

Peace Church United Methodist

The Lockdown Collection
of Sermons & Meditations

Volume IV
June 2021 – March 2022

Foreword

Dear Peace Church friends,
as I write this I have only four more Sundays as the
“active” pastor-in-charge of Peace Church.
Reading through the sermons and meditations shows
me once again what a fascinating community we are.

We have wonderfully gifted and committed young
and old people who share with us who they are, what
they have and what they think and believe.

On some occasions there were only a few people in
church to listen to the thought-provoking sermons
and meditations.

This is part of the reason why I believe in publishing
them as a printed booklet.

Now all can read them – whether you made it to
church or could not come.

Enjoy the texts.

Let them inspire you.

Let them encourage you to live the adventure of life,
held safe in the love and grace of a wonderful God.

Do justice.

Love mercy.

Walk humbly.

God bless you.

With much love,
Pastor Christine



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Communion



Meditation on Matthew 26: 26-30 *by Kat Wagner*

Today is a special day. This evening we will share Communion together. We will re-enact Jesus' last supper with his disciples: the Passover meal where Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and shared it among the disciples, saying "Take and eat; this is my body". Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." This moment, this meal, this table is one of the most important images that Jesus left us to remember him and his teaching. Blessed, broken bread to eat. And wine to drink. This was not a mealtime for debating, for analysing, for 'head work'. This is a meal for receiving, sharing, chewing, tasting, swallowing, digesting. Real, incarnational 'body work'. The few words, just two sentences, that Jesus spoke as he shared out the bread and wine are full of deep significance. But the

fact that he used actual food and drink, to be consumed, was also very significant. Communion is not just a holy symbol to observe with your eyes. Or a religious position to grapple with your mind. The bread and wine were part of a meal *to eat*. I would therefore like to focus on the *substance* and *actions* of this Communion meal.

The first action: **Jesus took bread**. Normal bread. Bread baked by someone, bought by someone. Bread that he called "my body". Christ's body. Jesus could have chosen any object to represent his body – maybe something worth a lot of money, to show just how precious it was; he could have chosen a golden object full of precious stones, for example. But instead, he chose something as common and accessible as bread. Something that is within everyone's reach, part of everyone's 'everyday'. Our daily bread. Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." (1 Corinthians 12: 27).

The body of Christ: extraordinarily normal bread. The body of Christ: normal, extraordinary people.

The second action: after taking the bread, **Jesus gave thanks**. Did you know that the Last Supper is sometimes called the Eucharist, which literally means thanksgiving or gratitude? We can also use this moment to pause, to think of everything we can be thankful for, and to give our thanks to God.

Thank you God for giving us our daily bread. Thank you Father God for our family here, our Peace Church sisters and brothers and our brothers and sisters in your whole Church around the world. Thank you God for making us a part of Christ's body.

Thirdly, after taking the bread and giving thanks, **Jesus broke the bread**. The one bread was broken into pieces – the body of Christ made of many parts. Breaking bread is a potentially crumbly, crumbly action. As we open ourselves to God and to each other, it can sometimes be a bit messy. But this is often the way God works, through our broken lives.

And as we see the broken lives of our sisters and brothers, of our neighbours, we are called to be Christ's hands and feet to them: to love, to heal, to pray. St. Augustine said that "the faithful know the Body of Christ if they do not neglect to *be* the body of Christ". The modern mystic Thomas Merton follows this by saying: "As long as our love for Jesus in the Sacrament of his love is a love only for the Head, without sincere and warm affection for our brothers [and sisters], without interest in the spiritual or physical needs of His members, our spiritual life will remain stunted and incomplete".

But we do not need to love others out of our own strength. In Communion, we can ponder on the fact that in order to make the bread and the wine, the grains and grapes have already been crushed. As Isaiah 53 prophesied about Jesus: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities."

Fourthly, after taking the bread, giving thanks and breaking the bread, **Jesus gave the bread to the disciples to eat**. Chew on it! Taste it. Chew on it for long enough that the carbohydrate of the bread breaks down into sugar. These pieces of bread are broken down further by teeth and tongue and stomach. The goodness of the bread becomes a part of us. We are a part of the body of Christ, just as Christ's body is now a part of us. Chew on it until you taste a sweetness, until you *know* with your tastebuds, with your physical reality, that you are the body of Christ. And if this truth is too hard to swallow right now, we have Communion as a recurrent reminder that we are full of God's goodness.

And finally, who is at the table? Jesus' friends who he shared the Passover meal with would all, in one form or another, very soon betray him, abandon him or deny him. "This is my blood of the covenant", he said, "which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins". And so it is even more significant to see that the forgiveness that Jesus gave with his words, was also physically carried in their bellies as the disciples went out from that room to the Mount of Olives and beyond.

This is Communion. While they were eating, Jesus makes the ordinary extraordinary: Bread. The body of Christ, broken for us. Wine. The blood of Christ, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus took bread,
gave thanks,
broke it
and gave it to them to eat...

I will pray to close:

Dear God, as we often pray, give us today our daily bread. And so we ask not just for food to live, but also to be reminded of the sweetness, the miraculous ordinary extraordinariness, of being part of Christ's body. May we encounter your very presence in this meal. And with your Spirit in us, may we live as Christ lived: to serve others. Amen

Israel Demands a King



Meditation on 1 Samuel 8:4-20 by Israel Pereira

Introduction (context)

In our liturgy, we just sang the song from Taizé “the kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come, Lord and **open in us the gates of your kingdom.**” This really captures the central message of today’s passage. A passage central to the history of Israel. A turning point. A request from the people to have a king in order to be like the other nations. The gates of God’s kingdom were closed in Israel.

Perhaps it was the many battles, the many struggles. Perhaps it was seeing the nations surrounding them grow in power. The Hittites, the Philistines. All with kings and an organized army. God did provide shelter in the times of the judges. God did deliver them multiple times from the hands of the enemy. Yet, Israel was different and it

seemed that the “other nations” had more control over their situation.

The gates of God’s kingdom were closed, and they wanted to establish their own kingdom, placing things under their own hands.

Context

From the beginning, Israel was called to be different. God chose an elder to leave his home to establish a nation. A nation not defined by kings, power, architecture...but a nation defined by trust. By faith. This is how Abraham’s journey began. Not with a conquest, but with trust.

In the time of the text, Mesopotamia is an area surrounded by kings. Kings that were considered gods. Kings, who were told to be descended by the gods. Kings descended **from above**. Like the Egyptian Pharaohs and tales found in the Code of Hammurabi. On the other hand, Israel wanted to establish their kingdom **from below**.

Based on what “the other nations” were doing. In the time of this text, a sense of national identity is being established. For the first time, Israel has a judge in Samuel that has a national role. Whereas before, judges were local and regional. Moreover, for the first time, a judge appoints his sons to take over the role of a judge. No other judge before Samuel, appointed their children to be the next judges. It seems that things were already in one way or another heading towards heredity.

Point 1: But it was never just about having a king

The elders come to Samuel, bluntly saying that he is old and his sons do not follow the ways of the Torah. They explicitly said that they needed a king to fight their battles and to reign over them. No word about God’s reign, no word about God’s will. Simply, give us a king, so “we could be like the other nations”. Even though they did mention Samuel’s sons wrong ways (see 1 Samuel 8:1-3), was it really expected that a king would hinder problems such as bribery and dishonest gains? In verse 20, they don't even mention what the sons of Samuel were doing, saying that “we want a king....then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.” Isn't this what God has been doing with Israel? Didn't God say that He would fight their battles and lead the nation? Didn't God say that He will be their king and rule over them long before (see Deut 33:5). Even other nations said that God was the king of Israel (see Num 23:21). I believe bringing Samuel’s age and his sons was a pretext. And even having a king itself was not really the main issue. The main issue was trust. Being able to see someone who plays the role of having things under his or her control.

The gates of God’s kingdom were closed in their hearts. And so they looked for something tangible, a symbol, a physical person, who would be able to provide a visible sense of security with armies and government. Kings provide a sense of security, a national identity. It is Israel handing over their insecurity, fears,

uncertainty to a monarchy, a king, to protect them. Hoping that this system will satisfy their need for security and control. It is letting a person give them a sense of security with his or her armies. Powerful palaces. Towers and walls.

It is looking for a person, and making the person more than he or she actually is. An unfailable super human with powers to rule, gold, crown and armies as physical confirmations of security, power and identity.

But God called Israel to be different. There were no armies established, no commanders. God raised failable common individuals such as Moses, who couldn't speak right and was a murderer. Such as Gideon, who said he was a coward. These individuals were called to be used by God, in their fallacy, to rescue the people. But now Israel wanted to take things into their own hands by establishing a monarchy.

Point 2: Dealing with the real issue

God sees Samuel’s frustration as Samuel approaches God in prayer, but tells Him that they are not rejecting his sons, nor Samuel himself, but they are rejecting God as their king. Something that has been the case from the day that God brought them out of Egypt until this day. It was not something new. It was a known problem that came in a different situation. The rejection of the trust in God. Perhaps things would’ve been different if the people simply asked for God’s direction in the situation. Perhaps God Himself would have offered them a king. But as we saw, it was never about having a king, nor an established army, it was about not trusting God to take control over the situation. Even later with Saul, David and all other kings, God remained faithful to Israel. Even when their temples, palaces, armies and kings were destroyed. Even in exile. God remains faithful. To the point that later places His own son Jesus, to truly rule over them. At the same time, God always maintained things under His control. With or without a king. From Genesis until the new heavens and the new earth. God never called Israel to become an Empire.

But to be a blessing to all nations. Later, Jesus defines us as salt of the earth. No matter the context. How many times do we make decisions and do things because we want to be like the “other nations”? When do we let ourselves be consumed by the pressures of society? To have control over our finances, to have control over our health, to have control over our future, our careers... Do these things at some point take over God’s role as king in our lives? Perhaps we see ourselves not being “good enough”, and we look for others to give us a sense of security and control. We might need a king because we might want someone else to take care of our problems. How do we involve God in such situations?

How difficult it is sometimes, when the “other nations” around us, people around us, seem to have all figured it out. But as we sang, “the kingdom of God is justice and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come, Lord and **open** in us the gates of your kingdom.” I invite you this week to reflect on God’s kingdom in your life. What does it mean to your daily life, to those around you. What does it mean to be different and be salt of the earth? What does trust in God look like in our daily lives? Let God open up the gates of His kingdom in us. Amen.

Liturgies of Our Lives



Meditation on Hebrews 10:23-25 by Megan Bedford-Strohm

“²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Throughout these many months of lockdown, restrictions and fears, in the midst of much AB-normality, we have also come, in a way, to get, at least a little bit, used to a new normal.

Before, we could not have imagined before a world in which we were only allowed to meet with one other person, or one other household, or even three other households. I had not thought to imagine a world where touch was discouraged, coming close to one another dangerous...

Certainly, I had not imagined what Peace Church might look like if we could not do so many of the things that make us, *us*. No singing, no hugging or passing the peace, no Eucharist, few kids running around touching and playing with everything in sight, no rice or coffee shared in a packed fellowship hall after church...

But then, under thoughtful, brave leadership, SO many people who have brought their unique gifts and ideas and so much love and resilience to this past year and a half.

Hundreds upon hundreds of packages have been mailed, new worship formats and ideas have been created, tried and tested; people have made music beautiful, made worship meaningful, in spite of limitations; so many calls have been made to check in with people and resources have been shared; handmade cards and muffins in hygienic bags; the PEACE CAST with so many thoughtful contributions of all kinds; the online service in which each and every prayer request pinned on this board and more are prayed for by loving brothers and sisters; the Christmas services and video; the beautiful celebration Pentecost was in spite of everything; the books compiling meditations from many people, some of who had never shared in this way before, new liturgies and liturgical elements... I could go on and on, and I am speaking to the choir anyways: it is *you* who have done it, who have made church happen and made COMMUNITY happen in a completely strange and unprecedented situation.

I just wanted to talk about this today, because as I was reflecting on community in life today, I felt nearly moved to tears with gratitude thinking about all of this.

As much work and effort —through frustration and ever-changing policies and situations — was put into doing things safely, as many things as it meant *sacrificing* — and don't get me wrong, I've missed some of those things profoundly — *but* nevertheless, this space remained, in many different formats, and for many of us it was one of the only spaces that remained a consistent source of gathering, of community, of spiritual renewal. Peace Church remained a set apart, beautiful, holy space and time amidst a crazy world and crazy year-plus.

I am saying all of this, because, as I was reflecting on the word community, I asked myself: ***what has COVID and all that it has brought with it, taught me about the meaning of community and concept and experience of gathering?***

We are so lucky and privileged here in Germany that enough people are starting to have access to the vaccine that we are seeing infection and death rates dropping, and life slowly but surely starting to look more 'normal' again for the time being...

With that comes so much to celebrate and sort of this feeling of a collective sigh of relief...And at the same time, there are other things which we aren't used to anymore: traffic jams, and commuting to work for some people, suddenly invitations to social events or plans for travel, etc. and realizing, maybe some of us have gotten used to a different pace than we had pre-lockdown, etc..

I have seen a lot of people reflecting on this: what aspects of our old 'normal' do we want to return to, and what could, perhaps, be permanently left behind?

What new things have we learned that we could incorporate as we rebuild a less-corona-dominated life?

As we gradually are allowed to *gather* again, and to participate more in community in physical, rather than digital, formats, what do we want that to look like?

I feel I have learned a lot from the creative community that emerged from Peace Church, and want to talk about this Sunday evening service for a few moments, specifically

A great deal of thoughtfulness was put into this gathering: it is something special; something that could only have emerged in this specific community, and in the particular circumstance that we found ourselves - with its unique limitations and opportunities ..

Those who planned this service thought about the unique time we are in: what are ways we can participate in communal

worship without being able to eat bread and drink juice like we normally would for Communion?

Lighting candles are a way we can do that

What are ways we can enjoy worshipful music together without being able to have a choir, or hymn books, or for a while there, not even being able to sing?

What are words that fit this time, this space, these people, our image of God, the kind of prayers and encouragement we want to take in to the week with us, etc...?

These are just some of the thoughts that go into creating a meaningful liturgy.

This let me to reflect more generally on the meaning of *liturgy*. The dictionary defines the word liturgy, in the religious sense, as a 'form for public worship.'

The word 'form' stood out to me here.

I thought about the word 'Backform', in German — a baking dish that gives the shape to your bread, muffins, quiche or whatnot.

Or the word Platform — whether it be physical or digital — as a place where things are shared, where people meet...

The *form* in both of these senses, is necessary for the good stuff to occur... The form isn't the *point*, but it is what makes possible whatever magic will occur in or on that form...

It creates the space

When planning a liturgy for a church service there are a range of things that are the 'intended outcome' or the hopes for might emerge if the space is created

- ✓ we hope for *encounter with God*.. perhaps through worship, prayer or sacraments
- ✓ we hope for a space to worship, maybe lament, maybe praise
- ✓ we hope to hear and be changed by the Word of God
- ✓ we hope to experience fellowship with others, seeking similar things,
- ✓ and more...

The liturgy is created in hopes of facilitating at least some of these things... These goals are how choices about music, rhythms, space, words, images, allotment of time are made. Every church service, whether it considers itself 'liturgical' or not, has a liturgy...

Part of what led me to reflect on these things is a book I am reading with some friends, by Priya Parker, called, *The Art of Gathering*. It isn't about church or written about the Christian life. Actually, it is a book by a professional facilitator and mediator on how to create meaningful gatherings. She recommends asking yourself, 'what is the purpose of this gathering?' — whether that gathering be a board meeting, a wedding, a book club, a baby shower, a funeral, a birthday party, a networking event, a dinner party... really any time people are *gathered*.'

We, as humans, have a general understanding that we need other humans; it comes naturally to us to herd or gather. That being said, sometimes we fall into patterns in which we gather in certain ways simply because that is how we have always done it, or how other people do it, or it how it is traditionally done. There can be really meaningful aspects to these traditions; but then again, sometimes they have lost their meaning or potency somewhere along the way. On the other hand, sometimes we *fail* to gather when and how we really need to — because there is not an existing form for it, or it feels to vulnerable, or we are afraid to impose on other people.

Priya Parker says the *purpose* of a gathering should be more than just a category: if it is a book study, the purpose should not just be 'to study a book', if it is a family reunion, not just to 'reunite family'.. those are categories, not purposes..

It occurred to me, in different language, Priya Parker is talking about *liturgy*, what I'd like to call the '*liturgies of our lives*.'

Our lives are *made up* of rituals, whether we are conscious to them or not. And those rituals, or forms, define what is possible, what even *can* come to be in our day, our family, our gathering.

As my focus today is on gathering in community, the question I'm posing is: What is the liturgy of your gathering? Of course it probably won't be as detailed as a church liturgy, but it still merits some thought, as we spend so much of our lives gathering, and the relationships that these create space to build and sustain are so crucial to our well-being, learning, service in the world, and so on...

Priya Parker is talking about creating the *forms* for the *magic* to happen: the creativity, the community, the connection, the celebration... whatever the goal is. This means digging deeper — then deeper still — about why we are meeting, what we hope to result to be.

Then she says, you should “use Purpose as your bouncer” and eliminate the elements OR even the whole gatherings that don't actually have a real or good purpose...

We have probably all had the experience that ...- maybe after days or weeks in the apartment during lockdown, when you felt so weighed down by overwhelm and discouragement — sometimes that walk with a friend, that church service, that Zoom book club... was exactly what you needed. It brought new buoyancy to your life, new hope, new perspective, it gave you the gift of energy to go back to your day-to-day as a better version of yourself.

I think everyone also knows the experience where the opposite happens,.. the gathering leaves you depleted and unchanged, or no better for it.

Of course giving, serving, even if it is exhausting, is part of the Christian call, but that is not really what I am talking about - I am talking about gathering with the hope of community and connection and encouragement and betterment, and leaving disillusioned. For those here who are planners to begin with... the point here is not planning something to death, or trying to control all our encounters and relationships.

No, the point is to leave the old entrapments of what we perceive as normal ... to not simply jump back into social life, as things open up again. without reflecting on our

whys.. Maybe sometimes less is more here. Less, with purpose... goes further than a lot, without reflection. There are different purposes for different gatherings, just as different liturgies are planned for different circumstances or parts of the church year.

Nevertheless, I think Hebrews 10:23-25 is a great start in orienting ourselves on the purpose for gathering ... in what we hope for from community. It talks about meeting to **encourage one another, and to stir each other up to love and good deeds.**

Some English translations also say 'provoke'... or 'spur one another on to' ... 'motivate one another to'...

I like the phrase 'stir one another up' to love and good deeds because of how captures the way in which motivating another to love, to be his or her best selves and do good in the world... Is not just a matter of using words, but of many things: sometimes just listening, showing the person you are there and you care, sometimes reminding the person of all the beauty you see in him or her, being a sounding board, or just someone they can be honest with, relax with, reflect with, learn with...

And as Christians, we gather to **remind one another of the hope we have: Hope that He who promises is faithful.**

In conclusion, I just wanted to share these thoughts with you, and questions I am posing to myself as well, as together we find ourselves in yet another point of transition: It is an opportunity for being thoughtful and creative. How are we learning from this time? I've shared some things I have learned from what community looked like throughout lockdown, what I've learned from liturgies and life here in Peace Church

And I want to encourage us to take some of those learnings, as well as Hebrews 10:24-25 into our lives as we think about they ways we gather, as we try to bring thoughtfulness into building the forms in which our lives occur, and as we reflect on the liturgies of our lives.

Sharing God's Plan



Meditation on Matthew 25: 30ff by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

Here, in the story of the Last Judgment, what makes some blessed is the fact that, though they didn't realize it, in seeing the poor and helping them, they saw and helped Jesus. By contrast, what makes others cursed is that they never really did see Jesus' suffering and in need because they never really saw the poor. The king addresses each of two groups as either blessed or cursed and announces the consequences - enter into the kingdom or depart from him. He shares with them his points for making these assignments, a need that they either met or did not meet: "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick, or in prison and you fed me, gave me drink, welcomed me clothed me, visited me, came to see me." Then the blessed ask the "when" question? "When did we see you hungry, etc. and meet your needs?" Of course, those who are accursed ask the

same question in verse 44, but for a different reason, to attempt to excuse themselves from punishment. The answer to both the blessed and the accursed group is the same. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (vv. 40, 45).

The kingdom of heaven shows up where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned. They are not only the "brothers or sisters" of Jesus; Jesus identifies himself with them. As in the Good Samaritan, the one who both saw and acted with compassion was the neighbour to the man in the ditch, so here it is the group that both saw and met the needs of the suffering that is blessed.

Blessedness comes from active compassion toward those who society and, in some cases, religion, have judged as not worthy and therefore to be excluded.

The parable points out that we as individuals, as churches, and as a society, are often not very good at judging others. We are too harsh or we are too lax. We judge by appearances, or we make assumptions about the depths of others' feelings and experiences that are not ours to make. We exclude and we make allowances on grounds other than those set forth in God's eyes. When we set ourselves up as judge over others, we promote ourselves above our human competence.

We need a better, wiser judge than ourselves. Who is that judge, according to Matthew's gospel? Throughout his Gospel, Matthew offers a number of titles for Jesus. Jesus is the Son of Mary and Joseph, the royal Messiah who was proclaimed king at his birth and whom wise men came to worship. He is the Son of God. He is also the Son of Man who combines qualities of servanthood and suffering with majesty and exaltation. The same Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head etc etc...

This parable combines the very different qualities of the Son of Man. He is the majestic, exalted Judge and King whose identity is hidden in the poor. We will be judged by the extent to which we see, have compassion, and act in response to his sufferings in the world. The story of the Last Judgement calls us to evaluate our own actions...

And what can help us here is an interpretation of today's sermon text in the painting of an African artist.

The painter of this piece of art from Togo invites us to see the story of the Last Judgement taking place in the slum of an African metropolis. In the century of globalisation what we do here in Europe relates to the lives of people who live on the other side of the world. What we do to them, we do to Jesus. And what we fail to do for them we don't do for Jesus either. At first sight the picture seems chaotic. Shacks and poverty, lack of space, dirt and dust, crowds of people. Streets in a slum somewhere in this world. And in the centre a strong woman with a heavy load... At the horizon: oil tanks, chemical industry.

Bank and business buildings displace the quarters of the poor. God in the picture, so the artist, is particularly walking with the group of women and men on the path of the cross through a world of suffering and death into the light of the resurrection. On their signs we read "I am thirsty..." and "Forgive them..." Both remind us of Jesus' last words on the cross. The painter allows the African people to connect their suffering and their desire for life – full, fair and just – with the suffering of Jesus.

Thirst must be stilled. Reconciliation made possible. Human rights realized even in the poorest spot of the world. It is those who follow Jesus, who will make the difference. It is all about life in the slums.

The people of whom the painting speaks live in such places. We meet people who are thirsty... not only for fresh water but also for life in fullness and justice. In the painting the people who walk in the demonstration carrying their cross also carry a banner saying "I am thirsty". Close to them we can see a strong woman pulling a cart with a barrel of water. Two children help her and push it...

Above the woman's head two people's thirst is stilled out of a huge jug which a woman holds. And a bit further to the right again a woman holding food and drink offers genuine welcome to the strangers who are just leaving their little refugee boats. Clean water is so essential on the African continent, and people often lack this most basic means for life.

We meet people who are hungry. And again we can see the woman who welcomes the strangers with water and bread. Next to her vegetables are grown by the inhabitants of the slums. And a car takes the products and transports them safely to where they are needed most. We meet sick people. In the painting we see the hospital right in the middle below the dove and the throne which are both symbolizing the spirit and the presence of God. The sick are cared for and where this happens God is right among his people. In another corner of the picture we meet people in a centre for counselling learning what they need to know about basic health issues...

We meet people who need clothing. And who make it. In the painting there is a weaver who weaves traditional African clothes. He uses the old skills to earn a living and is depending on customers who buy what he produces.

We meet children who go to school and children who play. Both things that often are not possible for the children in the slums of this world. But without playful learning and without school education these children have no prospect for the future. The power to change their living conditions in the slums lies in education. As long as children have to work and earn money to help their families survive, they will never escape the vicious circle of poverty and hopelessness.

We meet all these people.

And we meet Jesus who tells us that it is him who we meet in them.

If we understand Jesus correctly and take his words seriously we cannot try and look the other way. We have to see our sisters and brothers and relate to them.

We have to react and get involved.

The kingdom of heaven shows up where we least expect it. The presence of Jesus is hidden in the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, and the imprisoned.

On our way with Jesus we cannot ignore the poorest of the poor. We have to stand there with them, stay with them, watch, pray, and act.

Beside the poverty in the painting we can see the hope of the people, their will for life, their skills and abilities, and their dreams for a better future for the African continent.

And it is not only their skills and abilities, their dreams that we see if we follow Christ, but the skills, abilities and dreams of all those in this world who are poor, naked, hungry, thirsty or in need of any other thing that they would need for a good, satisfying and happy life. Let us help where we can, to make the dream of a just and peaceful world come true. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Joseph and His Brothers



Meditation on Genesis 50,15–21 by *Nicolas Kanzleiter*

¹⁵ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please

forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

If you think about your family, how does that make you feel? What does your family mean to you? Are you happy to be part of your family? Sad maybe? Angry? Proud? Did it change over the years?

Were there challenges, fights, losses? Were there happy times and joy?

What role did you play in your family and which do you play now? Is it still the same? Did it change? Did you change?

Families are tricky... and who if not Joseph had to find that out the hard way?

Joseph probably asked himself many of those questions over his entire life until and probably even after he was reunited with his family. After all that has happened to him there's more than enough reason for it.

Just imagine: Your own brothers, or sisters or whoever you consider family, throwing you into a well and leaving you! That wasn't just a prank, what Joseph's brothers did to him hit a lot stronger. In a way, family back then meant more than it does today. The family was the one system you could or actually had to rely on. Family meant protection, support, food, shelter.

Losing that system often meant certain death. In fact, families played such an important role, that crimes against it, like betraying your father, or killing a brother were considered some of worst crimes one could think of, leaving you an outcast if not even for execution.

Joseph's brothers did exactly that. Almost killed their brother, abandoned him and lied to their father about it. And they disrespected another important factor when it comes to family: responsibility!

They disrespected their own responsibility to take care of their brother and they put their father in the horrible position of letting him think that he failed to fulfil his role as his family's leader by losing one of his sons, apparently having misjudged the situation and giving him a too dangerous task.

It's hard to imagine what went through Joseph's mind while he was lying in that well. Betrayed by his own brothers, left for dead, unaware of what he did wrong. Did he misjudge the situation that much?

But I'm being a bit harsh on his brothers. Joseph wasn't a saint either at that time. He

was naïve, lazy and full of himself. And probably quite annoying at times. It doesn't excuse what his brothers did, but I think we all know how it can feel to have someone around who doesn't seem to contribute to anything whatsoever. And we were that person too at some point, I'm sure of that. So an unlucky combination of jealousy and entitlement eventually lead to where we are now with today's passage:

Call it luck, divine intervention or a last spark of petty by his brothers: Joseph got sold to slavers, survived, got to Egypt, climbed up a very steep ladder and became one of the most powerful men of the country. That's the short version.

Enter his brothers, begging him for forgiveness. I don't know how I would have reacted. 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ...'

What a phrase! Ok sure, if it hadn't been for his brothers betraying him, Joseph couldn't have prevented hundreds or thousands of people from starving. But still, they tried to kill him! I don't know about you, but I wouldn't be that cool about it.

It shows how Joseph had grown over the years. Years of slavery and hardship obviously change a person, Joseph changed for the better, grew wise and confident. Not entirely though! He still scared the living hell out of his brothers by hiding the cup in his little brother's bag and basically taking him hostage. But he clearly did grow. He wasn't the naïve young boy anymore, who would rather dream through the day than doing physical labour. He had become a responsible leader, capable of making tough and wise decisions, leading an entire culture through a crisis. And his brothers weren't the same anymore either, willing to admit their mistakes, surrendering themselves into slavery just to protect their youngest brother as they had failed to do so years ago.

Joseph understood that paying his brothers back for what they did wouldn't help anyone and apparently he didn't need that kind of satisfaction. Nor would it have made his father happy.

The last thing the old man learned was that his lost son was still alive.

There couldn't have been a greater joy for him than learning that his sons reunited, the family was whole again.

Joseph now was aware of what I said about families earlier. They needed him. Everyone in the country needed him. Joseph had grown so powerful that he had the resources, the influence and therefore the responsibility of taking care of those under his protection. It's incredible how he didn't hold a grudge against them, or at least didn't let it take over. But he managed to do so, used his position to do good. Took the chance to reunite with his brothers and his family, make sure they were safe, patiently repair what they had broken in anger.

We need leaders like him! People who use their power for good. People who know about their power, who are willing to accept their role even if they never planned for it to happen. People who are willing to change, to grow, to fix things. People who have the strength to become better versions of themselves, even if it's not an easy thing to do.

To finish, let me ask you one more question: Can you be such a person?

Amen

Communion Again



Meditation by Reiner Kanzleiter

Math was not my favourite subject at school, but I already knew that “two multiplied by two” is not five before I started school.

The cartoon on the front of the program shows a big city skyline, littered with flags, posters, billboards and banners...all with the same message: “two multiplied by two is five!”

Of course, we all know that this is not true. But the mathematical equation in the cartoon is just a placeholder. If we replace it, things might start to look a little different.

Let's stick with adverts:

- We give your future a home
- The only thing that counts is me!
- Stinginess is cool
- Nothing is impossible
- “two multiplied by two is five”

At first view, it's easy to see through it. But the hidden messages of these advert slogans go deeper than we think. And we are more seducible and deceivable than we would like to admit.



“Two multiplied by two is five”, can be replaced by:

- The world is bad
- Wars will always exist
- Attack is the best defense
- If you seriously looks for work, you will find work
- Politicians are to blame for everything
- Women’s place is in the home
- Faith and politics have nothing to do with each other
- The main thing is to be healthy
- There is no God, who asks for our responsibility in this world
- “two multiplied by two is five”

If you are told long enough that “two multiplied by two is five”, you will eventually believe it. Then it becomes a sentence, which we repeat thoughtlessly. Then we accept mere assertions without questioning. If it is only repeated often enough...the first contradiction will decrease. Millions of BILD-ZEITUNG readers can't be wrong. One can live from 132€ Hartz IV per month, as long as one is not you. The earth is a disk and “two multiplied by two is five”.

Will this calculation become generally accepted, because it penetrates from all advert boards into our mind? Or will this claim, that “two multiplied by two is five”, in its endless variations, eventually be exposed as a lie? As a lie, behind which we discover solid interests concerning power and money?

What if suddenly, one day someone comes along and says, "two multiplied by two is four!?" How many people will breathe a sigh of relief: "Finally, the spook is over. Finally someone dares to tell the truth!?"

Or, perhaps, suddenly an ambulance from the psychiatric hospital stands in front of your door, or - depending on the country - the military - because there is danger in your truth!

Why are we here today?

We are here because we listen to Christ, who said: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (John 8: 31-32)

Against all our “two multiplied by two is five” sentences, Christ says his truth:

- "Blessed are the spiritually poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the peacemakers - they all are God's children!"
- Jesus Christ says, "I am the way, the truth and the life!"

Against all “two multiplied by two is five” sentences we confess and celebrate by following Him:

- One does not live by bread alone, not by money, not by possessions, not by career, not by success, not by health - but by God's word to us, by God's promise and claim to us, by God's faithfulness to us.
- Instead of “two multiplied by two is five”, we confess: We live from God's love alone, more important than anything else is His will.
- More important than our EGO is the faithfulness to our fellow human beings, even in hard times. More important than profit is the community in the church of God.
- More important than the DAX or Bitcoin is righteousness according to God's will. “Two multiplied by two” is not five”, but four, that means spoken in the words of faith: We let God's grace be enough for us
- We accept our limitations and trust that God's power is made perfect in our weakness.
- We insist that every human being, regardless of race or origin, is an equally loved creature of God with the same right to live.
- We insist that in everything we do and create, we always have to ask: Does it serve

life, does it serve humanity, does it correspond to the Spirit of God?
- We refuse the ultimate claim of death on our lives; we do not believe that death has more power than the life-giving love of God.

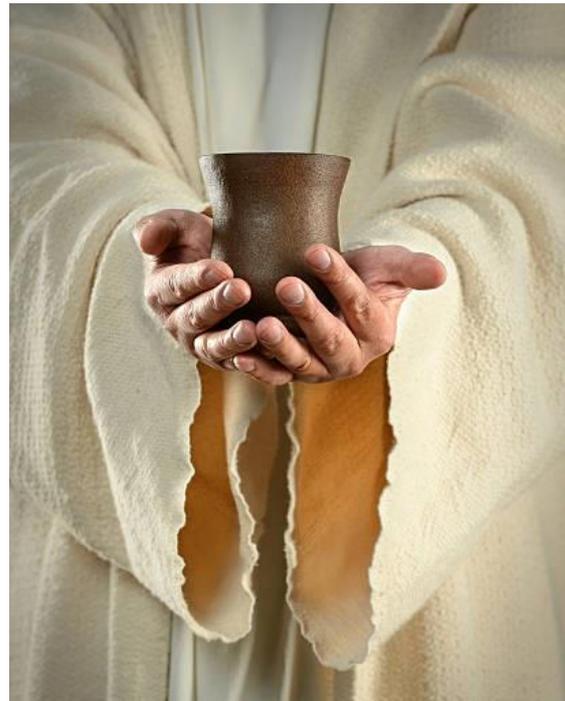


We celebrate our worship, today and every Sunday, together with all Christians, with believers and seekers, so that we do not stand alone with our flags and posters saying “two multiplied by two is four”. We become a reliable community in which people can breathe a sigh of relief: "Finally, the spook is over. Finally truth will make us free!" We celebrate worship, and today also Communion, and by doing so we are confessing: The truth is that we are all equally needy before God, equally dependent on his bread of life, his word of life, that we are all equally dependent on forgiveness and reconciliation, equally dependent on God who always will open doors, and show us new paths.



We go away from the table of the Lord, comforted, as a community, again and again, enabled to shape our lives differently. We know that we are told what is good: "...to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)

We go away from the table of the Lord, again and again enabled to bear our burdens, again and again, enabled to stand up against resignation. I hope and expect that one day people will come out of all churches and houses and whisper and say and shout: “two multiplied by two is four”. And they will form a long procession over the whole earth and through history, because they know, because we know: God’s love is stronger than death and our love and our hope receive power from the Holy Spirit.



This power of the Holy Spirit is present in every piece of bread, in every sip from the cup that we receive at the Lord's Table. It is the greater power of the presence of the Risen Christ - and it will become present in our words and our acting, it will become bread of life for the person next to us. And: the truth will make us free.



Joseph



Meditation by Jonas Bedford-Strohm

There are good years. And bad years. I readily admit: There was much *good* in my life this past year, but in the rougher moments of lockdown fatigue... I can't help but agree: this was a *bad* year. One of stress, uncertainty, worry, loneliness, depression, anxiety, depletion. A year, where even the best moments couldn't patch over the underlying exhaustion - mental and physical - for very long.

There are *good* years and *bad* years. All those who've had many good years... to store up joys, and wealth, and health, and safety nets... they're coming through fine. But all those who were struggling already - their struggles have been amplified.

These last twelve months have been a year of *splitscreen* reality.

- With new appreciation for abundance and privilege taken for granted.
- And unbelievable vulnerability and suffering for far too many.

The story of Joseph is full of such splitscreen realities.

He is privileged amongst his brothers by his father. This brings envy. They suffer of neglect while Joseph can do no wrong.

Joseph is oblivious and takes his position for granted. They disabuse him of that notion by abducting him and selling him. He goes from top to bottom in no time. But their violence brings them no peace. And they have nothing stored up from the good years when the bad years come, while Joseph had managed to reinvent himself.

He'd worked his way back to the top, becoming a trusted advisor of the Pharaoh in Egypt. And unlike his brothers, Joseph and the Pharaoh did store up wisely in the good years and are prepared for the bad. Joseph's prophetic dream shows extraordinary intuition for the ups and downs of life. Maybe because he lived it personally.

A famous campaign consultant in the US is known to say: "You're never as good as you look when you're winning. You're never as bad as you look when you're losing."

Joseph learned that the hard way. He isn't surprised by ups and downs. He factors them into his daily habits and life. And this makes for great advice. Joseph has matured. And then his brothers come. They violently took their place at the top. They didn't learn to plan for the bad times, they just took violently what they wanted. And now they're

unprepared for the hard times. Begrudgingly, they have to accept: they are now at the bottom. It's like Jesus said: "Whoever fights to find their life will lose it, and whoever is willing to lose their life for my sake will find it." (Paraphrased Matthew 10, 39)

They violently forced their way to the top, and they lost everything. They come to Egypt to ask for food. And then they realize: they're asking Joseph. Knowing they deserve punishment, they're afraid of retaliation. But Joseph has matured.

He knows what it's like to be at the very bottom, beaten and afraid. He remembers. He knows.

And this gives him great strength. It gives him a mighty power. The power of empathy. Jens Spahn said last year: "Wir werden einander in ein paar Monaten wahrscheinlich viel verzeihen müssen." We're likely gonna have to forgive each other a bunch a few months in – he couldn't have been more right.

We need a source of forgiveness now more than ever. Including forgiveness for Spahn himself, whose management does not always hold up under the brutal scrutiny of our weary people.

But self-righteous condemnation isn't the way of Jesus. As Matthew 7 points out: "**Do not judge**, or you too will **be judged**. For in the same way you **judge** others, you will **be judged**, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why **do** you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

Or John 8: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone."

Or Romans 14: "let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister."

Joseph had stopped passing judgment long ago, when he finally met his brothers again. He chose not to put any of the stumbling blocks that his brothers had put in **his** way into **theirs**.

He overcame evil with good.

So Romans 12 asks of us: "Repay no one evil for evil ... If possible ... live peaceably

with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Joseph forgives his brothers. He, who has been alone and isolated for years, will never take their special presence for granted. He rises above all his grievance and forgives them, because he appreciates their very presence.

They have nothing to give, they can do nothing for him, and he chooses generosity.

As the saying goes: "Character is what you do for people who can do nothing for you."

It's **this** spirit of generosity and forgiveness that we now need most.

We're all exhausted. Our mental and physical resources are depleted. We need relief.

From our own feelings, our anger, our desire to blame, our self-righteous mind, our own abyss.

All we really can do in this state is trust in God and God's ability to show us a path out of ourselves... to have empathy again, to feel and reach out beyond our own, and to see something larger than ourselves.

The Tutu children's bible summarizes Joseph's spirit of generosity to his brothers and has him say to them: "What you intended for harm, God intended for good.

... Bring our family here so they will be safe."

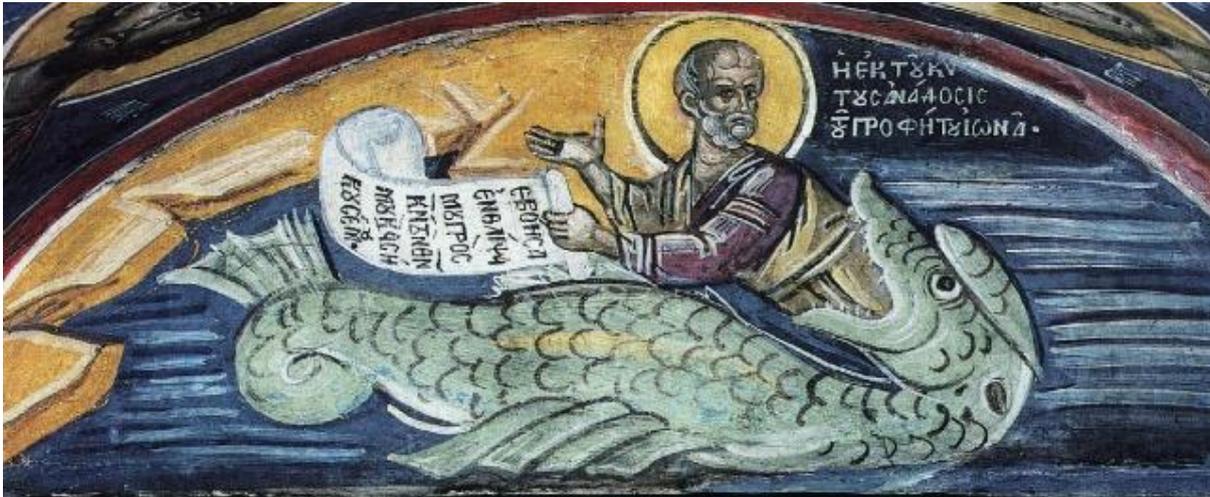
So, with Tutu, we can pray today:

Dear God, let my love be stronger than my anger.

Give me a spirit of forgiveness and generosity.

Amen.

The Sign of Jonah: The Way Up Is Down



Meditation by Kat Wagner

Bible reading: 'Jonah and the Big Fish' from the Desmond Tutu Storybook Bible

I'm imagining the newspaper headlines from the Nineveh Gazette: *MAN SURVIVES THREE DAYS IN GIANT FISH / STORM SURVIVOR CLAIMS HE WAS EATEN BY WHALE / FISH-MAN SAVES NINEVEH FROM DESTRUCTION*

As we just heard from Vanda, the story of Jonah is a rather dramatic story. The run-away prophet Jonah gets caught up in a huge storm and, at the point of drowning, is swallowed by a big fish, and spat out on the shores of Nineveh – exactly where he should have been going to start with. He shares God's message with the people, who repent and are saved. There are lots of dramatic stories in the Bible, and many of them follow a similar pattern. Someone falls into a perilous situation, only to find themselves later in exactly the right place for what God wanted them to do. Think of Joseph – he was thrown down a deep well by his jealous and murderous brothers, and after much suffering and many trials, he eventually ended up in exactly the right place in Egypt to save his family and lots of other people from a famine.

Think of Joseph – he was thrown down a deep well by his jealous and murderous brothers, and after much suffering and many trials, he eventually ended up in exactly the right place in Egypt to save his family and lots of other people from a famine. And did you know that Jeremiah the prophet was also thrown into a deep muddy cistern, by the civil leaders who didn't like his message. He was at risk of starving to death, but he was rescued and was able to continue his ministry. (Jeremiah 38:6-13).

And of course we know that the people of Israel had several experiences of being attacked and enslaved, eventually to be released and led back to freedom. (For instance, the Babylonian exile: 2 Chronicles 36:15-23).

As you can see: enslavement and exodus is the overarching story of Jewish history in the Old Testament.

The pattern of down and up, loss and renewal, enslavement and liberation, exile and return is quite clear in the Hebrew Scriptures. Let's fast-forward to Jesus. Here's the scene: Jesus has just driven out a demon. A crowd is forming, but some onlookers are claiming he has power from the devil instead of from God.

They want a sign.

And how does Jesus respond?

Luke 11: 29-30: *29 As the crowds increased, Jesus said, 'This is a wicked generation. It asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. 30 For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation.'*

Jesus obviously saw something of himself in the story of Jonah. And so the story of Jonah can therefore teach us something about the good news of Jesus.

Let's take a look...

The story of Jonah and the life of Jesus follow similar patterns:

- Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish; Jesus was dead for three days in the tomb.
- Jonah was spat out (very much alive) onto the shores of Nineveh; Jesus was resurrected from death to life and walked out of the tomb.
- And why? God intended to save the Ninevites through Jonah, even though they had done terrible things; through Jesus, God wanted to save the world.

So we can see, Jonah in the belly of the whale is a metaphor for what would later become the doctrine of the cross. The sign that Jesus chose to represent the mystery of transformation – for death and rebirth – is the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:39, 16:4; Luke 11:29).

So what does this mean for us?

First of all, this pattern of transformation feels very much like a mystery. This kind of faith is not logical or rational.

It's difficult for us to comprehend because it is counterintuitive. But this is Jesus' message: Mark 9: 35: *"Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last"*. And John 12: 25: *Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*

Very topsy-turvy!

Jesus tried to tell the disciples many times that this upside-down pattern was his destiny.

For example, Mark 8:31: *"He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days"*.

But the apostles misunderstood or rejected this message of transformation through darkness and suffering. (Mark 8:32, 9:32, 10:32).

In our culture, we are so used to trying to manage situations, to solve problems, to accumulate good things, to avoid suffering, and hide our struggles. In the letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul wrote something quite different! He wrote about "reproducing the pattern" of Jesus' death and thus understanding resurrection. Philippians 3:10-11: *I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

This seems to be the pattern that Christ was teaching and living: We don't know resurrection until we have died. The seed only sprouts a green shoot after it's been buried in the earth.

The way up is down. Joseph down the well. Jeremiah down the cistern. Jonah drowning in the ocean. The Israelites in captivity. Jesus crucified and buried. BUT, spending time in a fish belly is hardly pleasant. Nobody chooses to be thrown into a well or to go through pain, suffering or death. More often than not, it's the circumstances of life that bring us to the belly of the beast. We find ourselves in a situation we can't fix, control, explain, or understand. Have you had such an experience?

Maybe for you, the Corona-Virus pandemic has been a Jonah experience. Corona has been like a storm, and many of us have been unwillingly thrown overboard from the security of our normal lives. With all the uncertainties, challenges and sadness, we've found ourselves in a place where we've needed lots of faith. Where we've had to trust in the mystery of God's salvation. Where many questions have arisen, and answers are few.

Where some days have felt without meaning. And here, especially here, God's grace meets us. Because when we are led to the edge of our own resources, when we are no longer able to manage and control the situation,

then we only have the hands of God to fall into. In the depths of the sea, in the belly of the fish, in the darkness of the tomb, at the bottom of the well, when we've hit rock bottom... God's grace flows down to us. And later, when we look back, we know that we found something firm beneath our feet. We realise there were glimpses of light. We remember a sense of presence. We are somehow more alert to the presence of God with us. We have been transformed. This kind of transformation usually happens *not when something new begins but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart—disruption and chaos—invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites the soul to go to a new place. Because of Corona, we are different people. Because of the struggles we have been through, we are transformed people. We have been spat out by the whale onto a new shore.

We have been resurrected into new life. But be patient! This grace-filled transformation takes time. God lets Jonah run in the wrong direction, until this reluctant prophet finds a long, painful, circuitous path to get back where he needs to be—in spite of himself! And for Jonah, it even took a further experience of solitude and bitterness, as he tried to shelter under a withering vine, to bring him to accept God's mercy for the Ninevites and for himself. Nineveh was saved. And so, eventually, was Jonah. I want to encourage you to trust that God's grace has reached you, especially in the moments when you've felt absolutely lost and alone. Even if life feels disorienting, know that God sees you and is bringing you to new life, to new shores. Whether we are in the storm, or sinking in the water, or in the belly of the fish, or spat out on a new shore... God is with us. God cares for us. And God will guide us on. Amen

The Healing of Blind Bartimaeus



Meditation on Mark 10:46-52 ***by Nicolas Kanzleiter***

⁴⁶ They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷ When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out

even more loudly, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” ⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, “Call him here.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart; get up, he is calling you.” ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.” ⁵² Jesus said to him, “Go; your faith has made you well.”

Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

Let me ask you a question: Do you think you are a good listener? I think I am. And most of you probably do too. Some of you may think they are not. And a few probably didn't listen... Now let me ask you a second question: What makes a good listener? Is it someone who keeps quiet while others speak? Someone who can repeat every word you just said? Is it someone who asks clever questions? Or someone who truly understands what you are trying to say?

It's probably a bit of everything. But why am I asking you these questions, you may ask? Because it is something I keep noticing in the stories about Jesus. Every time Jesus is around and a group of people gathers around him, there's someone who gets left behind. And whoever that is, women, children, beggars, gentiles or outcasts, as soon as they are trying to catch up and reach out to Jesus, there's someone to stop them. There's someone in the group around Jesus, sometimes even some of his disciples, who seem to think that they are worth Jesus company and others are not. As if it were a privilege to some and not a right to everyone.

Did they not listen? Aren't they doing the exact opposite of what Jesus is trying to teach them?

So what do think? Are you a good listener? The people I was just talking about probably didn't listen. I always immediately picture them as completely self-righteous men, sitting around this famous teacher, calling him master and eagerly nodding to everything he says. What he says doesn't seem to be important, because hey! 'I have met Jesus!'

In the end it's about them, not even Jesus or his teachings. But who do they think they are? What brings them to the conclusion that they deserve Jesus company more than others? Being men? Being Jews? Or just being quick enough to catch a seat in the front row? And then they don't even listen properly. Jesus is repeatedly telling people to treat everyone equal as a child of God. And as soon as one of those children of God approaches, they turn around and

chase them away? Imagine how frustrating it must have been for Jesus to go through all of this, over and over again and how much patience it must have required. You really need to be the son of God to not lose your temper every time you're surrounded by those people, completely ignoring what you just said.

This is the worst kind of listener! And it's the exact opposite of 'What would Jesus do?' Now let me ask you a third question: What would Jesus do? And what would you do? Would you have listened? And would you have understood? Would you welcome a stranger to your table? A beggar, a criminal, a child, someone of another religion or country?

I know, you can't answer this question with a simple yes or no, because it's complicated and there's circumstances to consider. But what would you like to do? What do you think you should do? What do you think everyone in this room should do, including you? Or maybe, would you be the stranger, the beggar, the criminal from another country? A child among adults or practicing the wrong religion? Some of you have made that experience, I know that. How did you want to be treated? And how were you treated?

Did you meet Jesus? Or were you chased away, denied what should be your right, not your privilege? I don't want to live in a world where you need permission to meet or listen to someone. I don't want people to chase other people away. And I don't want people to think they deserve more than others because of whatever reason. If we truly want to believe that we can learn from Jesus teachings, we need to do more than just be quiet and say yes. We need to understand and repeat. And we need to do it! If I say that I don't want to live in such a world, I can't just lean back and wait for someone else to fix it. I need to do it myself! And of course, I can't do it alone, so let me now ask you not a question, but a favour: Will you join me? Will you welcome a stranger when you meet one? Will you support a blind person's way to healing? Because I will!

Naaman



Short Meditation on 2 Kings 5: 1-14 by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

¹ Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. ² Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. ³ She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." ⁴ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. ⁵ And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel." He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. ⁶ He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." ⁷ When the king of

Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me." ⁸ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." ⁹ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." ¹¹ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. ¹³ But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the

prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”¹⁴ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean.

Naaman – a well-known politician in Damascus, a statesman, second person after the king, minister of defence and foreign affairs, commander-in- chief of the king’s army... successful in warfare – especially against the Israelites...

Naaman was a powerful man! Everybody in the country knew him. And nobody had the faintest idea that Naaman himself was in trouble. In great trouble! Naaman suffered from leprosy. When Naaman told his king, the king was of course shocked. The king was willing to invest all there was: power, influence, money, connections – to save his “right hand”. And one day, out of all people, a young slave girl who served Naaman’s wife, said to her mistress: “If only Naaman was with the prophet who is in Samaria, the prophet could surely cure him...”

This girl had been brought as a captive from Israel. She was an enemy. And Naaman was not just her enemy but her oppressor, the man responsible for keeping her a prisoner of war... This girl must have had a big heart... must have been full of sympathy and humanity. And one day she found the courage to speak out what she’d thought for some time already. “In my home country”, she said, “he could be helped. In my home country Elisha, God’s chosen prophet cures and helps so many...”

Miss Nobody speaks to the commander-in-chief... about her home, her belief, her God. Had Naaman and his wife not been so desperate, they wouldn’t have listened. That’s for sure.

How could the second man in state listen to the advice of a foreign slave girl?

However, Naaman’s hopelessness and despair must have already brought him to the point of being open and willing to try just anything...

Naaman’s health became a state affair. With a letter to take with him, Naaman packed his things: servants, horses, chariots and lots of riches... When Naaman arrived at the Israelite court, the king of Israel was immediately terrified. This was going to bring along trouble... King and people were horrified. Then a message came from Elisha, the prophet: “Let this foreigner come to me.” And again: it nearly wouldn’t have worked, if Naaman’s servants, just as the slave girl before, hadn’t interfered. What happened in the story is that Naaman began listening to the ordinary people and doing the unusual and unspectacular little thing.

He must have learned a lot by listening to slave girls and servants, travelling unimportant roads, trusting invisible prophets and washing in a comparatively small country stream.

It is the small things that changed Naaman’s life... means and possibilities beyond power and world politics! He understood that the ordinary people have smart ideas, that the simple thing will do... that the unspectacular action in one of the smallest parts of the world has enormous success... Such experience changed Naaman’s mind, helped him see the living God – God in the words of a slave girl, in the advice of the unseen prophet, in the loving care & courage of his servants... After having washed in the Jordan Naaman had his eyes opened for those sides of life which till then he’d never taken in or found important: he could see the young slave girl with new eyes, respect his servants, listen to the peasants, appreciate the strange river, trust others, and learn that it does not always have to be him, who is in control. This is wholeness in our story. The beginning of reconciliation between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Damascus and Israel...! A healed and changed Naaman has the power to heal the society of his day. He can bring about liberation, justice and peace. Healing of an individual has consequences for the community. Communication with and respect for the ordinary people can lead to the healing of the nations... An interesting thought in these times of a pandemic...

Do Justice. Love Mercy. Walk Humbly



Harvest Meditation on Micah 6:8 by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

Harvest is one of the most wonderful times of the year... we are happy and thankful, full of joy... All is colourful and bright and beautiful.

I wish I could say this today just as I did some years ago. But how can I say this this year? How could I claim all is bright and beautiful?

We are living a second year with Covid and its consequences. Restrictions and limitations shape our lives, our relationships, our worship.

A second so-called African-style Harvest Festival without the abundance, the passion and the freedom of former years... We have the memories of hundreds of people, dances, hugs, auctions, and most delicious food eaten in a crowded fellowship hall. Yes.

And nobody can take these memories away. But this year, as last year, we can only do a part of what we'd love to do. Food-to-go, social distancing, keep 1,5mtr away from others when you dance, no auction, a limited number of people, masks, open doors even

though it's chilly outside to keep the air in here somehow fresh... How strange, really! And on top of that, the climate change, the floods and earthquakes, failed crops, and world hunger...

Nothing of these is beautiful and happy. But as the theologian Walter Brueggemann says: "We Christians have an opportunity to declare that there is another narrative out of which we can live our lives. It is a narrative of generosity, and freedom, and forgiveness, and hospitality, and justice. It is the narrative of the future."

In other words: Because we believe in God and try to live respectfully and thankfully in his creation, we have a different story to tell. Not the story of decay and destruction, but the story of life and fullness. Not the story of fear and death, but the story of hope and resurrection. Not the story of standstill and stagnation, but the story of change and transformation.

As a church we are challenged and encouraged to find sources of hope so that we can be inspired to take action on the causes and consequences of climate change and all hardship it brings about.

Walter Brueggemann, who is an Old

Testament professor, suggests that we go and seek advice from the prophets of old. They can, he says, inspire our imagination to offer an alternative vision in which the earth might be a different and better place, and then live that envisioned world into reality. In other words: Let us celebrate our Harvest Festival as well as we can. Let us remember the beauty of the past and so develop pictures of beauty and healing for the future. And let us not only hold fast to those images of hope but let us work for them to come true.

Micah is one such biblical prophet. We might wonder if someone writing millennia before greenhouse gas emissions and ecological breakdown has anything to contribute as a source of hope and inspiration for today.

Climate scientists and eco activists have been begging for the attention of the world in the past few decades. Micah begins his prophecy with a message that intends to go global: "Hear, you people, all of you; listen, O earth, and all that is in it." (Micah 1:2) Micah names and shames the corruption of political leaders, the dishonesty of the merchants, and the greed of those who control the use of land. He denounces their exploitation and oppression of people and land. He sees these social injustices as consequences of the loss of faith in the living God.

Then and now we must name the powers of injustice, stand up against them, and take steps towards a vision of Shalom – to use the beautiful Old Testament term. Then and now "false Gods" as self-interest, the belief in perpetual growth of everything, misuse of money, lead people away from a vision of peace and justice. According to Micah, there's a lot of woe coming to those in power who plan injustice and plot evil deeds on their beds. (2:1) And even more trouble is on its way for those who are bribed to proclaim that everything on earth is just as God would have it, and no harm will then befall us. (3:11-12) Climate chaos is not only coming, it is already upon us, not as punishment from heaven but as a direct result of our behaviour. The harmful actions come mainly from us – the people living in

the so-called first world countries, the global North. The impact is mostly suffered in the global South, among the poorest of the poor. Mostly...

But slowly and surely, we do understand that the floods here in our country this summer, the masses of rain that lead to failed crops have to do with the climate change, too.

...and with the terrible exploitation of nature and the abuse of the natural resources on this earth.

Micah in his day, urged people to change their ways and transform the world they lived in. "Act justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God," he says to the people, (6:8) because if they don't, "...the earth will become a desolate place because of its inhabitants as the result of their deeds." (7:13)

Honestly, if Micah lived today, he couldn't say things more precisely. His message for us may sound as follows: We must act on the crisis of climate change now. We must be responsible. We should be concerned on protecting our surroundings because this has been created for us. We have the wisdom to know what is right and what is wrong.

We must see the link between our consumerist lifestyles, climate change and people's suffering in so many parts of the world. We must see that our growth-oriented system is driven by powerful economic interests set on making profits but harming people and destroying our planet.

Droughts drive people to the brink. Storms tear families apart. Raging waters show no mercy. Our world is falling apart. And only we have the power to stop it.

We know there is a better way. A way that restores justice to our broken world. A way that protects the future for all of us, our children, and our grandchildren.

God, speaking through Micah, presents us with a radical challenge.

Do justice.

Love mercy.

Walk humbly.

We must learn to live with nature in harmony.

We must act with compassion for the

wounded creation and for its hurting people. We must loudly call for change. We must remember that the earth belongs to God. And we are those who can join in God's mission of restoring the earth. I want to keep this short... We all know what I mean.

Let me return to my sentence from the beginning. In that respect, harvest is one of the most wonderful times of the year! It reminds us of the beauty of God's world. It equips us with colourful and bright images of hope. And it awakens in us the desire and the power to resist destruction and work for renewal and transformation. Amen.

The Parable of the Growing Seed



Meditation on Mark 4: 26-29 by *Kat Wagner*

²⁶ He also said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

Jesus often taught using parables, a bit like stories or riddles, where the true meaning isn't always clear or obvious. Jesus told his disciples a lot of parables about the Kingdom of God. He would say: “The Kingdom of God is like...” He taught so much about the Kingdom of God, it was obviously very important to him. But this parable about the Kingdom of God doesn't initially sound like a particularly exciting story or comparison. If one were to summarise this parable to be just one sentence long, you could say: The

Kingdom of God is like seed that grows. I like growing plants too. If I told you that one day I planted some seeds and they grew, you wouldn't be particularly surprised at that information, or particularly over-awed by my storytelling ability!

What is so special or noteworthy about seeds that grow?! Let's take a look at the parable in more detail and see if we can discover some reasons why Jesus used the image of a growing seed to describe God's Kingdom. The focus of this parable is not the sower (man/farmer), nor the conditions of the soil. The focus is the seed itself and how it grows. So our first thing to notice about the seed is that:

1. The seed is **small and seemingly insignificant**.

I have some seeds here. Can you see them? Who here can see them? Jesus chooses to compare the Kingdom of God not with something big and impressive, but with something small and seemingly insignificant. Bigger does not necessary mean better. If you have ever felt small or insignificant, this parable is for you.

2. The seed and the soil contain all the necessary structures, nutrients and chemicals for growth to happen. The seed is naturally **full of potential** for life and growth, for fruitfulness and harvest.

3. The man doesn't know (or doesn't need to know) *how* the seed grows. It just does. To begin with, all the action happens underground. The seed grows **secretly**, and in the dark. We can't see it, we don't know if it is even growing until it breaks through the surface of the soil. The seed doesn't grow because the man tries to understand it. The seed grows despite his lack of understanding. God alone can see it.

4. The seed seemingly grows **slowly**. But if you were to study just what was happening, it would seem **miraculous**. A wheat seed takes about a week to germinate and sprout, depending on the temperature of the soil. If you were to try and watch it grow you

wouldn't see anything happening. You could only see it if you watched a time-lapse video. And then you could see the miraculous way it sends the roots down to seek out water, then the first shoot up to seek out the light, and how the stem and leaves and flowers and grains develop.

5. The seed grows irrespective of what the man is doing. Whether the farmer is awake or asleep, whether he works or rests, the seed carries on growing. This can be somewhat discouraging if you're the type of person who is very active trying to help people, or if you're the type of person who feels they need to always be involved for anything to happen. But Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is not dependent on just us. If we are full of energy and working, then great! But if we need to rest, God won't stop and the Kingdom will keep growing.

6. The seed carries on growing until it is ready to be harvested. It doesn't stop. It doesn't regress. It doesn't decide to go back into the ground. God is drawing us to himself, like the plant grows towards the sun. The power of God's love is great enough to keep growing the plant.

7. As the seed develops, it looks different and has different forms and features. First a stalk for stability. Then leaves for capturing sunlight. Then a head for flowers to develop. Then a full kernel, full of potential and usefulness. Growth has many stages. Journeys have many milestones. Change will look different at different points. Let's not get frustrated at the stages of growth that we are seeing, or compare ourselves or our church or our family with other people. What is important is the miracle of growth and the miracle of the Kingdom of God secretly growing amongst us.

8. As soon as the seed has fully grown it is harvested. It is not left to rot, or to wither away, or be wasted. It fulfils its potential. In God's Kingdom, nothing and no one is ever worthless, useless or wasted.

Conclusion

In Jesus' parable of the growing seed, we are

reminded that what is important can often be overlooked. The important things are often the small things, the little people, the seemingly insignificant actions. Jesus lived this way himself. He loved the poor, the outcast, the lepers. He made friends with those who were not admired or accepted by society. He treasured the small seeds. This parable teaches us to shift our gaze away from the big and impressive things of this world, to the small and little things.

From the rich and powerful people to the barely noticed people. Because this is where the Kingdom of heaven takes root and grows. What is the most unlikely place that you would associate with God's Kingdom? Maybe that is the place where the seed of God's Kingdom is secretly growing.

The seed of God's Kingdom may be the smile you give to a stranger. The 'thank you' you say to the cashier at the supermarket. The help you offer to a neighbour. The piece of litter you pick up from the pavement. The courageous decision you make that few people notice or comment on. The messages of love and peace that you send to your friends. This is how the kingdom of God grows. This is how the kingdom of God is growing, right now, amongst us. Can you see it? Maybe not so easily. But if you were to look back at a time lapse video in a few years' time, you would be able to see how much growth and change has happened.

The Kingdom of God is like a growing seed.
Amen

Meeting Jesus



Guided Meditation by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

Romans 12:18 "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

God made each of us, including our imaginations. Today we will use our imaginations to experience a guided meditation. Let's not give up on someone or something that looks like it's beyond hope.

Remember, Jesus said, "Seek, and you will find." If we seek Jesus and offer him our imaginations, we can sometimes meet him and spend time with him in a way that helps us understand how he wants us to live.

Let's try it and see!

Close your eyes and relax.

Listen to your breathing.

Don't change it, just listen to it.

As you inhale, breathe in all the love God has for you.

As you exhale, feel all your distractions leave... any aches and pains...any worries... any distractions at all.

Try to feel your heart beating, the heart God created for you.

Now picture, right before you, a large door... Go to the door, push it open, and walk through.

You find yourself in a beautiful garden.

Take a moment to look around... feel the grass beneath your feet... smell the flower... listen to the birds. Enjoy!

In the distance you see a stream winding through the garden.

There is a shade tree next to the stream, and a bench beneath the tree.

Jesus is there, waiting for you.

He smiles and calls you by name.

Go to him.

Jesus takes you into his arms with a warm hug. "I'm so glad you came," he says.

"Come, let's sit down and be together for a while."

So, you sit on the bench and enjoy each other's company.

Think about what Jesus is like...

Jesus takes you by the hand and says, "I have been with you always, through times of joy, and times of sadness."

Then Jesus shows you moments in your life, beginning when you were very young...

He shows you how he was there, sharing each moment with you...

What does Jesus show you?

How do you feel?

Jesus says, "At your Baptism, you became a child of God and a member of the body of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, I will be with you forever, during the good times and the difficult times.

Jesus points out the stream and invites you to go to the, touch it and call to mind your Baptism.

Together you go, hand in hand.

To your surprise the water is warm and life-giving.

With great joy Jesus gently leads you to the water.

Think about what it feels like...

As you stand near the stream with Jesus, you hear invisible voices cheering and clapping.

Jesus laughs and says: "You hear our family, the church, greeting you! They are the family and friends you meet every day and all those in heaven and around the world who pray for you all the time."

The sound fades, and you and Jesus return to the bench. As you leave the water, you become completely calm, and your heart fills with God's peace.

As you sit beside Jesus, you realize you can tell him anything.

What do you tell Jesus?

How does he respond?

Jesus then tells you it is time to go - but first he has something for you - something that will unite you closer with him and with all your brothers and sisters in the church. He takes from his cloak a small loaf of bread.

He blesses it, breaks it, and says, "This is my body, take and eat."

Together you share the meal.

Now you both stand up to go.

He invites you to return anytime and says he will be waiting.

He tells you he will be with you throughout your journey.

You will sense his presence in the people and events of your daily life.

You will be able to hear his voice in the Bible and find his love in other people.

He takes you into his arms for a farewell hug.

You turn to go, and you see the door is still standing open.

As you walk up to it, you take one last look at Jesus and remember that you can return at any time.

You go through the door, closing it behind you, and find yourself back here in this room.

Slowly you wiggle your fingers and toes, stretch your arms and legs, and, when you are ready, open your eyes.

Amen.

Seeing with the Eyes of Jesus



Meditation on Mark 12:41-44 by Becky Yebuah

The Widow's Offering

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

A woman, a mother, a widow.
We don't know who she was. She has no name.

I wish I knew her name and would not remember her as the “widow who had 2 mites”... It's sad because a few important Bible women, who are teaching very important lessons, are without a name. And here in this story, it is kind of sad, that we talk more about the two mites than about the widow.

If you google 2 mites, the first thing that appears is “the widows 2 mites, widow with two mites.”

If I tell you, that 2 mites in today's currency are only 0.25 US cents – how does that sound to you. Imagine putting 0.25 cents in the offering box? We wouldn't even think about doing it.

But back to the woman: As I often do – I want to give her a name – I will call her Liara - “Light”, “inner peace”.

In Mark 12 41/42 we read...

And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow called Liara came and threw in two mites. She put in 2 mites...

For most of us, the small money she gave would be nothing - it wouldn't mean anything to us. But it was all, it was everything she could give. She gave her all to God, for the love of God, with all her heart. Maybe also with pain in her chest...

After her husband's death, where would she get an income from?

Her Husband earned most of the money, I'll stick to “most” because we don't know if she tried her best by selling things on the market or not.

From the story I learn: During Jesus' times, it was better to have much than less. People with good reputation would ignore you

because you were poor. The priests in the temple did. The rich visitors to the temple did. Everyone with money would not even try to talk to you or be around you when you were poor.

So, this woman who had nothing, was not even important at all. People wouldn't see her effort of trying to give. In their eyes what she did, didn't count. She was a person to look down on. But Jesus saw her with different eyes, he saw her action and what she gave. And it touched his heart. Rich people would never understand the difference between what she did and what they were doing. It was easy for them to drop money in the basket. Whether Liara gave something or didn't give anything, didn't matter to the rich and powerful.

Liara was poor.

She had nothing.

She was a nobody.

But Jesus saw her.

He saw far more than a poor widow. Or the little money she gave. He saw into her heart, was touched by the way she 'd moved through the temple yard, and he knew her story. Because Jesus was so moved by Liara – he loved her and wanted to make the others see her with loving eyes, too. He didn't want to keep his love and affection for the young woman to himself. He called his disciples and shared her story with them. He wanted them to see who he sees...

Did the disciples understand what Jesus tried to tell them?

She was a poor widow, why would Jesus' friends be interested in her story or pay attention to her? Weren't there much more important and powerful people in the temple that day?

The disciples were just like everybody else, I guess. But Jesus made them change their focus. Jesus wanted to change their way of thinking. He changed mine too.

Just because Liara didn't give as much as the others gave, it wasn't worthless. It meant everything to her. And that is what counts.

To Jesus it was immediately clear that she had given all she has. ...no "let me put in half of the money, so I still have some left to buy food". No.

Her love for God was bigger than her hunger. She knew, that she could trust in God. God would provide for her. She could tell he did, since her husband had died.

I think, it's important to understand that you can have "nothing" but most of the time its more than others have. You can have nothing, but there still is your pride, your hunger for life, your desire to love, your willingness to care, your longing for a better future, your dreams which have not died. What matters is the way we see the things. What matters is to learn seeing with Jesus' eyes.

Maybe the poor widow was in her understanding rich, confident and happy, not because she had much money but much love. I imagine Liara not alone on her journey through life. There was always God, I guess, and God's people. All those who had their eyes opened through Jesus. It is important to understand, that through Jesus, we can change the way we see things. We get a second chance to overthink things and stories. We do not have to judge at first sight. We can even change our minds, let God and his love transform us – over and over again.

What Liara's story teaches me, is: Money can buy you safety and fun. Yes. But it will never make you as happy as love can do. It's not the money that counts, but our actions. Sharing hugs, listening to your friend's problem, inviting God into your life, or pray, is more than the rich can give with their money. Just ask yourself... what can I give that is worth more than money?

If you know the answer, just remember it every day. On days on which you feel you haven't got much to give, remember it.

If you don't know the answer yet, then do know: the answer will come -unexpected and at the right time. Liara, who in the eyes of the rich and powerful had nothing – but in the eyes of Jesus had all she needed to live as a beloved woman of God can transform us today and every day.

Remember her little story.

See her with the eyes of Jesus.

Love her and others like Jesus did. Amen

The Power of Words



Meditation on Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 by Nicolas Kanzleiter

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Let me start by telling you how great it is to see you all. What a pleasure to be able to stand and speak in front of you of all people. What a privilege! I couldn't think of a better

audience than you, to have such great and highly educated people listen to what I'm about to say!

That felt good, right? How would you have felt if I'd told you that, of all people it had to be you... that I'd rather speak in front of anyone else, but there you are. Fine, let's get this over with then, it's not going to get better anyways. At least someone listens to my words, even if it's just you... but then again, might as well speak to an empty room, what's the difference?

How did that make you feel? Probably not so good. I would be at least confused, probably hurt. And all that just because of a few words I just said. Nothing but wind, moving air that triggers your drums and still causes such an effect. Scary... and fascinating!

Words can be incredibly powerful. They can make you laugh or cry, they can motivate you or make you drop everything. They can bore or excite you, spark creativity or extinguish it forever. Depending on what someone says you can either hate that person or fall in love with them for the rest of your life. Words can give you ideas, make

you think, lead to growth or downfall. They can create entire stories in your head, build worlds, faces, sounds, music out of nothing or simply make you picture a pink elephant juggling balls on top of the Eiffel-Tower. Remember that teacher who always told you that you're not going to make it? And then a year later the one that made you feel as if you could achieve anything? Your parents saying they're proud of you? Your favourite joke or song? An honest Thank You, someone ignoring your greeting, that one compliment some stranger gave you 15 years ago? Or maybe that one time you accidentally really hurt someone? Nothing but wind, right?

How you say and communicate things has a huge impact and we're often not aware of that responsibility. Students belonging to a cultural minority perform significantly worse in exams if they've been told that they're ethnic group is less capable than others. So do female students in math exams if you tell them that men are better at it. Political systems that focus prison time on punishment rather than rehabilitation face higher rates of the same people committing crimes again, schools that focus on progress rather than deficits house happier and far more motivated students. It even goes so far that throughout history, authoritarian governments have repeatedly targeted authors and comedians out of fear, that one well-written commentary could make their entire ideology crumble, which was created and communicated using stylized speech as well by the way.

Now let's think about John for a moment: he was in a pretty tough spot if we consider what I just talked about. People were convinced that he might be the Messiah. What would you do? He wasn't some nobody in the first place. People came from all over the country looking for him to get baptized. He was already holding a lot of power and now they even start telling him that he could be their saviour. He'd be forgiven if at some point he started believing that too. And from there on it would have been a paved road for him. No one even

knew Jesus that well yet and John already had many followers. He could have rallied them all and maybe seriously challenge Jesus' position. The odds were in his favour at least. Why didn't he take that opportunity? Must have been tempting. Maybe he wasn't interested in power, knew how corrupting it can be. Maybe he didn't even realize the opportunity or deliberately ignored it? Was it trust or faith that made him wait for Jesus and not raise himself? What a huge amount of loyalty towards someone you've never met, of whom you couldn't even be sure if he really existed. Or did he know?

I have no way of figuring out what it was that made John act the way he did in the end. He showed a great deal of both, trust and humility, and maybe even confidence. And he ended up right, Jesus did show up and he did turn out to be the one people were waiting for.

In fact, John did two things: On the one hand, he told everyone that he wasn't the Messiah and on the other hand announced his arrival with such fiery words that it must have left people speechless. He clearly knew how powerful words can be and therefore I believe could withstand them and used them very efficiently to keep peoples hopes up. He knew about his power and took the responsibility it brought with it.

There's a lesson to be learned here, an example to take. Each and every one of us holds a lot of power. We decide how we shape and influence the people around us, their thoughts, their life, maybe even their future simply by our choice of words. And so can others with us. I can't tell you what to do with that knowledge and responsibility, whether you should use it wisely or ignore it and I won't. All I can do is make you aware of it, make you think about it, invite you to think about John and the power of words. Amen

“Open Up and Let God in!”



Meditation on Psalm 24 by *Kat Wagner*

Psalm 24

Of David. A psalm.

¹ The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; ² for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. ³ Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? ⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god. ⁵ They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Saviour. ⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, God of Jacob. ⁷ Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ⁸ Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. ⁹ Lift up your heads, you gates; lift them up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. ¹⁰ Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty - he is the King of glory.

The start of a new year is a good time to reflect on the important things of life. I'd like to present Psalm 24 as a good place to look for what is important in our life and our faith. Psalm 24 speaks of who God is; of

the relationship between God and us; and a reminder, an encouragement, a cry to 'open up and let God in'. This evening, I would like to take a walk through the three parts of this psalm. I pray that my thoughts and words in this meditation make some connection with your own heart and mind, and that we can all take a nugget of God's word into our lives this week.

So, to begin, Part 1: verses 1 & 2.

We are taken back to Genesis. Out of ocean depths, land masses rise. Volcanoes, clouds, rivers, and myriads of life-forms emerge and thrive and adapt and evolve and diversify. The earth is the Lord's. The intricate and dynamic structures, webs and relations. It is God's handiwork. All of it. For King David, the author of his psalm, it is not just the land that belongs to God (like a division of kingdoms), but EVERYTHING in it. Not just the boundaries, but all of its fullness. All resources, all production, all harvest, all wealth, all life, every person, every being – it all belongs to God.

The Psalm takes us out of our personal kingdoms and into God's big picture. The greatness of God is unfathomable. And we are living right in the heart of God's amazing creative energy. It is all good, because it is all God's.

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. (v1) In fact, the apostle Paul quotes this very verse to confirm to the early Christians that they could eat anything, not just the 'kosher' foods. Nothing is unclean, says Paul, because "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" (1 Cor 10: 26).

Part 2: verses 3-6.

³ Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?

What of us, if God is so great? How can mere humans approach such a vast and powerful God? The question is answered by verse 4. "Only those whose hands and hearts are pure, who do not worship idols and never tell lies." Pure hands AND pure hearts. Pure actions and pure intentions. The seen and the unseen. Hands that have never worshiped idols, thoughts and emotions that have never overflowed into words which hurt others and tell lies. Such a moral standard is unreachable, unattainable, even for the most devout. It's like an Everest-scale mountain that is impossible to even consider climbing: the climb would be technically very difficult, dangerous and inhospitable. Just one person could 'climb the mountain of the Lord', could claim his right to stand before God. One who came to earth from God himself. A hint of Jesus in this age-old psalm of David.

But even David knew then that God was a saving God. He knew that God was a relational God. He knew that God was a God who loved to bless. Here is a hope, a chance, a glimmer of something bright that must be sought, continually pursued. The psalm says, "Such people may seek you and worship in your presence, O God of Jacob". David's psalm pauses now. We have been confronted with a great, creator God. And our question of who may come face to face with such a God still has the remnants of a question-mark hanging over it. But this is not the end of the matter.

Part 3, verses 7-10. The whisper of hope becomes a shout of hope, a rousing chorus. With David, we imagine the ancient city of Jerusalem: the city walls and fortified gates.

David may have composed this psalm for the triumphant return of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. The sign of God's presence returning to his people. "Open up, ancient gates! Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of *glory* enter!" (v7) This glory was the light between the cherubim on the Ark. The glory that represented God's very presence was coming up the hill towards Jerusalem. God is not stuck up on a lofty mountain. God himself comes to the people. God himself approaches the door. Those outside the gates shout, "Open up, ancient gates and let the King of glory enter". Those inside the city walls reply, "Who is the King of glory?" And they reply: "The Lord, strong and mighty; the Lord, invincible in battle." This great God wants to be within the city. This great God does not want to stay 'out there', this great God wants to be within. "Open up, ancient doors, and let the King of glory enter!" Once again, the question from within: "Who is the King of glory?"

A doubt, a little uncertainty. Does this glorious King really want to come in? Do we really want this King here with us?

Once more the answer: "The Lord of Heaven's Armies – he is the King of glory". And so the psalm celebrates the Ark of the Covenant entering into Jerusalem.

And here's the really interesting bit:

According to Jewish history, this psalm was always read as part of Jewish temple worship on the first day of the week. And on such a day many years later, Jesus rode a humble donkey up the path to Jerusalem and entered through the city gates. At that very moment, we can imagine the temple priests crying out the words, "Open up, ancient gates, open up, ancient doors, and let the King of glory enter!" How can a mighty God enter into a city? How can we let God into our lives? His coming-in does not make him smaller or less powerful. His openness does not diminish his glory or might. But we can be sure, when the door is opened, he WILL come in.

Revelation 3: 20: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me."

A psalm in three parts: A statement of God's greatness; a question of our relationship with God; and a cry to open up and welcome him in.

So, in this new year, let me encourage you to open up your gates and let God in. Open up your doors, and let God in. He is standing there and knocking.

How is God knocking on your door this year?

Open yourself to God, who comes close to you through the little ones, the asking ones, the needing ones, the loving ones, the crying ones, the least of all.

Open up and let God in. Unclench your fists, open your hands, make space in the palm of your hand to receive a gift, and make space for another's hand to rest in yours. Open your heart, let fresh blood flow in. Let old blood be renewed and re-oxygenated. Open yourself to the creator God, who wants to be close with you. Open yourself to God, who comes close to you in humility, as one riding a donkey.

So this year, once again, with open hands and humbled hearts, let's open up and let God in.

Amen

Children of God



Meditation on Philippians 2 v 14-15 by Cathy Williams

¹⁴ Do everything without complaining and arguing, ¹⁵ so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.

Good evening.

Although I like to hear meditations, it's the first time that I've presented one myself. So where should I start?

It seemed a good idea to get the bible passage first so I contacted Kat. The answer - just choose a passage yourself, did not in the first instance seem very helpful.

Tuesday came and I started flicking through the 2199 pages of my study bible. This was clearly not going to be useful. So I prayed about what I should do. The first thoughts that cropped up in my mind were, you're a teacher, you've got countless assembly books, look at them, and secondly go from where you are at the moment.

The first passage that caught my eye in an assembly book was a poem about a poor boy named Alfred Dumble who couldn't do anything but grumble. The bible reference was Philippians 2 v 14 -15. This linked well to a book I have recently read about the power of positive thought.

Things were looking up – I seemed to have a place to start!

¹⁴ *Do everything without complaining and arguing,*
¹⁵ *so that no one can criticize you. Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like bright lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people.*

How easy verse fourteen sounds to be for some people. People like me have a lot to be happy about! A wonderful husband, supportive family, a place to live, great friends, not to mention Peace Church and being a member of God's family forever. My list could be so much longer.

But do I complain? The answer has to be yes. Often it's just little things, a bit of negativity here or a doubt there. I don't think of myself as a big complainer.

But internally?

Do I moan in my mind?

This answer is also yes. Sometimes my negative thoughts can be quite difficult. I like things to go in the way I want and when they don't well..... I complain inwardly! I can be rather self-centred!

I'm a person who has been blessed in many ways. I sometimes wonder how people in different circumstances manage. Why don't they complain and argue continually. People who perhaps have an abusive partner, no money, no where to live, estranged family, health issues and friends who come and go. How easy in this situation to sink into a hole and complain and argue constantly.

The striking thing to me is that some people in this second group are actually the most positive, friendly and caring people around. So how is this? Why aren't they always complaining? It's often justified. How do they seem to be able to see things in a different way?

Perhaps it's to do with God's love? When we accept God's huge, extravagant love for ourselves, loving ourself and then loving our neighbour becomes easier. Love is very powerful.

With God's love in us it becomes easier to love the people we complain about and argue with. People who we may find difficult, demanding or irritable. With God's

love in us it can overflow into other people. Love for everyone is important. It is powerful. However it requires effort and prayer to sustain it over time. God is showering us with love day in, day out but we need to be aware and notice it, in difficult times as well as when life is easier. Accepting God's love means that instead of criticising, complaining about and arguing with people, we learn to love them.

So how do we show that love and shine like bright lights?

Love is powerful and words are too. Nico's meditation three weeks ago described perfectly how we can use them both positively and negatively.

Words are everywhere.

They're in books, on the internet, on TV, in the newspapers, in our thoughts and on social media and that's before we start to think about just talking to people. Words can uplift people or completely shatter their confidence.

We all know people who use positive, uplifting, celebratory and thankful language. When this is used together with a smile, God's love begins to shine through. It's not easy and there are going to be times it feels impossible. But God's love is always there for us and with it, we can begin to shine. With God's love in us, we can begin to change our entire focus on life.

At the beginning of this meditation I described a poem about Alfred Dumble, a man who would always grumble. Well for most of the poem he walked around with his own personal rain cloud above his head and thunder making his hair stand on end. However at the end he'd learnt not to complain and the thunder cloud was replaced with a shining star!

God encourages us not to be self centred, not to complain and argue but to love and shine like bright lights in the world around us.

As children of God and let's remember Paul's words this week and try not to complain but to walk in the thankfulness and love of God.

God's Grace, God's Favour, God's Good News



Meditation on Luke 4: 21-30 by Kat Wagner

Luke 4: 21-30

²¹ Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!” ²² Everyone spoke well of him and was amazed by the gracious words that came from his lips. “How can this be?” they asked. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” ²³ Then he said, “You will undoubtedly quote me this proverb: ‘Physician, heal yourself’ - meaning, ‘Do miracles here in your hometown like those you did in Capernaum.’” ²⁴ But I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his own hometown. ²⁵ “Certainly there were many needy widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the heavens were closed for three and a half years, and a severe famine devastated the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them. He was sent instead to a foreigner—a widow of Zarephath in the land of Sidon. ²⁷ And many in Israel had leprosy in the time of the

prophet Elisha, but the only one healed was Naaman, a Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, the people in the synagogue were furious. ²⁹ Jumping up, they mobbed him and forced him to the edge of the hill on which the town was built. They intended to push him over the cliff, ³⁰ but he passed right through the crowd and went on his way.

Have you ever seen a nature documentary about Emperor Penguins? Emperor Penguins are the big ones that live in Antarctica. They often huddle together in large groups to be protected from the extreme cold and strong winds. The adult penguins take it in turns to stand on the edge of the group, but each penguin really wants to be in the middle where it’s warmer and safer.

We humans also have a natural tendency to group together. Of course, there are some people who love to stand out from the crowd, to go it alone. But some of us (and I include myself) find safety in belonging to the group. I’m talking generally. But here are

some examples. Maybe it's a friendship group, or a sports team, our neighbourhood, or our particular church, or a political party – we get a sense of warmth and safety from being a part these groups. It's comforting to be in contact with others who share our passions and interests. These groups also help us to define where we belong and who we are. And they protect us from feeling alone, vulnerable, and afraid. Just like a penguin huddle. I think there's probably a lot of other people beyond myself who feel this way too (?!).

Just like us, the synagogue go-ers in Nazareth in our reading were also a bit penguin-like. They were Jews and, as God's chosen people, that gave them a great sense of value and identity. But they were also a group that lived under the tyranny of the occupying Roman forces. Grouping together gave them comfort *and* safety.

We need to jump back now to the section of Luke chapter 4 that precedes our reading today. Let me summarize it for you. Jesus had arrived in Nazareth, his boyhood hometown, and was invited to preach in the synagogues. He was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he chose to read from the section which proclaims Good News to the poor, release for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and that the time of God's favour is now.

The synagogue go-ers were unsurprisingly very welcoming and positive towards Jesus. What a welcome message to hear! One that everyone in the synagogue could say Amen to. Any person present who had money problems would be looking forward to the good news soon coming their way. Those with eye problems would be relieved to hear that healing was coming. They were happy. They were affirmed. They were basking in the glow of God's favour resting on them. Except that Jesus didn't stop his teaching there. This is where tonight's Bible passage picks up the story. As seems to be his style, Jesus pre-empted the difficult questions and sets out to provoke. As we English like to say, he "sets a cat amongst the pigeons"!

It's as if Jesus draws a hypothetical circle around the group of huddling penguins and says, "God's favour is not just for you". Or even, "God's favour is especially for those *outside* your group of belonging".

He even gives two examples from the Jew's beloved prophets: Elijah and Elisha.

Instead of the many possible recipients of help among the widows in Israel, through Elijah, God's help goes to a foreigner, to a non-Jewish widow who lives in Sidon. And instead of a Jewish person receiving healing for leprosy, God's healing through Elisha goes to the Syrian, Naaman.

The safe, warm, secure circle of blessing that the Jews of Nazareth believed they were in was being called into question. Jesus dared to pop the bubble. He dared to expose their incorrect view.

Who would dare to question the Jews as God's chosen people?!

Who would dare to suppose that the Good News is not just for them?!

Who would dare to be so blatantly offensive, and in a synagogue too?!

They were angry. In just a few minutes, the group went from a polite and appreciative crowd, to a mob. With minimal words, Jesus had caused a riot. The people were up on their feet. It got physical. The crowd responded as one: remove the threat!; shut out the one who is disloyal!; silence the one who made them look foolish, silence him forever! They pushed him to the brow of the hill. To the town boundary. From the centre of the circle, to the edge, and pushed him to the brink...

But somehow Jesus escapes.

Jesus had gone into the centre of his socio-cultural world, to his childhood friends and neighbours, and had sought to illuminate the edges for them. He tried to highlight God's love for those on the outside. He wanted to show them how God goes to great lengths to include.

But the comfortable centre doesn't like this message. They could not accommodate this message in their worldview – they could not accept that their thinking might be missing something.

This is what I think we can learn. The Good News, according to Jesus, seems to be directed towards those on the edge, or even those on the outside. To foreigners. To the bottom of the social pecking-order. The untouchables. The landless, poor, neglected, rejected people.

And so-called 'undeserving' beneficiaries of God's favour. We call this grace. It's God's heart for those seemingly on the outside. The hateful crowd pushed Jesus to the edge of the hill. Exactly to the place of God's favour.

Somehow, Jesus passed through the crowds unnoticed.

So let me bring us back to the present moment. To our own lives. I have a short meditation exercise, which I invite you to join in. It requires a bit of imagination. In fact, you need to be able to imagine yourself as an Emperor Penguin! So, if you'd like to give it a go, I invite you now to close your eyes.

Imagine you are in cold, snowy, blustery Antarctica. You are an Emperor Penguin, along with many others there. There's a big group of penguins huddling together and others walking slowly around in the snow storm.

Where are you?

Are you snuggling up safe in the middle of the group, shielded from the storm?

Or are you on the outer edge of the group, getting some warmth, but feeling the wind on your cheeks?

Or are you wandering alone in the blizzard?

Wherever you are, what are you most aware of right now? What is capturing your attention?

How much comfort and warmth are you getting?

How much perspective of the outside world are you getting?

Now imagine that this scene that you find yourself in is actually a scene from a story being told by Jesus. You can hear Jesus speaking.

If you're in the centre of the group, can you hear Jesus' call to look up and look out beyond the group? Where does he want you to focus?

Or if you're out on your own far away from any group, can you hear Jesus' proclamation of Good News reaching as far as you, and beyond? Are you ready to receive God's favour?

What is God blessing you with right now?

Or if you're on the edge of the group, can you hear Jesus' challenging words about a prophet not being accepted in their own hometown? In this unique but uncomfortable position that you're in, between two worlds, do you notice the movement: some people are moving to the edge too to get a better perspective of the outside, and some are moving in from the outside, needing a bit of warmth. Are you ready to make space for others and share your perspective?

Jesus' voice is fading into the distance and we are left with our thoughts. The scene is ending. We return back to the present moment in our seats. When you're ready, open your eyes.

In summary, what I see in this passage is Jesus challenging any sense of ownership or exclusion to others of God's grace, God's favour, God's good news. Whenever we get too cosy in our groups of belonging, we are at risk of losing sight of God's big picture and God's inclusive and far-reaching love. Yes, we need friends and safety, but Jesus also calls us to the edge, to look beyond, to go out and to welcome in, to broaden our horizons, to see God's good news at work in the least expected places.

I will finish with a short prayer:

God, help us to put You at the centre of our lives, and to stand with those on the edge. Help us to feel your warmth, and to know that we are included in your love. And help us to look beyond our groups and to share your love with others. Amen

God's Love Letter to a Child



***Meditation by
Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter***

My dearest darling child,
I am writing this letter to you as a permanent reminder of how wonderful you are, and to tell you that no matter what happens, you will always shine because you are my child. I want you. I need you. I wish to be close to you.
I am your God, and you have enriched and will always enrich my life.
I will love you and fill you with grace and peace so that you can enrich the lives of many others – your immediate family, your mom and dad, your sisters and brothers, your close friends, your church friends, your uncles and aunties, and of course the strangers who cross your path and become your friends. The things you struggle with become my struggles, while all the wonderful things you accomplish in your young life bring me more joy than I could have ever imagined. I am your God, and when I look into your eyes, I see such hope for humanity, and for the type of world we should all live in. I see grace and peace, love

and joy. I see rainbows and sunshine, places to play and beautiful homes to live in. I see toys and books, cars, trains, teddy bears and much more.

I see a world filled with kindness for everything and everyone, whether it is a smile, a simple gesture or simply being there. This is what you bring to the world. A world filled with compassion for the vulnerable, weak, very young or very old. You, my child, can have a special sensitivity to the needs of others and help in the most sensitive and gentlest of ways. I know this!

I want you to appreciate the simple things. I pray that you take joy in simple every day occurrences which too many people take for granted, and I ask you to enjoy the awesome adventure of life in all its fullness.

I am your God, and I encourage you to speak your truth even if the world is not always ready to hear it.

I want you to have a great awareness of what fits together in life and what doesn't. This can sometimes get you into trouble, but I need for this world speakers, dreamers, creators, inventors, explorers.

And you, my child, have a part of each of these.

There is no one quite like you now and never will be. You have everything inside of you that will get you to wherever you want to go and be whatever you want to be.

Enjoy being a child, even if there are times you wish you were a grown up. Believe me there are so many grownups who wish they got back a little bit of their childhood...

Childhood is a special time for new experiences, learning new things, learning to do things better and also to simply have fun and celebrate the beautiful life I intend for you. Never forget the fun part. It is the stuff that wonderful memories are made of, and will get you through any difficult times later in life when you remember the special moments and the great and small joys.

I see you, my child. You are made in my image. And I can tell already that imagination is your greatest gift. It is one of the very special gifts I breathe into all my human beings...

Never lose your wonderful imagination my beloved and beautiful child - even if others may laugh at you and make fun of you. They cannot see the miracles and magic unfolding in your head, and they cannot see the places where your adventures take you to. Your thoughts are clear and pure and wonderfully simple, yet there will be times when you are burdened and sad.

It is your sensitivity and perception, your humanity, that makes you so aware. You will not only see all that is good but also the things that are not quite right in the world today.

I know some things don't make sense to you. They don't make sense to me either. I am your God, and I often wonder what people are doing. I see them and try to reach out to them. I try to reach you, and will always do. I so wish that you will seek out all that is good in the world, in others and most importantly in yourself. Then everything else will take care of itself.

I will always be there for you. I am your God, and I love you.

Know that I am there for you no matter what. I will always love and support you as you grow into your own unique person.

Don't change, just evolve into all that you are meant to become. It will be enough my child. Be a beacon of light. Be a beacon of hope for us all. Go to wherever the breath of life carries you, and go shine, shine where ever you go. Spread the light – my light - and illuminate the whole world because it's made for you.

I want you to live in it, care for it, guard it, develop and improve it. I want you to be my hands, my feet, my voice in this world which is always waiting for your touch and your tenderness.

Don't just exist, shine!

Love always,
God.



Facing Giants



Meditation on Numbers 13:26-33 by Israel Pereira

Introduction

1. The burning bush, it's where all got started
2. A fearful Moses was given a promise, twice
3. That God had heard the cries of the people. A people oppressed and outnumbered in strength. And that God, would bring them up out of where they were into a good and spacious land, bring them out of captivity, into a land flowing with milk and honey - a land where Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites and all the ites you can imagine were living in.
4. But to go to that land, they would need to walk, they would go through many years in the wilderness.
5. The land wouldn't land in front of them. They would need to turn faith into action. And walk.
6. God would take them by their hand and walk together, through the wilderness, through the struggles, through the fears, through the loneliness of the desert, out of captivity, walking together, God by their side, through ups and downs, walking towards the promise.
7. Already given on to them

Transition

1. But now, 40 years later crossing the wilderness, the land is right before them, will they take the next step?

Context

1. Sisters and brothers, the passage tells us of a story where twelve leaders. Leaders with insight. Walked into a situation where they were outnumbered.
2. They were sent by Moses to spy on this "good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey", that God promised Moses forty years earlier.
3. They spied the land, and brought a huge grape to show how prosperous the land was. Two people carried it. That's a big grape.

The Message

1. The passage highlights two different perspectives out of this group of spies that returned to report what they saw. They all saw the same sights, the same grapes, the inhabitants, the same land and the same cities
2. Ten out of the twelve highlighted the threat. The numerous, powerful, strong, tall people. Their fortified walls. The danger. The bad news. The fear. The threat on the horizon.
3. Only two out of the twelve spies highlight the delicious grape. The promised outcome. The freedom out of the wilderness. Yes there were obstacles. But yes God's goodness and faithfulness would walk with them to face the giants together.
4. Ten out of the twelve are overcome by fear.
 - a. They start spreading bad reports.
 - b. Telling the people of Israel will never make it.
 - c. Telling the people of Israel that they are

too weak, like little grasshoppers

d. Overcome by fear, they start lying saying that the land itself. The land that God called “a good and spacious land”, was an evil land.

5. One out of the twelve. Caleb. Outnumbered. Speaks up.

a. Outnumbered, but we are alright

b. Outnumbered, but we wont stagnate in the wilderness we gonna face our giants into the promised land

c. Outnumbered, but we believe God’s word is true

d. With God by our side, we can face our giants

6. There might be something in our lives, that makes us think we are disqualified

a. Although the great grapes are right in front of us, a statistic tells us we wont get it. We wont make it

b. Facts and odds might be against us

c. But will we settle and stagnate in the wilderness, or go into the promised land?

d. Things might make us feel disqualified

e. Perhaps didn't finish school

f. Perhaps we don't have the right degree

g. Perhaps we don't speak the language right

h. Perhaps we come from a broken home

i. Perhaps we tell ourselves we are not good enough

j. Perhaps our emotions are shattered by the giants in our lives

k. We all got some reason, some fact, some statistic, some background, a reason to stagnate. To feel outnumbered

l. A reason not to face our giants.

m. But we are not alone in this fight. God stands by our side in our doubts and fears.

n. Just like God called a fearful Moses by the burning bush as the people of Israel were facing their giants in Egypt.

7. In a way, we all have felt like the 10 spies. Felt outnumbered. Lacking the strength and the will to get out of our wilderness.

8. But just as God walked with the people of Israel in their wilderness, God would continue to walk with the people to face their giants.

9. Not by their own strength. But by faith in God's goodness and grace.

10. Who are the Calebs in your life? That voice that continuously tells us not to be paralyzed in our moments of wilderness.

11. A Caleb that tells us to stand up when we fall, to love when we're hurt, to face our giants when we feel weak.

12. How many times have I been like the 10 spies and quieted the Calebs around me cause I felt too overwhelmed by my wilderness

13. And how many times have I seen Caleb speak up to me through the lives of others.

a. Through acts of love and kindness

b. People who gave me courage when I was weak

c. Acts of kindness in unexpected moments

d. In God's community

e. How may we in a way be Caleb to someone else's life?

f. We might not have much, but how can we be that one voice of courage and love to those around us

g. Those facing giants, those in the wilderness

h. Outnumbered, Jesus used 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish to feed a multitude.

i. Used Moses, who couldn't speak in public to guide the people through the wilderness

j. Used an outnumbered woman, Rosa Parks, to sit in the bus and inspire a whole nation to face their giants and fight for equality

k. With God by our side, we can walk together through the wilderness, we can face our giants into the promised land, we can hear Calebs voice, reminding us that we are not alone.

Amen

Baby Born in Metro Station in Kyiv & the Canaanite Woman



Meditation by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter

Introduction

On the front page of your bulletin you can see the photo of a Ukrainian mother fleeing their home town Kyiv with her child. They sit in a train compartment & look out a fogged-up window. They start a journey into the unknown... They leave behind, as thousands of them do, fathers, brothers, uncles, grandparents, friends. Those staying behind are fighting for the freedom of their home country. Those fleeing run for their lives...

Let me begin this reflection with...

A Call to Peace

We declare together, oh God,
with hearts breaking, eyes weeping and souls
stirring:

We will stand and cry and weep with our
brothers and sisters in Ukraine and other
war torn parts of the world.

We will make a place of peace for even the
enemies at our table.

We will open our doors and our hearts to
those who enter them.

We will seek to forgive as we have been
forgiven.

We will love in Jesus' name because you
taught us that love conquers all. Amen.

Stories count more than tanks

More than two weeks into the war, it seems increasingly likely that Vladimir Putin is heading towards a historic defeat. He may win all the battles but still lose the war. Putin's dream of rebuilding the Russian empire has always rested on the lie that Ukraine isn't a real nation, that Ukrainians aren't a real people, and that the inhabitants of Kyiv, Kharkiv and Lviv yearn for Moscow's rule. That's a complete lie – Ukraine is a nation with more than a thousand years of history, and Kyiv was already a major metropolis when Moscow was not even a village. But the Russian despot has told his lie so many times that he apparently believes it himself.

When planning his invasion of Ukraine, Putin could count on many known facts. He knew that militarily Russia dwarfs Ukraine. He knew that Nato would not send troops to help Ukraine. He knew that European dependence on Russian oil and gas would make countries like Germany hesitate about imposing stiff sanctions. Based on these known facts, his plan was to hit Ukraine hard and fast, decapitate its government, establish a puppet regime in Kyiv, and ride out the western sanctions.

But there was one big unknown about this plan. As the Americans learned in Iraq and the Soviets learned in Afghanistan, it is much easier to conquer a country than to hold it. Putin knew he had the power to conquer Ukraine. But would the Ukrainian people just accept Moscow's puppet regime? Putin gambled that they would. With each passing day, it is becoming clearer that Putin's gamble is failing. The Ukrainian people are resisting with all their heart, winning the admiration of the entire world – and winning the war. Many dark days lie ahead. The Russians may still conquer the whole of Ukraine. But to win the war, the Russians would have to hold Ukraine, and they can do that only if the Ukrainian people let them. This seems increasingly unlikely to happen.

Each Russian tank destroyed and each Russian soldier killed increases the Ukrainians' courage to resist. And each Ukrainian killed deepens the Ukrainians' hatred of the invaders. Hatred is the ugliest of emotions. But for oppressed nations, hatred is a hidden treasure. Buried deep in the heart, it can sustain resistance for generations. To reestablish the Russian empire, Putin needs a relatively bloodless victory that will lead to a relatively hateless occupation. By spilling more and more Ukrainian blood, Putin is making sure his dream will never be realised.

Nations are ultimately built on stories. Each passing day adds more stories that Ukrainians will tell not only in the dark days ahead, but in the decades and generations to come. The president who refused to flee the capital, telling the US that he needs ammunition, not a ride to safety. This is the stuff nations are built from. In the long run, these stories count for more than tanks.

The stories of Ukrainian bravery give resolve not only to the Ukrainians, but to the whole world. They give courage to the governments of European nations, to the US administration, and even to the oppressed citizens of Russia. If Ukrainians dare to stop a tank with their bare hands, the German government can dare to supply them with some anti-tank missiles, the US government can dare to cut Russia off Swift, and Russian citizens can dare to demonstrate their opposition to this senseless war.

We can all be inspired to dare to do something, whether it is making a donation, welcoming refugees, or helping with the struggle online. The war in Ukraine will shape the future of the entire world. If tyranny and aggression are allowed to win, we will all suffer the consequences. There is no point to remain just observers. It's time to stand up and be counted.

Unfortunately, this war is likely to be long-lasting. Taking different forms, it may well continue for years. But the most important issue has already been decided. The last few

days have proved to the entire world that Ukraine is a very real nation, that Ukrainians are a very real people, and that they definitely don't want to live under a new Russian empire. The main question left open is how long it will take for this message to penetrate the head of Putin. (Daily Telegraph 4 March 2022)

When I read the following newspaper article, I knew which Bible story to choose for today...

Baby born in metro station as 23-year-old mother shelters from Russian bombardment:

Mia was born just before 8:30pm after officers heard her mother's screams and rushed to help.

A 23-year-old woman has given birth to a baby girl in a Kyiv metro station while sheltering from Russian bombs in what has been called a "beacon of hope". Mia was born just before 8.30pm on Friday after others in the station heard her mother's screams and rushed to help deliver her. An ambulance was later called to take them to hospital. Both mother and baby are said to be doing well. People sheltering alongside the mother have called the delivery a "beacon of hope". A witnessing woman said Mia was born in a "stressful environment" amid heavy bombing, but that the mother is "happy after this challenging birth". She posted moving pictures showing the newborn clutching her mother's hand. (inews 27 Feb 2022)

Bible Story

And here is the story of the Canaanite Woman who did everything she could to save her little daughter's life... With her bravery she overcomes hostility, boundaries, obstructions, national and cultural barriers, & role stereotypes to show the world a new way of life... may we all learn from her hope, her persistence and her love for life. May we stand up for freedom, peace, justice and democracy as she stood up for her child.

The Canaanite Woman

My little girl had an answer for everything. I'd say, "Time for bed, Becky."

"But I am not tired," Becky would say.

"You'll be by the time you've had your bath and your story."

"I might not be."

"I think you will. Bed, Becky!"

"But it's still daylight."

"That's because it is summer. Bed now, or there won't be time for a story."

"Oh mother! Not fair!"

She had a lot of questions too. Most of them began "Why?" or "Why not?" and I didn't always have answers.

Her grandmother got so cross! She'd tell Becky to do as she was told and not answer back. If Becky asked, "Why is the sky blue?" she'd say, "Because it is!"

But I loved it – I loved the way Becky asked and thought and worked things out.

The day she fell ill it just looked as if she had been in the sun too long. I brought her indoors, into the shade, and sponged her down. But she didn't cool down. Her skin was burning to touch and as dry as brushwood. We bathed her and gave her cooling drinks that she didn't want to take, but nothing worked. My husband, coming back from his work at the harbour, said that there was a famous Jewish rabbi staying at the white house near the sea. "What's a Jewish rabbi doing anywhere around Sidon?" said mother. "Trying to get some peace and quiet," he said, "but I wonder if he could help our Becky? He's supposed to be a healer. A miracle man, that kind of healer. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, and he healed a woman in..."

"He's Jewish and we're not," interrupted my mother. "He's not going to help us, is he? Why would he?"

Becky was ill, so I had to do the arguing for her. Why wouldn't he? I ran from the house. "He won't help us!" my mother called after me. "His God isn't our god!" "I don't want a god," I thought. "I want Becky. Run, run, run, keep running." I ran all the way to the white house, and I must have been shouting out for help as I came

nearer, because somebody opened the door. My legs wouldn't hold me up any more and I stumbled to the ground at the rabbi's feet. "Please, sir," I gasped out, "my little girl – Becky – she's dying. Please will you come and help her?" He looked at me, saying nothing at all. The crowd drew back to give him space. Because I was on my knees, he knelt too, to talk to me, but in his eyes I didn't see what I wanted. I wanted to see somebody who knew the right thing to do and do it. But he just looked sad. "Daughter," he said, "I can't help you. God sent me to help my own people, and they need so much from me. I can't go to everyone else too. It would be like taking the children's bread and throwing it to the dogs."

The dogs? Do you think I was angry? Or insulted? Or hurt? I didn't have time to be! Becky was all that mattered, and she would have an answer for him. What would Becky say? I thought of Becky's kind of answer. "But if you had a dog, and the children dropped crumbs under the table," I said, "you'd let the dogs eat the crumbs, wouldn't you?"

So what about giving us the crumbs?" I watched his face. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled. "You have real faith!" he said. "Go home! Your child is well!" I said thank you... I ran home to find Becky as bright as a button, out of bed and drinking pomegranate juice.

Years later, Becky came home and told me she'd joined a group of Jesus' followers – or "Followers of the Way", as they called themselves. "The way to where?" I asked her and she laughed. "The way to peace," she said. "Come with us, and share with us bread and wine!" (inspired by Margaret McAllister, Women of the Bible).

Silence

The world is longing for peace – God's peace – the peace Jesus can give... Let us try and imagine this peace as we remain a few moments in silence...

1. Do-na no-bis pa-cem, pa-cem, do-na no-bis pa-cem. 2. Do-na no-bis

12 pa-cem, do-na no-bis pa-cem. 3. Do-na no-bis pa-cem, do-na no-bis pa-cem.

Swords into Plowshares



Meditation on Isaiah 2: 1-5 *by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter*

Isaiah 2: 1-5

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

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; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Dear Randy, sisters and brothers at Peace Church,
most of you know how much I love Desmond Tutu and his theology. I love the way he speaks of "God's Dream" when he expresses the way he imagines the kingdom of God. The world as it could be – at its very best... this is God's dream... It is part of God's dream not to be alone – no lonely, isolated high above God, but a God touching the earth and being in all of us. It is part of God's dream that we become God's co-workers, God's partners, God's co-creators in the ongoing process of shaping the world and making it a safe space for all beings – no matter who we are, where we come from and what we believe.

"Dear child of God," Desmond Tutu writes in his inspiring book "God has a dream", "before we can become God's partners, we must know what God wants for us. I have a dream, God says, Please help me to realize it. It's a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and

hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that my children will know that they are one family, the human family, God's family, my family."

And then Desmond Tutu continues to explain that in God's family, there are no outsiders. All are insiders. Black and white, rich and poor, gay and straight, Catholics and Protestants, Muslims and Christians, Buddhist and Hindu, Palestinian and Arab, Russians and Ukrainians... and we could go on with that list – all belong!
All belong!

We have heard of God's dream through the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micha and others... Modern prophets and great leaders like Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi spoke and wrote about it: God's dream...
The visions and successes of these prophets, in our time and long ago, helped change their nations and inspire the rest of the world in its struggles for equality and justice and change.

Isaiah focusses on future events, on announcements of salvation, on the establishment of peace and justice coming from Jerusalem, from the house of God, from their religious centre, and the heart of their beliefs.
Today's text is rich in themes that call for theological reflection, and the reign of God. It drafts images for international politics, justice and peace, as God wants them. It speaks to the people, asks them, whether when they read these verses, wouldn't they too long for peace – eternal peace – God's peace – peace in God's world wide family.

We are encouraged to turn away from war, from shedding blood, and destroying homes and lands. Isaiah's poem is not a prediction

but an affirmation that history will reach its goal. That goal, the reign of God, will involve a radical transformation of existing conditions, - from nationalism and conflict, to unity and peace.

The future is God's.

People will live new lives.

People will follow God's call.

Weapons will be turned into agricultural tools. Everyone will turn away from war.

All are invited to live in justice and righteousness. All shall be peacemakers.

Could one dare to respond and participate in this world of God?

Could world leaders dare and see in this vision international political dimensions?

All nations will come to one place, one point, one moral, one agreement, and the result will be peace?

The world would be one...

How I pray that the world could be one
How I pray that we could all be one family!

Would we then let our brother's or sister's family exist in poverty?

Would we let them go hungry?

Would we bombard them, shoot at them, and wipe them out?

Extinguish all their means for life?

Would we?

NO!

We would not!

Desmond Tutu writes: "Members of a family have a gentle caring and compassion for one another."

How I pray that we will open our eyes and see the real, true identity of each of us. And that this one is not a black or white, rich, poor, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or Jew, but a brother, a sister, and treat each other as such. How I pray that we could recognize our common humanity, that we belong together, that our destinies are bound up in one another's, that we can be free only together. How I pray that a glorious world will come into being where all of us live in harmony as members of one family, the human family, God's family.

A genuine and lasting transformation would take place.

And God's dream would become reality –
through our doing...

How I pray...

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky
Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion, too
Imagine all the people
Livin' life in peace
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one
Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger...
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one
(John Lennon)

“The truth is, we need each other,” writes Desmond Tutu. We cannot survive and thrive without one another. He introduces the African idea of Ubuntu. Our humanity is caught up in one another's. The lonely, isolated human being is a contradiction to God's dream and intention for us.

“God is smart. God does not make us too self-sufficient,” says Desmond Tutu. We have our own gifts and that makes us unique. But I have gifts that you do not have, and you have gifts that I don't have. We are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. This interdependence is Ubuntu. It's the essence of being human.

My humanity is bound up in yours – no matter what.
I am human because I belong.

A person with Ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open to each other, available for each other, willing to be vulnerable, affirming others...
They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, oppressed and hurt. When there is war in one part of the world, the whole world is suffering...
When one member is humiliated, all are wounded...
As long as one member suffers, no one can be truly happy!

How I pray that we shall all have Ubuntu. ...that we move closer to God so that we can love each other like family, like sisters and brothers, regardless of who we are and of what we have achieved or not. God's love is infinite. There is and will always be enough of it.

Before you can love others, you must love yourself.
And to love yourself, you must know, from the bottom of your heart and with all your soul, that God loves you now, and loves you always.
Amen.

