



A LENTEN DEVOTIONAL THAT STARTS IN
UNEXPECTED PLACES.

A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE



bethany
TOGETHER FOR GOOD

INTRODUCTION



Lent is this incredible opportunity that we are given each year to shift not only our focus, but maybe even shift something within us. For forty days we are encouraged to fast, and pray, and reflect on our relationship with God.

This devotional booklet offers you 40 reflections that all start in unexpected places. But as you read, you'll discover that boy bands, and whirlwinds, and dirt, and bread, and so much more can teach us about the life of faith.

We invite you to read one reflection each day of this 40-day journey and to allow these meditations to change your perspective in dozens of different ways.

I am grateful to Rita Argus and Colleen Maki for their contributions to this collection. We hope that it can be a helpful companion through this season of Lent. May these words here, and this holy 40-day season, create space for something to shift in you, so that you might welcome the Easter Resurrection news in a new way.

Peace and Grace,
Pastor Nate

What does an internet modem have to do with our relationship with God?

Have you ever noticed that the solution to 90 percent of technology problems is to just unplug the machine, count to 20, and then restart?

If the computer isn't working, just unplug it, count to 20 and then restart the machine. If the copy machine isn't working, unplug it, count to 20 and the restart the machine. Cell phone's not working? Just take the battery out, count to 20 and start that thing back up! Internet's out? No problem, just unplug the modem, count to 20 and you're back online!

And when you think about it, isn't the season of Lent just one big reset button too? The church has this 40-day period where we are encouraged to slow down, to give something up, to fast, to unplug, to clear the deck so that we can be prepared to start over with the Resurrected Jesus on Easter Sunday. Easter's all about a fresh start and new life, but first we need to unplug and since Lent is 40 days long, we'll unplug and then count to 40 and then we'll start over with a new way of life on Easter Sunday.

Unplug, count to 40, and restart. Shut it down and start over.

Sometimes Jesus talks like this as well. There's a moment in the Gospel of John where Jesus says that he will tear down the Temple and in three days it will rise again. The Temple was the most holy site in the Jewish world at that time and Jesus goes as far as to say that he's going to tear the Temple down. He says this because he's become so frustrated with the ways that the Holy Temple had become a place of insiders and outsiders; a place where rules were more important than relationships; a place that had completely lost touch with God's hope for religion. And so Jesus basically says, we need to tear this thing down and start over. Stop worrying about getting all the rules just right, stop worrying about how well you're doing your religion, stop focusing on the lifeless Temple building and instead focus on building a relationship with the Incarnate Son of God. That's what Jesus meant by these provocative words.

When we turn our faith into a laundry list of dos and don'ts we are walking the wrong path, but when we shut it down and start over with Jesus, we discover a life that is altogether different, altogether new, a life that is whole and complete and in tune with God, our Creator.

Shut it down and start over with me, Jesus says; start over with me and I will show you what a relationship with God can really look like.

AMEN.

What can a loaf of bread teach us about Jesus?

By Rita Argus

When I was little, the church my family attended had the tradition of congregation members baking bread to be used for communion. My Dad was known for his bread making. People would literally get excited when they saw his name in the bulletin as next week's bread baker. So, one year, it was my Dad's turn to make the communion bread for Easter and he decided he would have a bit of fun. That week, instead of making his normal honey oatmeal loaf, he instead divided up the dough and colored each portion. He then wrapped them together to make a colorful spiral and wrapped uncolored dough around the outside, so that once it was baked it looked normal. The time came for communion and the pastor lifted the loaf of bread, blessed it and broke it to reveal the hidden swirl of color inside.

In John 6:35, Jesus says "I am the bread of life." What better illustration of the bursting forth of new life in Jesus than the bursting forth of color in this communion bread? Even today, when I partake in communion that involves normal colored bread, I am still reminded of this colorful loaf and the new life I have been given through Jesus.



What does a whirlwind have to do with God's hope for our lives?

"Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind." – Job 38:1

Throughout the Bible, God speaks in different and strange ways. Sometimes the voice of God is heard from a cloud, one time from a burning bush, another time in the sound of sheer silence. But in the book of Job, God eventually speaks from a Whirlwind. There is something significant about the voice of God emerging from a whirlwind because whirlwinds are these violent, destructive weather patterns that suck everything inward.

As the winds swirl and blow, all sorts of items get absorbed into the vortex. You've seen the pictures and the movies. Remember that movie "Twister" from the early 90's where even the cow gets sucked into the whirlwind? That's how whirlwinds work-- they pull everything inward.

Don't the worries and anxieties of this life tend to have the same force? When our life is hit with one tough moment after another we can quickly get to the point where all that we see is our own despair. Tragedy and trauma seem to create their own weather systems in our lives and they can easily suck us in so that we are unable to consider anything else. The only thing we can think about is how difficult our lives have gotten; how painful the situation is.

That's why this moment in Job seems so significant to me; because God is in the whirlwind. When we get sucked in by the stressors of life, God is there. In recognizing that God is there we are also connected with the larger truth: that God is bigger than our whirlwinds.

When we get sucked into the whirlwinds of life, one of the most powerful things we can do is zoom out. We get out of our spiraling thoughts, we stop getting sucked in by the stress, and instead, we remember the God who is always bigger than our problems.

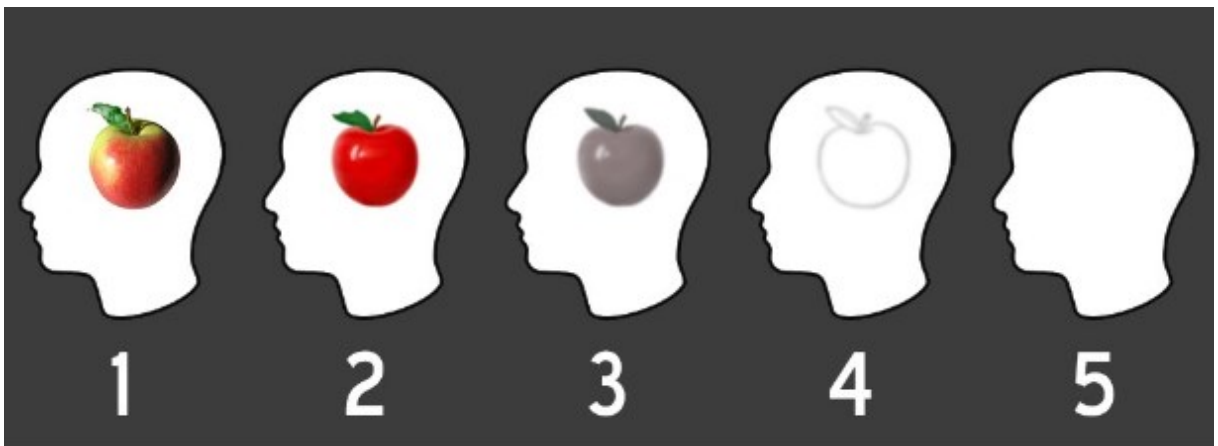
We zoom out and remember that all of this world rests in the hands of God. We zoom out so that we can see that even though it all feels out of control, God is still in control. We zoom out and recognize that our struggles and problems will not last forever. We zoom out so that we can remind ourselves that even in death God has claimed victory. No problem is bigger than our God.

“What does aphantasia have to teach us about anything really?”

By: Colleen Maki

Have you heard of aphantasia? I learned about it from a TikTok video about 6 months ago. I was blown away to learn that some people can conjure an image in their mind with such clarity that it looks like a high-def TV. What happens when you close your eyes and try to picture an apple? Try it... no really I mean try it RIGHT NOW! Do you see an apple? Is it red or green? Do you see grey and black swirls? When I close my eyes and try to picture an apple, my grandmother's face, my childhood home, or my favorite lake I don't "see" anything. That's called aphantasia. About 3% of the population has aphantasia. Which is probably why I hadn't heard about it until recently. Once I learned about this condition I wouldn't stop asking people around me about it: my coworkers, my family, my friends, and cashiers at the grocery store. I was curious if I was alone in this new-found knowledge or if everyone knew about aphantasia besides me.

When was the last time you really truly got curious about something? When was the last time you said, woah I've never heard about that before? Sometimes, as we grow older, it is difficult to remember how to be curious. Many of us have walked through the Lent and Easter story our whole lives from infancy to adulthood. We know the scriptures and we know the journey of Jesus to the Cross. Or at least we think we do. This Lent I challenge you to get curious about the stories. What do you see? What do you hear? What is new to you? What is Jesus doing? Who is he talking with? And then share about it—to your family, friends, maybe even those chatty Trader Joe's cashiers. Take time to be curious—it's really fun!



“What do fishing instructions have to do with an abundant life?”

I love the moment when Jesus calls his first disciples. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Simon, James, and John were fishing one night and they caught nothing. And so they're tired and they're frustrated and then Jesus comes along and he tells them to go to the deep waters and drop their nets. And you gotta think that there was just a little bit of annoyance in Simon's voice when he responds to Jesus instructions. I bet what Simon really wanted to say was, “First off Jesus, why don't you let the fishermen do their job and you do yours. We're not telling you how to Rabbi out here, so why are telling us how to fish? And Number 2, we've been fishing all night and so I'm pretty sure that we thought to look out there at some point over the past 12 hours.” But, to his credit, Simon didn't get that sassy. But he did say this, “if you say so Jesus...” You can almost hear the disdain in those words. If you say so....

And you know what happens next, they catch some fish. So many fish, in fact, that their nets start to rip. They catch so many fish that their boats start to sink. They catch so many fish that they must have been thinking “we are going to be so stinking rich!”

Because fish were their business. Fish were their income. If they caught a literal boat-load of fish than that means that they just hauled in a literal boat-load of money. BUT!... that's not what abundance looks like.

You see the real miracle here isn't the boat-load of fish. The miracle is what happens in the hearts of Simon and James and John.

I know that abundance isn't about getting lots of money because as soon as these fishermen dragged their overflowing boat to shore they leave it all on the beach and follow Jesus instead.

They don't quickly sell all the fish and pocket the cash. They don't invest the fish in a diverse stock portfolio so that they can live off the dividends. They don't even bet all the fish on over and parlay that with the under in the night game! They leave the fish in the boat on the beach and follow Jesus instead.

Because that is what abundance looks like. We have gotten into the bad habit of assuming that abundance is about money and possessions and wealth but when Jesus talks about abundance, he's talking about an abundant way of life.

What can Teen Boy Bands teach us about our God's hope for our lives?

I'm guessing that if you look back at your life your best memories and your most joyful moments were times when you were surrounded by people you love. It is certainly possible to feel joyful and fulfilled when you are alone, but the presence of others has a way of turning up the volume.

Speaking of turning up the volume, have you ever noticed the cycle of eerily similar boy bands that pop up every ten years? In the late 1980's, there was a wildly popular musical group of five young men called "New Kids on the Block." About 10 years later, "N'Sync", a group of five young men, achieved similar popularity. Ten years after that, "One Direction" burst onto the scene.

These groups (and there are many others) actually use a formula for their music. They all are groups of 4-5 individuals because scientists have found that when a group of people sings in 4-part or 5-part harmony, it lights up the brain in a different way. Something within us is deeply drawn to the sound of 5-part harmony.

It's as if there is something within us that is naturally drawn to the community. In the book of Genesis, God actually makes this point very clear. After creating Adam, the first human, God says, "it is not good for man to be alone..."

We were hard-wired to be in community with others. It's not easy to be in a community with others, but there's no denying that it is an essential piece of how God created us. This is why we practice faith together with others. We can't possibly perfectly believe on our own. We need the support and the faith of others to hold us up and inspire us. As my friend likes to say, "Faith is made whole in community."



What does a TV show preview have to do with hope for the future?

Shortly after my first child was born, my wife and I started binge watching the television show “House.” There’s one episode where Doctor House is shot by a deranged patient and yet he keeps working on the medical cases assigned to him. It becomes clear during the course of the episode that the gunshot wound is not only affecting House’s livelihood but also his ability to properly care for patients.

And then.... The episode ends and the viewer is left wondering if Dr. House and his patient are going to survive! Usually, when you’re binge watching a television show, cliffhangers like this aren’t that big a deal. All you have to do is press the play button to find out what happens next.

However, when I originally watched this episode, it must have been the third or fourth episode my wife and I had watched that night because I know that we turned the show off and went to bed, despite the cliffhanger. And so that night, every time I woke up to take care of my infant daughter; I had these weird questions running through my head about whether Dr. Gregory House was going to survive.

At some point the next morning, when I was thinking a bit more clearly, I remembered that the cliffhanger episode I had just watched was from season 2....and then I remembered that I had just seen a commercial advertising the premiere episode of House season 9.

It was at this precise moment that I realized, Dr. Gregory House was going to be fine. I’m embarrassed to admit how comforted I was when I realized that everything would be ok, but I bet many of you can understand that sense of relief that I had when I figured out how the story was going to end.

I’ve been thinking about this phenomenon a lot this week—this strange sense of comfort and security that we get when the end of the story comes into focus because I think it’s a feeling that our faith should cultivate in us again and again. When we’re met with the tension and uncertainty of the moment, we can take a deep breath and remember that God has already told us the end of the story.

If you watch the news or read the headlines it’s all enough to leave you feeling really uneasy and even downright scared. But our faith tells us that we know how the story is going to end. No matter what might happen, we know that God is in control and that God will not rest until all of creation is put back together.

Fear not, because we know how the story is going to end! Whatever uncertainty you feel today, whatever fear and struggle you are currently encountering, know that God is with you and that the story will not end until all the world rests in the arms of our loving God.

What does my friend leading an event have to do with our life of faith?

I love those moments when I get to watch friends in their element. I recently saw a friend who just came alive as he finally got to lead and facilitate a large group event after 2 years of Covid kept him from gathering people together. It was amazing not only to witness just how talented he was in a space like this but to also see the ways that he became more energized and more alive as the evening went along.

Witnessing my friend on that night reminded me that moments like that are what God hopes we all can find.

The fact that God became human in the person of Jesus just shows us that God deeply values *this* human life. And, while on earth, Jesus was consistently helping people recover their life and discover their purpose. Jesus wasn't concerned with people following rules just for the sake of rules; no Jesus was constantly guiding people "to have life and life abundantly." (John 10:10).

I think there is a lot that we can learn by simply looking at Jesus' life and seeing it as an example of how we were meant to live. God became human in the person of Jesus and so Jesus' life of compassion, celebration, and love can be seen as a guide for how we might live an abundant life; how we might live in the ways God always intended for us to live.



What do zombies have to do with the church today?

In our media and popular culture there has been a heightened interest these days in a once largely ignored population. Suddenly movies, books, video games and television shows are popping up left and right all with this one “people” group at the forefront. I’m talking about Zombies, of course.

Shows like “The Walking Dead”, video games like “Dead Rising”, movies like “Zombieland”, and books like “Pride, Prejudice and Zombies” have all seen widespread success in the past few years. We are utterly fascinated with the idea of creatures existing in an undead state terrorizing the townspeople as they try and feed their appetite for human brains. With all this in mind I think it is high time that the church jumped on the Zombie bandwagon!

The thing is, if we are really honest with ourselves, I think the church has been on the Zombie bandwagon a lot longer than we’d like to admit. Let me explain.

In my years as a pastor, I’ve loved to ask people, both inside and outside of the Church a simple question: “What is your hope for the future of the Church?”

Sometimes people will offer some tangible ideas: “I want to see a better Sunday School program,” or “I want our congregation to be more mission-minded,” or “I want our church to have more members and more young families.” These are all admirable hopes, but in a way, all of these hopes are elements of the broader statement that I hear most often. When I ask different people what they hope for in the future of the church nearly every time people will eventually say, “I just want the church to go back to the way it used to be.” It might not seem like there’s anything wrong with a statement like that, but the problem with longing for the past to return is that God has *never* worked like that.

We believe that God is continually making all things new. We believe that God is a God of Resurrection not a God of reanimation. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he wasn’t a zombie! The disciples didn’t recognize him; he was alive again but somehow different. Something new was beginning in the Resurrected Christ.

The problem is that when we long for the future church to look exactly like the church of the past, we’re hoping for a Zombie Church. We’re hoping for that which is dead to be reanimated into a world that is vastly different than it was 50 years ago. The Good News is that God is a God of resurrection and the future is filled with hope because God is breathing new life into the church, and into this world.

What does Moses' shepherd's staff have to do with God's call?

There's this great moment in the Bible when Moses speaks with God for the first time. Moses is out in the wilderness shepherding sheep when he notices a bush that is burning in the wilderness, but it is not being consumed by the fire. So Moses goes over to investigate and then God starts speaking to Moses from out of this burning bush.

During their conversation, God tells Moses to free the Israelites who are in Egypt. But even though this entire conversation is taking place via a burning bush, Moses is very apprehensive and unsure. He has all sorts of questions and excuses for God and at one point he literally says, "God, please send someone else."

At one point in the conversation, Moses says to God, "What if the Israelites don't believe that you sent me?" This is the first of a long line of doubts that Moses is going to raise, but God's response to this is so powerful. God says to Moses, "What's in your hands?"

God answers Moses' question with a question, and in so doing he's guiding Moses to see what God could see all along. Because in Moses' hand was, of course, a shepherd's staff. Moses had been out in the wilderness shepherding his sheep, and now God was asking Moses to shepherd the lost Israelite sheep out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the Promise Land. This entire story is a powerful reminder to us that when God calls, it's because God sees something important within us. We may have doubts and questions, but God has already placed in our hands all that we need.

So, what's in your hands? What gifts or skills do you have that could be used in a new way for the sake of God's mission?



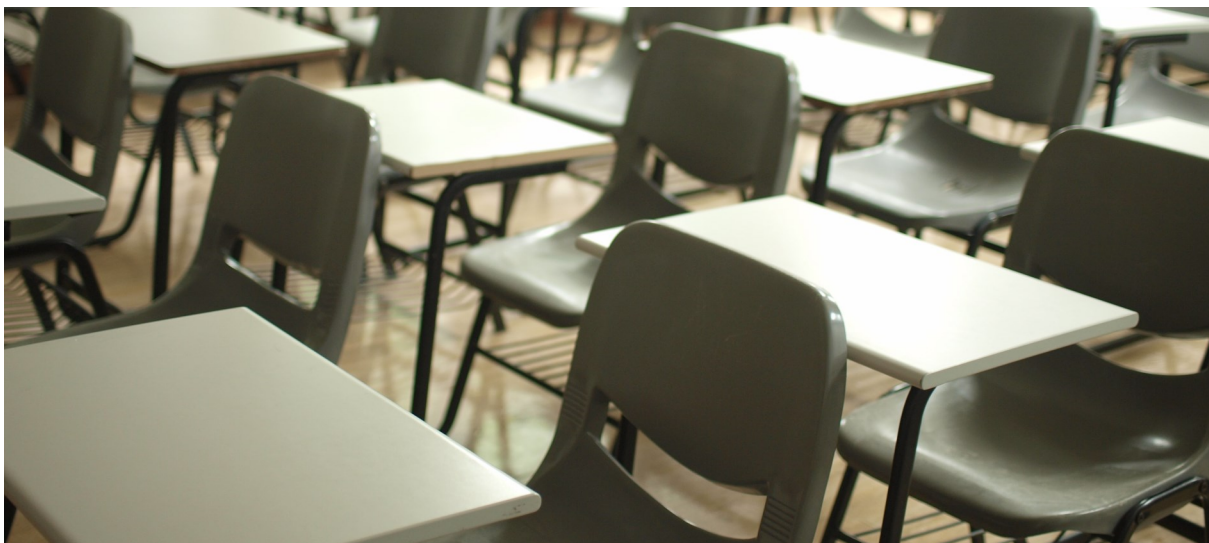
What do academics have to do with the life of faith?

God has created all of us in God's image—in the beginning we were created by God and declared "good". In this journey of faith we are called to use the gifts of our creation to seek and honor God: with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our mind.

Sometimes we can become too engrossed in the mind part of pursuing God. Try as we might, we cannot think our way to God. God is so far beyond our grasp that it would be idolatrous to believe that our intellect would be able to pin down God. Indeed, our relationship with God is largely dependent upon elements of faith.

However, so much good can come from the struggles of faith. We are all blessed with the incredible ability to think and reason. I strongly believe that challenges to our faith are also gifts of God. If everything was easy then how would we ever grow? We are constantly being molded to become more mature followers of God and Christ. Challenges to faith, doubts within faith, all of these are merely further steps toward a more mature, more whole relationship with God.

Please, do not abandon the questions that you have about God! Embrace these challenges as signs of God working in your life and remind yourself that God is always guiding you toward maturity. Our faith is a gift that allows us to be closer to God when the challenges of intellect overwhelm. But also, our mind and our intellectual struggles are gifts that bring us into a stronger relationship with God.



What does a 4th grade math lesson have to do with our life of faith?

Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally. Do you remember this mnemonic device from elementary school? It's designed to help you remember the order of operations. Parenthesis, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction. When you do certain complicated math problems you have to be sure to follow this specific order otherwise, you'll get the wrong answer. But ya know what? I don't think order of operations is just for math class, in fact I think there's an order of operations for our life of faith. Let me know explain...

There are all these places in the Bible where specific moral expectations are mentioned. For example, in the book of James it says, "let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness; welcome the implanted word; be doers of the word, and not merely hearers." And then in the Gospel of Mark Jesus says, "avoid fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly."

And here's what can happen: we see these lists in the Bible and we think that these behaviors are our end of the bargain. We get this idea that have got to keep all of these rules and avoid all these pitfalls in order to be right with God. We have to go to church every week and never use curse words and always give our unwanted toys to Good Will and if we do all of this well enough THEN we will receive salvation, THEN God will save us when we die and bring us to heaven. But I think this type of thinking is getting the order of operations all wrong. On the surface, it makes sense. In our world, everything has a cost, a cause and an effect. And so it just logically makes sense that if we want God to do something for you well, then, you're gonna need to do something for God first.

But I want you to know that God is actually better than that. God doesn't operate by the expectations and standards of this world. The order of operations is different.

What God does for us always comes first. We don't have to work our way up to God, we don't have to get it all right in order to be alright. God extends grace and mercy and forgiveness to us first.

And now, we've got to be careful because I'm not saying that we get to just ignore what the book of James and the book of Mark have to say about how we act, I'm not saying that. We just have to be careful about the order of operations.

God loves us and forgives us and saves us first. Then, in response to the gracious actions of God, we are freed to live as God hopes for us to live. All those behaviors that we read about in James and Mark and elsewhere in the Bible; that is what we will look like when the salvation of God really gets a hold of our life.



What can an ancient Russian painting teach us about the nature of God?

Take a look at this painting. This is a very old work of art. If you've ever been to my office, you might have seen the image there. You probably have a lot of ideas at the moment about the photo's meaning.

What if I told this painting was an Icon of the Trinity? You see it a little differently now, don't you?

Notice how they are all sitting together, and yet the focus, the center of the painting, is right in the middle, as if you are supposed to sit there with them.

This image that we see is supposed to depict the Father, Son, and Spirit all sitting together and yet the central focus seems to be on the space where we can fit in at their table.

Here's what I'm getting at. There is a fancy term that people use when talking about the Trinity it's called "perichoresis". You'll notice in the painting that the Father appears to be looking at the Spirit, and the Son seems to be looking at the Father, and then the Spirit seems to be looking at the empty space at the table. The idea behind "Perichoresis" is that the Father, Son, and Spirit all exist in this loving community, they are three and yet they are still one being, one God. This love they have for each other flows between all three figures, the Father, Son, and Spirit literally are a community of love. And this love they share moves between them, as the Father looks to the Son and the Son looks to the Spirit, the love flows back and forth both giving and receiving.

But notice that in this painting, the figure of the Holy Spirit is looking at the empty spot. This is the same spot that is in the center of the painting, the space that you might feel invited to sit at. That's because this is God's hope for us: that we might know and feel and be a part of God's community of love.

I don't know about you, but I find so much peace when I look at this painting and think about the beautiful promises that it expresses. What greater peace is there than to understand that God is love, that God exists as a community of love, and that God wants you to feel and become a part of God's love?

That's what some might call "the peace that surpasses all understanding". I hope this deep peace of God finds you today.

How is keeping the sabbath a gift from God?

The commandments I think are often misunderstood. We think these are just the rigid rules that God gave us that we must follow or else face the consequences. In particular, the command to “remember the sabbath day”, is something that we often see as antiquated or impractical when in reality it’s actually an incredible gift that God is trying to give us.

We live in a world that believes that our value and worth is determined by what we do. Now, more than ever, people are overworked and struggling to cram more and more into their lives. All of this stems from a belief that our value is based on how much we do.

This belief has infected us and we barely even realize it. We have been taught to think that there is something honorable about working ourselves to death.

Simply put, this is a lie. If you believe that your worth is measured by what you do then that is sinful. Because the scriptures are clear, our faith is clear; our worth comes from God. No one else gets to tell us what our value is. God and God alone determines our worth and value and it has nothing to do with how much you accomplish or how full your schedule is. Your worth is only determined by what Jesus Christ has done for you on the cross.

When we start to understand this, God’s command to “remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” suddenly starts to look like a gift rather than a responsibility. God commands us to keep the sabbath because God knows that work has to be balanced with rest. God knows that taking time to rest is the best way to live.

We are constantly told to go harder, grind more, boss up, push through, fake it till you make it and sleep when you are dead. I'm wondering where we can find tenderness, softness, alignment and rest. Aren't you tired?

The Nap Ministry
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What can a pot of dirt teach us about the Kingdom of God?

By Rita Argus

Good soil health is dependent on a number of factors. Good soil needs nutrients like phosphorus and nitrogen. It also needs an appropriate mixture of the soil components: sand, silt and clay, as well as organic matter that breaks down slowly and holds moisture. Which, speaking of moisture, good soil needs to be hydrated and it also needs to house a robust ecosystem of bacteria, fungi, and other microbes that work to break down organic matter and make nutrients more available to plants. It is in all of these things coming together that make a good soil, a viable ecosystem from which life and fruit can grow and flourish.

And when this ecosystem is flourishing, the benefits ripple out to the surrounding world. As this ecosystem is flourishing, plant and animal life is sustained and supported. Water, through rain, snowmelt, and irrigation is slowed and controlled. Pollutants and toxins are filtered and buffered. Nutrients are cycled and transformed to benefit different lifeforms. In other words, our homes, offices, roadways, and livelihoods are supported by this flourishing ecosystem.

So, if we think about ourselves in terms of being good soil...it is not hard to see how the constant demands of the world really deplete our soil. Because, just as good soil depends upon a number of factors, we too need community, connections, and relationships with each other and with God to build our soil health. And so yes, if you are following my line of thinking, I am saying that the community found at church is manure. Manure that is enriching our faith lives and our relationship with God.

Because amidst the muck and mess of soil, and manure, and earthworms, and everything else that goes into life, God is there creating and renewing life. And so we pray Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your word. Lord, let my heart be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood. When my heart is hard, break the stone away. When my heart is cold, heat it with the day. When my heart is lost, lead me on your way. Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart and let this community be good soil. Amen.



What does my physiology have to do with the message of the Bible?

I learned recently that anticipation often carries with it a specific physiological response. Our pupils dilate, our heart rate increases, our muscles tighten, and our senses are heightened. (Maybe that's why I'm so tuned in to the sights and sounds the Christmas season). But here's the really peculiar thing- when we are afraid, our body responds in the exact same way: our pupils dilate, our heart rate increases, our muscles tighten, and our senses are heightened. For our physical bodies, there is no difference between looking towards the future with hope or looking towards the future with fear. Perhaps this is why, for the longest time, I would mistakenly say things like, "I'm anxious for the show to begin" when what I really meant was, "I'm excited for the show to begin."

It's interesting to learn this little physiological detail and then to consider the message of the Bible. Because the most common phrase in all of scripture is "Do not be afraid." In fact, this particular phrase appears 365 times in our Bibles, once for each day of the year. It's as if God is telling us every day to face the future with hope rather than fear. It's all just a decision in the end. As I mentioned, our physical bodies don't know the difference between anticipation and anxiety, and so that means that the difference between fear and hope is often all just in our heads.

And to all this God says, "Do not be afraid." We can face the future with confidence and hope because we believe that there is a God who walks with us. We believe that there is a God who has a plan for our world and our life and that plan is NOT one of fear, but one of love, and life, and hope.



What does a sunburn have to do with following Jesus?

When I was much, much younger, I used to love wearing basketball jerseys. I had a whole collection of jerseys from my favorite college and NBA players and, during the summer months in particular, I would wear jerseys all the time.

One summer, I was working outside quite a bit. Thankfully, my job was more than supportive of my preferred attire. I was a summer camp counselor, so nearly everyday I threw on a different (hopefully clean) basketball jersey and then proceeded about my day at camp. Unfortunately, during one particularly hot and sunny week, I didn't apply enough sunscreen and I ended up with a bad sunburn.

When I finally took my jersey off for the first time all day, my co-counselor burst out laughing. My arms, neck, and parts of my shoulders were bright red, but the rest of my upper body was a pasty white. Even though I wasn't wearing a shirt, my sunburn made it look as if I still was. It was the most glorious Jersey Sunburn you could ever imagine.

While the sunburn was a little painful, I thought the jersey sunburn was one of the coolest things to ever happen to me. As I've said, I love wearing basketball jerseys, and this new jersey sunburn meant that whether or not I wore a jersey, it still looked as if I was wearing one! Even when I took off the jersey, you couldn't take the jersey away from me.

Stay with me on this, but I think that this Jersey Sunburn is a lot like our baptism. Our baptism is this joyous welcome into God's family. We are doused with water and, even though we're quickly dried off, the power of that event still remains.

During High School, I went through some difficult times. At night, before I would go to bed, I would spend some time in prayer, talking with God about all of my struggles. At the end of my nightly prayers I would go to the bathroom and wash my face with water. Three times I would splash my face, reminding my self of my baptism. Then, I would make the sign of the cross on my forehead and say out loud, "I am God's Child, and nothing can take this away from me." Regardless of what jersey we put on next, regardless of what we do or don't do, regardless of whatever struggles we might face, or success we might have— no matter what, we are God's beloved child, and nothing is going to take that away from us.



What do our past mistakes and failures have to do with God's plan?

I have a friend who always thought he wanted to be an English teacher. But when the 2008 recession hit, he was just finishing his education degree and suddenly there were no open High School English teacher positions.

It was a very frustrating time for my friend. He applied for any opportunity that came along, but nothing panned out. And through all of this I would support my friend and encouraged him and talked with him about other possibilities that he might pursue. And over time my friend would ask me about my job as a pastor and one day he admitted that he had thought in the past about maybe being a pastor someday. And so then I started to push him a little in that direction. And after some subtle pushing and then some not so subtle pushing, my friend went to seminary. And he's serving as the pastoral leader of a church right now.

But here's the really incredible part. The church where my friend is serving, it shares a parking lot with the local library. My friend who failed at being an English teacher is now serving the mission of God in a location that shares space with the library.

So often, this is how God works.

Think of all the stories you've heard on the news or in magazines or books about the atheist who goes on to become a pastor. Or the convicted felon who goes on to start a prison ministry. Or the homeless person who turns their life around and now runs a homeless shelter. God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called and in that equipping God takes your past and shakes it and flips it around and repurposes it for God's purpose.

There's a word for this, it's called Redemption and it's what God is all about. We can get so focused on the current chapter of our story but we must always remember that God has a Long-Term Plan. And that Long-Term Plan includes the redemption of all humankind. All of humanity, all of this broken messed up world will be redeemed by the power of God in Christ Jesus. That's the Gospel promise. That's what the Bible is all about-- it's about God's long-term plan to take our failures and repurpose them for the Mission of God. Your sin, your mistakes, your failures are not going to be brushed to the side and ignored. No, God's even better than that-- God's going to redeem those failures, God's going to redeem that sin within you! God's going to take those mistakes and missed opportunities and turn them into something beautiful!



What do puzzles have to teach us about chaos?

By: Colleen Maki

*“Then God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete **chaos**, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” - Genesis 1:1-2*

When I was a kid I loved puzzles. My parents would help me start them by finding the edge pieces and then organizing the inside pieces by color. I distinctly remember sitting in the basement on the concrete floor snapping the pieces into place. Dancing bears in tutus would come to life with each new piece. With every click of a piece the chaos would turn to order - the picture would come clear. What joy those clicking puzzle pieces brought me!

In the first creation story we learn that God created order out of chaos.

But what do we do when find more chaos than order in our lives? What do we do when the world is broken and the pieces don't seem to fit together? As people of faith, what do we do when we can't order the chaos of mental illness, racism, sexism, systemic poverty, hatred, and division?

We know that the pieces of the world's puzzle don't always just click into place and this knowing can be sad and overwhelming. As people of faith we are called to love our neighbors just as Jesus taught us to do. As corny as it sounds, each of us are a piece of the world, a piece of God's story. We can click together to bring order to chaos, justice to injustice. This work isn't easy—just like sorting puzzle pieces challenges the puzzle builder to trust the processes and test pieces over and over again until they click. God is with us in this work and helps us click those pieces in place. As you think about the chaos of the world, *know* that we cannot do this work alone. God is with us as well as all of the other puzzle builders! Ordering chaos and creating justice in a world of injustice can't be done alone it must be done in community—Jesus didn't do his justicemaking alone; he invited his friends into it as well. In this season of Lent, I encourage you to seek out others in the Bethany community and beyond to work together and build a new puzzle of justice.



How does prayer connect us with God?

Lately, I've been looking into some of the more ancient practices of the Christian Church. Christianity has been around for about 2000 years, and believe it or not, in that time people have come up with all sorts of different ways for connecting with God.

I've found it so fascinating and so helpful to my own faith to learn about some of these different practices over the years... examples: Praying by walking a prayer labyrinth, the process of "holy reading" (called *lectio divina*), maintaining a daily rhythm of prayer (called the Daily Office). These are just some of the many different practices that I have discovered, practices that were once widely used but have been lost through history.

As I've been able to discover and find value in different types of prayer and conversation with God, I've also learned something about the broader process of prayer.

God not only hears and responds to our prayers but God also works through the actual process of prayer. Our questions and prayers can be answered as we pray them, they can be answered simply by taking part in the act of praying.

I think we lose sight of the importance of the process and will simply pray a prayer to get results.

I really enjoy the spin that Celtic Christian writer John Phillip Newell puts on these ideas:

"Prayer is not about beseeching a distant one to alter the mystery of reality, but rather prayer is about coming into tune with the deepest energies within us—the energies that I believe are of the One. The practice of prayer is bringing us back into relationship with that which is already among us and within us."

We need to remember that we are holy and important in God's eyes and that God is present with us right now. This alone can fill us with peace and transform us. Perhaps, in the process, we'll even discover the answer to our prayers.

Take some time this week to really pray, to be intentional about the process and to see how God can work through the act of prayer. Perhaps you could try a new way of praying, whether that's by journaling or drawing, sitting in silence, or even going on a walk. Allow God to enter into the process.



What can a brown-nosing student teach us about the life of faith?

Think back to your school days. Do you remember that one student who was always trying to impress the teacher? The student might say something like, “I know that you said the final paper is supposed to be three pages, but I have just learned so much in this class and so I’m thinking that my paper will be 7 pages and I just wanted to let you know that I have soooo appreciated all that you have taught us.”

Something like this happened with Jesus and the disciples.

In Jesus’ day, there was this idea, this religious law that stated that a person should be willing to forgive their brother or sister at least 3 times. That was the rule. That was the law. You forgive three times.

And so one day, the disciple Peter, looking to impress Jesus, comes to Jesus and asks his teacher, “Lord, if someone sins against me, should I forgive them seven times?”

Peter wasn’t asking this question because he was interested in knowing if seven times was the right forgiveness number. Peter was asking this question because he knew, just like everyone else, that the law stated that you only had to forgive someone three times! Peter was asking this question so that Jesus would be impressed with his compassion and think of him as the best disciple of all.

But Jesus shoots him down. “No, not 7 times!” Jesus says, “but seventy-seven times!” This is the biblical equivalent of that professor saying to that suck-up student, “if you write a seven-page paper, I will fail you.”

The problem with Peter’s behavior in this passage is that he’s making the act of forgiveness all about him. It’s Peter’s ego that’s at stake in this moment and Jesus appropriately knocks him down a notch. As if to say, “Peter, forgiveness is far too important for you to turn it into a competition.”

So much of our religious life can drift into this ego sphere if we aren’t careful. It’s so important to remember that keeping the commandments, forgiving our neighbors, acting with compassion, and building a relationship with God – all of these aspects of our faith are meant to lead us into a more abundant life. They aren’t items on a ‘to do’ list that we get to check off so that we can feel superior to everyone else. They are a blue print for living a life that is full. This is what Jesus wants from us most of all – not more competition between people, but rather more people who are fully alive.

What can a bottle of wine teach us about the Holy Spirit?

By Rita Argus

In early March of 2020, we moved my Nana into an assisted living facility just before everything shutdown because of the pandemic. Within a week of her moving in, outside people were not allowed into the building, including clergy and other religious leaders unless it was an end-of-life situation. However, with the roll-out of vaccinations, the assisted living facility started to allow in outside people, who have been vaccinated. So, my Nana's pastor was finally able to bring in communion after over a year, to give to my Nana and the other members of St. Mark's Lutheran Church. Upon Pastor Andy's arrival, word got out that a pastor was there with communion and soon what was supposed to be a gathering of four women, turned into a gathering of six women, and then ten women, and then fifteen women. Working with the staff, Pastor Andy was able to get bread from the kitchen and my Nana, not missing a beat, scooted off with her walker to fetch a bottle of blueberry wine for the meal.

I love this story, because I think it speaks to what it means to be Spirit-filled people. Gathered into one by the Holy Spirit, what would have been a normal gathering of a few became something more. Through the Spirit, an ordinary room became a sanctuary. It didn't matter who each person was, all were given the open invitation to come and see that the Lord is good.



“What does a feast have to do with God’s promises?”

*“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines.
- Isaiah 25:6*

I’ll be honest, I don’t really like banquets. I remember the first banquet I ever went to, a friend spent the entire evening explaining the many and various banquet rules. I couldn’t just eat each bite with a different fork (there were 3 to choose from!), no each fork had a special job to do: one was for salad, one for the main course, one for dessert. Now what’s the fun in that?

The thing about banquets is that it’s all about the show. Everything has a special rule and you progress through the banquet as if it’s an elaborate performance. In my experience, I was so worried about following the rules that I never really enjoyed the food, the company, and the celebration itself. To me, a banquet ruins a good thing with all its regulations.

And you know what, I don’t think that this just happens at banquets. There seems to be a natural human tendency to take something great and turn it into a burden. Financial security becomes greed, love becomes lust, marriage becomes adultery, and politicians become extremists. Again and again we take blessings and turn them into something destructive or painful. We’ve become blind to the Good News that is being offered to us day after day.

I don’t like banquets, but I do love feasts. At a feast it’s all about celebration, rejoicing in the abundance of food and community and joy.

I think God wants us to have more feasts and fewer banquets. The blessings of God are meant to be celebrated and shared, not regulated and controlled. All throughout Jesus’ ministry he was arguing with the religious leaders about these points. He healed a blind man on the Sabbath and the priests said that was against the rules. When he prevents a woman from being stoned for her sins, people argued until he said, “Let he who is without sin, cast the first stone.”

Jesus’s life and ministry invites us to focus more on the grace of God and less on our human urges to get everything just right.

What do surprises have to do with our life of faith?

I know that it seems like we have had just one too many surprises over the course of this past year. 2020 has been the most surprising year on record for about a dozen different reasons that I won't go over in this devotion because I'm sure, like me, most of you are tired of being reminded of all the "unprecedented" things that have happened since January 2020.

While surprises might seem like a bad thing in the context of 2020, I want to remind us all that during normal-er times surprises were actually kinda fun. Surprise birthday parties, surprise visits from friends, surprise letters in the mail, remember all of those things?

A while back a friend told me about an unique approach to their prayer life. Apparently, every day, this friend would wake up in the morning and say a very simple prayer: "Surprise me God". (Apparently, it's from a book called "Surprise Me" by Terry Esau.)

It's a really interesting prayer, especially when you consider how asking God to surprise you could change your entire approach to the day. By asking God to surprise you, you are letting God be in control. Rather than trying to have everything go your way, rather than being disappointed when life doesn't go the way you had imagined, when you pray, "Surprise me God" you are letting God be in control and you can approach the day with confidence and a sense of trust.

But not only that. When you pray, "Surprise Me God" you are also opening yourself up to the possibility of surprise. You'll go about your day with a new perspective. What small ways has God answered that prayer? Where is God breaking in with a surprise?

Give it a try today. Really ask God to surprise you and then live this day with a sense of trust and a sense of hopeful expectation, because God is in control, and what God can accomplish in your life just might surprise you.

“What do sports movies have to do with God’s grace?”

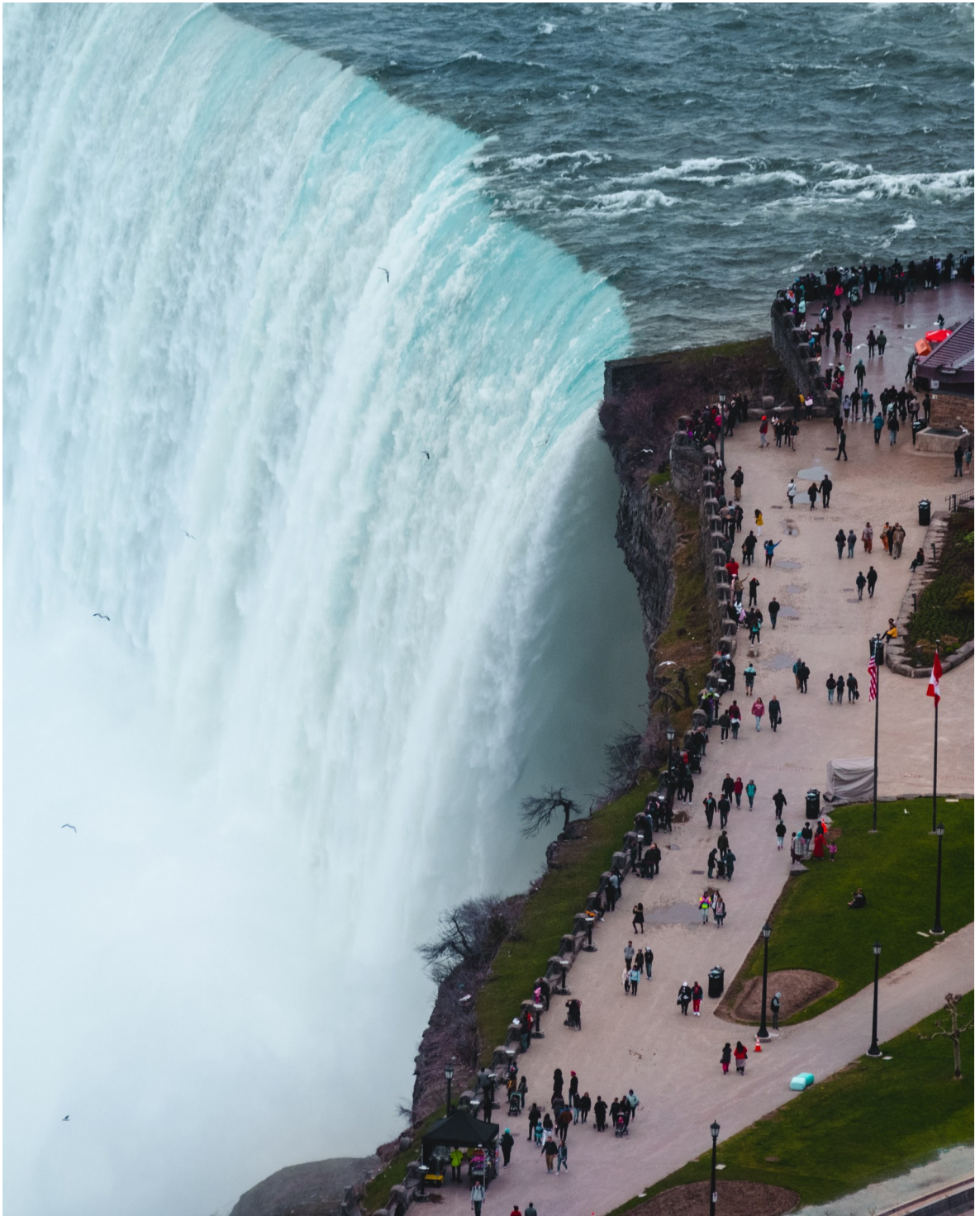
One of my favorite things in the entire world is a sports movie. Particularly, a sports movie that is geared for a younger audience. If I was to make a list of my favorite movies of all time there is no doubt that films like “The Sandlot”, “Mighty Ducks”, and “Space Jam” would make the list. What I really love about these sports movies is that even though they are about different sports, even though they are set at different times and in different parts of the universe, they still manage to all follow a very similar narrative arc. Here’s how it works:

First, we are introduced to some generic sports team. It doesn’t matter; basketball, baseball, football, softball, hockey, soccer, team whatever. What we learn is that this sports team is really bad at their sport! They lose all the time and don’t really seem to understand the simplest aspects of the game! But then, they are suddenly given some reason to play well. They need to win lots of games or something bad will happen. But it’s hopeless! They are so bad at sport! And then, there’s some new coach who has come to town that’s going to take this hopeless, rag tag sports team to the championship. And so the coach walks in to the first practice and sees the players running into each other, dropping the ball, missing shots, scoring on the wrong goal – the coach sees for the first time just how terrible this team really is and then – and this is the most important moment – and then the coach takes a deep breath and says with the utmost confidence, “I can work with this.”

I believe, that this is how God sees us. No matter what mess we get ourselves into, no matter what mistakes we make, no matter how unfaithful and undeserving we might be, God looks at us time and again and God takes a deep breath and says, “I can work with this.”

We are going to make mistakes. We won’t be perfect, we will mess up, time and time again we will make decisions that are hurtful and harmful and destructive to ourselves and others. But in the infinite goodness of God, in the infinite creativity of our Creator, in the infinite Holiness of the Holy Spirit, God will see these mistakes and God will take a deep breath and say, “I can work with this.”





What does Niagara Falls have to teach us about God's power?

The other day I had a friend share with me an interesting fact about Niagara Falls. Apparently, much of the water that flows down the Niagara River towards the falls is diverted. The water is directed elsewhere, away from its typical path in order to be used for electrical power.

This is always the case. Except, and this is the “interesting fact” part, during the summer months. During the summer, a far smaller amount of the water is diverted, not because we use less electrical power in the summer– if anything our air conditioners and fans cause us to use more power – but because the summer months are the peak tourism times at Niagara Falls.

Now, when my friend told me this I thought it was one of the dumber things I had ever heard. I've seen the Falls during January, when supposedly more water is diverted away, and believe me it is still very impressive. Why would anyone go to all the trouble (and surrender so much potential energy) by letting more water flow during tourist season?

But, before I could even make this argument to my friend, he said something that made me reconsider: “Isn't the real power of Niagara Falls not the electricity that it can produce but it's overwhelming beauty?”

It's the same with much of what happens at church. As a Pastor, I put a lot of effort into creative new ideas, clever sermons, and moving worship services, but ultimately the real power of Christianity comes through the simple beauty of its message.

“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is given for you, do this in remembrance of me.’” - 1 Corinthians 11:24

The simple yet beautiful Christian message is this: Christ died for us. Through ordinary bread and wine we proclaim this beautiful truth at Communion. But we also proclaim this powerful truth in all sorts of simple ways: through water at baptism, through the words of Scripture, through the act of gathering together in community– these are simple practices that illustrate and proclaim the powerful truth of God's love for us.

What does a mistake during worship have to do with our life of faith?

I was at a church service a while ago and it came time for the community to recite the Apostles' Creed. The individual leading worship was supposed to say, "we now confess our faith, using the words of the Apostles' Creed" but he misspoke and said, "We now confess our sins, using the words of the Apostles' Creed".

We usually recite the Apostles' Creed in church as a means of stating who we are and what we are all about as Christians. The creeds of the Church are meant to succinctly articulate what God is like and what we as Christians stand for. And yet, does the way we live our life actually reflect these beliefs that we confess every Sunday? It all makes me think... maybe we really *are* confessing our sins when we recite the Creed together.

The Apostles' Creed begins with this statement: "I believe in One God, the Father, the Almighty..." and yet don't we all serve other gods from time to time? Don't we all tend to worship the gods of wealth, status, control, and self?

From there the creed articulates a belief in Jesus' death, resurrection, and victory over death. But do we actually live like people who believe this? Aren't we all terrified of losing a loved one or the thought of our own death?

Then, the creed concludes with statements about the Holy Spirit, and the "holy catholic church" (note: the term "catholic" here means "united" or "unified") and yet don't we all seem to constantly be pointing our fingers at "other Christians" whose practice of faith we view as less viable than ours?

There are a lot of other statements in the Apostles' Creed that seem to be in conflict with our practice of faith. In a lot of ways, when we confess the Apostles' Creed, I think we really are confessing our sins.

But here is the thing; the Creed represents an ideal, an ideal set of beliefs that we will never be able to perfectly live out on our own.

That's why, when we confess the Creed during our Sunday worship service, we say the words together. We need the support of one another if we are ever going to live out these beliefs. And not only that, but notice also that when we confess the Apostles' Creed in church it's said like a prayer. When we get to the end of the Creed we all say together "Amen" because we are asking God for help in living out these ideal beliefs.

I know some people don't really like having the Creed as a part of the worship service, but for me, it's one of my favorite parts because it reminds me of the ways that I could do better. But, more importantly, it reminds me that as a community and with God's help, we will do better.

What does memory have to do with sinfulness?

Growing up in Confirmation Class I was always taught that sinfulness means “missing the mark”. I remember weird Bible studies at Church Camp where we would go to the archery range and talk about trying to hit the bullseye (or at least the target) and there would be some sort of strange connection to God’s desire for us to live a perfect “bullseye” life. We were told that when we missed the mark, that was sin.

But, much later in life, I learned that there is another way to talk about sinfulness. Apparently a much more Biblical way to understand our sin is as forgetfulness.



For example, when the Israelites had been in Jerusalem for a little while, all of their success started to distract them from all the things God had done. They became so focused on getting more land and more power and more shiny new things that they began to forget about God. And this forgetfulness caused the Israelites to lose their connection with God.

I really like talking about sin as forgetfulness because I believe that God is loving and gracious, and therefore sin as forgetfulness just seems like so much less pressure than having to always “hit the bullseye”.

But I also think it’s important to speak of sin as forgetfulness because it gives us a much better path forward.

When we speak of sin as “missing the mark” the only solution is to just do better. But when we speak about sin as forgetfulness then the path forward is to remember. And isn’t that what our faith is built on in the first place?

When we gather for worship, when we read our Bible, when we pause to say a prayer or read a devotional, we are deliberately remembering that God is a part of our life and our world. When we remember who God is and who God has called us to be, there is healing and power and grace in that moment.

What does a workout video have to do with our identity?

About 10 years ago, my friend and I tried out a workout program called “Insanity”. The name is quite fitting. These hour-long workouts were incredibly intense and yes, at times insane. But my friend and I would push each other to keep going, keep working, keep trying. And when we would be too out of breath to urge each other on, the man leading the video, Shaun T, he would provide all sorts of motivational encouragement.

Shaun T was like a slightly nicer bootcamp instructor, he’d shout all sorts of encouraging phrases to try and keep you going. But our favorite phrase, one we’d shout at one another even after the work was done was: “This is who you are!”

There is something undeniably compelling about that phrase and the idea that it expresses. Shaun T was telling us, not just that we were capable of completing the insane exercise routine, he was telling us that our essence, our very identity was as a person who completed exercises programs like this. “This is who you are” is an incredibly powerful phrase that has the potential to seal a person’s destiny.

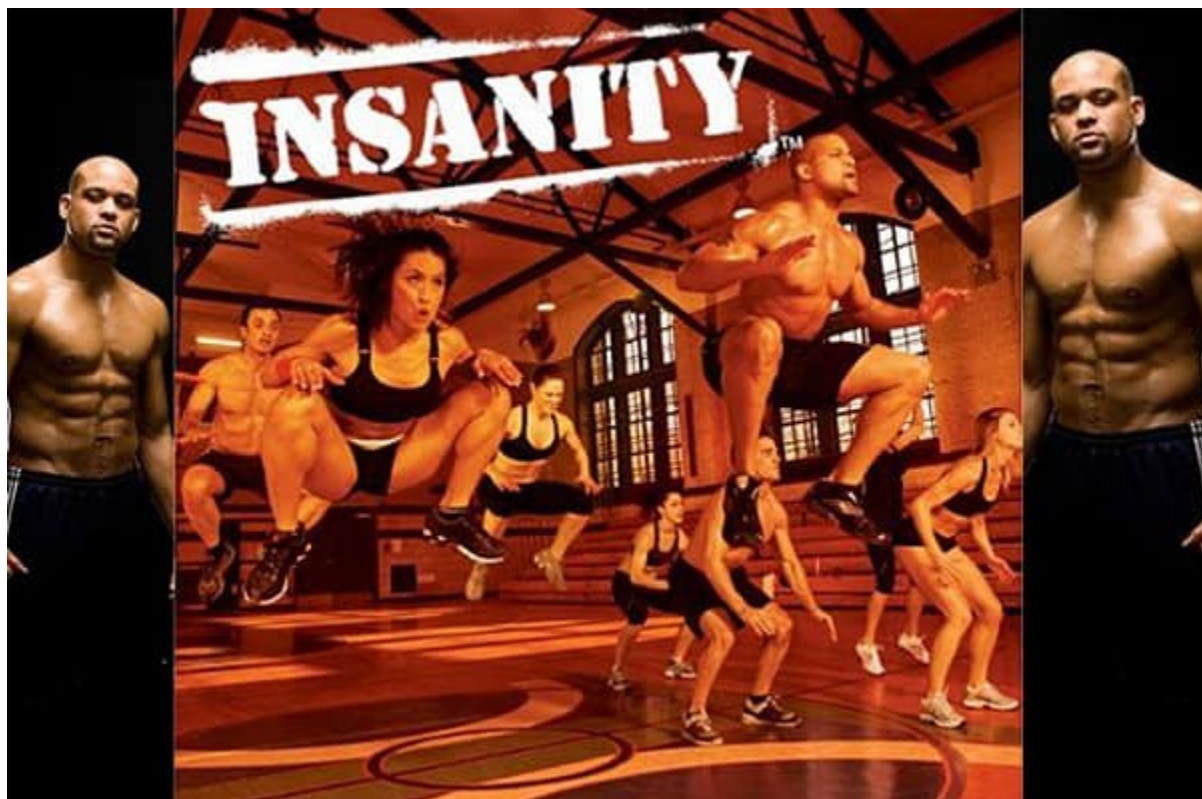
Think about it. Children who are told that they are loved and important often grow up to be exactly that. Because of what they’ve been told about themselves they are often pushed towards greatness. And yet at the same time, other children might be told that they are stupid and worthless and these words can be difficult to overcome.

But here’s the truth of our faith: whatever we might be told in our youth, whatever Shaun T says about us, whatever we hear from our friends or our enemies or from politicians-- whatever these people might have to say about who you are, as Christians we believe that it’s not the full story.

Only God gets to tell us who we are, and anything anyone else might have to say on the matter is secondary.

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he says that our identity is in Christ. We have died with Christ and we have been raised with Christ and so that means that we are not the same people we used to be; we have, “stripped off the old self with its practices and we are clothed ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the Creator.”

This is who we are! We are new beings in Christ who are being molded in the image of God our Creator!



How can the ordinary connect us with God?

You've just won... a new car!

I love that part of the Price is Right game show. It's always so exciting when the doors open to reveal some fabulous, expensive automobile and the winning contest jumps up and down hysterically excited about their good fortune.

We love new things, don't we? Even if it's not fabulous prizes on game shows, we love hearing about the newest smartphones; the newest gadgets that are **guaranteed** to make our life easier; the new Netflix show that we're **definitely** going to love.

There is such a focus in our world on the new and exciting.

But I'm not so sure living in this cycle of the new and exciting is good for us. It can cause us to always feel dissatisfied with the present moment; to always be chasing after the Next Big Thing believing that's where we will finally find fulfillment.

What if we learned to simply be present and grateful for this moment, ordinary as it may be? One of the consistent messages found in the Bible is that God is with us. And so, if we really believe that God is present with us, that means *that our current moment* has all that we could ever need. We don't need anything more than what we have right now because in this present moment God is with us. I love the way that Eugene Peterson adapted the language of 1 Corinthians 7:17 in The Message:

"And don't be wishing you were someplace else or with someone else. Where you are right now is God's place for you. Live and obey and love and believe right there."



What does a broken bottle have to teach us about the ways of God?

It was the first night of summer camp, the entire cabin had just arrived earlier that day and we were all still getting to know one another. As was the custom at Church Camp, the night ended with a devotional lesson from our camp counselor.

For devos that night our counselor had us walk into the woods where he gave each of us a small piece of paper and a pen. We were all asked to write down our expectations for the week— what we were hoping for, what we thought would happen, what we wanted to get out of the week.

Next, our counselor passed around an empty glass bottle. He asked us to share what we had written on the paper, and then place the paper into the bottle. After all the “expectations” had been placed in the bottle, our counselor took it, and without saying anything, he walked a few paces away from the group, and placed the glass bottle, filled with all our written expectations into a bag.

Then, still saying nothing, he took a large rock and smashed the bottle to pieces. The sound of shattering glass and the sheer volume of the event in the quiet of the woods caused a hushed silence to fall over the entire cabin group. After a long pause, our counselor explained his actions:

“All of us have a lot of expectations about this week. We all expect this week at camp to be a certain way, or for certain things to happen, but we need to remember that God is in the business of shattering our expectations.”

This was a great lesson for the all of us as we started our week at camp, and I believe it continues to be a good lesson for Christians today.

When Jesus died on the cross it seemed as if all hope was lost, as if the entire Jesus movement was ended— crushed by the Roman authorities. But instead, God shattered everyone’s expectations by using the crucifixion to defeat death once and for all.

As Christians we have a faith that is grounded in the idea that God will use the most unexpected ways and people to accomplish God’s Will. And so, when you’re expecting the worse, or things seem hopeless, remember that God is more than capable of shattering your expectations.

What do the changes in the seasons teach us about our life of faith?

I never liked school that much growing up, but I did always love The First Day of School.

Part of it was finally getting to wear my new shoes, but a even bigger part was simply the chance to start something new. The new school year always seemed to bring that opportunity to re-invent myself– the chance to get things right this time around– the chance to start-over.



I don't think we live our lives with that type of first-day-of-school-excitement too often. Obviously, its hard to get excited about each and every new day, but isn't this idea of starting over and new beginnings at the heart of God's message?

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" - 2 Corinthians 5:17

As Christians, our hope is found in Christ's promises to make all things new. This isn't just a new beginning tomorrow, or after Labor Day, this is a promise that God is not yet finished with you or me or Creation as a whole; in Christ sins are forgiven, diseases are healed, suffering is ended, new life begins.

What would it mean for us to actually believe this promise? So often I am filled with real despair– I see all the ways the churches are alienating others, or all the ways our political system is pitting neighbors against each other, or all the ways that violence, injustice, and suffering are rampant. I see all of these things and wonder how long this will all go on.

But on my good days, I remember and cling to the hope that Christ is making all things new. I cling to the hope that God is not yet finished with this world, and that the power of the resurrection is still at work, slowly but surely bringing new life and a new creation.

How does doubt play a part in our life of faith?

I had a friend ask me the other day to recommend some inspiring and encouraging Bible passages for a friend of theirs who is in a difficult place of doubt and questioning.

As I combed through my Bible, looking over the many underlined verses, I came across a few that spoke about doubt in some ways but nothing seemed to quite fit the situation.

But, in the process of searching, I realized something – isn't the entire message of Jesus about how God not only overcomes our doubts but also turns them into something beautiful? Let me explain...

The disciples were a rag-tag bunch of tax collectors and fisherman who probably doubted that their lives would ever amount to anything. And yet they were an integral part of God's mission.

Originally, the Apostle Paul so vigorously doubted the Christian message that he persecuted anyone who believed it. And yet God used him to start churches throughout the world.

During Jesus' years of ministry, he encountered and healed those who were sick or hungry or outcast– all people who doubted that their life could ever be changed.

And then, through the death and resurrection of Jesus we hear a clear message from God: that we should never have a reason to doubt God's love for humankind.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the famous theologian Paul Tillich who once wrote, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith but rather an aspect of it." In our world where we strive to know and prove everything without "a shadow of a doubt", the religious concept of faith can become blurred. We seem to forget that the very word "faith" implies that we are believing without full confidence– that we are putting our faith in something not fully known. If we had absolutely no doubts then what would it mean to say that we have "faith"?

As troubling as our doubts can be, there is hope, because God has always worked with individuals who doubt and so that means God will surely work with our doubts as well. In fact, I believe that we should stop seeing our doubts as a way we have fallen short, but rather see them as an indication of where God will work in us next.

After all, it's within our doubts that God plants the seeds of faith. As Paul Tillich also said, "The old faith must die, eaten away by doubts, but only so that a new and deeper faith may be born."

How might we misunderstand our Mountain Top moments?

I remember a Mountain Top moment I had during the last night of summer camp, when I was in High School. My camp counselors led our group through a devotional, just like they did every night. But that night, as I had the memories of the entire week replaying in my mind, I was overcome with this deep sense of God's presence. Really it must have been all of the joy and grace of that week building up and finally overflowing during that last lesson from my counselors, but whatever the reason, that moment is one I still point to as a time in my life when I knew that God was real, that God loved me, and that God was with me.

It's what some would call a "Mountain Top moment" in my faith journey. You've heard this phrase before I'm sure, those mountain top moments of faith that people describe when they are so filled with the spirit, when they are feeling so close to God, those "thin spaces" where heaven and earth seem to meet.

I remember that in the months and the year after that great moment at camp, I actually became really sad and even a bit angry that I wasn't able to have similar mountain top moments with God in the weeks that followed. At first I thought there was something wrong with me, and so I dedicated myself to daily prayer, daily scripture and reading. But that didn't work. So then I started to think that there was something wrong with God. Why wouldn't God show up as God had before? Did I just imagine all of that the first time back at camp? Did any of this church stuff even really matter?

I think it's because of our sinful human nature that this type of stuff happens. God gives us a gift; a moment when heaven and earth meet and we know God's presence. But then, what do we do? We try and turn these mountain top experiences into a commodity. These moments become something to be mass produced and hoarded. We want that feeling of closeness with God to come to us again and again and again like some sort of drug.

I remember being really frustrated in the years following my Mountain Top experience at camp because I wanted to have a repeat of my experience. I was looking and waiting and expecting God to show up in a similar way as God did that night at camp. But it just didn't happen.

That's because, mountain top moments are just that -- they are *moments* in our faith journey! God does not intend for these moments to be the entire journey and we must be careful not to allow ourselves to be so focused on chasing after a feeling that we don't notice all the other ways that God is truly faithful and present in our lives. Mountain Top moments are a wonderful gift of closeness with God, but they aren't the only part of our faith journey.



What does rejection have to do with Jesus?

Were you ever the last one picked for the team? Have you ever had a friend ditch you when you needed them most? Have you ever been picked on because you didn't quite fit in with everybody else? Well you need to know that at those moments of pain, during these small slights, you are united with Jesus. That's right, that's right, I know that it feel awful, but when we have been rejected the truth is, at those lowly moments when everyone else has turned their backs, we are actually united with Jesus right then.

Cone writes, "Therefore, to know Jesus is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless. That is why it can be rightly said that there can be no knowledge of Jesus independent of the history and culture of the oppressed."

You see, Jesus is on the side of the oppressed and the rejected. Jesus is constantly hanging out with the outcasts and the unwanted. Jesus didn't come to earth in order to build up his 401K. He didn't come to earth to climb the corporate ladder. He didn't come so that he could be famous and well-liked by all. He didn't come to earth for the glory or for the fame of so that he could become King.

Jesus came to earth for the rejected and the lowly and the downtrodden and the weak. Jesus himself was rejected in his hometown and then later in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities and the chief priests. Jesus showed compassion to the rejected who crossed his path, and he experienced all this rejection by his hometown and the elite of his day; he did all of this for our sake. So that today, we would know, that there is someone with us when we are in pain, someone weeping alongside of us, someone to be our Good Shepherd and our eternal comfort, someone to be our Prince of Peace when everything else seems like its falling apart.



What do emotions have to do with our life of faith?

Many years ago, I led a gathering for a group of young adults that focused specifically on the idea of humor as a Spiritual Practice. Our discussion mainly centered around how humor is so absent in the church. Sure, pastors occasionally throw in a joke at the beginning of their sermon, but generally speaking, things that happen at church are so... serious.

Why is that?

Certainly, there is a lot about our faith that needs to be taken seriously; a lot about our faith that is no joking matter. But I don't think this means that all signs of humor need to be altogether extracted from the church. In the same vein, I don't believe that all our other emotions should be removed from our life of faith. All emotions are holy gifts from God that speak to something real about us as individuals. Emotions are part of who we are and when we hide or repress these emotions we aren't truly being ourselves. When our faith is not free to embrace all of our emotions, we are holding something back in our relationship with God.

*“Your declarations of love last no longer
than morning mist and predawn dew.*

*That’s why I use prophets to shake you to attention,
why my words cut you to the quick:*

*To wake you up to my judgment
blazing like light.*

I’m after love that lasts, not more religion.

I want you to know God, not go to more prayer meetings.” – Hosea 6:5-6 (MSG)

I love this passage from Hosea because it calls out the problem we so often face as people of faith. We quickly forget that our faith is about building a relationship with God, not about getting everything exactly right. Growing up I thought church was all about following the rules perfectly: no talking in church, memorize all the prayers, stand at the right time, sing the hymns with gusto... etc.

But over the years I've learned that what God wants most of all is to be in relationship with us. A real, authentic relationship where we share all of ourselves with God. Sometimes this means talking with God about our joy, and sometimes it means sharing our humor, and sometimes it means sharing our sorrow, or our despair, or our even our anger.

All of our emotions are holy and precious to God, because our emotions are part of what makes us uniquely us, and that's what God desire more than anything else.



What does a bronze snake on a pole have to do with God's love?

There's this moment in the book of Numbers when the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness and they get upset. They complain to Moses and say that their lives were better off when they were slaves in Egypt. In response, God sends poisonous snakes that bite and kill many of the Israelites. This causes the Israelites to beg Moses to tell God that they are sorry. And so Moses does and then God tells Moses to put a bronze snake on a pole and if anyone is bitten by a snake they can look at the bronze snake and be healed.

What?!

It's such a complicated process that it's almost comical, especially when you consider that God is the one who sent the snakes in the first place, couldn't God just take the snakes back? Why do we have to go through this entire process of snake on a pole, lifted in the air, stare at the snake-pole ordeal?

God choice to do things this way because its real. Given the track record of the Israelites, if God had simply taken away the poisonous snakes you can bet that 3 months down the road the Israelites would had lost their faith in God again. If God were to have removed the snakes nothing would have changed within the Israelites. But instead, God's actions provide real healing for the Israelites.

Because in this story God doesn't just remove the source of the pain, but instead God sends healing at the place where it hurts the most.

What we need to hear today is that in our world where people are searching for something real amidst all the lies and half-truths that surround them, into this world, God promises to send real healing at the point that it hurts the most.

Moses lifted up a snake in the desert and that was how God conveyed this promise to the Israelite people. But, since then, God has lifted up Jesus first on the cross, and then into heaven, so that we might know the real presence of God with us in the midst of life's most painful realities.

What does hating one's family have to do with love?

There's this moment in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus says, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three" – Luke 12:51-52

And I think what he's talking about here is love.

I know what you're thinking – Jesus' words in Luke's gospel don't sound at all like love. Love is that gushy feeling that Hallmark talks about in their Valentine's Day cards. And ya know – I'll agree with you on that point. But I bet you'll also agree with me on my next point: Love changes everything.

It is this type of earth-changing-love that Jesus is talking about in the Gospel passage. Jesus is earnestly speaking to a crowd of people about his mission and his message. He is being very clear with those who are listening that he's not just another run-of-the-mill Rabbi; no, he is the Messiah. And he has come to turn everything around.

Jesus is on a mission to share with the world a love that is so inclusive and so radical that it will cause conflict and divisions; Jesus is on a mission to bring love to the world in a way that will change everything. And when you start to think about Jesus' actions, you realize that he was absolutely telling the truth—Jesus's loving actions DID cause division.

Rome was divided when they heard Jesus was telling everyone to serve God NOT Caesar. The Pharisees were divided when they heard that Jesus say that God's love and grace was stronger than all of their complicated religious rules.

And be honest with yourself. Jesus' message can cause division within us too. I'm pretty comfortable with the way things are going. I don't need everything to change. I'd much rather just stick with that Hallmark-type of love I mentioned earlier: love that's warm and fuzzy where everybody just gets along.

Hallmark might be alright with us perpetuating love like this, but Jesus is not, because that type of love won't change anything. That type of love just sits idly politely asking everyone to get along while all sorts of injustices and atrocities are taking place.

No, Jesus wants us to foster a love for this world that is assertive and courageous and at times divisive—in other words, Jesus came to foster a type of love that has and will change everything.





What can stolen Easter eggs teach us about the simplicity of our faith?

When I was 4 years old I lived on a dead-end street with all retired families. However, there was a boy, let's call him Joey, who would come to visit his grandparents from time to time. He was about five years older than me, but since I was the only boy on the street, he was more than willing to play when he came to visit. Needless to say, I looked up to Joey and did nearly anything he asked me to do without thinking twice about it.

One day, Joey was sitting on his porch while his grandma was picking weeds in her garden. I walked over and said hello. Joey said to me, "my grandma is being really nice to me today, we should go get her something to say thanks." As usual, I followed along without question. We walked down the street until Joey noticed a house with an Easter egg display on their front lawn. He told me that we should take several of those eggs and give them to his grandmother. Once again, I followed along without questioning. Shortly after we had walked away from that house, our hands filled with eggs, a woman from down the street, who had witnessed the entire event, began yelling at us. Joey and I started to run, but the women eventually caught us and then informed my mother, and Joey's grandmother, of our thievery.

Here's why I'm sharing this story with you today: I think there are a lot of times when we as humans want to show God our thanks but we don't always find the best ways to do this. Often times we try and show our thanks to God by going out and trying to convert all our friends, or by calling out the evil that we see in other people's lives. Sometimes, in our efforts to try and "win people for Jesus," we end up doing more harm to the Christian movement than good.

I think the strangest thing about Joey, me, and the Easter eggs, is that Joey thought stealing eggs for his grandmother was a good way to show his appreciation (and I followed along!). Wouldn't his grandmother have figured out very quickly that these were stolen eggs? Wouldn't it have made more sense for Joey to just help his grandmother in the garden?

"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

We can make our faith so complicated when really it's quite simple. Joey and I wanted to show his grandmother that we were thankful. This is a good thing. In the same way, we want to show God that we are thankful. But we don't need to overthink this! What God desires more than anything else is to act with mercy and justice and humility. Living our life like that is the best way to tell God, "Thanks".



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