible:

If you are like me, it is a struggle to remember the order of the 12 Minor Prophets. So I did what any wise writer would do and consulted the internet. It helpfully supplied two different mnemonics to help!

Here we go: “Homer Joins All Old John’s Mini Naughty Hamsters, Zealous Hawk Zebras Make.” Nah...not loving that one!

Let’s try another: “How Joyful All Our Journey Means No Harm, Zealous Heroes Zealously March.” All of that translates to: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

But now, let’s look at them in a different way!

Minor Prophets in Chronological Order

(some dates disputed)

Prophet	Years	Audience
Jonah	820-804 BC	Assyrians
Amos	810-785 BC	northern kingdom (Israel)
Joel	800 BC	southern kingdom (Judah)
Hosea	785-725 BC	northern kingdom
Micah	749-722 BC	northern kingdom
Nahum	661-612 BC	Assyrians
Zephaniah	630 BC	southern kingdom
Habakkuk	610-599 BC	southern kingdom
Obadiah	585 BC	Edomites
Haggai	520 BC	returning exiles from Babylon
Zechariah	518 BC	returning exiles from Babylon
Malachi	430-400 BC	returning exiles from Babylon

HOSEA

Hosea

Introduction:

Our youngest child graduated from high school on a Saturday, and we celebrated big, with family and friends gathering around a festive table. On Sunday, he loaded up his car and left for his summer job at a Christian camp. After lunch that day, we sat on our porch with two table settings. I started to cry as I looked around at the empty seats, and thought of our three children who had successfully graduated and now moved on to higher education and jobs. My husband tried to comfort me with words of encouragement, “Isn’t this exactly what we hoped for?” he said. “We wanted them to grow up and fly away!” In my blubbing, I managed to blurt out, “But I’m still sad!”

That story has a happy continuation, with our children coming home often, bringing their friends— and eventually their spouses and children —to keep our home filled with love and laughter. In Hosea, we see a story of a heavenly father who loves his children dearly and wants them to live on this earth in a love relationship with him. God wants the children of Israel (often called Ephraim in this book), to love him, depend on him, worship him. Instead, God sees his people wander away and worship with superficiality but not with a true and loyal heart. Their tendency to want to keep God at arm’s length and to worship as it is convenient for them, reveals itself as they pay homage to the traditions of their religious observances without committing their hearts to God.

Hosea is written in the Northern Kingdom, the only one of the 12 Minor Prophets to have that distinction. The center piece the story and probably the most memorable part is the story of Hosea, his unfaithful wife, Gomer, and their three children: Jezreel, Loruhamah, and Loammi. God uses this story of the prophet, Hosea—a faithful man—repeatedly redeeming his whoring wife, Gomer, to illustrate God’s own divine pain at seeing the Children of Israel leave the way of true life and begin to worship materialism, pleasures of the flesh, and earthly power.

The Book of Hosea powerfully makes the point that God created us, loves us, and wants our worship, but the Almighty doesn’t need us. God is not like we are. He is God. He longs for us because as Creator, he formed us and knows what is best for us. Creator God knows the way that leads to an eternity of joy, and for this reason God is constantly wooing us. The heavenly invitation to us, like the one of Hosea to his philandering wife, Gomer, is characterized primarily by the supremacy of GRACE. But for the grace of God, there go we all, sashaying down the lane, hips swaying, bright red lipstick on, looking for lovers that lead us further down the road of perdition and away from the safety and security found in the arms of our loving God. Sadly, our deviousness is often disguised in such a way that we ourselves sometimes have a hard time seeing it. We still go to church, we carry on with our routines, we keep up appearances, but at the core, we have a mushy, brown spot. The fruit we produce may look wholesome on the outside, but God knows we are not “all in.” Our hearts wander off into ruinous territory as we repeatedly prostitute ourselves by seeking after the desires of our hearts that do not come from God.

Hosea invites us to look again at where we are in our relationship with Creator God. His prophecy challenges us to see the grace offered us and invites us to accept it wholeheartedly, devoting ourselves to seeking after what really matters.

1. The Story

Read: Hosea 1-3

I remember going to a parent/teacher conference when my children were getting ready to go to a new school that had a different philosophy. The school grouped kids into grades K-2 and 3-5, promoting the philosophy that children learn better when they are allowed to explore and to reach and then to help teach what they have learned to the younger kids. When I went to that first meeting, I was prepared to not like it at all and specifically to not like the one teacher that I saw as the leader. But then she opened her mouth, and out came her story of how much she loved teaching and how she thought this new approach would help our kids learn. Suddenly I sat there, finding myself longing for this teacher to teach my kids! What a transformation in just a few minutes, and what a tribute to the power of a story to change hearts and lives.

Everyone has a story, don't they? As long as we don't know their story, we can disregard their well-being more easily, can't we? They become "those people." When we hear someone's story, in most cases, we find ourselves relating to them, asking ourselves what we would do if our circumstances were like theirs, and maybe even finding common ground. Stories matter. In a time when social media spreads news faster than fire on dry timber, we have to exercise caution to look for the people behind the stories and find ways to relate to them so that we don't blanket groups of humans into smothering stereotypes that do great harm both to us and to them.

Can you think of a time when hearing someone's story helped to change you mind about them?

Can you think of a way that we currently "dehumanize" groups of people? How does this affect us? How does it affect them? What can we do to help put a "face" back on a story?

Isn't it interesting that a lot of scripture is stories? Starting with creation and moving to the description of the final battles, the Bible consistently reaches out to us over the ages by painting pictures and telling stories.

What is your favorite Bible story and why?

We can relate to some of the stories more than others. Hosea may well be one of those that resonates. The story in chapters 1-3 sets the stage for the other teachings of Hosea that follow.

C.S. Lewis was a great storyteller. From the *Chronicles of Narnia*, we hear in a new way the whole message of divine love. It is said that during a conference on comparative religions in Britain, scholars debated about what made Christianity unique. They bandied about several ideas and began to argue, at which point celebrated theologian and author, C.S. Lewis, entered the room and inquired as to what the discussion was about. Reportedly, once informed, he quickly answered, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

Grace is the whole point of the book of Hosea. As the story opens, we see God speaking to Hosea and telling him to take a prostitute for a wife, to bring her into his home and to have children with her. Hosea obeys, “So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.” (v. 3)

I have to wonder how Hosea initially reacted to God’s command.

Have you ever felt God asking you to do something that didn’t make sense or was hard? How did you react?

Do you think this story really happened as described? (There are no “correct” answers here...) If so, why do you think so? If not, why not?

Hosea starts his prophecy by naming his 3 children with “message” names. Do you know anyone that has a name like that? In our society, we name children “Junior” or attach a number at the end of their names indicating the line they have come from: John Smith, III, would certainly remind us of his ancestors, wouldn’t it?

What are some “message” names you remember?

Let’s look at the names God told Hosea to give his children and why:

1. Jezreel (v. 4)-

Jezreel's name may mean "God sows" or "God scatters." With the passage of time, it is difficult to understand exactly what Hosea meant by this name but it is possible that it was intended to convey the thought that the nation would reap what it had sown and that their unfaithfulness would end in calamity.

2. Lo-Ruhamah (v. 5)-

Through Hosea, God pronounces an end to divine mercy to the country of Israel, after their repeated wandering from the path set before them. "No pity" or "Not loved" (translations vary) foretells the fall of the nation to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.

3. Loammi (v. 9)-

By saying "not my people," God conveys his disappointment with Ephraim's wandering. This phrasing strongly points out that God has standards that cannot be violated with impunity.

Hosea and Gomer have three children together. Hosea shows grace to Gomer; Gomer accepts and produces children with her husband. No matter what her future actions,

the 3 children remain as a testament of their love, a time when they were bonded together and working in concert to produce a family. Gomer's later actions do nothing to change that. She and Hosea will always have the evidence of their union. Maybe this story carries over into our permanent relationship with God: by showing us grace, the Almighty allows us to enter into a covenant relationship, never changing his mind about us; instead, always ready and willing to bring us home and restore us into a right relationship, if we are willing to repent.

While I am not entering into the ongoing theological conundrum about "once saved always saved," it might be helpful for us to refresh our memory about God's unfailing love to us—always.

Deut. 31:6 -

Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you."

Matt. 28:20 -

And remember, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Heb. 13:5-6 -

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you. So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?"

How does it make you feel to know that God is with you, no matter what?

Is there a time in your life when you can look back and see God's faithfulness to you no matter what your response was?

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Thank you so much for your eternal faithfulness to us. Thank you for the grace you offer to us. Help us to love and serve you always. Amen.

2. Knowledge of God

Read: Hosea 4-6

Do you like to underline in your Bible? I do! It's fun to see what is in pen or pencil or bright yellow highlighter. The notes on the side tell stories of when this or that passage spoke especially to me. I remember reading Psalm 127 in the hospital. "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him," stood out to me that morning after giving birth to our third child, a son. The note on the sidebar says, "Read on morning of Timothy's birth" and there is a lovely blue star by it!

What is a passage that you have underlined in your Bible? Do you have a particular system and color code for how you underline?

Sometimes, if we underline words that stand out to us, we can see new messages in the Bible. Going through these chapters, the words "knowledge" and "understanding" stood out several times. Let's look at the various references and see if we can find some lessons that speak to us today:

4:1-“Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and **no knowledge of God** in the land.”

4:6- “My people are destroyed for **lack of knowledge**; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me.”

4:10- “They shall eat, but not be satisfied; they shall play the whore, but not multiply; because they have forsaken the Lord and devote themselves to whoredom; wine and new wine **take away the understanding.**”

4:14- “...thus a people **without understanding** comes to ruin.”

6:6- “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the **knowledge of God** rather than burnt offerings.”

What kind of knowledge do you think Hosea is talking about here?

Although we can all readily agree that this is not a reference to the kind of factual content that is covered on a college entrance exam (whew!), we have to read this over a

few times and get in close to see the message. Part of the answer key here is likely in the first reference and also in the last:

_____.

Hosea makes the point that without God, we perish. Nothing we are or do makes sense into eternity. The Israelites are confused and have lost their way. He calls them out and names the sins that they are guilty of, and some of them are listed below. Isn't it always so easy to list the sins of others? But don't get too happy, our turn is coming next!

4:10- Forsaking the Lord

5:17- Idolatry

5:5- Pride

5:11- Vanity

6:7- Breaking the covenant

Let's take a moment to look at that list and think about more current events in our churches and in our own lives. Can you think of ways that we might be guilty of some

of the same sins that beset the Israelites? What about these possible translations to more modern times...

Forsaking the Lord...I got busy doing my own thing.

Idolatry...Sometimes prioritizing stuff before God: sports, house, car, kids...

Pride...I'm an independent thinker...or...I've got this, God. No need for you to interject here!

Vanity...Hope everyone notices my new dress/hairdo/shoes/boyfriend/girlfriend

Breaking the covenant...All of the above plus the ongoing mistake of repetitious, unrepentant sin.

Ouch! That's quite a list, isn't it? Sadly, we can all probably find ourselves somewhere in there. If you feel convicted, write a note here to God and let him know of your repentance and willingness to change so that he becomes your priority.

How do you think the knowledge of God might help us steer clear of these sins that so tripped up Ephraim? As Paul writes to Colossians, he makes a statement that might shine some light on the importance of having more knowledge of God:

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the **knowledge of God's will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and **as you grow in the knowledge of God**. Col. 1:9-10

Can you make a list of what Paul says will happen as we grow in the knowledge of God?

Besides being closer to God as we grow in our knowledge, we also understand the Divine will, gain spiritual wisdom, begin to lead lives that are worthy of God, and ultimately bear good fruit! Knowing God puts us on the right path to live lives that really please him.

As you consider these verses, maybe you will want to go back through Hosea's prophecy and underline some of these verses related to the knowledge and understanding of God.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, speak to us so that we can gain true knowledge of you and your ways. Draw us close to you, Holy One. Amen.

3. Grace Upon Undeserved Grace

Read: Hosea 7-10

Hosea starts out with a story of loving redemption: a man repeatedly showing grace to his wayward wife, Gomer. As the prophecy continues, these chapters spell out in detail the nature of Israel's sins and their unwillingness to turn back to God with a sincere heart. God uses Hosea to highlight the ways Ephraim continues to choose the path of unrighteousness: by making kings but not through God's direction (8:4), uttering mere words not followed by actions (10:4), and having a false heart that only puts forth the semblance of spiritual worship (10:2).

The BBC used to produce a show called, "Keeping Up Appearances," about a woman named Hyacinth Bucket (she insisted her last name was pronounced "bouquet!") who spent her time doing as the show's title describes—living a false life, where appearances mattered much more than reality. Consequently, she finds herself in humorous situations all the time, striving mightily to look like she is more than she is. While it is easy to laugh along with the British humor of the show, when we read Hosea, we don't see any humor at all. In fact, many of us shift uncomfortably in our recliners as we examine why God is angry with the Israelites: form over function; comfort over righteousness; accommodation over eradication.

The prophecy inspires us all to look deeper into our own customs, rituals and ways of life.

Let's read over a few passages from this section of Hosea and see where God might be calling us to change:

1. Read Hosea 7:8-16 and answer these questions:

- What does it mean for Ephraim to "mix with the peoples?"

- What is it that "testifies against him?"

- What does God say he will do to the Israelites when he compares them to birds?

- What awaits God's people because of their straying ways?

- The children of Israel “turn to that which does not profit.” What does that mean?

In their desire to keep up appearances and to be like the other nations around them, the Israelites have begun to look like everyone else around them. They are not a holy example to the other nations; instead, they work hard to blend in and make no waves. Does this sound like familiar territory? How are we guilty in our time and in our place of looking just like everyone else? Instead of being holy (set apart) we often show a remarkable degree of ability to change our stripes to fit the prevailing fashions of the day, don't we? How do you see yourself in this passage? How about your church family? What is one way you might align yourself more fully with God?

Moving into Chapter 8, we hear God express frustration with his children as they go their own way, despite his clear instructions. We have a 2 year old granddaughter, and it is quite interesting to give her instructions! When she goes for the plate of cookies

before dinner, we will clearly say, “No,” and move the plate out of reach. Often that is not sufficient, and you probably know what comes next—she looks at whoever said no, to assess how serious they are, and then looks around for a chair to reach the prize. Training and discipline are the only ways to help her understand obedience. As with a young child, God is showing Ephraim the error of its ways. The trouble is, Ephraim is not two, and they do know better by now!

Let’s look at what God’s indictment of the nation says:

8:1- “...because they have broken my covenant, and transgressed my law.”

8:4- “They made kings, but not through me; they set up princes, but without my knowledge.”

8:4- “With their silver and gold they made idols.”

8:12- “Though I write for him the multitude of my instructions, they are regarded as a strange thing.”

8:7- “For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.”

Trying to understand the spirit of what God is saying, let’s paraphrase these verses and try to put it in one paragraph:

“You broke all the rules that I gave you. They were designed for your good. You went about making important decisions without asking me: you became materialistic; you read my words but were not inspired because you didn’t want to see; you put all your energy into emptiness, and that is what you will get back.”

What do you think of the paraphrase? Do you think it is on target? If not, what would you change? To what part of these verses do you most easily relate?

Through Hosea, God is impressing on Israel how far they have strayed by prostituting themselves to evil and becoming slaves to wrong. In Chapters 9 & 10, he goes on to elaborate on their sin, offering conviction and opportunity for repentance.

Sow for yourselves righteousness;
Reap steadfast love;
Break up your fallow ground;
For it is time to seek the Lord,
That he may come and rain righteousness upon you.

Hosea 10:12

In verse 12, what image does God use to express the reward for truly seeking him?

How do we “break up...fallow ground” in our lives? Is fallow ground soft or hard? It is useful or useless? Do you see potential in places in your life that remain untouched, unproductive?

What does “rain righteousness” look like to you? What does God mean by inviting us to “sow righteousness?”

In our yard, we have a gingko tree. It is big and beautiful and has fan shaped leaves. Biologists tell us that it is an ancient tree, existing in the fossil record for eons. What makes the gingko particularly interesting is what happens in the Fall. It turns bright yellow and then one day—all on one day—the leaves fall off. The day it happens, we can go out and dance in the falling leaves, trying to catch them as they flutter to the

ground. It's such great fun—until the next day when we have to think about raking them!

Maybe God's righteousness raining down, looks like that—overwhelming beauty in our lives—replete with rewards for truth-telling, God-fearing, and sincerely-worshipping hearts that seek God and his will before all else. Grace upon grace.

Sometimes, when I am out walking the neighborhood, I like to listen to Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) talks. Recently, I heard a good one by Anne Lamott:

Grace is spiritual WD-40 or water wings. The mystery of grace is that God loves Henry Kissinger, Vladimir Putin, and me exactly the same as he or she loves your new grandchild. Go figure. The movement of grace is what changes us, heals us, and heals our world. To summon grace say, "Help," and then buckle up. Grace finds you exactly where you are, but it doesn't leave you where it found you.

Pause for Prayer:

God, thank you for offering me grace and then more grace. Help me to turn around and offer that same kind of love to people around me. For it is through the power of Jesus and in his name that we ask this. Amen.

4. TLC

Read: Hosea 11 & 12

In my Bible, the heading for Chapter 11 is, “God’s Compassion Despite Israel’s Ingratitude.” Sometimes the headings can be right on target in terms of summarizing the contents of the coming verses! Indeed, the passage that follows reveals God’s tenderness toward humanity in a way we can all relate:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
But they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
With bands of love.
I was to them like those
Who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.
Hosea 1:3-4

I am the grandmother of 5 little ones and realize every day the blessing that it is to have a small part in these young ones’ lives. Holding them, feeding them, helping them learn to walk, rocking them to sleep, comforting them—loving them—what a privilege it is!

As we read about a God who portrays himself as a loving parent, we are drawn to him, longing for that comforting relationship of the ideal mother—the one who never fails and is always compassionate. We are reminded of other verses, including Lamentations 3:21-23:

But this I call to mind,
And therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning;
Great is your faithfulness.

How do these word pictures of God as the ultimate good parent, help you in your faith journey? Do they bring back any childhood memories? Or any memories of raising your own children?

Hosea, and some of the other Minor Prophets, can be hard to read because they seem to vacillate between depictions of God as a kind, tender, compassionate parent and God as an all-powerful enforcer of the rules for righteous living. Do you ever struggle with blending and reconciling these two views? Who is God anyway?

Again, we come back to the truth of Christ who told us in John 15:9, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love,” and again in John 16:15, “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” Jesus and God are, through some mystery beyond human understanding, both One. Together with the Spirit, they are the Triune God, the different manifestations of the Holy One. So when we look at Jesus and hear his words, we are hearing and seeing God. When the Spirit lives in us, we have Christ in us and that points us to Truth.

In her book, *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans addresses this topic and provides another view of how we can see the God of the Bible in different ways, based on our perspective:

The truth is, you can bend Scripture to say just about anything you want it to say. You can bend it until it breaks. For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of whether to pick and choose, but how to pick and choose. We’re all selective. We all wrestle with how to interpret and apply the Bible in our lives. We all go to the text looking for something, and we all have the tendency to find it. So the question we have to ask ourselves is this: are we reading with the prejudice of love, with Christ as our model, or are we

reading with the prejudices of judgment and power, self-interest and greed? Are we seeking to enslave or liberate, burden or set free? (pg.56)

How do you react to this quote from Rachel Held Evans? Do you think people find what they are looking for in the Bible?

How do these passages on the tenderness of God encourage you to seek a well-rounded view of our Heavenly Parent?

As we read on in Hosea, we see God revealing his character just a little more; it is another crack of light that gives us a glimpse of the bigger picture of the Holy One:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?...
My heart recoils within me;
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;

For I am God and no mortal,
The Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath.
They shall go after the Lord,
who roars like a lion;
Hosea 11:8-10

Here, God uses Hosea to reiterate that He is not human; the Almighty's ways are above ours; the Creator's thoughts unlike ours. God who loves us whole-heartedly, and desires the same from us in return. He is jealous for our souls because that is what is the very best for us. He "recoils" from giving way to fierce anger, and instead treats us with gentleness and kindness—grace-filled gentleness and kindness.

Pause for Prayer:

God of power and might, heaven and earth are filled with your glory. We are small and temporary beings, and we struggle to have some comprehension of you. Help us as we relate to this image of you as a caring parent. Give us that assurance of your love and compassion—always. In Jesus' holy name we pray this prayer. Amen.

Day 5: Gift of Grace

Read Hosea 12, 13 & 14

It's early in the morning. Sounds of little feet pattering down the steps wake us up, and we peak out from layers of warmth to follow the children downstairs where the Christmas tree lights are still on and illuminate a pile of gifts under the tree. The wonder and awe reflected in our little ones' eyes brightens up our hearts as do the cries of "Merry Christmas!"

This highly idealized version of Christmas morning is equal parts a fulfillment of our dreams and of the commercial image of Christmas. But still. It is warm and inviting to think about, isn't it? The "perfect" Christmas morning of our imagination gives way to what more often happens in real life: multitudes stand around the tree, the rugged cross, the perfect gift of the Father to humanity, the most complete reflection of himself, God in person—but we are unwilling to "open" the gift, to accept the sacrifice, to welcome the Savior as Lord of all in our lives. It is as if God offers a cup of the water of life and the people stand back, thirsty, thirsty and say, "No thanks, we will work this out ourselves. We can do this alone." The river of living water flows, full and clear, abundant and grace-filled. But like the people of Hosea's time, we keep our feet firmly on the bank, unwilling to acknowledge God's sovereignty. We are held back by—what? Sin? Pride? Ignorance?

How do you relate to these two word pictures: the one of the “perfect” Christmas and the one where the people refuse to open the gift or drink from the water?

Even though Hosea’s prophecy was written long before Jesus came—maybe around 722 B.C.—his words are quoted a number of times in the New Testament. The problems he addresses all those years before, live on into the time of Jesus and into our day today, so many years later. We are like Ephraim (the Children of Israel), aren’t we? We see God’s offer of relationship and whole life, and we sometimes decide to settle for less.

Let’s look at some of Hosea’s quotes that are repeated in the New Testament and try to discern some lessons that can help us today:

1. “Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt I have called my son.’” (Matt.2:14-15 and Hosea 11:1)

What does Egypt represent in the stories of the Old Testament?

One of the powerful themes of the Bible is freedom: freedom from the captivity of sin. Over and over in Hosea (and in the rest of scripture), God invites people to accept the generous offer of grace and salvation. As Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

What do you think holds us back from accepting God’s gift of grace and freedom? How can we be people who dive deep into those crystal waters of forgiveness and invite others to join us? Are we “all in” for Jesus?

2. “When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’” (1 Cor. 15:54-55, Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14).

Through his death on the cross, Jesus offers us the perfect gift of wholeness and life in him. When we accept his sacrificial love, we become conduits for his grace to others: transmitting the flow of never-ending love to those around us. Jesus took our ultimate fear—and buried it in the power of his love.

How does knowing that Jesus has triumphed over death transform your life?

When I was a young girl living in the Northeastern part of Brazil, we visited an island called Itaparica. On that island there was a spring with its source enclosed in beautiful blue and white tiles. The water flowed steadily from the side of the hill and people lined up with containers to capture some of the pure water, which was reported to have medicinal value. Whether it did or not, I do not know, but the residents in the surrounding areas certainly believed that it did and made time-consuming efforts to take collect it and take it home. It is interesting to note that while we are often quick—too quick—to pursue some “cure” for our aging bodies, our sluggish minds or our creaky joints, we spend much less time and effort on staying close to the source of the Water of Life!

Why is it that we long for the “magic” cure? What does this reveal about us and our desire to have control?

Have you ever fallen prey to some type of medicinal panacea, a wonder-drug maybe, that promised more than it could ever deliver?

In John 4, when Jesus is talking to the woman at the well, he says, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” (John 4:13-14)

Wow! Gushing! This grace-filled water is not scarce, it is not limited; it is, instead, never-ending and flowing steadily. The offer still stands today. The grace the Hosea and Gomer exemplified in their lives is available to us. Will we drink? Will we partake?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, We ask for your help to see through the “fixes” this world offers and to know them for what they really are—hoaxes or short term satisfaction. Give us open minds and open hearts to accept what you offer us today—never-ending grace. Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

As we wrap up our study of Hosea, we see the continuum of God's love for his people, Ephraim, and for us so many years later. Starting with the example of one family (the prophet Hosea and his wayward wife, Gomer), God walks us through a real-life example of what he does for us. God's grace is abundant and ever flowing, but it does require us to respond and to open the gift that awaits us. We have to say "yes" to the offer. We have to check the box, sign the contract, allow him to remove the shackles, accept the gift.

God promises great rewards of love and of a life well-lived walking hand in hand with our Maker. But rejecting the offer carries heavy consequences: "...his fountain shall dry up. His spring shall be parched." (Hosea 13:15).

In the last verse of his prophecy, Hosea reminds us that "Those who are wise understand these things; those who are discerning know them. For the ways of the Lord are right, and the upright walk in them, but transgressors stumble in them."

Sadly, we attended a funeral for a young man who was close to us and unexpectedly took his own life. The chapel was packed — there might have been 500 people there, many standing at the back dressed in black. In the days after that sad event, I could not get the image of all those people, standing there, desperately sad. In response, I

wrote a poem which illustrates through a word picture of a stream of living water, the reality of God's offer to us and our needed response.

The 500 at the Funeral

500 or more
They stand
Strong and silent
Thirsty
Thirsty
By the flowing river
Of the Water of Life.
Their feet curl along the edge
Careful not to touch the crystal Water
For fear.
Of What?
Of giving in
To the tide of purity that sweeps over all?
To the water of life that answers every thirst?
They know in their heads
But not in their hearts,
They see with their eyes
But not with their spirits.

Instead of joining the great flow
They resist.
Thirsty
Thirsty.
Unwilling to give
Themselves to
The only Truth there is.
Pride holds them fast
Firmly rooting them in place
Along the dusty banks of life
Pursuing but never finding--
Even though it is right there,
All along.

Some dip their feet in
And splash around
Happy to have found
Some semblance of
Meaning

Purpose
Fulfillment.
Thirst-quenching
Ever-filling
Life.

Just a very few
Throw themselves in.
Completely,
Unequivocally,
With abandon,
Never turning back.
They drink deeply of the Waters
They breathe it in,
Immersing
Filling every thirsty crevice.
They turn to beckon their friends,
Joyfully urging them to taste and see
That the Lord is Good.
To drink from the well that never runs dry.

Guided and invited
The 500 come,
Inching forward
Still Afraid.
But buoyed by Hope
That friends profess:
The Water is sweet
There is a Gracious plenty.
Come and enjoy
True life.
Drink from the Source.

Joy Eastridge

Joel

1. Consuming Locusts

Read Joel 1 & 2

In the last book of J.R.R Tolkien's trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*, we see an epic battle between good and evil on the Pelennor Fields. The orcs are machine-like soldiers, gruesomely described as, "cruel, wicked, hateful,"¹ who seem too numerous to count and keep coming against the innocents who have taken refuge in Minas Tirith, the castle-city that is the last stronghold for the forces of good. Darkness and evil seem to prevail for a time, and the orcs successfully smash through many of the defenses before the refugees in the castle are ultimately rescued by the overwhelming forces of light and good. The story of the battle taking place in the imaginary realm of Middle Earth showcases what we sometimes feel as we walk on this Earth: evil appears to have the upper hand.

Reading Joel, I have to wonder if Tolkien spent time in this prophecy before composing his masterpiece. Passages describing the devastation of Judah include:

What the cutting locust left,
The swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
The hopping locust has eaten,

1

And what the hopping locust left,
The destroying locust has eaten...
For a nation has invaded my land,
Powerful and innumerable;
Its teeth are lions' teeth,
And it has the fangs of a lioness.
(Joel 1:4,6)

They have the appearance of horses,
And like war-horses they charge.
As with the rumbling of chariots,
They leap on the tops of the mountains,
Like the tackling of a flame of fire,
Devouring the stubble,
Like a powerful army
Drawn up for battle.
Each keeps to its own course,
They do not swerve from their paths.
They do not jostle one another,
Each keeps to its own track;
They burst through the weapons and are not halted.
They leap upon the city,
They run upon the walls;

They climb up into the houses,
They enter through the windows like a thief.

(Joel 2:4-5, 8-9)

Joel is a short book: just three chapters. Even though it is short, it contains a whole range of memorable passages as Joel prophesies to the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah and reminds them that many of their troubles are self-inflicted; the direct result of their waywardness and sin. It is also a visually strong book that leads with descriptions of the agricultural devastation the prophet was forecasting. If the people refuse to change their ways and repent, they will see the terrible day of the Lord come. “Alas for the day! For the day of the Lord is near and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.” (1:15)

In a place and time where a good crop meant the difference between life and death, Joel describes withered vines, ruined fields, grain destroyed and even animals groaning. For the people of Judah, this was the worst case scenario, their greatest fears personified. They could not imagine a greater tragedy than hoards of locusts, searing fires, and ground-parching drought. In the ancient Middle East, and even today, all around the world the change of the relatively innocuous grasshopper into the obnoxious locust brings fear and dread. When adverse conditions such as drought happen, grasshoppers swarm and change into a different biological phase and become clouds of destruction, leaving swaths of damage in their wake.²

2

What about you? Do you ever feel like evil has the upper hand? Do the battles against the orcs or the locusts feel familiar? What are some fears that can keep you awake at night?

Have you ever been to an arcade that had one of those Wac-a-mole carnival games where the object is to try to bat down the mole that keeps popping its head out of another hole? It is usually a futile effort, with the mole just a step ahead of the player, making it nearly impossible to win the game. This passage is reminiscent of that: the grasshoppers, personifying the ability of evil to exponentially multiply, seem to be indestructible. They climb up the walls and into the homes, taking over, consuming, obliterating even the strongest resistance.

The locusts are both literal and figurative creatures. On the literal level, they are agents of agricultural destruction. Looking a little deeper, we understand them to represent an invasion of soldiers, a foreign army who will leave devastation in its wake. Spiritually, the grasshoppers are a personification of evil and evil's power to overwhelm our defenses. Just as the orcs kept marching forward, so the clouds of insects in Joel appear too powerful to defeat. Their waves of evil grow into a tsunami, covering everything in sight.

Just as we begin to despair, we see the contrast of God's mercy and hope lined up against the legions of the evil one. Mixed in with omnivorous plague is a call to repentance and prayer and fasting:

Sanctify a fast,
Call a solemn assembly.
Gather the elders
And all the inhabitants of the land
To the house of the Lord your God,
And cry out to the Lord. (1:14)

Let's look at some of the elements of this verse:

What are the people told to do?

Who are they to gather together?

Where are they to go?

What do they do when they get there?

Can you think of a time in your life when circumstances seemed particularly dark and difficult and when troubles multiplied faster than solutions presented themselves? What was that time and how did you see hope? Was it through the Word, through a person, through a miracle?

In times of great distress, Joel offers this word of hope. It is an invitation, isn't it? In Hebrews we read,

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up **meeting together**, as some are in the habit of

doing, but let us encourage one another—all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Heb. 10:23-25)

In both Joel and Hebrews, we see the act of meeting together as part of our defenses against evil.

Do you find support in meeting together for study and worship? How do you share your encouragement with others?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, Help me in my struggle against evil in my life and in the world. Be my strength and my guide as I earnestly seek your face. Help me share whatever encouragement I receive with others. Amen.

2. Fast Food

Read Joel 1 & 2 and Isaiah 58.

Do you consider yourself a foodie? Do you enjoy ethnic food? If so, what is your favorite?

Food and I are fast friends. I love to eat. Three times a day. Ok, sometimes even a little bit in between. I enjoy thinking about food, buying food, preparing food, and even reading books where food is one of the main characters! Skipping a meal is hard. It's not my favorite thing. In fact, I would go so far as to say most people don't like to skip a meal. Then why does God repeatedly bring up fasting as a precursor to knowing his will, hearing his voice, making a right decision?

Fasting, whether from food or other indulgences, represents a sincere desire to find God. In fasting, seeking him out becomes so important that it takes precedence over other regular activities, such as eating. Isn't this hunger for him what God is really looking for when he directs us to fast? Fasting doesn't produce merit. Instead it simply puts us in the position to receive what God has for us: messages, blessings, conviction, assurance.

In Joel 1:14 we see the prophet urging the people to “Sanctify a fast,”(NRSV) or in another version, “Declare a holy fast.” (NIV)

What is your experience with fasting?

Other passages, especially Isaiah 58, thoroughly address fasting, the people’s reaction, and God’s response. In verse 6-7 God describes the ultimate fast:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

To loose the bonds of injustice,

To undo the thongs of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free,

And to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

And bring the homeless poor into your house;

When you see the naked, to cover them,

And not to hide yourself from your own kin?

God's version of true fasting makes me borderline uncomfortable. What about you? Compared to what he is saying, skipping a meal sounds like a piece of cake. The last part, especially, almost made me laugh out loud: "...hide yourself from your own kin?" I mean who does that? So let's get this fasting thing straight—if it's not just abstinence from food, what is it exactly that God wants from us? What does God say about how we should be fasting and what he is really desiring from us?

Let's back up and read a few of the verses in Isaiah 58 that come before the above passage. The people ask God a question, and He answers:

"Why do we fast, but you do not see!
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
And oppress all your workers.

Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
And to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
Will not make your voice heard on high. (1:3-5)

What do the people ask God?

What does God say about the people's purported humility? And what are some of the things they are doing wrong?

How does this wrong kind of fasting affect their relationship with him?

Do we sometimes expect God to acknowledge and reward our fasting? Is there something wrong with our attitude when we do that?

At the end of Isaiah 58, God outlines the results of the heart that fasts for true holiness with a longing for fellowship with God. The beautiful promises of God's faithfulness and His answers are the reward for the soul that diligently seeks after him with a sincere heart.

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
And your healing shall spring up quickly;
Your vindicator shall go before you,
The glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
You shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

(Isaiah 58:8-9)

How is your hunger for God? Do you miss your time with him when you get busy and neglect to worship or to spend time in prayer? How does this version of fasting speak to your heart?

After outlining the ruin of the country the people can expect if they don't turn from their wickedness, Joel invites the nation to fast with an eye toward earnestly seeing and doing God's will. Three times he tells them that the Day of the Lord is approaching, in 1:15, 2:1 and again in 2:11-13:

Truly the day of the Lord is great;

Terrible indeed—who can endure it?
Yet even now, says the Lord,
Return to me with all your heart,
With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;
Rend your hearts and not your clothing.
Return to the Lord, your God,
For he is gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,
And relents from punishing.

These words, written so long ago, remind us that the outward signs—rending our clothes— are not the transformative actions God is looking for. He is looking for so much more from us.

When was the last time you felt your heart broken for your own sin? For others'? For injustice? For discrimination? For the poor? For those who don't deserve one speck of mercy and yet are God's children? When was the last time we cried for the perpetrators of evil and not just the innocents?

I can say with all honesty that is just so much easier for me to stick with the visible signs: going to church, giving generously, sharing a good word, putting myself out—every now and then—to “bless” others. Don't get me wrong. Those actions are good. They are even necessary. But are they enough? Am I truly “rending my heart?”

Inner holiness is just that: an inside job between us and the Father. No one else can judge our progress or know our path. But let's be united in this: seeking after God with our whole heart, mind, soul and spirit is a lifetime job—it is the mission of life, isn't it? I think Jesus had something to say about that!

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, I long for a deep holiness that comes straight from you. Help me to fast in a way that pleases you. Help me to be able to see areas in my own life that need your touch. Amen.

3. Wedding Takes a Backseat

Read Joel 1 & 2

Our family has just celebrated our youngest son's wedding. It was a lovely and involved much preparation and detail, especially for the bride and her parents. Big or small, simple or elaborate, weddings are a big deal. No matter how it is celebrated, the joining of two people in a lifetime commitment, calls for a celebration: friends gather, people dress up, we eat cake, dance, proclaim happy toasts, and wish everyone involved, bride, groom and mother-in-law, all the best!

In Joel, 2:15-16, we read that although weddings are important, God's call to a holy assembly is more important:

Blow the trumpet in Zion;

Sanctify a fast;

Call a solemn assembly;

Gather the people.

Sanctify the congregation;

Assemble the aged;

Gather the children,

Even infants at the breast.

Let the bridegroom leave his room,

And the bride her canopy.

With prayer and supplication and fasting of the heart, the people get God's attention. He relents (2:15), sends a blessing and has "pity on his people." (2:18) He promises them that he will send sustenance that will satisfy, and that he will remove their shame by pushing the northern army far away.

God even speaks to the soil and the animals, saying,

Do not fear, O soil: be glad and rejoice, for the Lord has done great things! Do not fear, you animals of the field, for the pastures of the wilderness are green; the tree bears its fruit, the fig tree and vine give their full yield. (2:21,22)

What are your thoughts about God speaking to the soil? Does that strike you as odd or do you see God in relationship with all of creation?

Besides the soil, who else hears his admonition not to fear? (2:22) (This is just an aside, but based on what you read in the Bible, how do you think God relates to the animals?)

As he addresses his children in 2:23 & 24, what does he tell them to do and what does He promise them?

O children of Zion, be glad
And rejoice in the Lord your God;
For he has given the early rain for your vindication,
He has poured down for you abundant rain,
The early and the later rain, as before.
The threshing floors shall be full of grain,
The vats shall overflow with wine and oil. (2:23,24)

The last part of his promises are a treasure that stand out to us:

I will repay you for the years
That the swarming locust has eaten,
The hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
My great army, which I sent against you. (2:25)

Sometimes people say things like, “I have no regrets.” Really? No regrets? When I hear that I think to myself, “Either they have a terrible memory, or they are a big fat liar!” My judgment may be completely unfair, but it is hard to think how we could live very long—

for me, just a day will do fine—and not have some sort of regrets. Relationships are simply too delicate not to sustain occasional damage and require repentance and repair. No matter how perfect we are, we all fail from time to time. But God is faithful, isn't he? When we look back over “the years...the locust has eaten” and feel our sadness over actions done or undone, we take a great deal of comfort from this prophecy of long ago: our God will help to redeem the mistakes. Our past may never be ok in our view, but He can take what we did or didn't do, and transform it. We can count on that. Taking that perspective, we can, in some way, say with honesty, “I have no regrets. God has taken care of my past and is transforming it into something good in his way and in his time. My life is in his hands.” By God's power, we can have no regrets.

One of my favorite verses is, Ephesians 3:20-21, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Beyond redeeming the lost years, God goes on to promise Israel further blessings.

You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I the Lord, am your God and there is no other. (2:26-27)

What does he say about eating? Do you think he is talking about physical food or also spiritual food?

He promises the people will not be put to shame. Why do you think that is an important promise? What causes shame? How do we react when we are shamed? Can you think of a time when you felt shame? What helped you to get through it?

The third promise involves God's presence, "You shall know that I AM..." How does God's promise to be with his children give us comfort today?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me to know of your presence with me always. Help me be able to put you first in all things and enjoy the promises that follow my obedience to you. Amen.

4. Pour Out the Spirit

Read Joel 2:28-3:21

Do you remember those soft drink commercials where the actors pop a top on a can and guzzle down an icy cold soda? The ads capitalize on appealing to all our senses as we hear the liquid pour over ice and see the bubbles and watch the sweat drip off the chilled drink. The ads promise to satisfy our thirst. Ahh, satisfaction, and in the form of a liquid that we can all have! How easy is that?

What is your favorite soft drink?

Pouring out refreshment in the form of a drink is one thing, but in this passage of Joel, we see God pouring out his Spirit. His promises of abundance and love stand in contrast to the previous sections where we read about the hunger, thirst and dryness the people will be sure to experience unless they get their hearts right with God.

Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,

Your old men shall dream dreams,

And your young men shall see visions.” (2:28-29)

This passage, along with the next few verses, is repeated verbatim in Acts by the Apostle Peter as he preaches to the crowd after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Check out Acts 2:16-21.

When you read these passages, what do you feel like it means? What does the “pouring out” of the Holy Spirit look like in your life?

Think a few minutes about this visual of God pouring out his Spirit and Jesus talking about gushing water. If you were going to draw a picture of this, what would you draw?

When I read this, I see abundance, renewal, life! Like the children’s song says, “Fill my cup, let it overflow...,” we can almost envision a cup and God’s spirit pouring it full and overflowing with the water gushing down all around it. This image of pouring out brings us back to the waters of baptism, and the waters of the Spirit that Jesus described.

In the Book of John, Jesus states:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water." (John 7:37,38)

And...

Jesus said to her [the Samaritan woman], "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." (John 4:13-14)

Like the Woman at the Well, we are often guilty of taking Jesus' words too literally. As we read her story in John 4, we want to kind of poke her in the ribs with our elbow and say to her out of the side of our mouths, "Look, friend, he is talking about spiritual things, not regular water!" She is slow to get it, but then so is everyone else in the whole Story, so maybe we are, too. Being slow to grasp eternal truths is part of our human frailty; we live in a broken world, with small minds and limited understanding. Our challenge as we read the word is to open our hearts and thoughts just a little bit wider and look a little deeper beneath the surface for the truth.

Prophecies...Dreams...Visions...God promises that if we obey him, he will reward us with all kinds of renewal. Not only will he restore to us the years the locusts have eaten, but he will also plant in our hearts and in our children's hearts and in our elders' hearts all kinds of wisdom and discernment.

I have a t-shirt that quotes John Lennon's song, "You May Say I Am a Dreamer." Not too long ago, I was hiking with my husband and we pulled off to let someone pass us. She looked at my shirt and said, "I like that shirt!" I quickly replied with the end of the phrase, "...but I'm not the only one!" We both laughed and walked in different directions, sharing a moment where the promise of a dream united us.

Are you a dreamer? Do you daydream? Do you remember your night dreams?

Has God ever planted a dream in your heart?

What would you say is your grandest dream at this time?

The last verse of Chapter 2 reads:

“Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (NRSV)

“Then the Lord will save everyone who faithfully worships him.” (CEV)

What a blessing! What a promise! Everyone. Saved. Spared. Kept. Preserved. Let’s call on his name and ask him to give us and those in our circle of influence both salvation and renewal.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Lord, Thank you that you love us and offer to save us from our sinful selves.

Thank you that you pour out your wonderful spirit on us and fill us to the brim with prophecies, dreams and visions. Help us be prepared for all the good stuff you want to give us! Amen.

5. Glory Day

Read Joel 3

“Wait until you dad gets home,” was a dreaded warning from my mother when my brothers and I misbehaved. Dad did not like having to punish us, and he sometimes told us, as he administered whatever discipline was necessary, “This hurts me more than it hurts you.” (I don’t think we believed him at the time!)

In Joel 3, we see God pronouncing judgment on the peoples in surrounding nations who have mistreated and oppressed the Israelites.

In verses 2-8, what are some of the sins that God is holding the nations accountable for?

What does God say they will experience as punishment?

Does God sound angry and vengeful here? How does this contrast with 2:28 and 2:32?

Think back to the example I gave of my own father, disciplining us even though it was painful for him. How about God? Is he glad to have to punish the nations? Look at Joel 3:16 and write out that verse below:

God calls all the nations to come to the Valley of Jehoshaphat (also called the valley of decision) where he will “sit to judge all the nations on every side.” (3:12). God’s standards are holiness and purity. He cannot co-exist with purposeful, repetitive, deliberate evil. He will protect the people who call on him and turn to him as their God. Even the weak will find strength, as we read in verse 10; “Let the weakling say, ‘I am strong.’”

When we see scriptures that describe a holy God of judgment and seem to make him appear angry, let us pause for a moment and click “refresh” on our other mental images of God, even as we struggle to see the bigger picture. Look at the verses below and consider which ones especially speak to your heart:

1. **A God who enjoys our company:** “They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the tie of the evening breeze... ‘Where are you?’” Gen. 3:8,9
2. **God as protector:** “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.” Psalm 36:7
3. **God as the defender of the powerless:** “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.” Psalm 68:5
4. **God as rock and fortress:** “The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.” Psalm 18:2
5. **God as savior:** “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” (Joel 2:32 and Romans 10:13)

What other verses describing God’s nature come to mind?

As we study the scriptures, we are hit square between the eyes with how small our minds are and how hard it is for us to grasp and hold close one particular image of our Almighty God. As a unit, from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible presents God's person in many different ways, inviting us to a bigger vision of who he is, not one limited by our minds, our own experience and our own understanding. This "Big Picture God" is hard for us as humans. He keeps spilling out of boundaries and sliding through cracks and filling up empty spaces. The more we try to capture and contain him, the harder it is.

In Genesis 32, we read the story of Jacob wrestling with God, or God's angel, at Peniel by the forks of the Jabbok River. There, God puts Jacob's hip out of joint, leaving him with a permanent limp. Jacob is intent on getting God's name and holds onto God, pleading. God replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" (32:29) Jacob seems to want to find a way to get a handle on God, to know him in such a way that he can name him and claim him, in essence have some stature and power with God. But God closes off that possibility, leaving the door open for greater knowledge by Jacob (and by us) and also making our innate desire to have some sense of control over the Unknown less of a possibility. Life is a great mystery; living into that mystery keeps us open to more revelations from God. When I get too sure of myself and of what I "know" about God, I can sometimes lose my way in appreciating the fresh waters of the Spirit.

What do you know for sure about God?

What parts of God's nature are especially mysterious to you?

How do you hold these different characteristics of God in your mind and heart?

From the stories of Genesis, to the Prophets, to the Gospels, the Letters and finally the closing scenes in Revelation, the Bible is a treasure to be mined, not simply a buffet to be eaten from. Understanding the Holy Scriptures takes dedication and is a lifetime commitment. Even Peter, as he writes in his second letter, acknowledges difficulties way back then:

“So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. **There are some things in them hard to understand**, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures.” (2 Peter 3:15,16)

What cautions does Peter urge on us as we study the Bible?

What are some of the consequences of incorrectly interpreting what the Bible is saying? Have you seen evidence of this in our time?

In Joel 3, we see a verse that directly contradicts a similar verse in Isaiah. Compare the two passages:

Joel 3:10:

Beat your **plowshares into swords,**

And your **pruning hooks into spears.**

Isaiah 2:4:

He shall judge between the nations,

And shall arbitrate for many peoples;
They shall beat their **swords into plowshares**,
And their **spears into pruning hooks**.

What can we gather from this apparent inconsistency? What is your first reaction?

Is it that the Bible is wrong? Is it that someone didn't have their listening ears on the day they were writing?

No! Not at all. First of all, because we don't know which book was written first, it is hard to say who borrowed from whom. Either way, they have heard/read each other's transcripts. There is an assumption of prior readership which makes the contrast all the more telling. The real question we need to ask ourselves is: what is God trying to say to them and to me in this passage? I try to remember that when there appears to be an error, I am missing information—either I need to dig in to study or open my mind to a God who makes His word challenging on purpose!

As Joel's prophecy closes, he focuses in on some beautiful imagery:

In that day the mountains will drip new wine,

And the hills will flow with milk;
All the ravines of Judah will run with water.
A fountain will flow out of the Lord's house
And will water the valley of acacias. (3:18)

Wine symbolizes joy and milk is synonymous with strength. The water reminds us of God's ability to offer refreshment, renewal and cleansing without end. God's living water will pour out from the Lord's temple and water the dry valley around it. As we are cleansed, we in turn pour out that new life onto the people around us who are dry and needy.

How do these visual symbols of joy, strength and refreshment from the Lord challenge you today? How can you, as a representative of God with Christ living in you, be a source of life-giving sustenance to those around you? How does this idea of water flowing out of the temple inspire you to think about your own church and its purpose? What are we doing today to "water" the dryness around us?

Wrapping it up: Joel's prophecy takes us, in three short chapters, from consuming locusts to a definition of true fasting and back to the consequences of opposing him. Through Joel, God issues to us an invitation to true repentance. His call stands today.

Pause for Prayer:

Oh God, our ever-present help, our sustainer in time of need, we turn to you always because our very essence depends on you. We do not understand you, but in our own limitations, we see that you want us to remain open to greater revelations. Bless us, we pray. Amen.

Amos

1. From the South to the North

Read Amos 1:1 and 7:14 &15

Have you ever attended a conference or church service where the introduction for the speaker went on too long? Most of us have, and it can lead to one of two things: either we are tired before the presentation starts or the bar is set so high that the speaker is almost doomed to failure before they open their mouths to speak. When we open the Book of Amos, we read a simple description of the author, placing him as a “shepherd of Tekoa,” a town near Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Amos was from the southern Kingdom of Judah, and he preached a message to the northern Kingdom of Israel.

South vs. north. Bless my heart, I live in the South. Born in NOLA (New Orleans, Louisiana) while my dad was in seminary, I grew up overseas but have lived in the South long enough to claim it as my own: we have the best sweet tea, the best climate and the best casseroles when you are sick; we are actively, maybe annoying, friendly and we speak to you even when we don't know you. The differences between the people of

the South and the people “up North” are subtle but real; in Amos’ day, the differences were no less prominent.

Amos lived sometime around 790-750 B.C. and places himself on a timeline during the reigns of Uzziah in Judah and Jeroboam II in Israel. After David and Solomon’s unifying reigns, the Kingdom of Israel breaks in two under the inept, arrogant, godless leadership of Rehoboam. From 930 B.C. until the the two kingdoms are eventually wiped out by the Assyrians and Babylonian invaders, they exist in an uneasy truce, fighting back and forth, each claiming to be the rightful heirs to God’s graces and neither living into the life of true piety that God proclaimed for his people.

In verse 1 we read, “The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.”

Besides his profession and the political leadership of the time, Amos also places himself “before the earthquake.” A few years ago, my husband and I were privileged to visit Portugal. While there, we spent a few days in Lisbon. The repeated refrain there was, “Before the earthquake” or “after the earthquake.” Lisbon suffered a devastating earthquake and follow-up tsunami on All Saints Day, November 1, 1755, at 9:40 a.m. The quake itself is estimated to have been a leveling 8.5-9.0 on the Richter Scale but the tsunami that followed engulfed the city so that over 70,000 people died in Portugal and in the rest of the affected world including Morocco and Spain. The King of Portugal be-

came fearful of sleeping in buildings and after the earthquake he slept in tents, a fact that is symbolic of the massive cultural and psychological shift of the time; people were changed; life was altered. The earthquake became a “before” and “after” event for the country.

Can you think of more current events that are “before” and “after” watershed episodes in your country, town, personal life? Write down some that come to mind below:

In Chapter 7 of Amos, we read more about who he is as he records his own introduction to King Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” (7:14-15) As we read this passage, we hear his humility, saying basically, “I have no particular credentials. I was called. I answered the call. My background is simple, but I’m just telling you what God asked me to say.”

Amos tells us his work, his lineage (or lack thereof!), his calling and where he is in time. Think about yourself. If you were going to introduce yourself briefly to others and place yourself in time, what would you say? Write your own introduction below focusing on

your name, where you are from, who your parents are, and where you place yourself on a timeline.

How does it impact you that Amos was of humble origins, without particular credentials as a prophet? Do you ever feel like God might not call you because you are not qualified to speak his word? Amos' story refutes that line of thinking and puts us squarely in the camp of "possible candidates for prophets." I don't know about you, but being thought of as a potential prophet is enough to make most of us shift in our seats, isn't it?

Have you ever been called to deliver a message from the Lord to others? What was the situation? How did you respond?

There is a saying that goes something like this, "God doesn't always call the equipped; he equips the called." God sees possibilities and potential where others don't. God

doesn't always call the obvious people. Sometimes he uses some pretty unusual folks as his instruments. We have some friends who are atheists. Their little girl attends a church school. She is old enough to understand that her parents don't believe in Jesus, but she continues in her prayers and in her spirit of gratitude. Her parents still don't believe, but she is a prophet to them, and who knows? Maybe in time they will be able to listen to her witness and accept Jesus who himself set children up as being important in the Kingdom of Heaven, saying, "Let the little children come."

What do you think God might be calling you to do today? Is there some place of service that you have resisted going because you feel under qualified? How does Amos' resume speak to you and encourage you?

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Lord, Help us to go where you call us to go. When we see your vision, give us the courage to speak. Let us not be fearful but know that you will help us to prepare and to go according to your calling. Amen.

2. Choices

Read Amos 1:1-2

In our small town, we have a beautiful, handcrafted carousel. Built by apprentice carvers and talented painters, the carousel is a destination in and of itself. When we take our little grandchildren there, they have a hard time deciding which animal they will ride next since all are appealing and beautiful. It is a vision of loveliness and magic, and there truly are no bad choices when it comes to riding the carousel.

Amos' vision wasn't so beautiful, and his choices had consequences. The Lord revealed to him that the people of the north were sinning in ways that were particularly egregious. God wanted to offer the people a chance to repent, but first they had to hear about the error of their ways. Amos tells us that "he saw" (v. 1) and that "the Lord took me...said to me, 'Go'..." (7:14-15). It is possible that Amos was content doing what he had been doing, taking care of sheep, tending to sycamore trees and being a faithful man of God living in the southern kingdom. God shows him a vision of what he wants the people to see and hear and invites him to go deliver a message to the northern kingdom. He has an important choice to make.

Amos has a choice—as do we: are we going to choose God's way or our way? Every morning we wake up and choose. In speaking to the disciples, Jesus repeatedly high-

lights the decision they had to make. In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the Twelve, “But who do you say that I am?”

How does Simon Peter answer Jesus’ question?

Read a little further to Matthew 16:23. Who does Jesus equate Peter with here?

After Peter offers his clear statement of faith just a few short verses later, we hear Jesus calling him “Satan” for his refusal to accept a plan that involves sacrifice and death to Self. In verse 24 Jesus goes on to say, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (v.24-25, NRSV)

When our kids were younger, we had several ill-fated camping trips. One, in particular, stands out. After extensive preparation, sorting, packing, re-packing, loading up a car with all sorts of gear, we felt we were prepared for anything. We loaded up late on a Friday and took to the road. This was before the days of GPS, and we had underesti-

mated the distance from our house to the campsite. Arriving there late at night, the rain had already begun. We set up in the dark, with a cold drizzle baptizing our blankets and bags before trying to settle in for the night. The next morning we had a chilly breakfast under a leaky tarp—I remember working hard to get a hot cup of coffee—and then we sat around a picnic table to “enjoy” ourselves. By then, the sour mood and fatigue had already begun to settle in. We decided a wet hike would not be fun. At some point, we all looked at each other and said, “Let’s go to a hotel in town!” The idea was met with cheers. We quickly reloaded our wet stuff in the back of the van and headed for the nearest hotel, complete with an indoor heated pool. We finished up the weekend in a much different place than anticipated.

Jesus’ invitation to the Twelve, and to us, is one for ultimate peace and happiness and eternal life but not necessarily for physical comfort in this life. In fact, Jesus tries to prepare the disciples for much the opposite, “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33, NIV) In spite of Jesus’ warnings and words of preparation, the disciples are surprised by the persecution they face, and they run away when things get rough.

Can you think of a time when you faced difficulty for being a Christian? What was your reaction?

Amos' message starts out with a pronouncement of God's judgment and displeasure.

“The Lord roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherd dry up, and the top of Carmel withers.” (1:2).

In an agricultural society, the people understood the message of dry and withering pastures—conditions that would ultimately lead them to want and hunger. This opening most likely struck fear in their hearts, for they knew that if God withheld rain, then all they had would evaporate—it was really that simple. At the time of Amos' prophecy, Judah and Israel were enjoying prosperity. However their wealth had led them astray and they had forgotten what God truly required of them, “...to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with their God.” (Micah 6:8) Amos' prophecy, even in the opening phrase, reminded them that their riches and wealth were sand castles, built on nothing more than temporary conditions. Worse, they were using what they had unwisely, thinking they could appease God with empty rituals and go on doing their business as usual: oppressing the poor, taking advantage of the weak, persecuting the righteous.

In what ways do you see our current societies possibly falling prey to the same mentality? How do we try to appease God with empty rituals?

Our nation's prosperity seems solid, but what would it take to bring us down as a nation? Are we vulnerable? List some institutions or systems that we put a lot of trust in:

As depressing as it seems, we do tend to put our trust in places that can easily be demolished, don't we? The government, the financial system, military complex, infrastructure, cell phones—any one of these can be wiped away with the sweep of some cataclysmic event or even a “minor” event such as a sunspot or a meteoroid. All of our “security” suddenly feels a little empty, doesn't it?

Where does our true help come from according to Psalm 121?

What else does the Psalm say about how God is our true security?

Psalm 20:7 says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.”

How can God's name give us comfort and security? How do you see evidence of this in your life?

Just as God invited the people of the time to put their trust in him alone, so he reaches out to us across the ages, with words that bring us comfort and security in the midst of a changing world.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help me to look to you for my true help. Let my eyes stay firmly fixed on your will and your ways. Amen.

3. Circles of Judgment

Read Amos 1:2-2:3

In Dante's *Inferno*, the poet describes the descent into the far reaches of hell, using his own human measure of degree of sin to provide in great detail, descriptions of the horrors that await those who sin against God. In Amos, the author also seems to circle in on his target, starting with the more welcome judgments on Israel's neighbors:

Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, Rabba, and Moab.

List below some of the offenses that God is indicting these neighboring countries for according to Amos' prophecies:

Quite honestly, it is hard to understand the meaning of some of their offenses, the details having been lost to time. But we do know they were egregious sins, sins that

showed no regard for the well-being of others, sins that revealed dark hearts, given over to patterns of abuse and destruction.

What is the one common punishment listed in 1:4, 7, 10, 12, 14, 2:2?

Repeatedly, we see fire in Scripture as evidence of God's presence and his holiness: the fire and brimstone that descends on Sodom and Gomorrah; the burning bush and Moses; and the evidence of God's power with Elijah at Mount Carmel. Fire is described in other places in the Bible as a force for purification and refining:

1 Cor 3: 13-

"...their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work."

Matt 3:11-12-

"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his

threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Acts 2:3-4 -

“They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.”

The passages in Amos appear to forecast gloom and doom for the surrounding peoples who are showing no sign of repentance, but we also know that God can use his refining fire to burn up the chaff and preserve those who do receive and worship him. This God that we worship is merciful and compassionate, and knowing God, I have no doubt that even as his fire burned up those who refused to acknowledge him and submit to his direction, the fire also served to purify and refine others. As we read Psalm 103, we find comfort in these words:

“He does not deal with us according to our sins, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.”

In Amos 1 and the beginning of chapter 2, we repeatedly read the following phrase:

“For three transgressions of (location), and for four, I will not revoke the punishment...”

Why do you think Amos uses these words over and over again?

As a herald of news from God, Amos most likely delivered the same message wherever he went. It is possible that he delivered it with this refrain so that the people could remember it and repeat it. The social media of that day was actually more truly social than ours is now: delivered from person to person with an attempt to memorize it and pass it on. The poetic structure helped to ensure it would transfer accurately.

So, you might say, we get that part of it: God had a message and wanted it repeated, but beyond that, what does the refrain mean? I don't think it is possible to say clearly what the phrase means, except that Amos circles around Israel, the ultimate recipient of his prophecy, starting with the neighboring countries and peoples, enumerating their offenses against God before getting closer and settling in on judgment against Judah in 2:4-5 then finally hitting his target, Israel, starting in 2:6 and going on through the end of Chapter 3.

The sins for which God will send down fire are all crimes against humanity and violate what God has clearly laid out as a better way. Amos' listeners are possibly cheering a bit as the litany against its neighbors picks up steam and circles the drain. Maybe they are saying, "Go, God! Yeah, get those bad people for all they have done! They deserve everything they have coming to them." Like most of us, they may find it easy to point fingers at the people around them, casting a blind eye to their own faults.

Jesus saw this tendency in us and addressed it in the Sermon on the Mount where he says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" Matt. 7:1-3.

How do you face and combat this tendency in yourself? What helps you to be less judgmental? What works against you in your efforts to allow God to be the judge?

What is the difference between being judgmental and being discerning? How do we see others' sin, identify it, learn from it and eliminate or purge it from our own lives?

Do you think that maybe God's message to the people had something to do with seeing God's holy judgment and beginning to look inward? What if the message Amos delivered had started out with God's words of punishment toward Israel? How do you think that might have been received?

In Scripture, we often see God using a story or a parable to deliver conviction and establish the need for a change of heart. If you recall the story of David and Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan comes to David's throne room, the central point of his kingdom, and uses a story to allow the king to convict himself. Instead of pointing a bony finger at David, and proclaiming death for the king, Nathan wisely tells an apparently fictitious story of a wealthy man taking a poor man's precious lamb. David rushes in and pronounces judgment, thereby opening himself to receive the zinger, striking right into his heart, "You are the man!"

Jesus also delivered unwelcome messages by telling stories about people helping their neighbors, about shepherds and sheep, about weddings and guests. With all of these, the crowds had the choice of whether or not to receive the pronouncements as Jesus intended. In fact, we read repeatedly of how he offended the Pharisees—they totally "got" what he was saying, and they did not like it.

Psychologists say that the traits we find most annoying in our siblings, parents and spouses are those that we struggle with in ourselves. Whether or not this is true, it is definitely easier to point fingers and identify faults in others.

How can we work to become more conscious of our own faults and less focused on others'? Maybe you have a strategy that you can share:

I know that for me, the process involves the refiner's fire. Each day, by spending time in prayer and scripture reading and study, I try to remain open to God's conviction of sin in my own life and direction as to how to repent and resolve it. But it is not easy!

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Holy God, Help us as we struggle to allow your refining fire to work in us to burn away the parts that are not pleasing to you. Help us to see the sin in ourselves and to refrain from spending our time focusing on others' shortcomings. Amen.

4. God Indicts Israel

Read Amos 2:6-4:5

“Did you make this mess?” I pointed out the bits of couch pillow strewn across the living room. Mikey, our little mixed breed terrier, slunk off to the farthest corner, tail between his legs, nose down, eyeing me sideways with a look of shame. If he could speak, he would surely say, “Do I look like the kind of dog that would make this mess? You judge me so harshly!”

Sadly, like our pups, we are often guilty of seeing the mess and denying that we are the cause. In Chapter 2, God names the sins of the Israelites.

What are some of the sins he lists?

Greed, idolatry, fornication, deception...familiar sins. In 1 John 2:15-17 we read, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes,

the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.”

John lists 3 basic sins:

1. The desire of the flesh
2. The desire of the eyes
3. The pride in riches

How do you see those correlating with the sins God lists in the indictment against Israel in Amos 2:6-8?

Some sources list 7 deadly sins. They include: pride, sloth, greed, envy, anger, gluttony and lust.

As you look at this list, which one do you struggle with the most? Can you honestly share with yourself or the group, the one that trips you up most often?

In these passages, we see God carefully pointing out to the people where they have fallen short and the punishment that will come because of it. God is not a vindictive God, out to get us, but he doesn't allow us to continue in sin because it separates us from him. He desires that we live in fellowship and communion with him, and when we have unrepentant sin residing in us, we cannot also have the Spirit of Truth and Love. In these passages we can feel God's disappointment and his desire for the Israelites (and us!) to turn away from their habitual sin. The dire consequences that follow are not what he desires for his children, but ,nonetheless, they are the choice we are allowed to make.

While the writings of Amos and even of John can feel far away and removed from to-day, we know that we see the same sins all around us, and even if we don't actively participate, we may share the guilt with our silence, passivity or apathy.

I don't like to think about my own sin, do you? But acknowledging it and confessing it is the first step toward a restored relationship with the Father. What does God promise us in 1 John 1:9? "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Amen and thank you, Lord!

God Questions the People

After naming their sins, God questions the people, listing specific transgressions to confirm that they have, indeed, gone astray. He reiterates his years of care for them in

the desert and his blessing on their children — “I raised up some of your children to be prophets and some of your youths to be Nazirites.”

What exactly is a Nazirite? In Numbers 6, we read that they are people who have taken a special vow to be set apart, “holy unto the Lord,” either by their own volition or by their mother’s action as is the case for both Samson and Samuel in the Old Testament. James, the Bishop of the Church of Jerusalem, Jesus’ biological brother, was also thought to be a nazirite and even Paul took some type of temporary vow (read about that in Acts 18:18). In the Old Testament, Nazirites are set apart by 3 things:

1. They did not cut their hair
2. They did not drink wine
3. They did not defile themselves by touching a dead body

In our Christian traditions, we have seasons of being “set apart.” For example, during Lent many people give up something—usually a trivial thing, coffee, soft drinks, chocolate (ok, maybe that’s not so trivial!)—as a reminder in their daily lives of the sacrifice of Christ. These temporary vows are only meant to bring us to the point of dedicating our whole selves further to God—mind, body, spirit, 24/7. In a way, we are all now considered to be Nazirites, made holy by God’s sacrifice, covered in the blood of Jesus, purified from every unrighteousness—IF we accept God’s gift and submit to his way and his will. And that, my friends, is our problem and was the problem faced by the Israelites long ago. They heard the prophecy Amos delivered; they saw their sins enu-

merated; maybe they even felt the stab of conviction; but ultimately, they refused to turn and mend their ways—so punishment followed.

Like Mikey, our dog, they were sorry to get caught, but left with a pillow again, they would tear it apart without remorse. While a sense of guilt and of conviction is a first step on the road to redemption, it is only a sign post, not a destination. Those feelings, in and of themselves, do not impart abiding change. To escape the inescapable judgment, we have to make a hard right, away from the looming precipice to the safety of abiding in God's astounding love and grace.

“You only have I known...”

Having children or grandchildren gives us a close up knowledge of this business of disciplining those we love. We may observe other children misbehave, and it rarely affects us much —although it might make us take a seat further away! But when it comes to our own kids and grandkids, we care. A lot. We want them to behave, not so much for our own convenience but because it is what is best for them in the long run. Because we love them, we discipline. If we didn't love, we would simply let it go.

I think sometimes we miss that part of this scripture. God is love. God was love then. He is love now. Another way to say that is God = Love. His love is true, unending and boundless. His desire for us to have the best and to be the best is the same. So he

cannot and will not leave us where we are, if we abide in sin. He wants us to abide in him.

“You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”(Amos 3:2)

Do you hear the voice of a loving God here? How is he calling out to you?

As we move through chapter 3, we see a poetic section where God calls himself a lion:

“Does a lion roar in the forest, when it has no prey? (v. 4)

Does a young lion cry out from its den, if it has caught nothing? (v. 4)

The lion has roared; who will not fear?” (v.8)

In C.S. Lewis’ book, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*, he describes the great lion, Aslan, in an encounter with Lucy, one of the main characters of the book:

And then—oh joy! For he was there: the huge Lion, shining white in the moon-light, with his huge black shadow underneath him.

But for the movement of his tail he might have been a stone lion, but Lucy never thought of that. She never stopped to think whether he was a friendly lion

or not. She rushed to him. She felt her heart would burst if she lost a moment. And the next thing she knew was that she was kissing him and putting her arms as far round his neck as she could and burying her face in the beautiful rich silkiness of his mane.

“Aslan, Aslan. Dear Aslan,” sobbed Lucy. “At last.”

The great beast rolled over on his side so that Lucy fell, half sitting and half lying between his front paws. He bent forward and just touched her nose with his tongue. His warm breath came all round her. She gazed up into the large wise face.

“Welcome, child,” he said.

Lucy experienced Aslan, the Christ-symbol in the book, as a lion, beautiful, powerful and worthy of respect. In Amos, God compares himself to a lion. The invitation to take refuge in him is always there, but the results of not accepting the invitation are also stark.

The Cows of Bashan

God lists all sorts of sins in this multi-layered indictment of his chosen children, his tribe, the Israelites, but he saves the most egregious sin for last:

“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on Mount Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring something to drink!’... and you shall be flung out.” (4:1,3)

God sees our sins of pride, greed and lust, but what he cannot endure, the sin that ultimately he names over and over, the one sin that reveals to the utmost the depravity of heart—that sin is oppressing the poor. Named repeatedly in scripture, God’s call for us to watch out for the orphan, the widow and the refugee, these directives never fail to convict and bring us to our knees. For which one of us is not guilty of self-serving decisions? We make them every day in the form of excessive stuff, luxury living, taking advantage of those who labor for us, instead of living simply so others may simply live.

As we all squirm in our seats (or recliners!), let us listen to the Holy Spirit as She names places in our lives where we need to reform. Re-form our allegiances, our offerings, or priorities. Re-form our thoughts and actions toward the “least of these brothers of mine (Matt. 25).”

From time to time, when we read these ancient words of prophecy from God and when we translate them into the here and now, we have to ask ourselves probing questions:

1. Am I living out my faith in a way that pleases God?
2. Am I serving him above all and not my 401K or my bank account?
3. Am I watching out for those without a home land, for the home “less” around me, for those who are orphaned by being alienated from family, for those who are alone by divorce or loss of relationship through death?

As he calls us out, he often brings us to tears first—he breaks our hearts—and then he shows us how to address the need. As you consider these questions, where do you feel God’s direction today?

Pause for Prayer:

God, break my heart for what breaks yours. Help me to not be like the “cows of Bashan,” seeking my own pleasure, but to be wholly devoted to you and your will and your ways. Amen.

5. Bring Back

Read Amos 4:4-5:27

When I was a child, I had a friend named Bonnie. On long car trips, our family would sing the old Irish melody, “Bring back, bring back, oh bring back my bonnie to me, to me...” I would sing along, completely sure that the song was about my friend instead of that of a plaintive suitor, longing for his sweetheart. I misunderstood the whole point.

Can you remember ever feeling homesick as a child? What do you remember about the circumstances?

In his poem, “Death of a Hired Man,” poet Robert Frost tells the story of the old man, Silas, coming to Warren and Mary’s house to die. They are talking about him and in the course of their conversation arrive at one definition of home:

‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take
you in.’

‘I should have called it something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’”

Long on promises and short on commitment, Silas’ story poignantly reveals the need, indeed the longing we all have for a place to belong and for a heavenly Father who will welcome us there.

Where do you call “home?”

We tend to define home as a geographical place or maybe a place where our family of origin or our family of choice live. When asked, people will sometimes point to their place of birth, or their current residence or their parents’ old home place. But God has other ideas, bigger more complete definitions of what constitutes home. As Amos continues his prophecy, we hear God’s voice calling his people to “come home” to him and we see the repeated refrain, “‘But still you wouldn’t return to me,’ says the Lord.” God tried everything to get his people to wake up—famine, drought, destruction, death, crop failure—but nothing seems to have an effect on the Israelites who persist in their wrongdoing.

What are some of the sins that God identifies against the people?

1. 4:4-5- They sacrifice to idols
2. 5:7- Twist justice.
3. 5:10- Hate honest judges
4. 5:10- Despise truth
5. 5:11- Trample the poor by stealing through taxes and charging too much rent.
6. 5:12- Take bribes
7. 5:12- Deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

We see the Israelites wandering far from the way God has called them to live. Instead, they practice repeated and deliberate disobedience, putting other gods before the One True God, cheating, lying, stealing and hating truth. God issues a warning that judgment is indeed coming, “Prepare to meet your God as he comes in judgment, you people of Israel!” (v. 12)

I like to make lists. Have you ever made a list just for the joy of crossing things off the list? The Bible has several passages of lists that help us to understand how to live. The 10 Commandments come to mind immediately as do verses from the Book of James and sections of the Sermon on the Mount. In Psalm 15, we read:

“Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord?

Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?

Those who lead blameless lives

And do what is right,

Speaking the truth from sincere hearts.

Those who refuse to slander others

Or harm their neighbors

Or speak evil of their friends.

Those who despise persistent sinner,

And honor the faithful followers of the Lord

And keep their promises even when it hurts.

Those who do not charge interest on the money they lend

And who refuse to accept bribes to testify against the innocent.

Such people will stand firm forever.”

Underline some of the list of guidelines above and note how they contrast to the sins listed earlier. Do you see some connection?

God’s Goodness and Mercy in the Midst of Sin

In contrast to the evil ways of Israel and its people, God shows forth his holiness pouring out words about his might and his presence in all things. What does God say about himself and his character in the following verses:

Amos 4:13-

Amos 5:8-

After describing his might and his power, God makes a list of what the people need to do. Let's look at Amos 5:14,15.

Command		Consequence	
Do what is good and run from evil		That you may live! The God of heaven will be with you	He will truly be your helper, just as you have claimed he is.
Hate evil and love what is good.		Perhaps, even yet, the Lord God Almighty will have mercy	
Remodel your courts into true halls of justice.		The Lord will have mercy.	

8.

Yes, God does eventually bring justice. Because our hearts are turned toward evil and toward grace-less living, we deserve nothing less, and it is only his mercy that preserves us to this day. In Amos we see the repeated words of judgment, but also interspersed are words of his power, his longing for us, and his willingness to forgive. When

we talk about God we often over-focus on his judgment and put a lot less emphasis on his grace. In our humanity, we cannot conceive of God being able to forgive us and others for all we have done. Thank God, he does not treat us as our sins deserve! Amos lines his words of warning with the phrase, “Perhaps even yet the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on his people who remain.” The Lord extends his hand with hope and grace, longing for us to accept his invitation to come home.

Our God is the God of second chances, of forgiveness, of utter compassion toward us. When we come to him with our sins, he doesn’t wag a finger and frown on us, but instead takes us by the hand and lifts us up and cleanses us from the sin that so easily entangles. Let’s look at Psalm 103 and see what words of comfort we can find there about the character of this God who loves us so well:

1. Words or phrases that describe God:

2. How does he treat us?

3. What is he ever mindful of?

4. As you read this Psalm, what phrase really speaks to your heart?

Stay Silent

“For those who are wise will keep quiet, for it is an evil time.” (v.13)

Why do you think Amos says for the wise to keep quiet?

Do you think it is more effective to be quiet or to speak up when faced with injustice?

How does this particular verse apply to a situation that you are currently facing? Can you think of a time when you simply kept silent?

Come Back and Live!

Amos continues his prophecy in 5:1-2 with a funeral lament aimed at sobering up his listeners who seemed to think they were doing ok and that God will overlook their idol worship, their unconcern for their neighbors, their greed and their covetousness. Three times, God says, “Come back to me and live!” Inviting them to turn away from their current lifestyles and adopt the Godly way of life that leads to true living.

In verse 24, God describes what he really longs to see from Israel and from us, “I want to see a mighty flood of justice, a river of righteous living that will never run dry.”

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, please help us to live our lives so that justice pours forth from us and our righteous living gives you pleasure. Amen.

6. Relatively Speaking

Read: Amos 6 & 7

As you launch into the second half of Amos, take a few minutes to look over the book as a unit in your Bible—look at the section headings, notice the main points and think about what someone would ask you if you were on Jeopardy and there was a question about Amos. We are not going to have a quiz at the end, but Bible study does invite us to dig deeper, to tuck truths into our hearts so we can have a point of easy reference.

Now that you have the bigger picture, let's dive in!

Our church sends out youth mission teams every year. One time when I went with them, I was assigned to help lay a kitchen floor with laminate squares. Having no experience, I depended on the other leader to help me measure, re-measure, cut and then get started. Together, we figured out the proper place to start at the center of the room and then radiated out from there, to end up with a perfectly square floor—ok, not perfectly, but close!

In this passage of Amos, God sets out his standards using the image of a plumb line. He sees the Israelites measuring themselves against their neighbors instead of looking to him for the Gold Standard they are to use.

Look at 6:4-7, and underline some of the ways the people focused on themselves:

“Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; and sing idle songs to the sound of a harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!”

Thinking about our day and time, how would you translate the sins that Amos lists? What are some similar things that we are convicted about as we read these words from long ago? Do you think we ever over-pamper ourselves, saying, “I deserve this,” or “I have earned that,” all the while ignoring the plight of the needy around us? Ouch! Now we have gone from preaching to meddling...It is hard for us to consider ways in which we are guilty of the sins for which God convicts Israel, isn't it? I hate to think of my own desire to take it easy, to indulge myself and to rationalize my own luxurious tastes that ignore the needy.

Look at what you underlined above and see how it fits with a more contemporary version below:

1. Lying on couches while snacking...
 2. Eating excessive amounts of meat while others go hungry...
 3. Distracting ourselves with all sorts of entertaining pursuits to the exclusion of family time or other more important missions...
 4. Plastic surgery, massages, nail and hair treatments that capture our time and focus...
 5. Drinking too much alcohol...
 6. Other ways you see connections:
-
-

I feel pretty sure that Amos knew he would not win any popularity contests with his prophecy, and the list above isn't going to make me feel good about myself, either. Sadly, though, this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to my ability to spend resources on pleasing myself. Amos hits most of us below the belt and that is probably the reason we don't spend time quoting from Amos when we list our favorite scriptures! The people of the time don't like it much either and ask him to take his uncomfortable speeches elsewhere, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel." (7:12)

Are the contemporary equivalent sins that we listed all wrong? Is it a bad thing to pamper our bodies from time to time or to take some time out on the couch with a favorite bag of chips? Clearly this is not what God is trying to communicate through the prophet. In fact, Jesus loved a good party. He loved people. He surrounded himself with best friends and they went for long walks (really long walks), went fishing, ate bread and fish with 5000+ people, and lounged around tables throughout Israel and even in surrounding areas. He instructed them, and us, to “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matt. 11:28) He invites his disciples to, “Come away by yourselves, to a secluded place and get some rest.” (Mark 6:31)

So these particular acts in themselves are not the problem. Then what is? Part of the answer is in verses 12 & 13, where we read, “But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood—you who rejoice in Lodebar, who say, ‘Have we not by our own strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?’” God points his finger at the real problems:

1. The people not only indulge themselves, they do so at the expense of others
2. The people are unconcerned for justice and do not acknowledging God as the source of all their gifts and blessings, focusing instead on their own strength.

It's a fine line, but one that we must guard to walk carefully if we hope to hit the mark in following Jesus. He doesn't necessarily tell us to give away all our worldly possessions—although he does say that to one young rich man—but he certainly requires that we keep our eyes focused on where our blessings come from, lest we begin to give ourselves credit and hear the voice in our heads saying poisonous things like, “I worked hard for everything I have. I studied to get my degree. I am smart. I made great investments. Let those other people work hard and study hard. Then maybe they can achieve what I have.” Our arrogance in thinking these thoughts grieves the heart of the Father for he knows that we are only blessed because of him; he knows that it is only by his grace and mercy that we are anything at all or have anything at all. **This clarion call to a humility that extends over everything in our lives is possibly the most important fundamental attitude that we cultivate in our walk with the Lord.**

What helps you keep humility front and center in your daily walk? How do you resist pride in your self, your family, your country? What are some practical actions you take to keep your perspective right before the Lord?

So does he want us to feel guilty when we enjoy a luxurious pleasure? No. But sometimes he does convict us that we accede too readily to the demands of our flesh. Notice the distinct difference in the previous sentence between “guilt” and “conviction.”

How do you think guilt is different from conviction?

How do you respond to guilt?

How do you respond to conviction?

The enemy often uses guilt as a tactic to keep us under his thumb and to rob our joy in life. While guilt may have its uses in training us for a life of righteousness, it is not the New Creation in Christ Robe that we want to wear every day. When we pull guilt out of our closets, we go around with stooped shoulders, weary eyes, sunken cheeks, avoiding the sunshine. When we see conviction in our choices for the day, we put it on and take action to remedy the situation. Conviction shines a light on an area of our hearts that needs fixing and then points the way to the tools and hands us the blueprints for how to go about it. We can wallow in guilt and live lives of dull Christians that no one wants to be around, or we can be warriors who feel convicted and march out to make it right.

Can you think of a time when you felt guilty? It might be something you did as a child? Or a time when you took something that wasn't yours? Or drove too fast through a speed trap? Or even in a more life-altering way— a time when you were a victim and somehow felt “dirty,” having a sense that it was your fault?

Can you think of a time when you felt convicted about something in your life or in the world around you and set about doing what you could to repair it?

We recently attended a memorial service for a Jewish friend. The Rabbi, Wolff Alterman, spoke these words and they have stayed with me:

“If you see what is in need of repair and a way to repair it, then you are seeing what God has called you to do. If you only see what is wrong and ugly in the world then it is you yourself that is in need of repair. And all of us are in need of repair in one way or another. There is so much in need of repair that this task feels overwhelming. “You are not required to complete the task neither are you free to ignore it.” (Talmud)

How does this quote speak to you? Is there something God has put in your life that you are uniquely equipped to repair?

Go back up to the list of 5 (or more) contemporary applications of the sins listed in the book of Amos. Think about some ideas of how those actions can be transformed if done in a spirit of humility and love. Everything we do has the potential of being done in the pursuit of holiness or in the pursuit of self. It's always our choice. In the play "Shenandoah" the father character prays a prayer that goes something like this, "Lord, we worked really hard to get this food to the table. We planted it, we tilled it, we harvested it and we cooked it. But thank you all the same!" The humor is there, of course, and we chuckle, but the truth runs deep, for we are frequently ready to pat ourselves on the back in pride when we really have nothing whatsoever to be proud of!

Once again, we see that it is not the action in itself, it is the focus, the attitude. Maybe we do feel convicted to share more of our resources with the less fortunate and to indulge our own pleasures less, but we can also ask God to use every opportunity for his glory.

Pause for Prayer:

Yesterday we looked at Psalm 15. It spells out the kind of persons God longs for us to be. Use this Psalm as a prayer and take action where you feel convicted:

Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?

The one whose walk is blameless,

who does what is righteous,

who speaks the truth from their heart;

whose tongue utters no slander,

who does no wrong to a neighbor,

and casts no slur on others;

who despises a vile person

but honors those who fear the Lord;

who keeps an oath even when it hurts,

and does not change their mind;

who lends money to the poor without interest;

who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things

will never be shaken.

7. Fruit Basket Turnover

Read Amos 8

Growing up in Brazil as the daughter of missionaries, we lived on a piece of property that was covered with a variety of fruit trees. We had an abundance of avocado, orange, lemon, banana trees as well as a bunch of more exotic types: breadfruit trees and one called “genipapo.” The fruit of the genipapo was not edible (at least we didn’t think so...). It had a tendency to ripen all at one time and “plop” on the ground and rot quickly, raising quite a stench. The neighborhood women would ask mom if they could come and gather the rotting fruit. Glad to be rid of the smell, mom would agree, maybe not knowing the fruit were gathered and enjoyed for their rapid fermentation qualities and high sugar content!

In Amos 8, Amos sees a vision of a basket of ripe fruit. As with the genipapo described above, a bowl of “ripe summer fruit” has a short life span, sometimes hours, before it begins to rot and stink, quickly transforming from a thing of sweetness, beauty and promise into a moldy, smelly, mushy mess. Through Amos, God may be telling the people, “The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.” (v.2) God sees them sticking together in their decay and issues words of warning.

It is not completely clear what Amos is trying to say through the image of the bowl of ripe fruit. What do you think might be additional interpretations?

In the previous chapters, we see God calling the people out, pleading with them to see their sinfulness for what it is and do an about-face. He calls them out to change their ways, to see the wickedness that has subtly taken up residence in their hearts:

Amos 1:7, “Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing his secret to this servants the prophets.”

Can you remember a time when someone warned you about your behavior and told you it was time to “shape up?” Were you a child or has it been a more recent event?

Where do you see God calling you/your community to change behavior now? Is there someone who is giving you encouragement to change or is there another source of motivation?

In Chapter 7, two different times we see the phrase, “The Lord relented” in reference to calamities that were to befall the Israelites.

What phrase does the Bible quote Amos as using?

7: 2 _____

7:4 _____

Let’s go to the New Testament and look at the situation in the Book of James. Remember that James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He was the biological brother of Jesus and became a believer after the resurrection. Read through James 5:1-6 and underline the accusations that James levels against the Israelites of his day. Does it sound oddly reminiscent of Amos?

“Come now you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a

day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.”

Sometimes we think of the New Testament being all about peace and love. But here we read one of the many passages that call our attention to the here and now, to our actions today. James reminds us to look at our lives in the light of God’s love and to examine our consciences for places where we need to do a complete remodel in our lives. How does the above passage reflect what we read in Amos 8:4-6?

“Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’”

While both James and Amos call for us all to scrutinize our own lives and actions, they also go on to re-enforce the role of intercessory prayer in changing both ourselves and those around us. Read a little further in James and see what he has to say about how and when we should pray:

“Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:14-16)

With a cursory reading of this passage, we might initially think that it refers primarily to physical healing and our approach as Christians to prayer regarding our physical needs. And it does. But is there more here? Look again, more carefully this time. Does the passage seem to refer more to spiritual health? Is it just about the body or is James pushing us to a deeper message? Remember that this passage follows shortly after the indictment listed earlier.

What are your reactions to this scripture now?

Jesus came to this earth to bring compassion, healing, new life and sacrificial love. He came to show us the Father in a relatable way. But while he often practiced physical

healing, he was always trying to point his audience, and us, to what is in the arena beyond the physical. Look at the following scriptures as examples:

“I have come that you may have life and have it to the full. “ John 10:10

“When Jesus perceived their questionings, he answered them, ‘Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and walk?’” Luke 5:22,23.

In these two passages, do you see Jesus showing us how to raise our eyes to the world beyond? To elevate spiritual healing to a higher plane than simple physical healing?

We have all probably seen the commercials for the credit card company that lists the costs of various “things” needed to have an important experience. After several purchases—naturally using said card!—the purchaser ultimately experiences what is “priceless.” Credit card allegiances aside, how do you seek to pinpoint the priceless in your life? Have you ever experienced a powerfully answered prayer? Is it something that you can share with the group? Did it involve physical healing?

What about a time when you did not experience an answer to prayer in the way that you expected? Were you able to see evidence of any spiritual healing?

What helps you as you walk on your journey of faith to keep your eyes on your priorities? On what truly matters? On the stuff that has eternal value?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, Help me as I try to keep my life oriented in the right direction. Help me as I try to balance things out so that the “stuff” that have eternal value is front and center. Amen.

8. The Day of the Lord

Read: Amos 8

On August 21, 2017, we were blessed to be able to see the total eclipse of the sun in Townsend, Tennessee. My husband, an amateur astronomer and science geek regarding all things related to the heavens, planned for a year and did all that he could do to make sure our gathering of friends and family was just as perfect as he could make it. When the moment arrived, 1:30 p.m., we were all outside waiting and gazing at our various devices that reflected the rapidly disappearing sun. I turned on my phone to make the video (my assigned job!), and when the total darkness came, there was a general “Ahh, ohhh, wow...” that went on for several seconds. Every time I watch that 30 second sequence I get Holy Spirit chills because that event really did highlight God’s great power and might in a way that few other celestial events have. It was a day when God’s power manifested itself in nature.

In Amos, we read about the people desiring “The Day of the Lord.”

Amos 5:18- “Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord! Why do you want the day of the Lord? It is darkness, not light;”

Amos 8:9- “On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight. I will turn your feast into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation;”

The second description, sounds eerily like a total eclipse of the sun and yet here it is not something the people should look forward to, because they are not in a right relationship with God. His power and might shine, but the people persist in their wrong ways and do not worship and bow down to the one true God, prostrating themselves instead to false gods. When God sees their rejection, he promises that he will send them a different kind of famine.

Underline below the hunger the people will experience:

Amos 8:11-

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord God, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.”

Read on a few more verses:

Amos 8:12-14- What do the people do in seeking the word of the Lord?

After running to and fro even the young and beautiful are weary and faint. They cannot find what they seek because they continue to pursue idols (v.14) Their focus is all out of whack, their vision is blurred, and the result is ruin, death, destruction.

Have you ever felt hungry and thirsty for God's word?

Do you find it hard to make time to have your devotionals and to read the Bible?

What do you think could be a remedy for that?

Everything we are and have is from the Lord. We know this, but sometimes we think we can muster up enough will power on our own to persevere in Bible study. We do just fine on our own strength for a few days and then one distraction after the other takes

our attention and pulls us into its vortex. And friends, these distractions don't have to be evil in themselves—they can actually be good things, even good works. But they are not the best that God has for us. He wants to give us the best; our role is to simply ask him for it. I remember trying to do a time-consuming Bible study, Bible Study Fellowship, when our kids were little. It was so hard to find the time that I kept being that person that came to small group with nothing written down on the paper (the guideline was that couldn't share in group unless it was written down). Finally, I prayed about it and asked God to give me the desire to study his word. After the prayer it still wasn't easy, but it got better. And better.

If this is a struggle that you currently face, consider praying this prayer and signing it and dating it so that you can look back and see how God answers your supplication. He is faithful to answer us when we ask for what is in his will. And friends, this is definitely in his will!

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me to have a thirst for you. Help me to want to study your word. Help me to be able to make time. Amen.

9. More on The Day of the Lord...

Read: Amos 8

Why do we look forward to special days annually? Not only is it a break in the routine, but it helps us to have structure in our lives from year to year, doesn't it? When God made us, he knew we would live and thrive best if we had times to look forward to, breaks in the mundane routines. In fact, in the Law, God sets out a number of festivals that the children of Israel were to observe every year. Besides the weekly Sabbath and the annual Passover, there were harvest festivals including the Festival of Booths, where everyone went on a massive camping trip—living in little huts outside!

What is a holiday that you look forward to every year? What is your favorite church holiday or tradition?

The Day of the Lord is a term that we find throughout scripture, starting in the Old Testament and moving all the way through Revelation. Far from a holiday or a festival, it generally describes a Day of Judgment, promising evil will come to an end and that no

one gets a free pass when it comes to practicing unrepentant evil: lies, greed, oppression of the poor, to name a few of the sins that most grieve the Lord's heart.

Look at the passages below and underline the consequences of the Day of the Lord:

"Near is the great day of the LORD, Near and coming very quickly; Listen, the day of the LORD! In it the warrior cries out bitterly. A day of wrath is that day, A day of trouble and distress, A day of destruction and desolation, A day of darkness and gloom, A day of clouds and thick darkness, A day of trumpet and battle cry against the fortified cities and the high corner towers."

"Behold, the day of the LORD is coming, Cruel, with fury and burning anger, To make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it. For the stars of heaven and their constellations will not flash forth their light; The sun will be dark when it rises and the moon will not shed its light. Thus I will punish the world for its evil and the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud and abase the haughtiness of the ruthless."

What is your general impression of the Day of the Lord when you read these passages?

There are close to 100 passages in the Bible that refer to this time of judgment, this Day when God's righteousness will reign, and not all of them are dark and gloomy. Some of them promise a gathering together of God's people, a time when justice will prevail and God will honor the downtrodden. Read the passages below and underline words that hold hope and light:

"So rejoice, O sons of Zion, And be glad in the LORD your God; For He has given you the early rain for your vindication and He has poured down for you the rain, The early and later rain as before. The threshing floors will be full of grain, and the vats will overflow with the new wine and oil. "Then I will make up to you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the creeping locust, the stripping locust and the gnawing locust, my great army which I sent among you."

“Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.”

“In that day the LORD will start His threshing from the flowing stream of the Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, and you will be gathered up one by one, O sons of Israel. It will come about also in that day that a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were perishing in the land of Assyria and who were scattered in the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD in the holy mountain at Jerusalem.”

Jesus also spoke of the Day of the Lord and the eventual judgment and reward that would come.

"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

"He who rejects Me and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him;
the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day.

Jesus wants all of us to know that, while it may seem that evil is prevailing in our day and time, there is an ultimate Judge, one that will not tolerate hate, who will not condone the practice of lawlessness, and one who holds us all to a higher standard of love. There is nothing that escapes his view and no evil that gets by. We will be called to give an accounting for what we have done!

If that's the case, you may be thinking, we might as well give up. Who can stand in the face of such holiness? Who can prevail when the bar is set so high, when the standards are impossible to meet? Wait! Not so fast. While the Day of the Lord is indeed coming and God's righteousness will light up the sky and sear every heart, it is also a message of hope and love and grace. Don't miss out on that part!

Our God is a God of grace and love. He sent his son to redeem us. He loves us. He calls us by name. He will not discard us. He will not forget us or forsake us. Instead, on that Day, he will gather us up.

"Then they will see THE SON OF MAN COMING IN CLOUDS with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth to the farthest end of heaven."

What promises in God's word, help you as you walk through life? Which ones do you find yourself repeating when you get discouraged?

My granddaughter, Olivia, likes me to read books with her but there is one book where she always wants to turn the page and skip over the picture of the angry face. "It's scary," she says. Maybe we are a bit like that, too. We read about The Day of the Lord with a tremor in our hearts, worried that somehow this God that we love and worship will judge us so harshly that we won't survive the test. God does not desire for us to live huddled up in fear, cowering in a corner of concern. No, he wants us to be fist-pumping, victory-lap running, dancing fools! He longs for us to live free and joy-filled lives of love.

The warnings are reminders: reminders that we cannot fool God. We must pursue authentic, sincere lives of holiness. When we do, we have nothing to fear—much the opposite.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me to turn away from anything that is evil in my life. Help me to live solely in pursuit of your goodness and mercy. Help me to live a life that reveals and reflects your love. Amen.

Below is a poem that I wrote a while back which offers a possible vision of the Day of Judgment.

Heaven's Gate

I slipped off my sandals
Leaving my earthly self behind.
I walked to the other side
A-cross.
Stream of vividly clear crystal water
Flowed over rocks smooth as silk
Under my bare toes,
Weary with world's weight.

As I stepped onto the mossy bank
He took my hand,
Helping with that last step
Into the beyond.
His grip was love itself
Tenderly he opened his palms
And there I saw, beside the nail marks,
My name, tenderly scrolled, etched there
By love.
We sat on a big Rock,
My Savior and I.
Our feet dangled into water
Alive with power to both cleanse and refresh.
We talked over the questions I had
Once so many
Now, simple and stark:
Where could I have loved more, better?
Gently he led me through
A review of what I had seen and done.
He showed me how,
In his love,
He took my wrong turns,
My disobedience

And remade them into
A pattern of redemption,
Quilted with the stitches of forgiveness.
He showed me beauty beyond imagining
Where love in my life
Paved the way
For his love
To come through.
In my newly opened mind a thought came:
This is judgement day!
And yet, I felt not judged
But cleansed and loved.
We stood up,
My Friend and I.
I took his hand and we moved on,
Deeper into eternity,
Greeting joyfully those already
Settled in.

Joy Eastridge, June 2016

10. God's Restoration and Renewal

Read: Amos 9

In 2019, Cathedral of Notre Dame burned. “Our Lady” was built between 1163 and 1345 A.D. and the massive structure has seen fires before. It was spared the worst in this episode. But the damage is severe, and the startling images of the spire crumbling in flames leapt around the world, provoking us to mourning and also to solidarity as one people on one fragile planet, reminding us again of how we must help each other regardless of nation and origin.

The first time we worshipped at Notre Dame was back in October of 2001, right after 9/11. We arrived in Paris on a Sunday morning and after dropping our stuff at the hotel, headed out to wander through the town, taking in the sites. We went to mass at the cathedral and walked all the way to the back to find a small group of worshippers in a little chapel deep in the recesses of the building. Mostly women, the group of about 20 welcomed us and paused in their worship to pray for us Americans. We kneeled with them, thanking God for his continued work in our lives and in the world.

Have you ever worshipped at a large cathedral? What was your experience like?

Is there a particular church building that speaks to you? Why?

How does God sometimes use man-made buildings to point the way back to him?

Amos' recorded prophecy draws to a close with a vision of destruction which seems to start at the altar in Jerusalem, "I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said: 'Strike the tops of the pillars so that the thresholds shake. Bring them down on the heads of all the people; those who're left I will kill with the sword, Not one will get away, none will escape.'" (v.1)

The Lord goes on to pronounce judgment on all who continue in persistent sin and who say, "Disaster will not overtake or meet us." (v.10) He opposes the proud and is weary of those who disregard his plumb line of righteousness. God is again calling the people to a day when his way will be the way of all people. "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!" (Amos 5:24)

God's judgment and invitation extends beyond Israel to all peoples: "Are not you Israelites the same to me as the Cushites?' Declares the Lord." While Israel is God's

chosen people in that they are the ones through whom he plans to send his son to “restore David’s fallen tent” (v.11), they are not singular in occupying a special place in God’s heart. God loves all people and calls them to worship and bow down before him. God continues his work, in his way, with all people everywhere. He wants us, as his people, to recognize his love for all and to freely share the message of mercy that he has for all mankind.

Are we ever guilty of feeling like we are in an exclusive club called “God’s Favorite?” In what ways do we act like we have a favored status with the Almighty? How does this passage convict us and invite us to see the world as God does?

John 3:16 is so familiar and yet we sometimes miss some of the important words it contains: “For God so loved THE WORLD that he gave his only son...” Who is this “world”? Are there any exclusionary clauses? As followers of Christ do we get a pass not to love certain unlovable people? What about people that want to do evil to us? Do we get to not love them?

Within our church and the larger church of Jesus, we often see factions and divisions as people pridefully proclaim that they have the inside track, the real knowledge, the unadulterated truth. The Bible repeatedly cautions us to see ourselves as members of one body and to understand that “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.” (1 Cor. 13:12) There is much truth to be revealed, and our small minds cannot grasp all that God is and has for us. In Galatians 3 we see Paul lay out his vision of the progress from the Law to Grace and how that leads us past nationalism, religious fanaticism and into the realm of love and unity:

“ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Amos Ends with Blessing

After all the words of gloom and doom, Amos ends on a note of encouragement and blessing, including the Messianic promise of verse 11. “On that day,” he says, God will

lift up his people and make them into what he desires for them to be. “The time is surely coming, says the Lord” is the phrase that precedes a series of promises: planting, reaping, overflowing harvests, rebuilding, eating, safety, security.

Examine the verses below and underline the verbs that highlight the good that is to come:

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord,
When the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
And the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
The mountains shall drip sweet wine,
And all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
And they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
And they shall never again be plucked up
Out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord your God.”
(9:13-15)

What does it look like for the “mountains to drip sweet wine” and for the “hills...to flow with it?”

While it may be tempting to set our sites on actual physical beverages, what do you think this passage is referring to on a deeper level?

Let's look at a few scriptures that promise flowing water and wine as the rewards of a life of righteous living. Underline what stands out to you:

John 2:10,11-

“You have kept the good wine until now. Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”

John 4:13,14-

“Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.’”

John 7:37,38-

“On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believe in me drink. As the scripture has said,’Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Rev. 22:1,2-

“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Which passages did you underline? Why? What part of God’s promises stands out to you the most?

God uses Amos, a common man, to bring a powerful message of God's righteous judgment and his abundant love to the people of the northern nation of Israel. Faced with the trial of abundance and the opportunity to become corrupt, the nation has fallen down in their pursuit of God and given way to their own desires for possessions, wealth, self-serving carnal pleasures. In addition, they have taken God off the throne of their hearts and put themselves squarely in the place that belongs to the Almighty alone. God repeats his call for their repentance and promises ultimate destruction if they do not heed his voice. Through this ancient prophecy God also calls out to us as we enjoy a time of great prosperity and ease, a time when wealth and money speak loudly and lies flow like a river all around us. He beckons us to step out of that current and step into the waters of purity and justice that flow from his throne through us as a blessing for the world.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father and Almighty God, We humbly ask you that you would keep us from evil and that you would strengthen us to be your force for good in the world around us. Amen.

Obadiah

Obadiah

Introduction:

One of the hardest offenses to forgive is when someone rejoices over the misfortunes of others. After 9/11, some news outlets purported to show video coverage of people in other parts of the world celebrating the devastating attacks on the United States. Now, years later, it is unclear if those images were even real or if they were clips staged to incite hatred. What remains is the certainty that being glad about another's misfortunes is a sign of moral corruption so deep and so wide that only God can sufficiently address it.

Obadiah's twenty one verses outline God's punishment of Edom after they participated in the downfall of Jerusalem. God's judgment of Edom reverberates today as we find ourselves tempted by the sins of self-centered nationalism or even personal, prideful self-absorption.

Written around 587 B.C., in the aftermath of an attack by Babylon that essentially destroyed Jerusalem, Obadiah has the distinction of being the shortest book in the Old Testament and follows the prophecy of Amos, where he predicts Edom's downfall in Amos 9:12.

To understand more of what this short prophecy is referring to, we must review our childhood Bible stories from Genesis where we read of two brothers, Jacob and Esau —twins who were born competing and remained at odds throughout their lives. Eventually they made a tenuous peace, as Esau left the area and moved south and east of the Dead Sea to a mountainous country which became known as Edom. Esau's brother, Jacob, occupied Canaan, and eventually fathered twelve sons who would become the twelve tribes of Israel.

Obadiah outlines the consequences Edom will suffer for its passive and active aggression toward Judah, for its pride and lack of compassion. Its lessons resonate today as we continue to struggle with issues of mercy, especially toward those who we perceive to be either our enemies or who are more fortunate than we are.

1. Punishing Pride

Read: Obadiah, v. 1-14

Obadiah describes an unflattering picture of humanity at its worse. Essentially, Jerusalem was overwhelmed by Babylon, and Edom not only approved that, but they took part in plundering the defeated city. This event happened so long ago that we may be tempted to ask, “So what? How does this affect me?” Let’s remember that these verses are preserved for us for a reason. It is not so that we can simply learn about some far away land and some people who were prideful and lacked compassion toward others. Instead, we are to examine these ancient words and consider how we might see the same behaviors around us today between nations, between communities, and even inside ourselves.

One of the least attractive traits in humanity is the tendency to gloat or rejoice when someone gets what we feel they deserve. The story of prideful Edom may even take us back to our own childhood where we played on the playground and saw a bully pick on someone. Maybe that “someone” wasn’t our friend, and as we witnessed their mistreatment, instead of reaching over to pick them up, maybe we stood by or even participated in their humiliation, thinking to ourselves, “Well, it’s about time.” I hope none of us have a memory like that. I hope we all reached out to help the oppressed, but chances are many of us have times in our past when we did not do the best thing—when we instead allowed injustice to go on because we lacked courage or because we secretly agreed with the perpetrator.

If a story from the playground is too remote, we can probe our spirits a little bit closer to home with this imaginary scenario. Envision a successful but boastful business man or woman who loses everything in the stock market. We see their home go up for auction—maybe not just their home but also all their belongings—those “toys” we might have envied—the fancy boat, the imported car—all that stuff that we couldn’t ever afford. Instead of hearts filled with compassion, we attend the auction and think self-righteously, pridefully even, “Well, it’s about time they got a taste of what it feels like not to have everything.” At the auction, we pick up that watercraft we might have been so envious of, paying a greatly reduced price because of our neighbor’s misfortune. As we take it out to the lake, and skim along in jet-powered luxury, a smile might play on our lips, as we entertain the thought, “Haha. Look who’s living high now!”

Nationally, some of us remember when Katrina came through, and there were some seriously misguided religious leaders that saw God’s hand in punishment of New Orleans. The Category 4 hurricane decimated a huge area, and the government was slow to come to the rescue. As people bickered over what needed to be done, many of us watched at home while people died in the Superdome, in itself a gaudy symbol of extravagant and proud wealth. Americans are blessed to live in a wealthy country that works to take care of its citizens. This is a good thing. But we must be on guard lest our wealth and privilege lead us to think that we are somehow special and that God loves any one nation over another. When we see an earthquake or a tsunami or some other natural calamity, do we think, “God is on our side. He is defending us because

we are so good, so superior to those ‘other’ folks.” Maybe we don’t go that far in our nationalistic zeal, but instead slide into the easier, maybe even more seductive thought pattern that focuses on the fact that we prepared, we paid our taxes, so let “them” take care of themselves.

Not so long ago, I was reading “The Little Red Hen,” to our 4-year-old granddaughter, Olivia. If you remember, it is the story about a plucky, industrious red hen who plants wheat, harvests it, grinds it, bakes it, all without help from her friends. When it is time to eat it, they are all there and she says—in more words, of course—“No way. You didn’t help with the work, so now I will eat it myself!” After reading this story for a couple of different nights, Olivia kept coming back to it. Finally she said, “That’s not right. She needs to share.” To Olivia, with the pure heart of a child, sharing is what we do—not just when it is convenient or when the other person has contributed—it’s what we do all the time. Sharing with others helps them, but ,ultimately, it also paves the way for us avoid moral bankruptcy. When we pridefully elevate ourselves, we paradoxically condemn our souls to darkness —a high price indeed!

The bedrock verse from John 3:16 stands out in stark relief when we probe these depths of private sin, “For God so loved THE WORLD...”

We remember God’s love for the entire world with humble hearts. As we faced the COVID-19 pandemic and other crises like it, we all became simple humans, beloved by

God, but on an even footing as we faced him: sinful, worthy of redemption, and forgiven if we will only say “yes.”

As you read through these examples, I am sure you can add a few of your own:

1. Were you ever bullied or do you remember a bully in your past?

2. Can you think of a natural disaster where the victims were blamed?

3. Can you think of a time when you might have felt someone got what they deserved and been less than compassionate toward them? Ouch!

4. What are your thoughts about the story of Olivia and her reaction to “The Little Red Hen?”

Let’s look at what God says to Edom about their behavior.

1. Read verses 2-4 and consider the following questions:

- What does Obadiah say will happen to Edom?

- How does he describe Edom’s heart?

- Even though they “soar” what does God say will eventually happen?

2. In verses 10-14, we have a list of “you should not have’s.” What are some of the actions Edom took against Judah that God will punish?

3. In verse 11, we may even cringe as we read the ultimate indictment of Edom’s behavior, “you stood aside...you too were like one of them.” How does this charge resonate with us today? Are we ever guilty of standing aside? True honesty pushes us to our knees as we read these sad verses. As you bow before the Lord, confess to him times when you might have been indifferent to the plight of others. Write out a prayer asking for his forgiveness and mercy and for a change of heart, if needed.

Pause for Prayer (fill in your own):

2. Making It Right

Read: Obadiah v.15-21

“I’ve got your back,” is an expression that probably originated in the military as soldiers promised that they would defend their vulnerable buddy as he/she ran toward cover.

We use the phrase a lot in our day-to-day lives, too, to convey loyalty and friendship.

The people of Jerusalem must have wondered if God indeed had their back when they saw the Edomites standing by or assisting in the plundering of their community during the rout by Babylon.

Do you have a friend that you know will always have your back—someone who will defend and stand by you no matter what? How does that make you feel? How can we be that kind of friend to others?

God promises that what Edom did will not go unpunished. “The day of the Lord is near for all nations. As you have done, it will be done to you; your deeds will return upon your own head.” (v.15, NIV) God lays out, as a simple fact, that evil will not go unpunished. There are serious consequences to the deeds of darkness, and God will not overlook the long list of wrongs Edom did to Judah, wrongs which culminate with the

indictment, “You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives; you should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress.” (v.14)

Edom captured those who were trying to get away and turned them in. The Edomites’ evil is not so far removed from more contemporary times. The recent biopic “Harriet,” based on the life of Harriet Tubman, details the extraordinary courage of one woman. As we watch her courageous exploits and her withering disdain for the institution of slavery, we feel ourselves caught up in the desire to do good for one another instead of evil. Sadly, even as we are so inspired, we can also look back at those who opposed Harriet and who gladly turned slaves back over to their masters, so the owners could inflict whatever barbaric punishment they saw fit. Some of these persons—participants in the system of slavery—believed themselves to be God-fearing, righteous, holy people. As they did the exact opposite of what God would call them to do, they perceived themselves to be on the correct side of the law; their actions were clothed in a thin veil that obscured even their own view of what amounted to personal greed and misplaced zeal for preserving what they understood to be “Christian values.”

What are some evils in history that you wonder about?

What are some ways that God rights those wrongs? Are there places where you can't see justice happening from where you sit in history?

Read through Obadiah 14-21 again. In this section, we see a lot of God's foretelling what will happen to the people of Edom. God contrasts their doom with how he will elevate Jerusalem:

Edom:

- Shall be as though they had never been (v. 16)
- The house of Esau [will be] stubble. (v.18)
- No survivor of the house of Esau. (v.18)
- Dispossessed (v.19-21)
- Ruled over by those who were saved from Mount Zion (v.21)

(Optional: Read also the following scriptures and read in greater detail the offenses of the Edomites toward Judah: Ezekiel 25: 12-14 and Ezekiel 35:1-15)

Jerusalem:

- They shall escape (v. 17)
- Take possession (v.17)

- House of Jacob shall be a fire...and a flame (v.18)
- They shall possess others' kingdoms and lands (19-21)
- The kingdom shall be the Lord's (v.21)

God's promise of retribution and justice elicits two emotions: satisfaction and confusion. Satisfaction because we all want to see the bad people get what they deserve, in spades and without fail. Confusion, because if they do, and we gloat over their impending misfortune, how are we any different than the very people that we so long to see brought to justice? How do we keep from becoming the very monster that we want to see destroyed?

In the familiar Psalm 137, we read about the Israelites living in Babylon and longing for their homeland. The first six verse are filled with poetic beauty and have been included in multiple songs. However, as we read to the end of that same Psalm, we read the eye-popping desire of the very same poets, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" Gulp. Really? They want the Edomite babies to get dashed against the rocks.

For answers to this theological conundrum, we must turn to the clearer revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. God sent him to us because, without him, we could not ever grasp—much less embrace—the concept of grace. The Edomites and the people of Jerusalem really all got what they deserved in terms of divine punishment. All of us would suffer the same fate, had we lived back then. As he sought to reveal more

of his fullness, God could do no less than to show us the utter folly of tit-for-tat, eye-for-an-eye, tooth-or-tooth, sin-for-sin. There is no end to that type of justice because it is not the fullness of justice. The ultimate justice of God relies on the concept of grace which was not fully delineated until Christ.

Hear the words of Jesus:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:3)

“Those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty.” (John 4:14)

“I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35)

“I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12)

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt. 5:44)

Which one of these is your favorite saying of Jesus? Is there one not listed that stands out to you?

In Jesus, we see a more complete picture of who God is. Jesus’ life and teachings turn all of this Old Testament justice upside down—or should we say, right side up? For when God so loved the WORLD—those from Jerusalem and those from Edom—he pronounced judgment and carried it out as a way to show us clearly how much we need grace. We are incapable of being good. The more we try, the more we fail. Even in our self-righteous rejoicing over the defeat of evil, we all too easily forget the people

behind the evil, and we neglect to pray earnestly for them. In so doing, we condemn our own souls and pronounce our own judgment—unless absolved by grace.

We contrast the messages of Obadiah with the words of Jesus in order to paint a fuller picture of our God who loves with justice and might and power and grace—all at the same time. If you feel like this bigger picture of God is beyond your understanding, then you are probably in the right place. For our humble recognition of our own lack of understanding is a foundational attribute for those who earnestly seek God. Our God is not only the God of the Old Testament but also of the New. The ancient stories of creation all the way through Revelation, paint a picture that reveals itself much like a complex stained glass window, all the parts of which make no sense on their own, but, together and from a distance communicate wild beauty that touches our souls. We are loved. We are forgiven. Our sin abounds, but grace abounds all the more!

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help us as we struggle with our own desires for evildoers to get what they deserve. Help us as we struggle to practice offering one another grace and love and to trust you with making it all right in the end. In the precious name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

Obadiah and the other prophets pour out the golden highway to God, because their prophecies help emphasize our need for Jesus, God's most perfect revelation of himself. Even as we see Edom and Jerusalem duking it out—brothers gone bad—we are horrified to discover ourselves right there, in the midst of the ancient battles between light and darkness, between pride and humility, between vengeance and grace.

As one of the Book of Twelve, Obadiah sings the songs of a new time, a new testament between God and man, holding forth a dire need for a different way. He cracks open the door so that we can see beyond our own darkness into the wonderful promise of Jesus.

Jonah

1. Running Away

Read Jonah 1: 1-3

Have you ever run away? As children, many of us may have had a fantasy about running away, and a few of us can even remember packing our bags and asking for a ride to Grandma's house.

Have you ever run away from home?

Jonah is also guilty of running away; however, he is trying to outrun the Almighty God. He clearly hears his instructions, and instead of obeying, he makes a decision to turn away from what God is asking him to do and go in the opposite direction. In fact, he decides to leave God behind and take a boat to Tarshish, probably reasoning, "God's presence and direction are too loud in this place. Surely he doesn't mean for me to go to Ninevah—those folks are bad, bad and deserve everything they've got coming. No, me, I'm going to that resort place I've heard of, Tarshish. Surely, God will leave me alone if I go there to soak up some rays and get away from it all."

Jonah runs away to a different geographic location. Sometimes we run away, too. We may not go to a different town or country but there are other ways of running away: we can stay busy with activity, work, electronics, substance abuse, volunteer work, exercise—you name it. What are some ways we might try to drown out God's direction?

Running away is a repeated theme in scripture. Who are these Biblical characters fleeing from?

Jacob- Genesis 27:41-45

Jacob- Genesis 31:17-21

Moses - Exodus 2:11-15-

David- 1 Samuel 19:8-10; 1 Samuel 21:10-

Elijah- 1 Kings 19: 1-4-

Adam and Eve- Genesis 3:8-

Disciples- Matthew 26:56-

Adam and Eve hid "...from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden;" the disciples ran from Jesus in Jesus' time of need. In Mark, we read the story of a young man, possibly the author of the Book of Mark, "...but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." (Mark 14:51).

The Bible contains many stories of people fleeing, running away from trouble: running away from the consequences of their own sin (Jacob and Moses), running from threats

on their lives (David), running from a sense of failure (Elijah) and running from God himself.

Running seems to be a thing that we humans do. If we have troubles to work out, instead of staying the course and seeing it through, we sometimes throw up our hands in despair and take off—occasionally in a literal sense but more often figuratively or spiritually—abandoning the situation and relocating to a situation of greater comfort and ease.

How does scripture treat our tendency to run? In all these stories, the running eventually ceases, and the characters end up facing their troubled pasts and dealing with them—not alone, mind you—but with God’s help.

In Scripture, God repeatedly invites us to turn around (repent) and see him as the source of healing and true peace. In the military, cadets are taught early-on how to do an “about face,” and turn crisply on their heels so that they face in the opposite direction. Repentance is all about doing a 180, except that we are not usually so crisp about it. Many times we sort of turn, meandering along, rationalizing, taking our own sweet time before eventually resuming the path God has set out for us. God waits patiently for us to come home, giving us repeated opportunities to go in the direction he would have us go.

Thinking it over...

Where is God calling us to repent—to turn and face in a new direction?

Is there a place in your life where you feel you are running away from God? What can you do to get back to where he is calling you?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, show me the places in my life where I continue to run from you. Help me to be able to repent, to turn around, and head back the way you would have me to go.

Amen.

2. Hampered by Hate

Read Jonah 1:1-3

We talk about hate all the time, don't we? We hate it when we are late; some of us hate turnips; we talk about hating the way we look or even a book or movie.

What is something that you talk about "hating?"

True hate is stronger than that, isn't it? True hate is an active passion that can overwhelm our reasoning and make us do things that we would not ordinarily do. Jonah grew up in a time when the Assyrians did terrible things to the Israelites. The nation to the north was known for its excessive cruelty in battle and for its particular lack of mercy toward prisoners or slaves. The reputation of Assyrians for being gratuitously sadistic was known to all in northern Israel where Jonah lived. It is likely that Jonah grew up hating the Assyrians. Even though the Bible doesn't directly make this statement, in some ways, it doesn't have to. Jonah realized that he was risking his life when he opposed God and got on the ship to Tarshish. He knew who God was and he feared a God who was able to control the storm and the seas. While his fear of God was strong, his likely hatred of Ninevah and all its residents was stronger.

In our society, we talk about terrorists, hate groups, hate crimes, genocide and we realize that these roots of intense hatred toward others are not so far removed from us.

Where do you see the effects of hatred around you? In your friends and family, your community, your nation?

Have you ever felt hated because of your nationality or the color of your skin? If so, how did you react?

Have you ever actively hated someone because of their national origin or because of things they have done? How did that hatred affect you?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." Dr. King's life actively illustrated his commitment to love and his true passion for peace. Even while suffering a martyr's death, he clung steadfastly to the one true hope in life: Jesus. Because of his obedience and love, Dr. King's example of righteousness lives on and inspires us today.

The Epistles of John teach us about love and how it is the opposite of hate.

“Anyone who claims to be in the light and hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the lights, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.” (1 John 2:9-11)

What do these verses tell us about hate and how it affects us?

In what ways does this passage tell us hatred causes us to lose our way?

In 1 John 2:5 we read, “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”

Here we read about being complete in Christ. What is the hallmark of someone who experiences this “wholeness” together with Christ?

“This is how we know what loves is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16)

In a practical sense, what does it mean to “lay down our lives” for our brothers and sisters?

When we are able to do this, what does it teach us?

“And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Those who obey his commands lives in him, and he in them.” (1 John 3:23)

As we read this verse, what 3 verbs show us the way:

In his hatred, Jonah was walking into a dark place: he went into the dark hold of a ship, he came out into a fiercely dark storm, he gets tossed into a dark sea and then spends 3 days and nights in a truly dark place. His story clearly illustrates the contrast between the life of disobedience, walking in hatred and darkness, and the way of life and 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." (John 8:12) Just as Jesus is the light that guides us, he invites us to allow him to shine through us. Read the verses below and think about how we are to behave in the midst of darkness and hate:

"Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matt. 5:16

Who is to get the praise for our good deeds and our shining lights?

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of the darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” 2

Cor. 4:6

When we submit to Christ and let him rule over our hearts and lives, what does this verse say about how does his light illumine us?

Jonah’s intense loathing of the Ninevites puts him on a path of active disobedience to God. What follows next is an epic storm, a storm of such proportions that it leaves no doubt in Jonah’s mind about Who is behind it. For Jonah, it provides re-direction. For us, the storm serves as a warning that comes down through the ages: hatred has no place in us. Love, belief and obedience are the true forces for good and change then and now.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help me to look deep into my heart and find those places where I might harbor hatred. Root those out of my life. Dig them up and throw them far away. Let me be covered, instead, with your love and peace and a life of obedience to you. Amen.

3. Sleep of the Dead

Read: Jonah 1:4-6

Have you ever been so exhausted that you dropped off into a “dead” sleep? I can remember a time after my beloved sister-in-law died. I was overwhelmed with sadness and grief and guilt over her last days and the suffering she endured. My husband and I had a long-anticipated trip to the Holy Land with our church planned. After we boarded the plane for the journey from Atlanta to Istanbul, I fell into a deep sleep—sitting straight up in a coach seat. I woke up as we landed feeling disoriented by the change in location, language, and climate.

Jonah also sleeps. He has probably been wrestling with God’s Spirit for a period of time. Most likely this call to go and his refusal to obey, did not happen over the space of a few hours or even a few days. We don’t know how long he argued with God about not going to Ninevah, but by the time he hatched his plan to leave God behind, he was exhausted, worn out by the effort of opposing God. When he gets on the ship, the scriptures tell us, “Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep.” He was sleeping so soundly that he slept through a wild storm!

Jonah’s sleep is truly the sleep of the dead. Spiritually dead. He makes up his mind to willfully disobey God and experiences a false sense of peace. His disobedience cuts him off from God, silences the direction of the Spirit in his life, and allows him to sleep.

When our children were small, they became adept at figuring out when mom was going to lecture them about their behavior. In the heat of the moment when emotions were rising, they would sometimes try to stop up their ears with their fingers and hum a “la,la,la” tune loudly enough to drown out my remonstrations. As Jonah runs away, he seems to have his hands over the ears of his spirit, singing the “la, la, la” song which lulls him into this deep sleep—the sleep of the dead.

Do we sometimes hear reminders in our spirit, gentle whispers, nudges with directions— “Write a card to that person in distress,” or “take your neighbors a loaf of that bread,” — and we tune it out by turning on the TV, or occupying ourselves with social media or even taking a long nap?

Do we sometimes “numb” our consciences so that we are no longer affected by the urgings of the Spirit of God? The Bible tells us that habitual sin can eventually lead us to the point of no longer being able to hear.

Isaiah 6:9-10:

“Go and say to this people: ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand. Make the mind of the people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.’”

Paul repeats this scripture at the end of Acts and Jesus reminds his audience repeatedly, “He who has ears, let him hear,” indicating that even though we all do have ears, we often lack the willingness to hear and certainly the desire to obey. Revelation 2:7 carries it further, allowing for the promise that awaits those of us who truly listen: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will grant the right to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God.”

What do you do to keep listening well and to not become numb to the voice of the Spirit in your life?

“Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god...Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.” Jonah hears the call to pray and this time it comes through the mouth of people who are unbelievers, desperate unbelievers. Sometimes it is the people who are truly different from us in terms of faith, that call us to come back to our original beliefs—to return to God and listen again.

Have you ever had a time of wandering from the faith or maybe simply “tuning God out?” A time of being spiritually asleep, “dead” to the faith? What brought you back? Can you think of a person, an event, something someone said that woke you up?

This story from the Old Testament is played over again in the life of Jesus but with strikingly different results.

In Mark 4:35-41, we read the story of Jesus calming the storm. After a long day of teaching, the Bible tells us that Jesus climbs into the boat with his disciples and they head across the lake. Jesus, exhausted from his long day of teaching, finds a pillow, plumps it up and settles in for a nice nap as they cross the Sea of Galilee. In transit, a massive storm blows up—so fierce that these seasoned fishermen are in fear of their lives. They do all they can first, then in their moment of despair, turn to Jesus who is sound asleep and wake him up with the plea, “Do you not care?” Jesus gets up and speaks words of peace to the storm and “...there was a dead calm.”

How is this story similar to Jonah’s? How is it different?

Like Jesus’ disciples, do we sometimes look at the storms surrounding us and lose our perspective? The disciples don’t take their problem to the Lord and ask for his help, they jump right to the existential question, “Do you really love us? Because if you did,

you wouldn't be asleep on a big, fat cushion while we are rowing away, about to die!" I cringe to think how many times I do the same thing: I work and work on my problems, forgetting to take them to God, and then cry out for a sign that he cares for me. Meanwhile, the Lord is with me through it all, waiting for me to shut off the screaming and yelling, the blaming the next person for not pulling at the sails the right way, or for not bailing the water fast enough. We can identify with this scenario simply because we all do it. All the time. We like to think we turn it over to the Lord, but I have a friend who says, "Yep. I turn it over every morning. I take it to the Lord in prayer and lay that sucker on the altar. Trouble is, I have picked up the whole mess by noon and carry it around with me for the rest of the day!"

How can we be different from the ungodly people in Jonah's story who seem to be casting about for something, someone, anything to save them?

Are we like the disciples who have Jesus in our boat and yet neglect to turn to him with our problems and instead reveal our lack of faith by questioning his love?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, I want to turn my troubles over to you. Help me to be able to turn to you in the storms of life and to trust in your loving care. Amen.

4. Ice Bucket Challenge

Read: Jonah 1:7-17

In 2013, Pete Frates, Pat Quinn and Corey Griffin came up with the clever idea of having people dump ice water on one another, record the event for social media, and then use it as a fundraiser. The simple plan was effective in raising over 100 million dollars toward ALS treatment and research. Our family and friends did it, too, and had fun posting videos online to encourage others to give. For those that participated, they quickly discovered that having a bucket of ice water dumped all over you was startling and invigorating.

Jonah also faces a trial by water, but his comes as the result of having the sailors cast lots to determine who is the person responsible for bringing the fierce storm upon them. Written in approximately 720 B.C., Jonah's story is ancient and part of a time and culture when people believed themselves to be largely responsible for the natural disasters that overtook them. This type of thinking—that natural events result from misbehavior—is rather foreign to us. We don't generally see a storm and ask what we did to cause it.

Can you think of times when we (humanity) are responsible for natural disasters?

While we may not directly cause or even contribute to some natural disasters, we can all look at the effects of global warming, wildfires, fracking, flooding related to erosion and deforestation and see our collective hands at work, destroying part of God's exquisitely planned earth.

When the children were growing up, we admonished them, "Leave it better than you found it." We try to do what we can to be careful with God's beautiful creation.

In what ways do you work to preserve creation? How do you work to leave the natural world a little better than you found it? How do you allocate resources and energy to make the natural world a better place?

Jonah's shipmates realize they are at the mercy of the storm. They do all that is in their power to make the situation better, including throwing cargo overboard and calling on their gods. Eventually, the captain discovers Jonah asleep and says in so many words, "Hey bud, get up and help out here! We are all about to drown! Do you believe in any kind of god? If you do, then for heaven's sake start praying!"

After casting lots to see who is the responsible party, the group zeroes in on Jonah asking him to tell his story. Jonah, the ever-reluctant missionary, tells them about his

God, the one true God and says, “I am a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.” Despite Jonah’s backward witness, his poor preaching, his unprepared sermon, the men are willing listeners. They are desperately thirsty for some truth—for knowledge of the One True God.

When they discover that Jonah is trying to flee God, they are understandably even more fearful. Again, they try to escape the sentence that Jonah has self-proclaimed, “Pick me up and throw me into the sea.” They row as hard as they can but without success. Eventually, they give up and pray.

Write out their first prayer:

Here we see their first act as believers in the God of Jonah. They sincerely ask him to not hold them responsible for Jonah’s life as they follow through and obey God. “...for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you. (v.14)

God is constantly working with us, calling us to a life of obedience. Jesus says to his disciples, “Follow me.” He doesn’t give them a lot of details, just the simple instruction to leave it all behind and walk.

As “His-story” unfolds in the words of the Bible, God shows us people on both sides of the spectrum of obedience. What do these characters do when they hear God’s call?

Think about these examples and maybe add a few more of your own.

- Abraham- Ex. 12:4- Left it all; destination unknown.
- Saul-1 Sam. 10:1, 20-24- Anointed but hid in the luggage.
- Gideon- Judges 6:36-40- Puts out a fleece to double check.
- Elisha- 1 Kings 19:19-21- Burns his oxen and offers the neighbors a meal celebrating his ordination.
- Matthew-Matt. 9:9- Leaves his fortune and livelihood behind.
- Saul/Paul- Acts 9:4-6- Sees the light and is physically blinded.

Others:

What does the Bible have to say about obedience and the lifestyle we live when we walk in Jesus' footsteps?

In John 14:21, we read, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." (NIV)

Obedience is the hallmark of the true believer.

I hope God is not calling us to throw anyone overboard literally. However, as with most scriptures, we are invited to look deeper, to explore hidden meanings, to find applications that are below the surface. Jonah's case is extreme. But sometimes extreme measures are called for as we obey God and jettison sinful habits, sinful social circles, sinful practices on the internet, sinful reading, and sinful ways of using our resources. As we follow Jesus and obey him, we begin to shed the parts of us that are unbecoming, that don't blend with the purity of our Savior. As we grow to love him and others better, we find that evil no longer fits, and throwing it overboard is the only and best thing we can do.

What do you need to throw overboard as you follow Jesus? What parts of your life are unbecoming to a true follower? What steps will you take today to get rid of that disgusting cargo?

When the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, “the sea ceased from its raging.” Apparently, the effect was immediate and impressive. They knew, beyond doubt, that their obedience had resulted in salvation for them. “Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.” (v.16)

After meeting God through Jonah, the men learned to pray, obey and follow. Immediately after meeting God, their faith is tested, they obey and then see God’s mighty deliverance. The Bible says that they “made vows,” meaning that they made commitments to God—maybe like we do when we experience baptism or when we join a particular congregation. The implication is that their lives are transformed by hearing the Good News of a mighty God, one who rules over the mysteries of the sea and of life and has the power to save.

Jonah was on a missionary journey even as he sailed away from Ninevah. Even though he was intentionally moving away from God, God continued to use him, in spite of himself. In my life, I know there have been times when I have been going away from the way God is calling me to go. And yet, he can make good come out of my bad.

Can you think of a time in your life when God has made good out of difficult storms?

When he has used you, even in a rebellious state to make good come for others?

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me as I identify parts of my life that are causing storms. Help me to get rid of sin that is holding me back. As I seek to obey and follow you, let me see your glory and deliverance in my life. Amen.

5. Going Deeper

Read: Jonah 1:17, 2:1-10.

For my 45th birthday, I decided it would be a good idea for the whole family to get scuba certified and go diving together—don't ask me why. I think I just picked something that was out of my comfort zone. Anyway, off we all went for scuba lessons. During one of the lessons we were at the bottom of a pool learning to “buddy dive,” meaning share air with our diving buddy. Suddenly, my air went off. Instead of looking to my diving buddy and asking to breathe some of his air, I panicked and shot for the surface—TOTALLY the wrong thing to do. Later I learned that the instructor had turned my air off on purpose to see if I was really learning the lesson. Needless to say, I wasn't really absorbing what he was teaching. (Although we went on to complete our training and dive together, that experience did make it hard for me to relax and enjoy the whole adventure.)

Just as I struggled with my training, Jonah was also having trouble living into the lessons God was teaching him. I don't know what Jonah was thinking as his shipmates prepared to cast him overboard. What do you think was going through his mind?

- Suicide by sailors.
- I'm going to die anyway, so I might as well not take the others with me.
- I will gladly sacrifice my life to save theirs.
- God can save me, even from the unknown forces of the deep.

- I am ready to allow God to turn this whole situation around, so I will cast myself into his care.
- Or something else? _____

It's impossible to know what was going through Jonah's mind in all of the turmoil of the storm and through the prayers of the men but it is worth considering that Jonah was probably experiencing a real sea change of heart as he looked into the darkness around him and saw death looming. Jonah does have a tendency toward hyperbolic comments related to his own death and could even be considered depressive given his comments which we will examine later in chapter 4. Jonah is in the most desperate moment of his life. However, his attitude does leave us with questions: How did he know God would spare the sailor's lives if they threw him overboard? Was this something God told him in his dreams?

Whatever his thoughts, Jonah ends up in the water, tossed there by the hands of shipmates who felt they had no other choice. Can you think of a time in your life when you faced death? How did you react?

Take a minute to read verse 17 again, “But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.”

Write out the first phrase here just so it sticks in your mind:

It’s easy for us to get sidetracked with speculation about the fish. We get lured down the line of figuring this thing out: what kind of fish was it? How big was it? How did Jonah breathe inside it? Wasn’t it a whale like all the kids’ picture books show? Questions of “how” clutter our minds and we overlook the salient phrase: “But the Lord provided.”

In the Nativity Story, we see Gabriel speaking to Mary when he says, “For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1:37) Mary is able to put aside her questions of how and simply trust in God’s provision for her. Her reply sets an example for us all as believers, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

In Jesus’ ministry, he highlights God’s surpassing greatness when the disciples question him about his statement that that the rich will find it hard to enter the Kingdom of heaven. They have just heard him talking with the rich young ruler, a man whose heart is set on his riches and they have become an obstacle or an idol to him. Jesus tells him to go give it all to the poor. The young man leaves “grieving” for he loves his stuff more

than he loves Jesus, and he can not fathom giving it all up for love. He leaves with the ultimate poverty, loving material things that can only bring him heartache and loss and not loving the One who could make all his material things have true meaning. At the end of this exchange the disciples are upset at the impossibility of anyone being saved. That's when Jesus delivers this zinger, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." (Matt. 19:26)

Where in your life do you see an impossible situation?

How can we be more like Mary and speak the words that open the door to all kinds of possibilities?

In the person of the prophet Jonah, the Lord takes a leaky, broken vessel and by his power, and his power alone, transforms him. Jonah is unwilling, unprepared, ungracious, but in spite of all this, God uses him as an unlikely messenger to the people of Nineveh. Come to think of it, the Bible is a veritable litany of unlikely messengers, used by God. Biblical characters of shady character spring to mind without too much effort. Read a little about how each of these earned their descriptive moniker and write a reason why they might be considered unsuitable messengers for God:

Jacob the Trickster- Genesis 27:19

Saul the Spear Slinger- 1 Sam. 18:11

Ahab the Abhorrent-1 Kings 16:33

Peter the Denier-Matt. 26:75

Saul/Paul the Persecutor- Acts 8:3

God takes men and women full to the brim of unworthiness and, through his grace and love, makes them into new creations. In the Psalms, David expresses it well: “He drew

me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. Psalm 40:2,3.

When Jonah is thrown overboard, he is full of shame, unfulfilled potential, regrets, and sin. As he sinks, he begins to pray. God, in his mercy and love, hears Jonah's prayers from the deep, from the depths of despair and lifts him up.

God is always ready to take us, broken as we are, and transform our lives into something truly wonderful. He promises new life on this earth and everlasting life as we die in Christ.

Psalm 43:18,19:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

What are some areas of your life that you long to allow God to make-over?

How does it feel to think of God doing a completely new thing?

What does Psalm 43:18 tell us to do with the “former things?”

Regrets, past failures and pride can hold us back like a ball and chain around each ankle. We keep trying to move forward under our own power, and we pull and pull but eventually, we wear out and give up. Unless we are able to ask God for help, and turn over the reigns of our lives to him, we are relegated to the “could have been a great life” status.

Do you think that inviting God to release us from our past, our burdens, is a one-time event or a daily commitment? Why or why not?

What scriptures help you as you contemplate living a life of true freedom in Christ?

Evil looks at our burdens and offers condemnation and guilt. Love, in the person of Jesus, sees our sin, convicts us, and through grace, offers us a chance to repent and ex-

perience redemption. Our new life in Christ sparkles and shines through the burial of our sins in the blood of Jesus and the renewal of life in the waters of baptism. Is there a burden that you want to lay down now? Pray about it and consider sharing your prayer with another person that you trust so that they can pray with you and for you, too.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me as I dive deeper into your love. Help me to leave behind my burdens, my shame and my pride so that I can accept your love and grace fully. Amen.

6. The Song of the Deep

Read: Jonah 2 and Matthew 12:38-42

In 2018, a young soccer team and their coach decided to explore a cave in Thailand as part of a celebration for one of their birthdays. They didn't all emerge again for 18 days. Hundreds of people were involved in their rescue. One Thai Navy SEAL died in the effort. The world followed their saga and there was a collective sigh of relief world-wide as the final person came out—the coach— escaping the dark, gloomy, watery cave. Their daring rescue involved being helped through currents strong enough to rip off the divers' masks, fluctuating levels of water, pump failures, torrential rains. Throughout the ordeal, there was doubt that the rescue could be accomplished.

The rescue was riveting because of the age and innocence of the boys, and the brave daring of the rescuers. We might wonder, also, about the symbolism inherent in the high potential for burial in a watery, dark grave and the blessing of having them burst forth into marvelous light.

With Jonah, we read that he is in “belly of the fish three days and three nights.” (1:17). Jesus talked about “The Sign of Jonah” in Matthew 12 when he said, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth.” He clearly predicts his death to an audience that wears spiritual earplugs.

Even his closest followers have a great deal of difficulty discerning what his words mean because surely, surely, they think, he cannot possibly mean that he will die?! They continue to follow but carry their doubts with them all the way through the trial, the crucifixion, and even after the resurrection.

In Matthew 28:16, we see a clear picture of their faith mixed with doubt, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

God knows what we are made of. He knows that we are but dust. He understands that interspersed with our most faith-filled moments we will have wide open fissures of doubt, places where faith has to move in and back-fill as we continue the journey with God. In his infinite mercy, God does not dismiss us because of our wishy-washy-ness. He doesn't deny us when we walk away from him. He doesn't desert us even when we shut the door in his face. Instead, he keeps knocking, inviting, beckoning, providing us with the deliverance we need right when we need it.

From the belly of the “sea monster,” God works with Jonah and Jonah cries out to God in repentance, pleading, “As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple. Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty. But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay.” (2:7-9)

As he has a near-death experience and feels the darkness closing in, Jonah lifts his heart to God with worship, thanksgiving and pledges. How do you respond to God when you are going through a tough time? What is it that helps you to turn to thanksgiving?

What do you think Jonah means by saying, “what I have vowed I will pay?”

What kind of vows do you make to the Lord? The church I attend asks new members to say, “We vow to uphold this church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.” Others who are present when the new member is welcomed into the fellowship are invited to remember and consider the vow that they previously made.

How is remembering an important part of your faith journey? What occasions help you as you reflect on God’s abundant provision and protection?

Recently our son took his wife and their little one and a half year old son, Owen, to the extended family's mountain retreat. Built many years ago, it is a rustic lodge, friendly to critters of the woods who sometimes take shelter in and around it. As they were preparing to leave and were loading things into the car, Owen toddled off to the side garden, in view but just exploring the ivy and trees nearby. He sat down in the ivy and then said clearly, "Snake!" and got up and moved away from the Copperhead that sat curled up less than a foot from him! The shock upset all of us adults who understand the peril that our precious little one was in. We continue to offer up our gratitude and can't thank the Lord enough for protecting him. Our prayer is that God will continue to deliver Owen from evil and that this little one will in turn lead others to the Savior.

The whole episode of God's protection does lead us to think about the myriad times God spares us from evil —so many that we don't even know about or acknowledge.

Can you share a time God protected you or someone you love? Let's pause for a moment and thank him again for every day of life.

The disobedient prophet should have died; we have a narrative of some of his time in the deep, dark place and it mirrors what we read in the Psalms of David. David lived about 200 years before Jonah and his Psalms would have been familiar. The memo-

rized words rose up from deep within him as he turns his heart to the Lord. Note the similarities by listing the verses where you find the following:

Psalm 9- Reference to the Pit, to Sheol, and the gates of death.

Psalm 30- The Pit, Sheol, responding with thanksgiving.

In Jonah's great distress, he longs to once again see the Lord's temple:

"...how shall I look again upon your holy temple? The waters closed in over me." Have you ever had a season in your life when you were not able to attend church or became lost in confusion and chose not to attend corporate worship? Some of you may still be there now. The church as the Body of Christ is a holy institution, established by God. But the people in the church are sometimes far from holy. One of our friends has a wise and elderly father who has persevered as a firm church member all his life but he is known to say from time to time, "That man is more religious than God!" We chuckle because we understand exactly what he means. And yet, the church is where the fellowship with other believers feeds and deeply nourishes our spirit. As we work to get along with one another, we find our efforts rewarded with abiding friendships that help to complete us and lead us along the path of righteousness.

Think about your current participation in corporate worship. On the scale of 1-8, how do you rate your connection with the church?

1. Can't stand it. Never go.
2. Online is close enough for me.
3. A couple of times a year is about all I can take.
4. I go but I don't get much out of it. People don't seem to notice that I'm there.
5. I wish I had a church family that I could connect with.
6. I love it when I can go. It makes my heart sing.
7. Attending worship gives my days structure and meaning. It is part of who I am.
8. I look forward to it every week. It's the highlight of the week.

Do you think that getting more connected with a congregation could be helpful to you?

Why or why not?

Jonah's immersion in the water takes him from the lowest depths to the highest heights of praise. He turns his distress into a beautiful song and that song reaches the Lord God Almighty who "spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." (v. 10)

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, Bury me in your love and care. Help me to see my desperate times as opportunities to turn to you. Make my distress into songs of praise and thanksgiving through your power. Amen.

7. Jonah's Call: Take 2

Read: Jonah 3

Jonah may not be the most reluctant evangelist of all time, but he is sure to make the Top 10! The Lord calls him “a second time” and Jonah goes to Ninevah, but he seems to do his duty before the Lord without enthusiasm or love. When God’s word comes to him after he is deposited on the beach, he follows the rules laid out in the job description of prophet: “Carries a message for God to the people,” but he does it almost resentfully. We see this, not so much because of what we read in Chapter 3 but in his reaction to Ninevah’s salvation in Chapter 4.

Billy Graham, by contrast, was the exact opposite of Jonah. Visiting the Billy Graham Library in Charlotte, North Carolina, is inspirational. Situated on the grounds of what was once the Graham family farm, the center is built to resemble a barn. Inside is a guided tour of Graham’s life.

Part of the unfolding story is told in old reels of his sermons and of his conversations with celebrities.” He talked with all sorts of notable figures from that time: Woody Allen, Johnny Carson, Phil Donahue, to name a sampling. The remarkable thing about those interviews was Graham’s attitude. He was relaxed, confident, humble and loving all at the same time. He faced people who wanted to bait him, to get him into a conversation that involved controversy, and instead of becoming defensive, Graham responded with

calm assurance, peace, scripture and an attitude of love and kindness toward his interviewers.

Somehow, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Billy Graham looked at others and saw equals, people created in God's image and all needing his forgiveness and redemption. His demeanor transmitted the message: "You are valuable, loved; like myself, a sinner in need of the forgiving love of Christ." Instead of seeing judgment or superiority, the interviews are suffused with his humility and kindness. It is quite obvious why so many world leaders wanted to meet him and spend time with him. Graham didn't seem to see others as his "salvation projects"—people who might add to his grand total of souls saved in the score card of heavenly accounting. Instead, he appeared to be genuinely interested in each person as a fellow human being, created by God, worthy of his love.

Billy Graham is a Christian that many of us look up to. Who are others that inspire you? Why?

Think about your own life. Do you transmit love and kindness and humility to others? What do you think can help all of us have more of that kind of a Spirit?

Our God is a God of second chances. He gives Jonah a second chance to fulfill his calling, and Jonah obeys. Scripture tells us that it's a big job—big by anyone's standards: "Now Ninevah was an exceedingly large city, a three days walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk." (v.3,4) Jonah wades into the city but only makes it a third of the way across before revival strikes the town and brings it to its knees. It appears that Jonah simply had to open his mouth and speak the words God gave him, "Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown!" Upon hearing the simple message, the people believe God and, "proclaim a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth." (v.5)

The message is direct. 40 days. The people turn from their old ways, humble themselves by fasting and by putting on the garb of repentance: sackcloth—itchy and ill-fitting, this fabric's constant poking and scratching served to remind them of their sin before the Lord. By clothing themselves with humility they reveal to God their sincerity, hoping that he will forgive them and give all of them a second chance, just as he had Jonah.

Can you think of other places in Scripture when you see the time frame of 40 days?

What happened at the end of each of these 40 day time frames?

Moses- Deut. 9:9, 18-

Elijah- 1 Kings 19:8-

Jesus- Matt. 4:1-2

On Mt. Horeb, Moses receives the Word of God in the 10 Commandments and other laws; Elijah flees Jezebel and travels to Mt. Horeb where he talks with God and meets him in the “still, small voice.” Jesus fasts and prays before facing off with the Devil during the Temptation. After that, he launches into his ministry on earth, the three years of teaching, preaching and healing.

Jonah’s 40 days of preaching in Ninevah are also a time of hearing God’s message. The masses of people hear and repent and the news reaches the king on his throne.

The Bible doesn't tell us that Jonah delivered the warning to the king personally, only that he heard and "removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes." (v.6) The king hears of truth, acknowledges God, repents and sets an example for others by his words and his deeds. He issues a proclamation that instructs all of his cabinet, his nobles and all the common people (and animals!) to fast and pray for deliverance.

The people are hungry for the word of God and when they hear it, they take action and turn from their sin. How many times do we discount the ability of God's word to change hearts? How many times do we think, "Those people are really beyond all hope. God can't transform _____."

Who do you sometimes think there are people who may be beyond redemption?

How do we ask God to help us see all people as redeemable? How would we be different if we truly felt that no one is beyond God's reach?

Have you ever felt that you might be in that category? Is there a sin that you feel is too great to bring to God?

One of the first verses that I learned as a small child was 1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sin and cleanse us of every unrighteousness.” Believe that verse and putting it into practice can be life-changing! The freedom of knowing that we are forgiven brings new life to our hearts. Through his forgiveness, we become forgivers—people who can offer love to all others.

Is there any sin that you want to confess right now? Bring it to the Lord and he promises cleansing and new life.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, Help me know you as a God of second chances. Help me to be gentle with myself and with others. Help me to see your willingness to forgive and to extend that grace to your children around me. Amen.

8. The King Bows Down

Read: Jonah 3:6-10

Our small group was talking about times when they met Jesus. One woman said that she first fell in love with Jesus through the story of Adam and Eve and God's killing the animals to cover their nakedness; another woman talked about a retreat where the worship music touched and transformed her life; a third person talked about a time of special awareness of Jesus being her special Friend and walking with her through the day at age 7. Interestingly, the first person is an intellectual, the second is musical and the third is someone who is all about relationships. These stories help to highlight the fact that God meets us all in different ways and at different times in our lives. Just as he made us unique, fingerprints and all, he also does not have a "one size fits all" approach to revealing himself to us.

The people of Ninevah were ready. The evangelist came. The message was simple. The response was phenomenal. Jonah was just what those people needed. God knew that. He called and prepared his Prophet (albeit on the second try!) and Jonah delivered.

In Jeremiah 29, verse 13, we read: "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart..."

What are some ways that God speaks to you today? Try to think of as many different ways as you can:

Try to think back to a time when you met Jesus in a personal way; a time when you felt God delivered a message crafted just for you. What were the circumstances of that story:

Have you ever had a chance to share the story of God's special touch on your life with someone? Consider now who might like to hear about your encounter with God and write down their names here:

Jonah's message touches the hearts of many, starting on the periphery of town and moving to the king, at the very center. With his proclamation, the king encourages confession and details some of the sin for which they all need to repent. From his leadership role, the king becomes a spiritual leader as well, humbling himself and inviting others to join him in submission to an Almighty God.

"Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." (v.8,9)

The king's humble confession of violence encourages all his people to see where they hold on to a damaging sin: violence.

Where do we hold violence in our hands? Can you think of ways that we harbor sins of violence against others? What are some instruments of violence or examples of ways that we instruct others in violence? Where do we condone violence against others?

How can we rid ourselves of the violence that is in our hands?

It is easy to regard Ninevah as a city from long ago, a violent place that is no more. It is less comfortable to uncover the Ninevah in ourselves, the sin and violence that continue to reside in us, that we hold in our own hands. We can read the literal story of Jonah and tell it to our kids and think in our minds, “Well, at least I’m not as bad as all that... tsk, tsk.” But. Then. We turn and face Jesus. Red-faced, we admit that we too, like the Ninevites, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

The king got it. He heard the message, believed it and acted on it, leading a nationwide revival that begged God’s forgiveness without assuming that it was a given. His authenticity reflects his knowledge that he and his people deserve to die; they should get punished for what they have done. Only by God’s grace and merciful love can they hope to escape the judgment that is their due.

Do we follow the king’s example and display authentic humility and sorrow for our sins? Or are we “name it and claim it” Christians that sometimes tend toward a prideful ownership of God’s ways, using his promises as weapons to wield as we excuse ourselves from the rigors of righteousness, allowing ourselves great big fat causeways to walk on while we demand that others stick to the narrow way of discipleship and discipline. True honesty probably makes most of us cringe as we read...

Consider spending a few minutes in confession, searching your heart and mind for times when you may have excused your own bad thoughts or behavior while demand-

ing purity of others'. Then maybe follow up with a prayer thanking God for his mercy and forgiveness and grace.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help me to have a heart full of love and forgiveness for others. Give me an attitude of mercy and humility. Amen.

9. And God Changed His Mind

Read: Jonah 3:10 and Jeremiah 18

When we got married, I had the inside of my husband's wedding band engraved with the words, "Joy Forever." While the play on words and the sentiment is sweet and romantic, none of us is forever. But isn't it one of the things we love about our God and that we especially enjoy celebrating in song or reciting in scripture verses? We love God for his unchanging nature—he has been and always will be faithful, loving, kind, merciful...and yet, in Jonah 3:10 we read, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." He changes his mind? What? How does Jonah 3:10 and Jeremiah 18, jibe with this God that is everlasting and eternal?

First, it is important to establish that God is God. Any effort to explain him and pigeon hole him is doomed to failure. Far be it from any of us to arrive at any conclusive knowledge about God and his nature. We are but dust. God can be and is all things. He doesn't owe us an explanation. We don't need to understand in order to love him and obey him. However, in our search for ways to trust him and walk with him, we do at times come to a point where we can sometimes feel scriptures are in conflict with one another. How can an unchanging God, change his mind?

Let's look at some thoughts on examining difficult scriptures:

When we read the Bible, whether as a casual reader wanting to simply check it off the “to do” list for the day or as a serious Bible scholar, we all run into passages that test our devotion to the Word. Whether it is the purity laws of Leviticus or the killing fields of Joshua or the harshness of Judges and Kings, we all get to spots where we have a choice: skim or dig in.

While “skim” is one way to deal with trouble, it is fraught with problems. This approach decides one of two things:

1. The Bible doesn’t mean everything it says or
2. I just can’t go down this part of the road of scripture.

Skim, effectively ends up picking and choosing parts of God’s Holy Word to focus on and leads to a serious deficit in a more mature, complete understanding of God and who he is.

Skim also sees the horror of some of the Old Testament stories and closes off a bit of our spirit from God’s purview. We see parts that we can’t understand and our spirits say, “I just can’t love a God who condones this.” We hold a small but significant grudge against the Almighty. The grudge may not show up in church or in relationships, but eventually, the bitterness of unacknowledged resentment toward God will seep out, poisoning our ability to love him fully and to accept his love. I remember being in a Bible study once and a lady said, “I just don’t read the Old Testament. I don’t like it.” How sad! She missed out on so much more that God had intended to give her in her walk of faith.

Do you consider yourself more of a “skim” or a “dig in” kind of Bible student?

So, “Skim” may not be our best way to go. What do we do with the other option, “Dig In?”

There are some ideas to consider regarding the process of Digging In when it comes to scriptures that are hard to understand.

1. **The Bible is a unit.** From Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning” to Rev 22, “I am the Alpha and Omega” and all of it in between, the Bible is a message intended to reveal to us God’s nature, his love, and his holiness. From the pilgrimage of the children of Israel all the way through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, the thread of God’s eternal love for mankind weaves itself steadily and powerfully. The growth of the church through the action of the Holy Spirit brings us into the beauty of God’s big picture for all creation. So all the passages that present difficulties must be seen through the examination of the text as a whole. One Book.
2. **We don’t have the whole story.** We are lost if we can’t get comfortable with the knowledge that we don’t have all knowledge, and we will not have it until we cross

over to the other side. This doesn't excuse us from doing due diligence, from burying ourselves in the passages, the culture of the times, in translations, in cross-examinations; but, ultimately, there is room for interpretation and God has purposely left his Word that way, for his own reasons—to be revealed in the fullness of time.

3. **Difficult passages must be looked at in context:** seeing what has come before and what comes afterward. An excellent example of this can be seen in Leviticus 15:1-4, where a man is stoned for breaking the Sabbath by picking up sticks. Our initial and very human reaction to a story like this is, “Really? Killed for picking up sticks? That seems harsh.” If we are not careful, we move further from that observation into criticism of a perfect God. These thoughts then progress to an obstacle between us and our Savior. Instead, let us look at the preceding verses. There are many uses of the word, “unintentionally.” Before this particular story, God’s word highlights repeatedly the forgiveness available to all through confession (and in the Old Testament, the associated appropriate sacrifice). This man deliberately, and in open rebellion, chooses to defy God’s law: essentially, he is saying, “I don’t agree with these laws and I’m going to show you all that it doesn’t matter.” In a nation that was preparing for war, having a person in their midst who was going AWOL put the entire nation at risk. Perhaps his deliberate sin had to be punished unequivocally.
4. **Scripture invites application in the spiritual realm.** As humans, we live in a sensory world: we believe what we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. God invites us to

be ready to elevate our experience to the realm of faith—the greatest and last frontier—but one that can only be traversed with the guidance of the Spirit. Many of us live our whole lives bound by the here and now, reacting to what happens around us. We fail to see how much more God has for us because we refuse the invitation of faith.

5. **Our pride can lead us astray.** Sometimes, when we read difficult passages, we make the mistake of thinking that God is like we are: judgmental, harsh, unforgiving. When we put on him our sinful characteristics, combined with our limited understanding, we end up with a complete mess. A spirit of true humility is essential as we look into passages that are hard to understand.
6. **Come back to it.** There are times in our lives when we are not able to delve into the more difficult passages of Scripture. We may be going through grief or a family crisis or a time of trial and we may not be able to dig in right now. Maybe today is not the day that it is going to make sense to you. The Word is alive. It speaks to us in different ways, at different times.

Think of a passage in the Bible that troubles you.

Which one is it?

Now, go back and read some of the surrounding scriptures. See if you can gain any new insights based on the discussion above. Write down below one thing that you noticed in rereading the passage:

Pause for Prayer:

God, please help us as we read Scriptures that are hard for us to understand. Speak to our hearts. And give us the perseverance we need to continue to dig in as we walk this journey of faith. Amen.

10. God Changed His Mind- Part 2:

Read: Jonah 3:10 and Jeremiah 18

In the last day's reading, you were invited to look again at a scripture that challenges you. The one from Jonah 3:10 may not have been the first to pop into your mind. Some people have no difficulty with the idea that God can be both changing and unchanging—he is above and beyond and through time. In recent years, we have begun to explore the frontier of science proposed by the Theory of Relativity which proposes that time is more fluid than we originally thought; again, we get a glimpse of how small our minds are and how beyond understanding our God is.

Let's just say, for the sake of this study, that you struggle a bit with this passage. Let's look at three other place in the Bible where God changes his mind and examine those in context and for commonalities.

1. Read over Exodus 32, the story of the children of Israel, creating a Golden Calf.

- Who interceded on behalf of the people? How was Moses' loving intercession key to changing the outcome of this story?

- Do you think God is inviting us to be like Moses in earnestly loving the underserving sinners so that they do not perish?

2. Read over Amos 7:1-6.

- Who interceded on behalf of the people? How was Amos' loving intercession key in changing the outcome of this story?

- Do you think God is inviting us to be like Amos in earnestly loving the underserving sinners so that they do not perish?

3. Read over Jeremiah 26 and focus in on verses 13 and 19.

- Who interceded on behalf of the people? How was Hezekiah's loving intercession key in changing the outcome of this story?

-
- Do you think God is inviting us to be like Hezekiah in earnestly loving the underserving sinners so that they do not perish?
-

Previously, King Hezekiah himself experienced God's merciful extension of his life. He had been very ill, so much so that the prophet Isaiah came and announced it was time for him to take care of his affairs. "This is what the Lord says; Put your house in order, because you are going to die; you will not recover." (Isaiah 38:1). After earnest prayer, God allows Hezekiah more time on this earth and we read, "I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city." (v.5) Again, the prayers of a righteous man, offered in a spirit of humility and gratitude, alter the course of events and illustrate God's eternal bent toward mercy. In the case of Hezekiah, it is by granting him more time on this earth. However, it seems clear that many times our equally earnest prayers have eternal consequences, revealed in current time or unrevealed until the fulness of time.

When have you experienced evidence of God's mercy after prayer?

As we examine the entirety of Scripture, we see an unchanging God repeatedly relenting/changing his mind/re-considering/wiping the slate clean. By so doing and using this phrasing, is he perhaps showing us the way? Is he inviting us to so love others, that we pray with great love for them? When we love others this way, we become more like what God is, laying down our lives for our friends, becoming Christ to those around us, allowing his grace and mercy to live in us and to effect change in a lost and lonely world.

Is it possible that he wants us to see that if he can change his mind, we have no business holding a long term grudge or ever closing the door of our lives to grace and mercy toward others? We experience God's unfailing forgiveness time and time again, but, like Jonah, we are often eager to see others get what they have coming.

Jesus affirms this concept in his forgiveness of the lame man, brought to Jesus through the roof by his 4 friends, "Is it easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to

say, ‘Stand up and walk.’” (Luke 5:23) Jesus brought to light the fact that he is about more than physical healing or about life-extension policies—he longs for us to experience the “much more” of eternal life with him.

What does Jesus say in John 10:10-11 about his vision of true life?

What does Jesus say that he is?

In 1 John 3:16, we read, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” How does this passage challenge you? What do you think it means to “lay down your life” for someone else?

How does this relate to our sincere prayers for others?

In Ephesians 2:4-10 we read in part, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

Perhaps this discussion of Jonah 3:10 does not fully satisfy you. What other considerations do you see that you might share? (There are no right or wrong answers here. Just share what is on your heart.)

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help us when we have questions to be able to trust that you are love and that you are a “big picture” God. Help us to accept our own limitations and to allow for your limitlessness.

11. Hands Free

Read: Jonah 3:10-4:5

Not too long ago, we bought a new car. It came equipped with lots of non-essentials such as heated seats and a variety of settings for the air conditioning. But one new thing quickly grew on me and became an essential: hands free Bluetooth. It is so nice to have my phone pair up with my car's sound system and magically allow me to talk to people by addressing them in thin air, in my car, hurling down the highway. Goodness! It is still pretty remarkable. When my hands are free, I find that it is easier and safer to be a good driver.

In our lives, sometimes we hold on tightly to bitterness or to a desire for revenge. When we do this, we do not have our hands free to love others and to do ministry the way God would have us to. These burdens from the past become like rocks in our hands, making our journey far from easy and certainly not safe from the evil one.

In these verses, we see Jonah obeying God and preaching the Good News to the Ninevites. When the Ninevites repent and change their ways, the Almighty relents and wipes their slate clean. God forgives the multitude of their sins and offers them an abundant measure of grace instead of the forecast fire and brimstone, judgment and destruction.

Jonah is not pleased. As we read this passage it feels like even though he is preaching to the people to repent, he himself is rooting for his message to go unheard. He wants them to get what they've got coming, even though he himself was spared from the fate he deserved. Jonah quickly forgot the grace he received. Can you think of examples in your life or in current events where people do not want to extend mercy to those in need even though they themselves have experienced mercy? If so, why is this?

Recently, I was caring for my little granddaughters, sisters aged almost 3 and 1. I reached over to pick up my squealing 1 year old granddaughter, Malia, and tried to calm her piercing, high-pitched squeals, "No, no! That hurts Nana's ears! No squealing." I put on my sternest face and tried to communicate with her. She waved her chubby arms and squealed again, setting my ears on edge. I put her down and mumbled, "I'm going to have to put you in time out." My two year old granddaughter, Olivia, immediately perked up, "Time out? She's too little!"

"No, she is not going into time out," I explained. "She is too little. You are right. Nana is just trying to figure out what to do to help her understand."

As the evening continued, Malia screamed over and over, communicating her frustration and fatigue in the only way she knew how. Each time, Olivia would ask (rather

gleefully, I might add...) “Is she going in time out now?” I had to chuckle and told her over and over, “No, she’s too little,” kicking myself for mumbling something I didn’t mean in front of an attentive 2 year old.

Judgment, righteousness, rules, boundaries, the difference between right and wrong—it’s where it all starts. We begin to learn this from Day 1 with our parents and grandparents and others cooing over our successes and—hopefully—setting appropriate boundaries to guide us. The flip side of the coin of life is mercy, compassion and unconditional love. These attributes do not come to reside in us unbidden. We must invite them into our hearts each day. Our natural tendency is toward gleeful enforcement of the law: I’m right, you are wrong; I’m good, you are bad; I’m going to heaven, you will cook in hell.

Jesus came to teach us a new way, not to abolish right and wrong and not to deny that God is a just God, but to complete the picture, to fill in some of the details that were not fully presented in the picture of the Old Testament God. As a whole Book, the Bible starts with “In the beginning” and ends with “I am the Alpha and Omega,” and in between paints a multi-faceted picture of a God who loves humanity, who created us for relationship with him, who longs to restore us to a life of wholeness; he is a God who suffers when we stray and who stands waiting, with open arms, for us to come home, come home, “ye who are weary, come home.”¹

It's easy to point our fingers, to shout with glee when others get what they deserve. I'm so glad God doesn't treat me as my sins deserve. I'm so glad I have found in Jesus the God who forgives my sins even as he hangs on a cross, suffering. This God of mercy looks over at the murderer and speaks words of tenderness, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) Because of his love, I can only hope to try to treat others with the same compassion and tenderness.

But it is not something that grows naturally in the Garden of my Heart. There the twin trees of Judgment and Righteousness grow and thrive. The plantings of Love and Mercy struggle along, frequently overshadowed and shaded by the other two. Love and Mercy require daily tending, gentle pruning, weeding out the strident tentacles the other two boisterously put forth. In great humility, I see that only with Jesus' tender hands guiding mine can I hope to cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Gentleness and Self-control (Gal. 5:22)—these beautiful fruit will grow in abundance with daily attention—but if I skip a day or two, suddenly Judgment and Righteousness reach over and cast a shadow. When that happens, I am still planted in God's garden, but my beauty is small, my ability to spread the fragrant odor from the beautiful Fruit of the Spirit is stifled and choked.

Read the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-10 and consider the following questions:

1. What is Jesus doing immediately before this event on the Mount of Olives? In the temple?

2. Who brought the woman?

3. Where is the man?

4. Why do you think the Scribe and Pharisees bring her to Jesus?

5. As the men leave, who goes first? Why do you think this is?

6. How do you see this woman reacting to Jesus' merciful love?

As he talks with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus faces a crowd with stones clutched in their hands, anger in their eyes, hard judgment in their souls and he asks them to consider first themselves: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (John 8:7) Slowly they go away, one by one dropping the hardness they hold in their hands as they realize how guilty they all are and how much they need the forgiveness they stingily withhold for themselves.

Where in your life might God be calling you to extend forgiveness to someone?

Is there a family member that gets on your last nerve or habitually offends you? Is there someone from a different political party, nation, race, sex that you simply cannot forgive? Is there someone who has hurt someone you love and who is unrepentant? Do you continue to hold a stone in your hand that has their name on it? Write those names down here and pray for them and for yourself in relation to them.

How does clenching our hands tightly around stones of resentment keep us from effective ministry to others? Pray now for God to help you as you forgive others and release the bitter hardness that keeps your hands full so you can instead reach out in love to others.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Lord, Take the stones that I continue to clutch in my hands. Help me to release my bitterness, my resentment, my old grudges. Let me have my hands free to do whatever is it that you are calling me to do. Amen.

12. Object Lesson

Read: Jonah 4

Think back to your school days. Which lessons stand out? Chances are, the lessons, sermons, classes, demonstrations you remember all invited some sort of participation on your part. You got to hold, taste, smell, or in some way interact with the object of the lesson. Teachers know the power of the audio-visual, and good teachers employ them liberally.

God is a wonderful teacher. He speaks to us in ways that we can understand and relate to. The story of Jonah has a particularly poignant lesson plan:

1. Issue the call
2. Correct the action
3. Re-issue the call
4. Correct the action
5. End of story. Lesson lives on.

Jonah does God's bidding. He preaches to the lost souls of Ninevah. They repent. He gets mad. What? As God says, "Is it right for you to be angry?" Jonah, ever the reluctant preacher, is a big believer in the death penalty for sin. He effectively says to God, "I told you so. Back when I was in my own country and you called me to do this, I said

to myself, ‘I’m not going to go preach to those godforsaken heathens. If I do and they repent, God will forgive them! I want no part in that mess!’”

Jonah’s gracelessness toward others is truly appalling, but it does invite us to further self-examination. Are there other people, even neighbors, that we neglect to share the Good News with because we make a decision that they probably won’t get it anyway? Are there people groups, religious groups, races that we exclude from our circle of love?

Sometimes we have to keep asking ourselves these questions because we become de-sensitized within our culture to the way things are instead of the way things should be. If you doubt this to be true, think about how many “good” people defended the institution of slavery or how many Christians stood by in Nazi Germany or in Jim Crow South? Where do you see evidence of persecution or inequality today? Who do we see as beyond God’s love and mercy?

In his book, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, Bryan Stevenson states:

“Today we have the highest rate of incarceration in the world. The prison population has increased from 300,000 people in the early 1970s to 2.3 million

people today...one in every three black male babies born in this century is expected to be incarcerated...We have invented slogans like ‘Three strikes and you’re out’ to communicate our toughness. We’ve given up on rehabilitation, education and services for the imprisoned because providing assistance to the incarcerated is apparently too kind and compassionate. We’ve institutionalized policies that reduce people to their worst acts...” 2

Where do you see a lack of kindness and compassion in your family, neighborhood, city, country?

In Micah 6:8, we read, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” At my son and daughter-in-law’s house, there is a sign over the back door that you read as you exit, “You are entering the mission field.” In order to be good emissaries for Christ, we have to spend quality time with our Lord, walking with him in the cool of the morning, in the heat of the midday work, and in the busyness of the evening. As his disciples, our ability to do anything of eternal value at all hinges on how attached we are to him. Jesus invites us to walk a personal walk with him but he doesn’t say it will be easy—he promises that he will never leave us—and he encourages us to persevere in “walking humbly with our God.”

As we seek to love mercy and show kindness to others, we become bridge builders, people that specialize in forming authentic relationships of love and kindness with others, in person, on social media, in long distance outreach through missions.

How are you building bridges of relationship with people in your family, neighborhood, city and around the world?

What mission outreach is particularly meaningful to you? Why?

Jonah preached the message; then he sat down to watch the spectacle unfold, apparently more concerned with his own image than with the fate of 120,000 people and animals. Jonah's pride interfered with his love, didn't it? He wanted his prophecy to be fulfilled so that he wouldn't look bad before the Ninevites! We cringe as we consider his motivations, but if we carefully look at ourselves we can remember times when we happily said, "I told you so!" when our earnest warnings were fulfilled.

"I told you so!" is a common refrain in relationships, isn't it? Can you think of a time when you gleefully saw your own "prophecy" fulfilled?

How connected are judgment and pride? Do you think that maybe sometimes, when we announce how God is going to punish someone for their misdeeds, we border on pride rather than on love?

Jonah goes outside the city and makes himself some sort of shelter, a “booth,” where he sits down to wait it out and see what God is going to do. In order to open Jonah’s eyes a little wider, God has a plant grow that literally comes up overnight and provides excellent shade. Jonah is saved “from his discomfort” and he is “very happy about the bush.” We can almost see him smiling and resting back in ease and comfort.

Jonah allows his personal comfort to take precedent over God’s work in people’s lives. Ouch! While most of us may not harbor the sin of lack of love toward others, we probably all spend a little too much time in the ease and comfort of a nice, soft couch. We decline to do the hard work we need to keep doing, and opt instead to be “very happy” about things that are really of no import at all.

What is your favorite creature comfort:

1. Your bed?
2. Your air conditioning?
3. Your refrigerator?
4. Your running water?
5. Your indoor plumbing?
6. Other: _____

It is embarrassing to think how often we put our physical comfort ahead of things that are really important. Where is God calling us to think first of what has eternal value and live our lives in the light of that calling?

God makes short work of Jonah's R & R and a worm comes to kill the nice shade bush. Just like that, Jonah is ready to die and says, "It is better for me to die than to live." God again asks Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?" God presses the question further to hit home the object of the lesson he is trying to teach Jonah and us: People matter. Animals matter. Souls matter. You and your personal comforts do not measure up. Listen and learn.

Jonah suffers from a bad case of overestimating his own importance. God is patient in teaching him, allowing him repeat opportunities to get it right and in the end using a

very practical daily experience—absence of shelter and housing—to illustrate his point in a way that would really make an impression on his student.

Can you think of a time when God has used circumstances in your life to draw you to himself and to correct you?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus invites us to be aware that our true treasures are not the creature comforts of this world: “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” (Matt. 6:19-20) He also points the way to a life free of worry and stress, focused instead on what truly matters.

Read Matthew 6:25-34.

1. What animals and plants does Jesus mention?

2. What are some things he says that we worry about unnecessarily?

3. In verse 33, what does he say we are to strive for instead?

4. Write out verse 34, if you wish, and think about committing it to memory so that the next time you find yourself angry about something that really doesn't matter, you can pull this verse up and re-focus.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord Jesus, help me to be focused on your love for me and for others. Help me not to spend my time worried about things that don't matter ultimately. Transform my thoughts so that I am filled with love and compassion that come from you. Amen.

Micah

Introduction

Once we hosted a holiday dinner at our house. One of my friends brought an elaborate cake: 3 layers of moist red velvet with thick coconut cream stuffed between the layers, topped with freshly-whipped green-tinted cream. The presentation was stunning, as she had piped on the cream in little flowers, making the whole effect almost too pretty to eat. Almost. I sliced the cake and offered it to one of our four year old guests. He examined the plate and turned away, saying, “I don’t like anything green.” What I offered him was one of the best tasting things he would ever put in his mouth, but he turned it down, based on his suspicion that I might offer him something “healthy” or good for him.

After having a hearty laugh and enjoying his piece of cake for him, I sat down and thought some more about this little guy’s refusal to accept the gift. Reading through Micah, we see the recurrent theme of a God who offers the best to his children only to have them refuse it repeatedly, going after the empty life of idol worship and material gain, rejecting his love and the fullness of life that he offers—the really good stuff!

In 7 chapters, Micah preaches to both Israel in the north and Judah in the south, aiming his words at all of God’s people who seem to be bent on doing the opposite of what God has planned for them. Micah’s prophecy may be most famous for a verse in Chapter 6, “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,

and to walk humbly with your God?” With these words in verse 8, Micah succinctly summarizes what God is asking him to preach. His words provided guidance in his day and continue to serve as a touchstone to us today. When we lose our way, when we have lots of questions; when our focus gets fuzzy, the ancient words of a man who lived long ago can help us re-direct and step back to the way of truth, mercy and humility.

Although chapter 6 gets the most press, with lots of “likes” and “shares” and Facebook memes, there are many other treasures buried in this short prophecy. Written about 100 years before Jeremiah, probably around 722 B.C., Micah is later compared favorably to that renown preacher, possibly showing the great esteem and regard the Israelites had for his words. Later, much later, his words of love and correction— and his prophecy of consequences and judgment— resonate with the people. It is possible that, like the little boy refusing the cake, many of the recipients of his words weren’t prepared to take in the very best that God had to offer them.

As we dive deep into Micah’s words, let us consider how these words applied to the audience of the prophet’s contemporaries, and then let us also take a more personal look at current nations, churches and our very selves, asking God to shed a light on areas where we need to heed his warnings today.

1. Come, Lord Jesus!

Read: Micah 1 & 2

There was once an advertising campaign sponsored by a billboard industry association which posted signs that purported to quote God. One of my favorites was, “Don’t make me come down there—God,” which reminded readers of our parents threatening to come down to the basement play area and eliminate the squabbling or make us fix our mess. The similarity is enough to make us chuckle, but then the true meaning stays with us, and we wonder again at God’s grace and mercy at truly “coming down here” in the person of Jesus Christ.

Can you remember ever seeing one of those billboards? If so, which one did you like the best?

Micah’s prophecy starts out with verses that remind us that “the Lord is coming out of his place, and will come down and tread upon the high places of the earth. Then the mountains will melt under him and the valleys will burst open, like wax near the fire, like

waters poured down a steep place.” (1:3-4). Micah’s words emphasize that God sees the mess we have made with our sin and our lostness; he promises to come to us, all the while expressing his disappointment with humanity’s tendency to follow after idols. Micah’s words foretell a time and place when the Son of God will surely come. In Chapter 5 we read:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
Who are one of the little clans of Judah,
From you shall come forth for me
One who is to rule in Israel,
Whose origin is from of old,
From ancient days...
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the
Strength of the Lord. (5:2,4) NRSV

God’s coming into the midst of the people is marked by images of him walking on the high places (where the people worshipped idols). The lasting consequences of his coming are dramatically illustrated with the verbs melting, bursting, pouring.

When God manifests himself to us, he transforms our lives, doesn’t he? We are never the same after we allow God’s touch. Knowing his love and accepting it is truly the single most important mission in our lives; and yet, God’s coming is not a uniform process. He pours out grace upon grace, coming to each of us at our point of need.

Holding back, holding on, arms crossed, hearts sealed, so often we decline God's willingness to enter into our world, our lives, our very hearts. Is it pride that holds us? Is it shame? Is it a sense of unworthiness? Is it complacency? Is it peer pressure? Our reasons for not accepting God's coming into our lives are many, but as we submit and accept, everything changes. We go from black and white to Technicolor and, just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we are amazed. Think about whether you have fully invited God to be a part of your life. Is there something holding you back? Write your thoughts on the lines below:

If you are on a journey with Jesus, then read the verses below and consider how God has touched your life and how your world continues to change because of his presence your life. On the lines below the verses, note some of the ways God changes us:

1. "Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." Isaiah 1:18
2. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" 2 Cor. 5:17
3. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." John 8:12

4. “You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Eph 4: 22-24

Micah’s introduction places him squarely in time and place: he is from Moresheth and lives in the days of the kings Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (742-687 B.C.). His prophecies are intended for the people of the time living in both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. He doesn’t mince words or appear to make any attempt to soften the verbal blows. He repeats the message God has given him. Word for word. But the message he carries is a burden to him. Because of his passion and his personal mourning over the message, he is sometimes called “The Wailing Prophet” by Biblical scholars. He proclaims in 1:8-9:

For this I will lament and wail;
I will go barefoot and naked;

I will make a lamentation like the jackals,
And mourning like the ostriches.
For her wound is incurable.
It has come to Judah;
It has reached to the gate of my people, to Jerusalem. (NRSV)

The Wailing Prophet takes no joy in the message he delivers to his countrymen. It is not a pleasant duty. Even as he wails over what God asks him to say, he delivers further indictments. Let's look at Chapter 2 for examples of some of the types of sins that convict the children of Israel.

Verse 1: What are they doing at night?

Verse 2: What do they do to others' houses and fields?

Verse 6: What do they say to preachers who try to correct them?

Verse 8: What do they do to those who are trusting and peaceful?

Verse 9: How do they treat women and children?

Verse 11: What kind of people do they want to listen to?

The God of the Universe is speaking through Micah to the Children of Israel and, of course, to us today. He invites us to examine ourselves for places where we reject his coming into our lives and where we continue in the practice of injustice.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, As we read this ancient words, speak to our hearts. Let us wail and mourn for the places where we reject you, where we turn away from your message for us, and where we continue in the paths of injustice. Break our hearts, Lord, for what breaks yours. Amen.

2. The Danger of Status Quo

Read: Micah 3

Alzheimer's is a terrible disease, isn't it? It robs the victim of their mind before their body dies. Except for occasional glimpses of lucidity, those that suffer from the dreaded disease often live in a state of confusion. One of the interventions from caregivers that can sometimes help is keeping things the same. Much like small children, Alzheimer's patients frequently prefer less variety and more stability: the same environment, the same shows on television, the same food, even the same clothes. While taking away choices and changes would be frustrating and limiting for most people, these patients appreciate consistency.

Can you remember a time in your childhood when you wanted to watch the same television show repeatedly? Or to wear the same favorite item of clothing? If so, what was it?

In this passage of Micah, we read about cruel leaders and rulers who want everything to stay the same, not to alleviate suffering but to inflict it. Micah prophesies against them:

Hear, **leaders** of Jacob, **rulers** of the house of Israel! Isn't it your job to know justice? —

You who hate good and love evil...(3:1)

Hear this, you **rulers** of the house of Jacob and **chiefs** of the house of Israel,

Who abhor justice and pervert all equity,

Who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with wrong! (3:9)

The leaders have it all backwards, don't they? While they are supposed to be busy leading the people into a righteous way of living, what is it that they are doing instead? With what words does Micah describe their deeds?

Just as the leaders and rulers have gone astray, so the religious establishment also perpetrates evil in the name of good. Micah calls out his fellow prophets who sell themselves for food and who are willing to maintain the status quo by speaking falsehood and by "teaching for a price." (v.11).

How does "teaching for a price" possibly relate to us today? Have you heard any instances of pastors or other spiritual leaders who are prone to remain silent in the face of sin so they don't lose their positions?

The false prophets of that day “lean upon the Lord and say, ‘Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us.’” (v.11). How can we relate to this today? Are there instances you are aware of in your congregation or community where large portions of people remain silent and unwilling to effect the necessary changes because it threatens their “bread” or livelihood?

How often do we cry “Peace” (v.5) along with the false prophets and sit back in our comfortable recliners, hoping that justice and mercy will prevail but not at our expense?

Micah goes on to point out that his words do not hurt those who are not guilty. “Do not my words do good to the one who walks uprightly?” (Micah 2:7) When we live as God would have us live, we have true peace, don’t we? The stinging words of the prophet don’t disturb us because we have a sense of being and doing what God calls us to be and do.

What helps you to have true peace in your heart? How do you stay the course of being at peace with God and others?

There are some people in our church family to whom we refer as “pillars of the church.” These are generally older folks who have been integral parts of the congregation for years, decades, lifetimes. They have often been the ones that have helped to make our church what it is today: vibrant, loving, caring and reaching out. The term, “pillars of the church” is a high compliment, a description that doesn’t at all refer to people who are unwilling to change but to folks who lead the way for the rest of us. This is the opposite of the kind of people to which Micah is referring. These prophets and leaders and “pillars” are stuck in place and unwilling to move in the direction God calls them to go, longing instead for the false peace of complacency and the personal comfort that can accompany the simple absence of conflict.

Who are some elders that you would call pillars of your church in the best possible way? Are there any that you might think are the other kind of pillar—unwilling to change and stuck in preserving the status quo? As you write below, pray for those that come to mind, starting with yourself!

Pause for Prayer:

Lord God, help me to be the right kind of pillar in my family, in my church, and in my larger community. Help me to long for justice and righteousness, not for the absence of conflict and for personal comfort. Amen

3. Holy Rocks

Read: Micah 4

A number of years ago, my husband and I were blessed to have the opportunity to travel to the Holy Land where we visited a number of traditional sites. “Traditional” means that scholars and tour guides dispute where actual events took place, laying claim to various portions of real estate based on economic and political and other reasons. The truth is, when you are there, visiting a place in the vicinity of where Jesus walked, that is not what matters the most. What struck me in being there were the large numbers of people from every corner of the globe that eagerly sought out a physical experience of God—longing somehow for greater closeness with him through the act of walking around where he might have walked while on this earth. When I saw the stone that marked the place where the Baby Jesus was supposed to have “laid his head,” the rock was smooth from all the millions of people who had been there before I came. They touched it with reverence and awe, making that rock holy not because it really marked a particular spot but because it stood as a monument to all the people who earnestly seek the Lord.

Have you ever been to a place that was holy because it was a pilgrimage destination— independent of whether it actually was the actual geographical location of the event? What was it, and how did you feel about it?

As Micah continues his prophecy in Chapter 4, he speaks of Jerusalem as a destination for those seeking closeness with God. Scripture tells us that “peoples will stream to it.” Read 4:1-5 and answer the following questions:

In the last days
the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
Many nations will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the Lord Almighty has spoken.

All the nations may walk
in the name of their gods,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord
our God for ever and ever. (NIV)

1. According to verse 2, what will come from Zion?

2. What will happen to their swords and spears?

3. What promises do you see for those who are obedient in verse 4?

4. In verse 5, we see a pledge. What do the people say they will do?

Verse 3 may feel familiar. It is repeated from Joel 3:10 but backwards! It is also reminiscent of Isaiah 2:4, where we hear the words that have been made into song,

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (NRSV)

The focus on destruction from chapter 3 gives way to a rebuilding, a time of peace and prosperity for those who obey his commands. Again, we have to be reminded of how these eternal words speak to us literally at times, but more often, figuratively. We are invited, through God's word, to keep our focus on the bigger picture, the eternal destination, the ultimate good which brings everything into order in his time and in his way. Just as the literal sites of the Holy Land are not the holy part, so we are invited to have a vision of the eternal when we read his Word.

Going back in time and in our Bibles to the Book of Joshua 24:15, we read familiar words, “Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (NRSV)

Both the Joshua passage and Micah 4:5 invite us to make a decision about which way we will go and how we will lead others. Are we living lives that are consistent with what we profess? Do our words and actions come together congruently? Are we living out our calling as “church people?” Do we see others who are seeking God—maybe in what we consider to be misguided ways—as holy and loved? Or are we judgmental and dismissive of those who don’t practice faith the way we do?

Reflect here on your thoughts about these questions and consider if you hear God’s nudging to revise how you “walk in his paths.” (Micah 4:2)

We have several pre-school grandchildren. They ask lots of questions, repeatedly. Over and over. At age two it starts with “Why?” And moves on to more sophisticated questions as they move through ages three and four. The problem is, they don’t have the capacity to understand our answers and using logic with them is frustrating. Recently, we were FaceTiming with our 3 year old grandson when he suddenly interrupted us to

ask, “How can I see you on the phone?” My dear husband explained using terminology that involved the words “signal, satellite, reception.” He listened with a puzzled expression. When the explanation was completed, I added, “Honey, it’s a miracle, a true miracle!” As adults, we sometimes go into long explanations about why they cannot play in the street, only to find them heading that way—again! If we are capable parents and grandparents, we set good boundaries and enforce them consistently, always with a watchful eye.

God is a good parent. He knows our limitations. He tells us our limits. He sets boundaries, guidelines—laws, even—to help us. In the end, we still struggle to understand, and he tells us, through his prophets, “But they do not know the thoughts of the Lord; they do not understand his plan, that he has gathered them as sheaves to the threshing floor.” (4:12)

Our son and his wife recently adopted a dog from the shelter. Theo is a large dog and loves to run. While he is afforded plenty of exercise, he is constantly on the look-out for a crack in the fence, an open doorway, a chance to slip out. When they went to an empty ballpark, they let him off the leash to run to his heart’s content—and run he did, his part-hound nature soaring in the freedom of the large space. But he kept coming back to the gate to make sure they were still guarding it. Even though he had ample space, he still wanted out, and his desire for adventure overruling his good sense. His curiosity and wanderlust propelled him out—out into being lost, out into dangerous

traffic, out into unknown territory that was not in his best interest. How many times are we like Theo—pushing boundaries even though it is not what is best for us?

Where do you sometimes struggle with God’s loving boundaries in your life? Are you challenged by addiction, by temptation to commit adultery or by desires to spend your time doing things that don’t honor God? Write your thoughts below and consider someone with whom you might be able to share these thoughts:

This same theme is repeated in Isaiah 55:6-12:

Seek the Lord while he may be found;

call on him while he is near.

Let the wicked forsake their ways

and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them,

and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways,”

declares the Lord.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,

so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands. (NIV)

What stands out to you in this passage from Isaiah? Underline phrases or words that speak to your heart or write them below:

The beautiful poetry of this passage cannot hide the central message from God, “Trust me, you do not know what I know.” Just as we have to teach our little ones, so the Lord longs to teach us. There are things that we will not understand on this side, that may only become plain in the next life; but our God is a good God, and he wants what is ultimately best for us. Most of us will continue to struggle with how this all fits together, since evil certainly appears to have the upper hand during our time here on earth. As we seek God with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding (Prov. 3:4-5), the very rocks we walk on become holy ground, for in seeking sincerely, our pilgrimage paves the way to heaven. God, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Pause for Prayer:

“This, then, is how you should pray:

‘Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come,

your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from the evil one.’” (Matt. 6:9-13, NRSV)

4. Promises Fulfilled

Read: Micah 5

As we open Micah 5 and read through verse 1, we come up against one of the difficulties of Bible study: a variety of ways to translate and interpret the same words. Check out the different versions:

“Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us...” (New Revised Standard Version)

“Marshall your troops, O city of troops, for a siege is laid against us...” (New International Version)

“Now muster your troops, Daughter Troop! They have laid siege against us...” (Common English Bible)

“Jerusalem, enemy troops have surrounded you...” (Contemporary English Version)

While Bible scholars go back to the original Hebrew and make prayerful decisions about which particular words to use to convey the message in our language, from time to time, all of us, as readers, come up against the barriers of human understanding of God’s word and message. This particular verse doesn’t hold any particular deep theological implications —at least none that I can see!—but it illustrates some of the difficulties we face in taking God’s word seriously and studying it carefully.

Our little 3 year old grandson enjoys mining for gold. To be clear, his parents take him to a “mine” where he pays for a buckets of sand and then pours the sand through a sieve over running water to discover treasures in his bucket. What he does is a vastly simplified version of true gold mining, but it helps him understand what might be involved on a grander scale.

As we become careful students of the Bible, our eyes are open to the infinite possibilities of interpretation and translation on a grander scale. Just like mining for gold at a kiddie mine, when we are new to it, we pick out special verses, memorize those, and sometimes disregard the pile of other scriptures that are hard or don’t conform neatly to our understanding. As we mature in our faith, we begin to explore the bigger scope of biblical study. Diving deep can lead to discomfort and disagreement as the Holy Scriptures are life-altering for us as Christians. Nevertheless, sifting through passages, comparing notes, reading commentaries, and praying for personal inspiration all come together to lead us to more profound insights.

Can you think of a passage in the Bible that is hard for you to understand?

How do you think more intense study might shed more light on the section that puzzles you?

The prophecies of Micah 5: 2, 4-5, were spoken some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, and hold forth a great deal of hope for the people of that time and for us today, as we all lean into God's long term plan for the redemption of humanity. Seven hundred years later, as Herod is interviewing the Magi who have followed a star to Bethlehem, the Jewish elders quote this verse from Micah as evidence of where the Messiah was to be born. And again, in John 7, we see a discussion about whether or not Jesus is who he says he is, and the group mistakenly thinks he is from Galilee, thereby negating his claims.

God's long view of time is hard for us, isn't it? As we pray, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done..." we think of here, now, yesterday! We long for the eradication of evil, for the peace of Christ (referred to in Micah 5:5), for justice, for mercy. In an instant society where fast food, fast phones, fast dating, even fast devotionals, are the norm, we struggle with a divine plan that unfolds over centuries and millennia.

Reading over the prophecy above, can you see how Jesus' contemporaries might have misinterpreted the nature of the kingdom that was to come? What are the consequences of their lack of understanding?

How about us? Is it possible that as we read God's word, we focus on the wrong things? What are some of the consequences of our lack of understanding? How can we approach scripture with a spirit of humility?

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help us as we read scripture to have holy inspiration. Help us to elevate our thoughts to a spiritual realm and not to judge your words by human standards. Give us more of your mind and fill our thoughts with your thoughts. We ask this through Jesus our Savior. Amen.

5. God's Lawsuit

Read: Micah 6 & 7

There are lots of television shows and movies about the justice system, aren't there?

From the oldies like Andy Griffith, Columbo, and Hawaii 5-0 to the more contemporary Blue Bloods, NCIS, and Law & Order, we seem to love to watch a perpetrator get caught and punished. Amidst the murder and mayhem of the stories, we often see the lawyers as central characters, presenting the accusation, detailing the offense, and proposing a possible judgment until the lawsuit is either dismissed, continued or receives a verdict from the judge.

What was your favorite old crime show? What about a favorite in the current crop?

Have you ever been part of a lawsuit? If so you may have some memories you wish to share:

Chapters 6 & 7 of Micah read like the unfolding of a lawsuit where God has a case against the people; the earth itself serves as a witness; God's goodness manifests itself in spite of the obvious guilt of the accused; God presents his version of a good life; in the end, God expresses his compassion and mercy in the face of obvious transgression.

Let's look at these passages and outline some of the accusations, witnesses, defense and verdict:

1. **Plea:** "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you?" (6:3)

List what God says he did for them from 6:4-5:

2. **Accusation:** "The voice of the Lord cries to the city." (6:9)

List some of the wickedness God sees from 6:10-16:

3. **Witnesses:** “Rise, plead your case before the mountains.” (6:1)

List some parts of the earth that will hear God’s complaint from 6:2?

4. **Indictment:** “The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright;” (7:2)

List some of the ways Israel shows its corruption from 7:1-7:

5. **Appeal:** “...when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me.” (7:8)

List what the prophet Micah says will happen in God’s mercy from 7:9 and 7:18-20:

6. **Verdict:** “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?” (6:6)

List the different sacrifices the prophet proposes (6:6-7):

7. **Judgment:** “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (6:8)

List the 3 steps God requires from us as we live transformed lives (6:8)

Micah 6:8 is the subject of many plaques, art projects, Bible studies and sermons. The words are familiar and even memorized. But do we really live them out? How often do we forgo justice in the interest of expediency; how often do we love money more than kindness; how often do we walk proudly with our God, so sure of ourselves that we give off the bad odor of arrogance before a mighty and holy God? Sadly, most of us

have to nod our heads in agreement, knowing that we fall way short of the standards God has set, knowing that if he were to bring us to court and file a lawsuit against us, we would fail, fail, fail.

Surprisingly, in the upside down economy of heaven, when we know our own sin and acknowledge our shortcomings, then we are truly in the position to see ourselves as God sees us: beloved and forgiven. As we read the very end of Micah, we hear again the absolute wonder of his grace toward us:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity,
And passing over the transgression
Of the remnant of your possession?
He doesn't retain his anger forever,
Because he delights in showing clemency.
He will again have compassion upon us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot. (Micah 7:18-19, NRSV)

As the old hymn says, "Just as I am, without one plea..." Our God loves us. When we confess and turn away from our sin, he is faithful to forgive us and help us move forward.

God sets out steps in our recovery process from sin. As we read Micah 6:8, we see the 1, 2, 3 approach to walking closely with him. In this verse, he sets forth questions we

can use to determine if our decisions are based on his ways. We can always test ourselves when we have questions about how to proceed:

Is it just?

Is it loving and kind?

Is it humble and Godly?

I have a friend who teaches students in Kindergarten, first and second grades. When one of the children wants to report to her on another, she makes a practice of having them stop and ask themselves two questions before continuing: Is it kind? It is necessary? Maybe those lessons learned in Kindergarten are still relevant to us today!

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, I acknowledge my own sinfulness. I need your forgiveness. As I turn to you, I humbly ask that you receive my confession and help me to do better in moving forward. I so want to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with you. Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

In many ways, Micah reiterates the messages of social justice that we find in Amos.

Micah uses his voice to remind us continually to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. He mourns the proliferation of iniquity with passages such as, “Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice.” (Micah 7:5, NRSV)

As we read and study Micah, our mission becomes applying the messages to our own world today. How can we be people who live uprightly in a broken world? How can we share light and love in a time when “The faithful have disappeared from the land, and there is no one left who is upright...” (Micah 7:2, NRSV)

Our family recently saw the movie about Bryan Stevenson and his work with the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama. “Just Mercy” is basically about the story of inmates on death row. Bryan works with his team, at great personal risk, to ensure a review of their cases. Several of them are eventually freed, leading to a new look at death row inmates around the country. Additionally, Bryan works to establish the Peace and Justice Memorial, a landmark that gives our country the space and place to grieve our past related to lynching. Bryan’s work inspires us to ask ourselves the question, “What can I do? What is my role in helping promote justice and mercy where I live?”

As we close Micah, let us tuck these questions into our hearts, write them out in our prayer journals, and speak them to trusted friends. Together, we can rise up and believe Micah's words, "He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication." (7:9)

Nahum

Nahum

Introduction:

Our son-in-law is a high school wrestling coach. Together with his other coaches, they are responsible for encouraging their team to do their best and to put out full effort in every match. We don't know what he says to them in the locker room or when they are huddled together before a meet, but whatever it is, it works to motivate them! His team won't quit.

In Nahum, we see a prophet who is encouraging the people of Judah to persevere in fighting against Assyria. Just like the wrestling team, the country is huddled together, and Nahum encourages them to go to battle to defeat the people of Ninevah. He promises that God is a wrathful God who will “rage against his enemies” (Nahum 1:2). His prophecy assures the people of God's might and power over Assyria, the arch enemy of Judah during the time this book was written — probably around 700 B.C. His message, while ostensibly directed solely at Assyria and specifically at the people of Ninevah, has a subtext intended for the children of Israel: Beware. God is powerful and will not allow sin to go unpunished forever.

Read alone, Nahum is a disturbing book, full of references to God's indignation, anger, and vengeance. However, the book is placed close to the story of Jonah, a story that highlights God's forgiveness specifically to Ninevah but also to all persons, everywhere,

who repent of their sin and turn to him. It is important to read this book and balance it out with what we know of God's nature and character from other books of the Bible.

Day 1: Is God Mad at Me?

Read: Nahum 1

Our granddaughter, Olivia, is 4. She has a bad habit of chewing holes in the thin fabric of her leggings, resulting in several ruined pairs of pants. Each time her mom and dad ask her about where the holes came from, she cries and doesn't want to tell them, saying, "I'm afraid you will be sad and mad." Her parents assure her that telling the truth is important, and then she breaks down and runs for the safety of their arms and says, "I won't do it again." But then she does. So while you may reflexively say, "I could cure her of that habit in no time!" You might be missing the point. Our God is merciful. He is not like a human. He has no limits on his ability to forgive. Yes, there are consequences to our wrongdoing, but there is no comparison between the deep love of God and what emanates from even the purest person's heart.

God IS love.

God = LOVE.

Where there is LOVE, God is there.

Before we launch into Nahum with his portrayal of God as an angry, finger-pointing, wrathful being who brings true fear into our hearts, let's turn to the end of the Bible and look at 1 John 4:7-12. Underline all the places where you see the word, "love."

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way; God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (NRSV)

How many times did you count the word "love?" _____

Think about your past and identify a person who exhibited great love and forgiveness toward you, especially when you were a child. How do you feel about that person today?

Now, think about someone who was a stern, judgmental presence (I hope this one is hard to come up with!). How do you feel about that person today?

I am not implying that God is NOT a God of justice, judgment and righteousness—because he is. But as we study and absorb Nahum’s prophecy, let us also balance out the other words of Scripture that show us a God of mercy, gentleness and forgiveness. Embodied in Christ, this ultimate revelation of the Almighty shows us a God who carries us close to his heart like a Shepherd. We read in Isaiah 40:11, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” Jesus refers to himself in John 1:11 when he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (NIV) He also utters the words, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do,” as some of his final words.

As you read through Nahum 1, what are some of the attributes and actions he assigns to God and what he will do to the Ninevites? Which ones stand out to you?

Differing versions use a variety of words, but some of the descriptors and action words that I underlined include:

Jealous, avenging, wrathful, rages, whirlwind, storm, indignation, heat of anger, fire, afflict, cut off, you are worthless...

Pretty harsh stuff, huh? Interspersed among the words that assure Judah of God's destruction of their enemies are words that remind us of his kindness and his unfailing love. Granted, overall Nahum 1 comes across as depicting a wrathful God, but let's not neglect the phrases that counter that thought:

Nahum 1:3, "The Lord is slow to anger but great in power..."

Nahum 1:7, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects those who take refuge in him."

Nahum 1:15, "Look! On the mountains the feet of one who bring good tidings, who proclaims peace!"

Nahum strongly urges the people of Judah to take heart and know that God is in control and that he will defeat those who go against him. God will not allow injustice and idolatry to go on forever. He will act to right those wrongs.

How does Nahum 1 encourage you in our time? Do you see political and personal wrongs that need to be made right? Do you really believe that God takes notice of those sins and will eventually punish the perpetrators?

Trusting God to make things right is hard, especially when our timeline is so short, when our vision is so confined, and when our own sin is still so prevalent.

How can we encourage each other when we huddle together like that wrestling team? What words do you offer your fellow Christians about God's sure defense of the cause of the righteous even when all evidence points to the contrary? How do you keep the faith?

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Lord, Thank you for your love and forgiveness that continues to cover over me every day. Thank you that in your time you will right the wrongs that we see in this world. Help us to be able to trust in you and know that your plans are best. Amen.

2. Sifting Through

Read: Nahum 2 & 3

Have you ever been to an occasion where the speaker was really terrible? A friend once told me about a graduation speaker that didn't know when to quit and went on and on while the audience sat out in the blazing sun, caps and gowns melting in the heat. After tolerating more than any audience could possibly bear, someone stood up and began to clap and others eagerly joined in as they found a way to get the torture to stop.

Perhaps even more difficult than having someone go on and on is sitting through a lecture or sermon that you disagree with. Most of us have had an occasion or two when we have been in a church service or a lecture hall where we found ourselves raising our eyebrows and cocking our heads as we considered the speaker's words. Sometimes, after the words have a chance to settle, we end up thinking, "Hmm, while I didn't buy all of that, there were parts that certainly made me think." And sometimes, not.

Can you share a time when a speaker went on too long or when you reacted skeptically to their message?

As you read over Nahum 2 & 3, you may find yourself questioning the images and even recoiling from some of the words as the prophet outlines what will happen to Ninevah. These two chapters are a tough read as the author condemns Ninevah and forecasts its doom. Let's look at some of the phrases Nahum uses to describe Ninevah at war and its sure demise as God steps in to defend Judah:

1. Nahum 2:8, "Ninevah is like a _____ whose waters run away." (NRSV)

2. Nahum 2:10, "Devastation, _____, and _____."

3. Nahum 2:13, "See I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will

_____ your chariots in smoke, and the _____ shall devour your young lions; I will cut off your prey from the earth, and the _____ of your messengers shall be heard no more."

4. Nahum 3:1, "Ah, City of _____, utterly deceitful..."

5. Nahum 3:5, "I am against you, says _____, and will lift up your _____ over your face; and I will let _____ look on your nakedness."

6. Nahum 3:19, "There is no assuaging your hurt, your wound is _____... For who has escaped your endless _____?"

After considering these two chapters and filling in some of the blanks, what is your reaction to Nahum and his prophecy? How do you read some of the shocking imagery,

especially in 3:5-7, and reconcile that with the God that we see revealed in Jesus Christ?

There are no easy answers, and as we consider these difficult Scriptures, we are reminded again of several truths:

1. God is God, and we are not.
2. God's purposes will prevail in the end.
3. God is a righteous and holy God who demands right living from his people.
4. God is always ready to forgive.
5. God is love.

Let's look at some Scriptures that correlate with these truths. Which of these speaks to your heart in a special way?

1. "My thoughts are not your thoughts nor are my ways your ways," says the Lord."
Isaiah 55:8 (NRSV)
2. "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."
Prov. 19:21 (NIV)
3. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Rom. 12:21 (NIV)

4. “Jesus answered, “I tell you not seven times but seventy-seven times.” Matt. 18:22
(NIV)
5. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” John
15:12 (NRSV)

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, As I read these hard Scriptures, I pray that you will help illuminate my mind and show me the truths that I need to apply to my life today. Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

Some artists use mixed media to create. By combining paint, fabrics, metals, plastic, and printed material, they can communicate feelings, thoughts, impressions and more complicated messages. If we focus on a single part of an artwork, we can miss the bigger picture. As we learn to appreciate art, we find that if we want to understand the piece completely, we have to step away from admiring the individual components and look at the work from a distance. So it is with God's Masterwork, the Bible. He conveys many messages to us through the mixed media of storytelling, poetry, prophecy, and history. Any one part, on its own, does not reveal the whole picture, and as careful Bible students, we have to take in different parts, look at them carefully, and then stand back and hold the whole book in our hands to see how each part figures into the whole.

Nahum is a great example of how one part communicates in part, but not entirely. In this prophecy we see a strong dose of God's justice and his power to overturn the forces of evil and to provide correction where there is sin. This minor prophet communicates in hard-to-hear ways that don't completely fit with other truths we know. Nahum invites us to further exploration of scripture so that we can have a more well-rounded understanding of all God is trying to tell us.

Habakkuk

Habakkuk

Introduction:

Do you like to do things “by the book?” Lots of personality-type inventories can help us figure out if we lean more toward being a person who loves the rules or who leans more toward bending them. God makes us all different, and it is not wrong or right to be one way or another, but what we do share in common is the hope that if we follow the rules, and check the boxes, then the outcomes will be good. In life, we often seek out the “if/then” equations, places where decisions match up perfectly with consequences, every time. Naturally, this type of situation doesn’t exist very often in nature. Life is full of choices, and circumstances don’t play out clearly and follow our hope-filled, prescribed path. The disappointment that life doesn’t fit neatly into molds and that chaos tends to follow us around, is hard for all of us. Habakkuk is no exception to that rule.

In three short chapters, the prophet Habakkuk shares his turmoil by crying out to God, then preparing to wait, and finally by making a bold statement of faith that says essentially, “No matter what happens, dear God, I will still worship you.”

Habakkuk writes during a time of great uncertainty and turmoil. He lives in Judah while Josiah and Jehoiakim (c. 640-598 B.C.) are kings. He is concerned with the impending attack he foresees by the evil forces of Babylon, and he wrestles with the truth that bad

things happen to good people. He asks questions that don't have easy answers and considers many of the theological queries that continue to occupy us to this day. With his words of prophecy and prayer, Habakkuk gives voice to the often unspoken doubts of the righteous.

1. Our God Is Able

Read: Habakkuk 1

On January 19, 2015, the young teen, John Smith, from St. Charles, Missouri, was playing with some buddies on a lake covered by thin ice. He broke through and was swallowed up by the dark waters below where he spent 15 minutes and was rescued but was unresponsive. Later, at the hospital, after all efforts to revive him failed, the medical team was ready to pronounce his death. His mother came in and pleaded over John's cold and lifeless body for the Holy Spirit to bring him back to life. Even as she prayed, the heart monitor registered a pulse. Against all possible medical forecasts, John walked out of the hospital three weeks later, intact in mind and body and spirit.

This miraculous story of healing and restoration is chronicled in the movie, "Break-through." The real-life persons depicted tell in follow-up interviews how realistic the movie is, and how it portrays exactly what they went through. The movie is heartwarming and encouraging because, from time to time, we all face insurmountable difficulties that only a true miracle can resolve.

In Habakkuk 1, we read about a people who are discouraged and disheartened. They need to know that God is able, and that he will step up to defend the defenseless. They need to know that he will perform a miracle, if needed.

Read their plea and consider how this passage might reflect your own life and troubles:

Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
And you will not listen?
Or cry to you “Violence!”
And you will not see?
Why do you make me see wrongdoing
And look at trouble?
Destruction and violence are before me;
Strife and contention arise,
So the law becomes slack
And justice never prevails.
The wicked surround the righteous—
Therefore judgment comes forth perverted. (Hab. 1:2-4, NRSV)

What are some of the problems that Habakkuk identifies?

Considering that this passage was written thousands of years ago, the prophet’s complaints to God remain remarkably relevant, don’t they? In fact, in my own prayers, I sometimes hear myself saying things like, “God, don’t you see the injustice in the world? Where are you?”

In the Bible, we read scriptures that bring us comfort and new insights. In Ephesians 3:20-21, we read, “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or

imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever an ever! Amen.”

Underline the key words in the verse above that stand out to you.

Where does this verse say God’s power is at work? _____

Where is the glory? _____ and in _____.

God is able to do more—much more. Is there a place in your life where you cannot imagine a way out? Is there a struggle in your church family that appears to be without solution? How can we apply this verse in our prayers? Are you inspired to pray differently?

Other verses that help us remember that our God is able include:

John 16:33, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world!” (NIV)

1 John 5:3-4, “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.” (NRSV)

In these verses John reminds us that we can have peace when we live in Christ, and we can overcome (conquer) our troubles in this world through faith. These verses make it sound almost too easy, don't they? Of course, our faith journey is never easy or simple, but scripture encourages us to place our confidence in Christ and to live faithfully—and in the end we will be more than conquerors.

After the prophet's initial complaint, we see God's response recorded:

Be astonished! Be astounded!

For a work is being done in your days

That you would not believe if you were told. (Hab. 1:5, NRSV)

Habakkuk's prophecy goes on to assert that pride will result in the downfall of the proud Babylonians, but not before God's people suffer. He recognizes that God, "Cannot look on wrongdoing," (Hab. 1:13, NRSV) but that the Holy One allows suffering for a time, saying in that same verse, "Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?"

What are your thoughts as you read over the prophet's struggles with God? Have you ever had questions like his?

God is able to answer our prayers in remarkable and astounding ways. He can bring the dead to life, as he did in the case of John Smith, but he doesn't always do that. And why not? We don't know the answer to that question, but all of us must struggle with it, and come to some peace with an Almighty God who sees more, knows more, and loves more than we can ever imagine.

Pause for Prayer:

Lord of all, We ask for your help in dealing with the questions that we have about evil and how it seems to have the upper hand. Help us know how to continue to trust in you as the Almighty, a God who is truly able to do more than we can ever ask or imagine. Amen.

2. God Replies

Read: Habakkuk 2

Most of us have had the experience of waiting anxiously for news. When I left home to go to college, my parents were missionaries in Brazil. This was before the day of quick emails or free phone calls; we used old-fashioned letters—dad’s were typed and mom’s handwritten in her flowing, school-teacher-perfect, cursive. I checked my campus post office daily for a letter, and it made my day to see the green and white border of the Brazilian airmail envelopes peaking through the tiny window of my box . Those letters were a lifeline in a time when I was very homesick.

Can you think of a time that you eagerly awaited a letter, email or text?

As we begin reading Habakkuk 2, we see the prophet getting ready for a long wait, prepared to stand like a soldier, watching for the Lord to speak:

I will stand at my watch post,

And station myself on the rampart;

I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,

And what he will answer concerning my complaint. (Hab. 2:1)

Habakkuk waits expectantly for an answer from the Lord. He is prepared to “keep watch” and to stand at his “station.” His example makes me wonder if we sometimes

ask God for guidance and pose our questions to him but fail to wait attentively for his reply. Are you ever guilty of that? What are some tools you can use to help you record and remember your prayers so that you wait expectantly for answers?

The Psalms have lots to say about waiting on God expectantly. Underline in the verses below some of the words that direct us on how to wait for the Lord:

1. "In the morning O Lord, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation." Psalm 5:3 (NIV)
2. "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes." Psalm 37:7 (NIV)
3. "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry." Psalm 40:1 (NIV)
4. "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope." Psalm 130:5(NIV)

Habakkuk's watching and waiting are rewarded with an answer from on high. God gives him his answer in the form of a vision which he is to write on tablets and share with others via a runner. Before Twitter, Facebook, and even snail mail, runners carried the news wherever their feet could carry them. Even then, news travelled fast!

The vision God instructs Habakkuk to write down and send out serves to invite listeners to hear and align their lives with God's directives. Through the prophet, God says, "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, and it will not delay." (Hab. 2:3).

Habakkuk relays God's invitation to the people of his time and also to us to continue to wait on the unfolding of the Almighty's purposes. He goes on to admonish them about the perils of pride and possessions, two sins that continue to doggedly pursue humanity through the ages even into our time.

Have you ever taught a baby basic sign language? Before they are able to speak, babies can learn signs for common things they might need to say such as, momma, daddy, more. More? Yep! Even tiny babies, can put their fingers together and touch them to their lips to signal they want more! As Chapter 2 unfolds, we read more about greed —"like Death they never have enough" (Hab. 2:5)—and about stealing from creditors, plundering others, and using evil gain to establish themselves.

Alas for you who get evil gain for your houses,
Setting your nest on high
To be safe from the reach of harm!
You have devised shame for your house
By cutting off many people;
You have forfeited your life. (Hab. 2:9-10)

The verse above reminds me of Hitler and his Eagles' Nest, his retreat in Germany, perched high above the mountains. He plotted evil against all peoples, but particularly the Jews, and thought he could escape punishment. In the end, he died by his own hand, holed up in a bunker with his wife, Eva Braun. The coward died, but not before he was responsible for inspiring the killing of almost 12 million people.³

Habakkuk's prophecy goes on to indict those who will do violence to cities, to the animals and to the earth itself. Write out 2:17 below:

We continue to struggle with violence done against our earth, against the animals, and against all of his beautiful creation. Sometimes as Christians we may think, "Well, that's a separate issue. The environment doesn't really relate to my walk with the Lord." It is possible that we need to step back and think again about God's exquisitely beautiful and fragile world, which he entrusted to us to care for and to guard. God means for us to be good stewards. Just as our sins of greed and selfishness destroy us on the inside, so they destroy our world as we try to take more and hoard more and live in a way that satisfies our desires for luxury and convenience.

³ <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2011/01/27/hitler-vs-stalin-who-was-worse/>

What part of the environmental crisis particularly troubles you? How do you personally take action to make things better?

Do you think God will punish us for the way we abuse the earth? Why or why not?

Chapter 2 closes with this admonishment: “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him!” (Hab. 2:20) God is on his throne. He is in charge. He will answer us. Let’s be ready and listen.

Pause for Prayer:

Almighty Creator God, We quiet ourselves before you and pray that we would be able to listen carefully for the vision that you have for us today. Amen.

3. Habakkuk Prays

Read: Habakkuk 3

Performance poetry is making a comeback. I recently attended a spiritual revival conference, and one of the main attractions was having a poet come out in the middle of the praise song set to recite a rap-style poem, a challenging piece that made us all think. While writing, reciting and memorizing poetry was once a mainstay of society, other forms of the written word have taken the stage until recently, when poetry has again stepped up to claim its rightful place in the lexicon of important avenues of expression.

The third chapter of Habakkuk reads like a poem. It is titled a prayer, but it is clearly a prayer meant to be read aloud and possibly sung. In fact, at the end of the book there is a note instructing the reader on how it is to be sung: “To the leader: with stringed instruments.” Translation makes it hard to hear any of the usual parts of poetry—the rhyming and the meter—but the cadence is there, along with a strong dose of anthropomorphism.

Do you enjoy poetry? If so, what is your favorite type? Can you name a favorite poem?

In this chapter, the prophet Habakkuk combines prayer, a victory chant, and a statement of re-commitment to God to form a poetic whole that speaks words of encour-

agement and inspiration to us even today. He starts his prayer/poem with an appeal to God:

O Lord, I have heard of your renown,
And I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.
In our own time review it;
In our own time make it known;
In wrath may you remember mercy. (Hab. 3:2)

The remainder of the poem depicts a powerful God who uses nature at will, dominating the earth, the rivers, the animals, the oceans, even the sun, to reveal his glory and dominion. In 2:13, Habakkuk declares, “You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed. You crushed the head of the the wicked house, laying it bare from foundation to roof.” This verse reminds us of God’s promise to crush Satan and harkens back to Genesis 3:15 and also pushes us forward to look at Jesus as the fulfillment of all God promised to do:

1. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.” (Gen. 3:15)
2. “The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet.” (Rom. 16:20)
3. “The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him...But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” (Rev. 12:9,11)

How do you react to the Genesis, Romans and Revelation passages quoted above? Do they surprise you? Comfort you? Distress you? Why?

One of the beautiful parts of careful Bible study and of looking into some of the more obscure passages of scripture is this uncovering of God's great plan throughout history. As we see the thread stitching through from the very beginning all the way to the end, we marvel at God's plan and how he continues to work, even today, to accomplish his purposes.

Habakkuk ends with the beautiful passage from 3:17-19. This passage always reminds me of a book I read while I was in college, struggling with my faith. *Hinds Feet on High Places*, by Hannah Hurnard, lived up to its title—the allegorical story carried me to higher places in my walk with the Lord.

Can you think of a book that changed your life? Maybe you can share several books that have made a difference in your spiritual journey:

When I read Hunard's book, I did not realize that the title came from the Book of Habakkuk, a three chapter masterpiece tucked into the Book of the Twelve, as the Minor Prophets are sometimes called. Though the prophecy chronicles a story of dis-

agreement with God, it ends on a high note, a beautifully poetic passage, a place where we are invited to pledge our allegiance to the Almighty, regardless of how he responds to our prayers and pleas:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
Though the produce of the olive fails,
And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock is cut off from the fold,
And there is no herd in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
And makes me tread upon the heights.

Habakkuk encourages us to open our hearts to God, to share freely with him from our own doubts, but to also see and acknowledge his mighty hand at work, ultimately trusting him to be our strength and help.

Pause for Prayer:

O Holy One, You do lead us to new heights if we will let you. We pray that you will help us to trust in you and to know your great love for each of us. Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

The ancient prophecy of Habakkuk was written long ago, but resonates so clearly in our own day and time. The book is not long, but it encapsulates humanity's endless struggle with God: Is God good all the time?

In some Christian circles, believers say the phrase, "God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good." When I lead or participate in this little ritual, I sometimes think to myself that we sound like we are trying to say it until we really believe it...and there may be something to that! But truly, when we become careful students of the Bible, we do see the evidence that God is a loving God, one that wants the best for us; he is a God who longs for closeness with us and continually draws us closer. I don't know why the Almighty loves me like he does, but it is true!

Habakkuk's opening expression of frustration, and then his statement of being willing to wait on the Lord, are followed up with the beautiful poem that closes the book, words that forever stand as a testament to the unfailing love of the Creator God, "He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights."

Zephaniah

Zephaniah

Introduction:

Zephaniah's prophecy is a bit different from some of the other prophets' because he uses only God's voice as he foretells death and destruction for all: humans, animals, and creation as the promised day of the Lord approaches. We hear the wrath of God loud and clear in these three short chapters. Zephaniah's words present a God who is disgusted and disappointed with humanity. And yet. The Lord is not willing to give up on everyone and promises that a remnant will be spared.

Along with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Micah, Zephaniah focuses on the remnant, a faithful core of people, to move us through a dark, angry prophecy to an ending that is full of light and love.

1. Royal Warnings

Read: Zephaniah 1

There is a parlor game called “Six Degrees of Separation” which is based on the theory that movie buffs can usually find a connection to a movie starring actor Kevin Bacon in six questions or less. In real life, Microsoft actually ran the numbers and confirmed that the 6.6 billion people on the planet are only separated by 6.6 degrees of separation (conveniently the same!). In other words, we are all only six or seven introductions away from every other person on the planet. It’s hard to imagine, but apparently true. Being a fairly “ordinary” person, I find it hard to believe that I am just seven introductions away from the Queen of England or Barack Obama!

Who is the most famous person you have ever met?

Zephaniah starts out his book of prophecy by proclaiming himself close to royalty. His introduction seems to stress that there are no degrees of separation between him and the royal family. This highlights his social standing and shows his close linkage to Hezekiah, placing himself squarely during the reign of Josiah, the reformer (640-609 B.C.). His introduction may be an attempt to give his words more credibility. He wants his people to hear what he has to say and to take it seriously!

The time frame makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and possibly Habakkuk. Like some of the other prophets, including Joel and Amos, Zephaniah focuses on the coming judgment of Judah and the Day of the Lord.

Let's look at what Zephaniah 1 has to say about this dreaded day of the Lord (from the NRSV):

- * Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand; (v.7)
- * And on the day of the Lord's sacrifice I will punish the officials...(v. 8)
- * On that day I will punish...violence and fraud. (v.9)
- * On that day...a cry will be heard. (v.10)
- * The great day of the Lord is near...(v.14)
- * ...the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter. (v.14)
- * That day will be full of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry. (v.15)
- * Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. (v.18)

Write below some of the actions the Lord will take on his day and underline the descriptive words that give us a glimpse of what is ahead for Judah:

It is hard to fully understand exactly what God is communicating through Zephaniah with the many references to the “day of the Lord.” It reminds me a little bit of raising teenagers and telling them that any misdeeds would pay dividends and have consequences. As loving parents, we tried to spare them when we could, but sometimes allowing natural consequences to happen was just what they needed in order to learn. Judah seemed to have become self-satisfied, erroneously thinking that God would not punish their misdeeds. They may have started to think that anything goes and that God doesn’t really care what we do—if he even exists...Through Zephaniah, God corrects them saying, “I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good nor will he do harm.’” (v.12, NRSV) This whole passage is a pointed reminder that God is on his throne, and that he is in charge and that evil will not go unpunished, despite what people think.

Thinking that God doesn’t care what we do is a sin that we can relate to in our day and time. How do you see this thought pattern reflected around you? When do we fail to take God’s directives seriously?

Besides the sin of complacency, God also points out that the people are trusting in material goods to be their security:

Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste, Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them. (1:13, NRSV)

Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath. (1:18, NRSV)

Material wealth was a trap then and it continues to be a source of trouble now. How is money a blessing and a curse in your life? Do you find yourself trusting in your retirement account more than in God? Do you find yourself often worrying about money? Jot down some thoughts below:

It's true that Zephaniah lived a really long time ago. But the sins and problems he addresses in his prophecy seem oddly contemporary. Let's consider how we can pray daily that our relationship with God will not become stagnant, that we will continue to trust in him and not in material wealth, and that we will not become complacent.

Pause for Prayer:

God of Might, You are worthy of our praise and you are always at work around us, considering the deeds of all. Evil will be punished in your way and in your time—on your day of the Lord. Help us to be faithful followers. Amen.

2. Rescue for the Humble

Read: Zephaniah 2 & 3

In the book, *No Place to Hide: A Brain Surgeon's Long Journey Home from the Iraq War*, by Dr. W. Lee Warren, the neurosurgeon relates stories of operating on Americans and Iraqis, all victims of the Iraq War. With humility and love, he writes of caring for all who came to his operating room—American soldiers, Iraqi soldiers, insurgents, and innocent bystanders, all caught up in a war that spared no one. Without regard to their nationality, he and his fellow care providers rendered exceptional care, every time, to all:

In the frantic moments of handling a mass casualty situation, the victims were assessed according to their medical needs; each and every one treated with the same skill and degree of effort. This had been drilled into our heads before deployment; it was not our job to judge who deserves our care. We were to treat whoever showed up, to the best of our abilities. (p.83)

Did you know about this policy in 2004 when these events took place? Are you surprised about it?

Dr. Warren operated from a Christian perspective and was faced with judgment calls that would try even the most devout, faith-filled person. As a man of God, he tried to live out what he read in the Bible: scriptures about being merciful to our enemies, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of wrong. His stance was not just personal; however, because as a country America made the decision to offer medical care to our enemies and everyone involved, whenever we were able, to the best of our abilities.

In Zephaniah 2:3 we read, “Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the Lord’s wrath.” The passage goes on to condemn Philistia, then Moab, Ammon, Cush and finally Assyria—especially its biggest city, Ninevah. Through the prophet, God details some of the consequences of not being humble, of not seeking righteousness, and of not obeying God.

After announcing his judgment of the surrounding countries, those who are enemies of Judah, God circles back to Jerusalem.

Fill in the blanks below about the indictment of Jerusalem, from Zephaniah 3:1-5 (NRSV):

1. Ah, soiled, defiled, _____ city. It has listened to no voice; it has accepted no _____.
2. The _____ within it are roaring lions.

3. Its _____ are evening wolves that leave nothing until the morning.
4. Its _____ are reckless, faithless persons;
5. The _____ have profaned what is sacred, they have done violence to the law...
6. The _____ within it is righteous; he does no wrong.

Zephaniah points out that the leaders—officials, judges, prophets and priests—are all guilty and stand in stark contrast to a righteous God. The Almighty points out their misdeeds and continues to invite them to accept correction, warning of what will happen if they don't.

When I was a child, we played a game called “Musical Chairs” with friends at church. You probably know how it works: music plays, while participants walk around a group of chairs. There is one more person than there are chairs. When the music stops, the player left standing is eliminated until only one chair remains. Zephaniah's words feel a little like that. God has offered repeated chances, but first the surrounding countries have fallen away, then the unfaithful, unrepentant people of Judah. Finally, only the faithful remnant is left standing. God's promises of joy and restoration follow.

For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly.

They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord—

The remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies,

Nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths.

Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.

Zeph. 3:12-13, (NRSV)

When you read the passage above, what stands out to you? What are some of the characteristics that will define God's remnant? And what does he say will be the end result for them?

In the final verses of Zephaniah, he urges the people of Judah to "Sing aloud..." because God is in their midst. The Lord is dealing with their oppressors, restoring the remnant's fortunes, and bringing them home. When they are faithful, they will reap the rewards and be praised by others.

We all want to be part of the faithful remnant, don't we? But life is hard, isn't it? In the craziness of the war of life, we often do the opposite of what God asks of us. Instead of being pure and truthful, we lie. Instead of being lowly and humble, we feel ourselves full of pride. We struggle mightily to be worthy, but, in the end, we know that we will never measure up. But there is hope! In Jesus, God sent his son to show us a new way, a way that is full of light and love, a way where we measure up because he sacrificed himself for us.

Just as Dr. Warren saved the lives of enemy combatants and American soldiers, so God longs for all of us to be saved from the darkness of sin that threatens to engulf us. God's love reaches beyond borders as he tells us in Zeph. 3:19, "I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help us to see our own failings and to be humble and truthful. Let us be people who look to you to rescue us from ourselves and our ongoing struggle with doing what goes against your will. Amen.

Conclusion: And Now This...

The closing verses of Zephaniah are labeled “A Song of Joy” in some versions. A verse that stands out is, “The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zeph. 3:17,NIV) In these words, we find comfort and care. We remember not only God’s judgement but also his compassion, his mercies and the wonderful plans he has for us.

Haggai

Haggai

Introduction:

Haggai's prophecy is about priorities—about getting our lives right before God and knowing that all else will come together. In its two short chapters, we are invited to a time of self-examination and reform. The issue of living our lives in a way that accurately reflects our true priorities is one that Jesus referred to when he said, in his Sermon on the Mount, “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matt. 5:33)

On two chapters long, the little book of Haggai is dated 520 B.C., a precise number based on the lives of the rulers of the time: King Darius, the Persian emperor, Zerubbabel the governor of Judah, and Joshua the high priest. A contemporary of Ezra, Haggai encourages the people to stop wasting their time and to join together to re-build the temple. The people's return from Babylon was in 538 B.C., and now, eighteen years later, Haggai prompted them to take action on what God was calling them to do.

The issue at hand is the rebuilding of the temple, but the meaning for us today extends beyond the physical building referred to at the time, and leads us to consider how we currently spend our time, money and talents. We are invited to ask ourselves what God is calling us to do today.

1. Refocus

Read: Haggai 1

I remember in my early 40's when my eyes started to “change.” I began to hold reading material further away until my arms stretched uncomfortably, and I was forced to peruse the store aisles in search of “reading glasses.” After a number of years, even those became limited, and I shuffled through the day, putting my glasses on and off or looking everywhere for them—sometimes while they perched firmly on top of my head! Changing visual acuity and the inability to focus on reading material, taught me something about the importance of being able to see clearly.

Do you, or have you ever worn, glasses? Have you had one of those experiences of looking for them while they are on the top of your head?

In Haggai, God is reminding the people that they have their priorities out of focus. They are living in a time when they are putting their material wealth to work for themselves, all the while neglecting what God is calling them to do. Check out verse 6 and consider this slight paraphrase, separated to visually highlight the contrast:

You have sown much—————and harvested little

You eat_____but never have enough
You drink_____but you never have your fill
You clothe yourself_____but no one is warm
You earn wages_____and put them in a bag with holes.

How could you re-frame this verse in contemporary terms?

You spread yourself thin but..._____
You indulge in gluttony but..._____
You take in all kinds of knowledge but..._____
You shop all the time but..._____
You make investments but..._____

While verse 6, sets up the contrast in our focus vs. God's focus, the next verses pose a question and set out a course of action. Let's ask ourselves the question Haggai puts out there:

“Consider how you have fared.” (v.7)

How balanced is your life right now? Do you feel that you are living the way God would want you to? What are some areas where you might consider a change?

Taking a few moments to ponder where we are can be the first step in making a life-altering change. Have you ever had an opportunity to attend one of those time-management seminars? I can remember being asked to analyze how I spend my time and resources. I was surprised when the leader suggested that it was fairly easy to figure out what I truly valued—all I had to do was look at my calendar and my checking account! The truth was in plain view. Alas! The tales my calendar and checkbook tell about me, and what is really my focus in life, are stark. Despite what we say, and how we sometimes even fool ourselves, the reality is that many of us suffer from misplaced priorities.

Once the hearers have had a chance to consider Haggai's invitation to reform their ways, he offers words of direction:

Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the Lord. You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? Says the Lord of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses. (Hag. 1:8-9)

God goes on in the next few verses to remind the people that straying from the ways of the Lord has consequences. Being disobedient and going their own way leads them to a life of constantly seeking and never being satisfied. The beauty of this particular passage is that the people do listen and change their ways. They are then filled with God's spirit.

Read the passage below and underline the following words: obeyed, feared, spirit.

...all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God, and the words of the prophet Haggai, as the Lord their God had sent him; and the people feared the Lord. Then Haggai, the messenger of the Lord, spoke to the people with the Lord's message, saying, I am with you, says the Lord. And the Lord stirred up the spirit...(v.12-14)

What does God promise them in 1:13?

How does it help us to know the Lord is with us? And how does it feel to know that when we are living lives of right priorities, lives of obedience, that the Lord will "stir up the spirit?"

Surprisingly current, Haggai's words remind us that we often get our priorities out of line. God's invitation, in this particular story, is for the people to re-build his temple. For us, the prophecy extends beyond the physical re-building of any particular edifice. Instead, God guides us to look at how we can always put him first and be faithful. Much like wearing reading glasses to focus, God's word can help us stay on track. Through study, prayer, fasting, gathering together, com-

munion and other means of grace, we are able to keep our eyes trained on the Master, the one who makes “the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.”⁴

Pause for Prayer:

Lord, help me to see as you see. Open the eyes of my heart. Fill me with your spirit and guide me. Amen.

⁴ Lemmel, Helen H., 1922. Copyright 1922, renewed 1950 Singspiration Music

Haggai

2. Hammering Out Holiness

Read: Haggai 2

G.K. Chesterson once said, “Fairy tales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that dragons can be killed.” This quote came to mind recently when our grandson, Owen, now three, kept telling us about bad dreams involving a wolf. He was spending three nights with us while his parents were away, and after two nights of hearing about his bad dreams, on the third evening as I tucked him in, I told him, “Now Owen, you don’t need to worry about the wolf. The wolf has to get past Nana before he can get to you. Don’t worry. Nana will take care of the wolf. This reassurance seemed to satisfy him, and in the morning he said, “I didn’t dream about the wolf. You got him, right, Nana?”

Can you remember having bad dreams as a child? What helped you overcome your fears?

As Haggai continues his visions and prophecies, his words are replete with messages from God to comfort the people, inviting them to “take courage...My spirit abides among you; do not fear.” In Hag. 2:4-9, we see several phrases that invite the remnant of Israel—those who have returned from Babylon as well as those left behind—to be courageous. As you read over this passage, underline the words that comfort or help you:

Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the Lord; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the Lord; work, for I am with you, says the Lord of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts. The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the Lord of hosts. (Hag. 2:4-9)

What stands out to you in this passage?

God is comforting his people who have suffered greatly. He promises he will reward their efforts in rebuilding the temple. But wait! Is this the famed “prosperity gospel?” Can we conclude that God is saying that if we give to him, then he will reward us financially? Is this a quid pro quo? Certainly not! God wants us to be faithful to him and to show him our faithfulness by our actions and by the re-alignment of our priorities. This much is true and is illustrated by the entirety of the scriptures. The promise does not mean, however, that if we give to the temple, or do good deeds, that we will be rewarded financially. As tempting as this premise is to humanity, it can hold great promise for ultimate corruption of the spirit of the gospel, as well.

In the New Testament, James, the brother of our Lord Jesus, tackles the thorny questions of faith and works. Expounding on it in chapter 2:14-26, we read in verse 22, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works.” James’ writings

further outline the relationship of works as a response to faith, not as a way to faith. When we are changed and have our priorities re-oriented, works become an outgrowth of that new way of life.

As we move on through Haggai 2, we read some puzzling verses about contamination and purification. The question at hand seems to involve some people who were participating in the effort of rebuilding. From this distance, it is hard to tell exactly what Haggai is referring to, but maybe we can establish some life application for ourselves today. Through his prophet, God invites us to consider the following:

1. Our individual pursuit of holiness, doesn't automatically make those around us holy.
2. Outside influences can contaminate us and distract us from our focus.
3. Blessings will pour down when we re-orient our lives (Hag. 2:19, "From this day on I will bless you.")

When, in your own life, have you found these statements to be true?

Modern-day engagement stories have become real social media events, haven't they? Sometimes quite elaborate preparations precede the moment when the groom-to-be—or bride-to-be at times!—pops the question that leads to the formal time of preparation for a wedding. Haggai closes with the promise of God's blessing: "...and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts." (Hag. 2:23b) The signet ring was not a sign of betrothal as much as a

sign of royalty—a sign of God’s power and promise to the people. With the coming of Jesus, we have all been assigned to be priests and to lead those around us into a closer walk with our Lord. During the days of the reformation, Martin Luther zeroed in on the importance of each believer, clarifying that all persons of faith would be special emissaries of the true Gospel; he called it “the priesthood of all believers.”⁵ We are indeed chosen; let us be faithful.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for somehow choosing us and for making us worthy through the sacrifice of your son. Help us carry forward the message of transformation as we live into our calling as priests.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude: Preached and Explained* (New York, NY, Anson D.F. Randolph, 1859), 106.

Conclusion: And Now This...

The prophet Haggai pronounces his message across the ages, striking our hearts even today, with words that help us re-focus and prioritize. To summarize, let us look at a few of the more telling phrases:

Consider how you have fared...(1:7, 2:16)

The people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God...(1:12)

The Lord stirred up the spirit...(1:14)

Take courage...(2:4)

I am with you...(2:4)

My spirit abides among you...(2:5)

Do not fear...(2:5)

From this day on I will bless you...2:19)

I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts...(2:23)

By plucking out these verses from the two chapters, we can see the overall trend of Haggai's words: he sought to motivate the people to place God and his mission at the center of their lives. If they obeyed, he would provide them with the material goods they needed to accomplish his purposes and would use their faithfulness to further unlock their influence of ministry in the rest of the world.

Zechariah

Introduction:

“I hate being in the minority!” I exclaimed as I entered our daughter’s house. Wesley, our son-in-law, happens to be black and laughed heartily at my remark. Being a white, middle-aged lady, I truly know nothing of being in the minority. In fact, my exasperation had to do with trying to convince people of the merits of wearing a mask to help stop the spread of COVID-19. I met opposition and apathy and felt I was preaching a message very few were willing to hear and act on. Being a black male, Wesley lives with being in the minority every day and faces the dangers inherent in living while black in modern America. Being in the minority—ethnically or in relation to a message—is never a fun place to be.

Zechariah also found himself delivering a message that most people at the time did not want to hear. Both a prophet and a priest, he was probably born in Babylon and returned to Judah as a young man, where he went on to preach and teach over the course of a long ministry. His message, like that of most of the other Minor Prophets, invited people to get serious about living a life of holiness and dedication to the Most High God. He repeats God’s call to his beloved children, “Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you.” (Zech. 1:3)

The book is roughly divided into two halves: the first half (chs. 1-8), describes eight night visions, and the second half (chs. 9-14) sets a darker tone related to the people’s need for redemption.

Zechariah is indeed in the minority as he calls God's people to repent, rebuild, and live a life of holiness before God. Additionally, he offers words of prophecy related to the coming of Christ and a liberal dose of encouragement to the people to persevere in the midst of hard times, knowing that God is in charge of all.

1. The Next Right Thing

Read: Zechariah 1-3

In Disney's movie, "Frozen II," one of the main characters, Anna, finds herself in a situation where she wonders if all is lost and if only grief lies ahead. She breaks out in song—as any good Disney princess would—and belts out some lyrics that might apply to more than life as a cartoon character. She says:

But a tiny voice
Whispers in my mind
You are lost, hope is gone
But you must go on
And do the next right thing.⁶

Which one of the Disney princesses is your personal favorite and why?

Zechariah, as a prophet and a priest, works to help the children of Israel live in such a way that they are always doing the next right thing. In the first six chapters of the book, he details his night dreams. Through these fantastical visions, he conveys to the recipients of his prophecy

Anderson-Lopez, Kristen and Robert Lopez, songwriters. "The Next Right Thing" 2019. Disney Music Company.

God's desires for them and some of the consequences of turning away. His visions are colorful, multi-layered, and confusing.

Have you ever had a dream that you couldn't figure out? Maybe when you woke up, you went on to tell someone else about it, and in the telling, you discovered yourself what it meant? My hope is that the same thing will happen for us as we talk about Zechariah's dreams and what they might mean. Keep in mind there aren't any "right" or "wrong" answers. Read over the passages below and try to answer some of the questions. Remember that some meanings are lost in translation or are swept away with the passage of time. While it may not be possible to translate these night visions into any particular discreet meaning, I hope you will find some guidance and possibly inspiration for doing "the next right thing."⁷

1. **Red horse-** Zech 1:8-17.

- How many horses are there and what color are they?

- Who do you think is the messenger and what does he ask God?

- What is God's response?

- Why do you think there is a measuring line across Jerusalem?

⁷ For this section, I used the Common English Bible (CEB) because of the poetic and easy-to-read layout.

- How do the promises of verse 17 comfort you?

2. Four horns- Zech. 1:18-21.

- What do the four horns do?

- What are the four metalworkers about?

- How does God's plan to destroy those that are hurting Israel translate to you today?

3. Man with a measuring line- Zech. 2:1-13

- What is the first messenger doing with the measuring line? (Bonus question #1: Which other Minor Prophet talks about a plumb line?)

- What does the second messenger promise that is hopeful? How can this be a prayer in our own lives?

- What do you think the phrase "four winds" means? (Bonus question #2: Check out other places in the Bible that mention the four winds.)

- Verses 10-13 promise again that God is coming to dwell among his people. God tells the people to "rejoice and be glad." How do you sense God's dwelling in you now? What is our response to God's presence with us?

4. Joshua and the Adversary- Zech. 3:1-10

- What is the Adversary doing? And how does he continue to do that to us today?

- What does God say to the Adversary about Joshua and how does the prophecy describe Joshua's clothing?

- What does God remove from Joshua and what does he put on him? How does God do that for us today?

- Who is "the Branch" referred to in verse 8?

- What is the closing promise and how would you translate it to our times?

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, as we think about these night visions and the figurative language involved, we sincerely pray that you would speak to our hearts in a way that we can understand. Help us, God, to keep on doing the next right thing. Amen.

2. The Next Right Thing (Part 2)

Read: Zechariah 4-6

As we continue to explore Zechariah's night visions, let's approach them with a prayer for clarity, while remembering that there are no specific right answers!

5. The lamp stand and the bowl- Zech. 4:1-14

- Zechariah is confused by the lamp stand, bowls and adjoining olive trees. What does the messenger answer him when he acknowledges that he does not know what they mean? Also, you might want to look up Psalm 20:7 which reminds us to put our trust in God.

- In verse 7, we see a reference to a capstone. In 1 Peter 2:4 & 7 we read about living stones and about the rejected capstone. So who do you think the capstone might refer to in Zechariah?

- Zerubbabel was part of the team that helped to rebuild the temple in 520 BC. What words of encouragement does God offer through the words of the prophet Zechariah? How do those same words remind us today that God is still at work, even when we can't see it?

6. Flying scroll- Zech 5:1-4

- What do you think the flying scroll represents?

- Who does God say he will punish?

- How does God's attitude toward those who lie and steal relate to us today?

7. **Basket-** Zech. 5:5-11

- Some translations refer to the basket as a "hand basket." What is inside the hand basket?

- Where are the messengers (angels) carrying the evil in the hand basket? Does this remind you of a common aphorism?

—

8. **Four chariots-** Zech. 6:1-14

- How does the prophecy circle back to horses? What color are these?

- We also see the repetition of the phrase "four winds." What are the horses and chariots doing as they go to the four winds of heaven?

- The visions close with another reference to the “Branch.” Do you think they might have been pointing to Jesus, along with leaders of the time?

- In verse 15, the visions close with a phrase that reminds Zechariah (and us) of what is necessary when we follow God.

As we close out this section about the night visions of Zechariah, we may be tempted to throw up our hands and give up. Why does God’s word have to be so complicated, so hard to understand. Why can’t God tell us in a more straightforward manner what he desires?

The answer to this age-old question is that he does. He speaks to us plainly at some points, but he also wraps his message in complicated visions, double-meanings, symbols, and stories that aren’t easy to follow. Just as God created billions of us with unique fingerprints, features, and DNA sequencing, so he delivers his message of love and redemption in ways that are simple enough for the smallest child and complex enough for the most studious PhD to ponder for a lifetime.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God of the universe, We don’t understand you or your message at times. We struggle with confusion. We ask for your light to shine in our hearts and lives so that we can be obedient and follow the light we see. Amen.

3. Following God's Instructions

Read: Zechariah 7 & 8

Don Helder Pessoa Camera was the archbishop of the Catholic Church in Olinda and Recife, Brazil, during the years that I attended high school there. He was a priest with a servant's heart, but he drew the ire of many, especially the military dictatorship that was in power during the time of his tenure. He took the side of the poor, especially those who lived in inner city slums, and was famous for saying, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." Once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, he opponents blocked him from receiving the honor.

Zechariah, too, may have raised eyebrows and drawn criticism as he answered the delegation from Bethel that came to see him. They asked questions that seem to imply their desire to justify themselves before the Lord by their good deeds, especially their habit of fasting at particular times. God answers the men plainly, saying:

Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (Zech. 7:9-10, NRSV)

Have you ever been in a situation where you had to deliver a message that was not well-received? Or maybe you felt the need to warn someone that they were going down the wrong path?

What does Zech 7:11-12 say the men do when they hear the words from the Lord?

Have you ever tried to correct a child who refused to listen? The symbolic defiance of putting their fingers in their ears, is enough to anger even the coolest of parents! The NIV says, “But they **refused** to pay attention, they **turned** their backs and **stopped up their ears**. They **made their hearts as hard as flint** and **would not listen** to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit...” Sounds like a pretty bleak picture of disobedience and even of disrespect, doesn’t it?

How does God respond to them and their unwillingness to listen or to repent? (Zech. 7:12b-14)

In the end, the people end up with a desolate land. A place that once had been pleasant is now laid waste by their sinful attitude.

Fortunately, God is not done. In chapter 8, Zechariah goes on to describe God’s faithful promises to the remnant, to those in the minority who stay faithful even when everyone else falls away.

Let's explore some of the beautiful imagery God uses to convey his promises to those who are faithful and righteous.

1. "And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets." (8:5)
2. "There shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit...(8:12)
3. "I will save you and you shall be a blessing..." (8:13)
4. "The fasts...shall be seasons of joy and gladness: therefore love truth and peace." (8:19)
5. "In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.'" (8:23)

These verses detail God's desire to give the faithful remnant safety, prosperity, peace and good relationships. Which one of these verses speaks to your heart? Why?

In verses 16 and 17, the prophet and priest, Zechariah, makes of list of things the people should do if they want to please the Lord:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

God highlights in these verses how much he hates lying, injustice, violence, and corruption.

When we live in a way that exemplifies what God sees as truly good, then the people around us will want to seek the Lord as well. They will see his light shining in us and want to “entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts...” (Zech. 8:21). Conversely, when we follow perversity, seek our own pleasure, and stray from the path he has set before us, we cause people to turn away from God. We become agents of the Adversary, with a heavy burden of judgment against us.

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, Help us to follow your instructions and to love what you love. Help us to be truthful, peace-filled, and kind. Amen.

4. Looking Forward

Read: Zechariah 9-11

I am writing this during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. People react differently to the isolation and social distancing required to avert disaster—some suffer depression, others become defiant and still others are beset by doubts as to the veracity of news reports. All groups share one attribute in common: disappointment. Most people have had to change plans, cancel vacations, miss reunions, skip funerals. The disappointment itself wouldn't be so hard if there were a known end in sight. We all need something to look forward to; we like to be able to make plans, to dream about seeing a friend, to get back to a more normal routine. Not knowing when that will happen is deeply distressing to most of us.

How did you react during COVID-19? Were you more depressed, defiant, doubtful or disappointed?

Just like most of us during the pandemic, the Israelites needed hope for the future. Zechariah's prophecy takes a turn in chapter 9, providing much needed hope for the future. There are no more visions or words of encouragement about rebuilding the temple. Instead, the tone changes and the writing becomes more like a poem or an allegory, holding forth hope for when the Messiah will come and make everything right again.

Let's read over Zech. 9:9-12. Underline some phrases that you find hopeful and make a note as to why:

9 Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you;

Triumphant and victorious is he,

Humble and riding on a a donkey,

On a colt, the foal of a donkey...

11 As for you also, because of the blood of my

Covenant with you,

I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.

12 Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;

today I declare that I will restore to you double.

As we read this passage, we are reminded of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem before his passion and crucifixion. You can review it in John 12:15. What is the significance, to you, of God's action in embedding prophetic words in a book written 500 years before Jesus' coming?

The promises about the Messiah gave the people of that time hope, something they sorely needed to get through their days. Today, having the benefit of the entirety of scripture, we are able to see, with true amazement, God's hand stitching the thread of love and redemption all through history.

Taking a closer look at the scripture above, what do you make of the phrase, “prisoner of hope?”

I am reminded of the verse in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you...”

Is it possible that being a prisoner of hope means something positive—possibly being kept safe within the boundaries of a life of hope?

How do these verses speak to you? How does hope transform your life? How do we stay ready to share that hope with others as Peter urges us to do?

While extending hope to the people, Zechariah also admonishes the shepherds of the time—his fellow prophets and priests—that they are in danger of leading the people astray. “Therefore the people wander like sheep; they suffer for lack of a shepherd.” (10:2b) Being without able leadership is a precarious position for most believers. From the beginning of scripture, we see the tendency of the masses to follow after messages that promote ease and instant gratification. While we see this characteristic in our day and age, it is not unique to our time. Humanity in sin suffers from the desire for the quick fix, a pill to swallow, a way of life that will be fun and entertaining, not full of the rigors of a righteous life. God is constantly calling us to a life of true happiness and eternal pleasures; but like sheep, we are easily distracted. As a result, we often don’t live our best life, settling instead for something that looks good on the outside but doesn’t give us that fulfillment and satisfaction that we long for.

Back in the early 1500's, Rome and the Catholic Church were the epicenter of Christianity. Pope Leo X was pope at the time and saw his position as more of a temporal king rather than a servant shepherding his flock. He was a patron of the arts on a massive scale and indulged in all sorts of frivolity, including that of keeping an elephant, Hanno, on the grounds of the Vatican. Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk in Germany, saw the excesses of Rome, the selling of indulgences, the corruption of God's law, and began to speak out and write about what he was seeing. His life was threatened many times, but eventually his protests and Rome's dismissive attitude led to the Protestant Reformation. The people of the time, especially the poor, suffered under the rule of Rome. They longed for the hand of a true shepherd, guiding, loving and bringing them hope during the trials of life.

Think back to people who have been shepherds in your life. Were they pastors, Sunday school teachers, youth leaders? How did God use them to guide you? Are you shepherding someone right now?

Zehcariah's prophecy continues as God promises to make things right in his way and in his time:

My anger is hot against the shepherds,

And I will punish the leaders;

For the Lord of hosts cares for his flock, the house of Judah,

And will make them like his proud war-horse.

Out of them shall come the cornerstone,

Out of them the tent peg,

Out of them the battle bow,

Out of them every commander. (Zech. 10:3-4)

What do you make of the cornerstone, tent peg, battle bow, commander? Remember, there are no “right” answers. We seek insight together!

Pause for Prayer:

Lord of all, we pray for our shepherds. We pray for wisdom and discernment for them. We also pray for ourselves as shepherds. We pray that we will be faithful to the calling you have placed on each of our lives to be “prisoners of hope.” Amen.

5. On that Day

Read: Zechariah 12-14

I have a friend, Linda Coffey, who is a wonderful photographer. Most of her photos are really good, but some of them are exquisite. I recently saw her photo of a ruby-throated hummingbird as he poised for a sip of nectar at her feeder. She captured not only an instant but also more than that. The photo helps us see beyond the here and now and elevates our thoughts to the Creator. In her book, *Time and Despondency: Regaining the Present in Faith and Life*, Nichole M. Roccas talks about *chronos* time and *kairos* time. She points out that as humans, we live in *chronos*, or chronological time. God, as a transcendent being, is over time and outside of time in *kairos*. “All moments in time are potential vessels of eternity,”⁸ Rocco says. Linda’s photo is of *chronos*, but it reveals *kairos*, a thin space between heaven and earth where God shows us a peek of himself.

Can you think of a “thin space” in your life? A photo, a place, an event? Where have you felt time collapse and heaven become more real?

The last part of Zechariah’s prophecy is called an oracle—a prediction of future events. In these three chapters, the priest and prophet invites us to see God’s foretelling his creation of a juncture between *chronos* and *kairos* through the promises of the Messiah. According to Zechariah, the

⁸ Roccas, Nicole M., *Time and Despondency: Regaining the Present in Faith and Life*. Ancient Faith Publishing, 2017. Chesterton, IN.

world is in a broken place, but there is much to look forward to “on that day.” Indeed the last three chapters are unified by the repetition of the phrase, “on that day” — sixteen times! In the Common English Bible, this section is laid out like a poem with each “stanza” beginning with the phrase.

Look over some of the prophecy that follows the phrases “on that day.” What are some of the events foretold? Be aware that much of it is symbolic, and we may have lost some of the meanings of the symbols in the chronological passage of time. Nevertheless, the passage can contain treasures for us to find if we are willing to dig deep! (Some of it is pretty graphic. Don’t miss reading the description of the walking dead in Zech.14:12!) Share one or two that speak to you:

In Zechariah 12:10-14, we see a description of the mourning that will take place “on that day” as the people of Jerusalem look upon “The one whom they have pierced.” In Zech.14:4, we read about how “On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives,” again reminding us of the coming of the Holy One on a day that will change all of time into what God plans for it to be. From the beginning of *chronos*, God has been at work making a way for us to be reunited with him “on that day,” in the fullness of time, the completion of *kairos*. Sadly, not all people will attend to God’s design and wishes. In his grace and mercy and compassion, God has seen fit to make us creatures who enjoy free will. We have the opportunity to make bad choices. Zechariah’s prophecy reminds us that not all of God’s people will choose to do what he asks. Not all of

us will accept his plan for us and his requirement that we submit to his will . In Zech. 13: 8-9, we read:

In the whole land, says the Lord,
Two-thirds shall be cut off and perish,
And one-third shall be left alive.
And I will put this third into the fire,
Refine them as one refines silver,
And test them as gold is tested.
They will call on my name,
And I will answer them.
I will say, ‘They are my people’;
And they will say, “The Lord is our God.”

What stands out to you in this passage?

In 1 Peter 1:3-7, we read, “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” We are refined so that our beauty, can shine through—getting rid of the dross, the parts of us that need to slough off and die.

We are reminded, once again, that we are in the minority. “God’s chosen” doesn’t mean that he picks some and leaves others. It means, instead, that he picked us all and some of us declined! “For God so loved the WORLD...” that he sent us all an invitation via his son, but some of us respond with a definite “no” or worse, an apathetic shrug.

Have you responded to God’s invitation? If not, take this time to write out a prayer to the Lord letting him know you want to be with him in Chronos and Kairos time.

Conclusion: And Now This...

At the front, top, and center of Asbury University's chapel are written the memorable words, "Holiness Unto the Lord." The phrase stands as a strong, visual reminder of the true purpose both faculty and students have at that university: pursue a life that pleases the Lord, no matter what field you train for.

Zechariah might have been pleased with a banner like that over Jerusalem, since he starts his prophecy with an invitation to holiness—"Return to me...and I will return to you" (Zech.1:3). After his visions and his calls to social justice, he concludes with a list of occurrences, "on that day." He details how God wants to break through our carefully crafted concept of time to show us his vision of eternity—eternity that exists in kairos time. God longs for us to break free from the confines of our small-minded understanding and to live in the promises of his fortress, a stronghold where we can exist behind a moat of love as prisoners of hope (Zech. 9:12).

Malachi

Malachi

Introduction:

There is a children's book called, "Love You Forever"⁹ that details the antics of an ever-growing little boy, from infancy all the way through later adult years. Through it all, his mother remains steadfast in loving him so much that she goes to great lengths to stay close to him. Like the mother in the book, God takes extraordinary steps to reach us, to establish a relationship of love, and to stay connected. In Malachi, we see the summation of his outreach to the children of Israel during the time of the prophets. Once again, he issues the invitation to the people to choose the path of righteous and to stay faithful through diverse temptations.

Written after the completion of the temple, Malachi sees the culture of injustice, immorality, and profanity. He admonishes the people to listen to the invitation of God and to prepare their hearts for transformation. Again, we read, "'Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the lord of hosts." (Mal. 3:6)

⁹ Munsch, Robert. "Love You Forever" Buffalo, NY, Firefly Books, 1986.

1. How Have You Loved Us?

Read: Malachi 1-3

Our church is like many other churches in that we have a food pantry. Besides buying from local suppliers, it also accepts donations from the congregation and community. It is funny to look through some of the interesting food that gets donated: canned sauerkraut, mincemeat, bulgur wheat, capers and other less commonly used fare. This is, of course, only a small portion of what ends up at the food pantry, but it is the subject of some laughter and wonderment on the part of the volunteers! A less common problem is finding donated foodstuffs that are of inferior quality—cheaper products which were purchased with intent to donate. The poorer goods most likely have little effect on the recipients who may be just as glad to get them, but they do speak loudly of the condition of the heart of the donor.

If you have ever volunteered at a food pantry, what is the funniest item you have seen?

Malachi is addressing a similar problem with the children of Israel. They have taken to disregarding and disrespecting God, offering him leftovers or seconds without a thought, forgetting that God might be very able to distinguish the difference in a heart fully devoted to him and one that is solely preoccupied with the appearance of good but harbors moral decay just beneath the

surface. Below the “scratch and sniff” exterior, lies the malodorous evidence of adultery, lying, cheating, refusing the alien, and living a life that sets aside the holiness God longs to see in us.

The book asks a series of questions and sets out to answer those. As we begin to read and study the prophecy of Malachi, let us consider the questions:

1. How have you loved us? (1:2)
2. How have we despised your name? (1:6)
3. How have we polluted it? (1:7)
4. ‘What a weariness this is,’ you say, and you sniff at me. (1:13)
5. Why does he not? (2:14)
6. How have we wearied him? (2:17)
7. How shall we return? (3:7)
8. How are we robbing you? (3:8)
9. How have we spoken against you? (3:13)
10. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? (3:14)

I can remember my mother saying to me, “Don’t be sassy.” Being “sassy” was pretty bad on the list of offenses and sometimes required a warm backside to help me remember! In reading the verses above, I just cringe and want to duck out of the way of these folks who are about to get their backsides smacked by the Almighty. The questions, in and of themselves, are not objectionable, but the way they ask them certainly is. Their attitude is really pretty awful, but, sadly, far

from unique. Think about our day and time. How do these impertinent questions sound familiar? Do you think we are ever guilty of asking God “sassy” questions that disregard his holiness and his love for us? Make a few notes below of ways you think we might be able to relate to the children of Israel from so long ago:

Chapters 1 and 2 of Malachi are focused on detailing how the priests have become complacent about their offerings to God. God outlines some of the problems:

- “Where is the respect due me?” (1:6)
- “When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor?” (1:8)
- “Cursed be the cheat who has a male in the flock and vows to give it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.” (1:14)

God sees through the priorities. He sees into the hearts of those who deliberately choose to offer him less than the best. It is not the item itself. It is not the financial worth. God doesn’t ever need our money. Jesus himself pointed out the beauty of a generous heart in the story of the Widow’s Mite.

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put

in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4)

Jesus knew that the widow gave all she had. By giving her whole heart, her whole self, and all that she had, the widow left us an example to follow. God does not want or accept our leftovers. He is not pleased when we offer up less than the best to him. The people around us may not know the difference, but we cannot fool God.

How do you prioritize your relationship with God, not just in your finances but also in your time and talents?

Through Malachi, God reminds us of his greatness when he says:

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. (Mal. 1:11)

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, help us to see and know your greatness. Forgive us when we are tempted to offer you less than the best. We love you and want to serve you with our whole hearts. Amen.

2. Priestly Problems

Read: Malachi 2 & 3

While I was babysitting our young granddaughters one day, we used a cardboard box and a bit of fabric to create “The Tennessee Theater,” a stage where they could use stick puppets to act out imaginative stories. The beauty of a stage like that is that sometimes, if we listen carefully, we can hear the subtext, a clearer message about what these little ones are thinking. They tell stories about their dreams, opening their little hearts so that the adults caring for them can see what is going on—if we pay attention.

Have you ever been in a play or acted in a drama? Did you find yourself free to express your deepest feelings through the character you were portraying?

When God sets up the temple laws, sacrifices, and tithing rules for the children of Israel, he sets the stage for them to show their true colors. God doesn’t need their sacrifices, their tithes, or their rigorous rule-keeping; but in his goodness, he sets all that up so that the people can recognize their deep need for him and their inability to be good enough to save themselves. The whole priestly system, carefully delineated, step-by-step, in the Old Testament, is a stage that reveals to humanity their basic need for a Savior. In Malachi, as the Old Covenant comes to its conclusion, we find the Israelites struggling with keeping their priorities in line and with understanding their

foundational need for transformation. And none struggle more than the Levites, the clan of priests who are intended to lead the way in practicing holiness.

Let's look at what God says through Malachi to the priests:

1. "And now, O priests, this command is for you." (2:1).

- What does God say he wants them to do?

- What does God say he will do if they don't obey? (2:2-3)

2. "Know, then, that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may hold, says the Lord of hosts." (2:4)

- How does God describe the covenant he has with them? And what does it call for?

3. Read the passage quoted below and **underline** God's requirements of his priests:

My covenant with him was a covenant of life and well-being, which I gave him; this called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in integrity and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and the people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. (Mal. 2:5-7)

The Levites were set apart from the very beginning of God's covenant with his people during the exodus from Egypt. Throughout the complicated history of the time of the judges, kings and prophets, God uses the priestly caste to incorporate proper worship into the life of the people. In return for their special role, God called the Levites to live lives that were set apart. God wanted to them lead by example, and he delineates some of what he expects in this passage of Malachi.

At this point, some of us may be thinking, "Shew. So glad I'm not a priest. I mean, that's a whole lot of expectations!" But wait. Let's go to 1 Peter 2:9 and see what God has to say about that as he continues to reveal himself to humanity in the New Testament.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

So we are priests, too? Yikes! So all that language about reverence, integrity and uprightness applies to us? Yes! How do you feel about being called a "priest?" How does that affect your view of yourself and of other believers?"

When God chose the Israelites as his people, they were to be the prototype of all he intended for the world. He gave them his law, showed them the way to go, and asked them to faithfully walk in it. As we know, the descendants of Abraham disappointed themselves and God time and time again. Over the centuries, it became abundantly clear that humanity, on its own, could never be

all that God intended. Instead, we require God's grace manifested through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. He died there to pave the way to God through his love. He opened the door to salvation by offering himself as the perfect sacrifice, the culmination of all God's plans for the redemption of humanity. After his death, with the curtain in the temple torn in two from top to bottom¹⁰, we were now allowed into the presence of the Almighty as a "royal priesthood, a holy nation." Lest we be confused and too narrowly interpret this passage, this "nation" is not a political system. It is instead the home country of all of us who acknowledge our sin and our need for grace.

This passage about priestly problems concludes with some warnings to the priests. In Mal. 2:8-9, God accuses the priests of leading people astray. Let's look at a list of what they have done:

1. You have turned aside from the way...
2. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction...
3. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi...

What are the consequences?

"...and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you have not kept my ways but have shown partiality in your instruction." (2:9)

While these warnings may apply primarily to our shepherds and leaders today, they also go deeper than that. This words stand as an invitation to each of us to consider the true state of our hearts, to look deeper and to see the "subtext" —the stuff we may not even acknowledge to ourselves.

¹⁰ Matt. 27:51

Pause for Prayer:

Dear God, help us to be pure in heart. To walk before you with reverence, integrity and uprightness. We need your grace to be able to do this. For it is in the sweet name of Jesus we pray,
Amen.

3. Bad Behavior

Read: Malachi 2 & 3

As a missionary kid (MK) in Brazil, my childhood years were filled with a different kind of wonder. My older brother, Roger, was always cooking up fun schemes, things for us to do and explore near our house. He built tree houses for us, we tried to raid bee hives (not our smartest idea!), and he set up traps to capture the monkeys that populated our trees. Some of his hare-brained ideas made me question his good judgment, even as a little kid—making me the voice of reason—and maybe the tattletale, too, when things got out of hand!

In your youth, were you the “voice of reason” or the “adventure-seeking rebel?”

Malachi is serving as a voice of reason for his brethren. He is conveying God’s repeated invitation, “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” (Mal. 3:7) He is also pointing out where the people have gone wrong, inviting them to return to an attitude of respect toward the Almighty God. Some of the sins he listed are in Mal. 3:5-6. Underline some of the problems God calls out:

Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress

the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. For I the Lord do not change.

Malachi encourages the people to not cheat, to be faithful to their marriage vows, to be pure in heart, knowing that God can see through the veneer of righteous living that many were exhibiting. The people were not only cheating in marriage but also trying to cheat God out of money—a ludicrous undertaking indeed! Read over Malachi 3:8-10:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?”

In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

1. How are the people robbing God?

2. What does God say will be the result of their behavior?

3. What does he mean “Bring the full tithe to the storehouse?”

4. What kind of “food” is God talking about here?

5. What is the result of the people's faithfulness in tithing?

6. Does God promise material blessings in return for tithing faithfully?

God's invitation to us through Malachi is to be faithful—in all things. He wants to see us living our best life—lives of love, kindness, mercy—lives that reflect him and his nature to others. Just as I'm sure my parents grew weary of my brother's elaborate schemes to have fun, so God grows weary of our persistent unfaithfulness. In Mal.2:17, Malachi relates, "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them;' or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'" God is weary, both with those that turn right and wrong on its head and glorify the perpetrators of evil, and also with those who doubt there is a God of justice.

How do we sometimes glorify and excuse those who persistently practice evil?

Are we among the faithful or among the faithless that ask whether there really is a God who will enact justice?

What practical advice do you see in these texts that we might apply in our day to day lives to help us seek to live the way that pleases God?

Pause for Prayer:

Holy God, help us be holy as you are holy. Help us to seek to live lives that reveal you to others by being faithful, kind, and loving. Amen.

4. Beautiful Bridge

Read: Malachi 3 & 4

Lake Lure, North Carolina, boasts a beautiful flowering bridge, worthy of a visit. Passersby can enjoy the intense experience that appeals to all the senses; it is even designated as a place where the blind and visually impaired can enjoy a multitude of flowers in close proximity. When we were there, we encountered dozens of people walking the span, taking in the beauty of what was once an ordinary bridge.

Have you ever been on a memorable bridge? Why does the memory stand out to you?

Malachi, because of its placement in the Old Testament, enjoys the distinction of being a bridge between two times: the time before Jesus' coming and all the time since. In between, we find a space of about 400 years, a time of waiting and expectation, as the people anticipated the promised Messiah.

While the word, "Malachi" means "messenger," we read in this prophecy about God's plan to send another messenger, the promised one who will fulfill his plan. Three prophetic passages stand out:

- “See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (Mal. 3:1-2)
- 2. “But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.” (Mal. 4:2-3)
- 3. “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts...” (Mal. 4:5)

Let’s consider a few questions about the above scriptures:

1. Who do you think this “messenger”—called “Elijah” in Mal.4:5—is, that will “prepare the way?”
2. What does the promised one bring “in his wings?”
3. What images does Malachi use to help us understand the transformational nature of the Promised One’s coming into the world?

In Malachi 3:16-17, we read about God keeping a “book of remembrance.” It almost sounds like a holy scrapbook, doesn’t it? Scrapbooking is a fun hobby for many. Do you like to scrapbook or

make picture books about special trips and events?

In a few heart-warming verses, we read about those that worship the Lord gathering together to talk, and how God pays attention and listens (Mal. 3:16-17):

Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession...

These verses are so lovely because they validate what we do when we meet together in worship, don't they? And they remind us that the God of the Universe is listening. Not only is he listening, but he is also making a scrapbook about us! Ok, so maybe it's not a scrapbook, per se, but Malachi's wording suggests that our worship is an event to be recorded, remembered and treasured. After all, we are his "special possession."

In the New Testament, Jesus reminds us that when we gather together, he is there. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matt. 18:20). How do you react to these passages about the Lord being present, listening and loving it when we gather? Maybe the tender beauty of these verses can help encourage us when we feel weary of gathering together to worship or study the Bible. Knowing we are pleasing the Lord can make the extra effort worth it!

Pause for Prayer:

Dear Lord, thank you that you went to such great lengths to bridge the gap between us. Through Jesus, you have made a way for us to cross over from a life of sin and darkness into your marvelous light. Thank you. Amen.

And Now This...

Throughout the scope of the Old Testament, God has laid forth his plan for the redemption of the world. From creation to the fall, and to the time of Christ, we see his hand at work, weaving a beautiful bridge of love, the main crossbar being the perfection of Jesus on the cross. His righteousness and love makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to come to God as the redeemed, the remnant, the ones made Holy by his sacrifice.

Malachi, the messenger, lays out again the dangers of corruption and sin, especially among the leaders of the people. He admonishes them to seek out a life of right living in expectation of God's great gift—the Messiah.

Concluding Thoughts:

Congratulations! If you have gotten this far, you deserve a special award of recognition! The Book of Twelve (or the Minor Prophets), is not a portion of the Bible that we come to often or with great ease. With passages that sometimes make us squirm and want to run for cover, they are also replete with reminders of God's goodness, mercy and forgiveness. Despite the passages of doom and gloom, in the balance, the Minor Prophets stand together, as one, seeming to offer forth the phrase, "Return to me, and I will return to you."

The messages of the Minor Prophets do tend to become somewhat jumbled, as we go from one to the next and become just slightly confused about who said what and when. While Jonah and the fish are indelibly marked in our minds from childhood with Hosea and Gomer possibly joining the cast of more familiar characters, many times Amos and Joel and Nahum start to blend together.

To possibly help with that—and just in case you want to go back over this someday—I have attached a "cheat sheet" —maybe better called a "summary sheet" given our material! These are ideas and concepts that stood out to me. You may want to make your own list. I hope this is helpful and that you can go forth and put new truths you learned into practice in your journey with Jesus.

Summary Sheet of the “Not so Minor Prophets.”

Book Name	Major Theme	Best verse	Favorite word/ concept
Hosea	Grace	6:6	Knowledge
Joel	Repent	2:25, 32	Locusts
Amos	Righteousness	5:14-15	Plumb line
Obadiah	Humility	1:15	Day of the Lord
Jonah	Mercy	4:2b	Running away
Micah	Social Justice	6:8	God’s compas- sion
Nahum	Judgment	1:15	Destruction
Habakkuk	Evil and God	1:5	New heights
Zephaniah	Seek the Lord	2:3	Day of the Lord
Haggai	Obey	2:4	Take courage
Zechariah	Holiness	1:3	Return to me
Malachi	Purity	2:5-7	Gather together

Notes

Jonah

1. God Changes His Mind- Part 2- hymn “Ye who are weary come home.” Thompson, Will. 1847-1909.
2. *Just Mercy: A story of Justice and Redemption*. Stevenson, Bryan. Spiegel & Grau: New York, 2015. p15.

Amos

1. C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia* The Chronicles of Narnia (1951, this edition Harper Collins, 1994) 141.
2. Frost, Robert. “Death of a Hired Man.” _____

Joel

1. Tolkien, J.R.R., *The Hobbit*, Chapter IV.
2. _____: (_____
_____)

Hosea

1. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 45.

2. Taken from : _____

3. Evans, R. *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*. Nashville: Nelson Books, 2018.

Habakkuk

1. Hunard, Hannah, *Hinds Feet on High Places*, (UK: Christian Literature Crusade, 1955), 158.

Zephaniah

1. Warren, W. Lee, *No Place to Hide: A Brain Surgeon's Long Journey Home from the Iraq War*, Zondervan, 2014, Michigan. (p.84)