

WHAT *is* MOST IMPORTANT



LENT 2021

What is Most Important

Daily Bible Guide | Reservoir Church | Lent 2021

Find the Bible guide online at: <https://www.reservoirchurch.org/lent/>

Introduction

Each year, in the weeks before Easter, our church embarks on a season of spiritual formation. We open some time and attention to look reflectively at our lives, to welcome God's guidance and teaching, and to see what growth may come of that. This season in the year where winter meets spring is called Lent. Lent comes from an Old English word meaning "spring." It's used to refer to the six-week period before Easter Sunday. For centuries, Jesus followers have marked this period of anticipation for Easter through prayer, fasting, and giving.

This year's Lent, we will be guided by some of our ancient tradition's most impassioned and most obscure voices, known as the minor prophets. In the Christian Bible, there are 12 minor prophets. They are called "minor" not because they are unimportant but because the collections of their writings are shorter.

The past year of our lives has been overwhelming at times. So much is changing, so much is being revealed, so much has come undone. Some of us have regrounded during this season; we've been discovering again what is most important. Others of us are unmoored; we've lost touch with what is most important and we're not sure how to find our way forward. Most of us are hanging on, waiting and hoping for better days to come.

Jerome Berryman, who created Godly Play wrote, "Prophets are people who come so close to God, and God comes so close to them, that they know what is most important." We hope this Lent to lean toward God and to discover or rediscover what is most important. Berryman also writes, "Prophets are people who know the most important things. They know which way to go. They are the ones who show us the way." Our church doesn't try to define what should be most important for all of us; we don't tell you exactly which way to go. But we believe that as we lean toward God in prayer and listen to the prophets, the Spirit of God will be our teacher and guide and show us each some of what is most important as well as show us the way forward.

Berryman writes, "Sometimes people forget who they are. They hide from God and pretend God isn't there." Lent is an opportunity to explore the intersection of finding ourselves and finding God again. The prophets dare us to experience God as not aloof from our lives and concerns, but vitally and lovingly engaged. The great modern Jewish scholar of the prophets, Abraham Heschel, wrote, "The fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God." We'll engage with God's big, bold

feelings about life on earth and see how that experience speaks to us, helps us remember who we are and what is important to us. The great Bible translator Robert Alter reminds us that these prophets are not fortune tellers but “the conscience of the people.” We’ll read the prophets and see how they prick our collective conscience, grounding us in what is good and just and important.

This year’s Lent has a few parts to it:

Sundays — The best way to start Lent will be to join us for worship on Sundays! We’ll introduce the season and its themes in our worship service on Sunday, February 14th, live on Zoom and available all the time through our website and YouTube channel. For the six Sundays following, each week’s Sunday service will introduce the themes and practices for the week. Each of the six weeks will include a daily guide with Bible excerpts, reflections, and suggestions for response. We’ll listen to a different minor prophet in each of the first five weeks and sample the voices of a few others in our final week.

Lent in a Bag — At Reservoir, we’ll start the season by distributing bags that contain a printed version of this guide with several small objects for use in the daily spiritual exercises at the end of each reading. If you didn’t get one of these bags or are accessing the material online, you can supply your own objects. Most are quite simple - a match, a ribbon, some dirt and seeds, for instance. Or you can read and engage in the prayers while skipping the more physical, embodied activities we suggest.

Deck of Lent Cards — We’re also giving you what looks like a deck of cards. But instead of playing poker with them, you’ll see that they contain each day’s spiritual engagement, so that you can carry them around with you and use on the go, or place them somewhere to review that day’s prayers and reflection. You can also use them beyond this season, or invite a friend to participate with you.

Bible Guide — Each week, use this guide’s readings and reflections in your personal practice. Setting aside 20-30 minutes a day will help the experience be most fruitful for you, but less time or less consistent practice is better than nothing!

Along with each day’s reading you’ll get:

Points of Interest — a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren’t meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself. We try to name things you hadn’t noticed but wish you had, as well as give voice to some of the questions and observations you may have had but weren’t sure what to do with.

Spiritual Engagement — an invitation to a reflective question, a short exercise with that week’s symbolic object, a meditative prayer, and a suggestion for how to close your time with God. These practices are inspired by some part of the day’s passages and also have their own developing rhythm connected to themes of the week. For example, in response to the first day’s reading, you will find these invitations for spiritual engagement. Each day will follow the same pattern.

- REFLECTION: What makes you want to roar and shout, push and crush today?
- OBJECT: Strike a match* to express your holy flame of anger. (**as many as you need*)
- PRAYER: Inhale: Yah | Exhale: Weh | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: As you blow out each match, draw your attention to God who is with you and your anger in this moment. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Seek me and live."

We hope Lent will be a season of rich spiritual formation for us – of engaging spiritual practices that increase our health and encourage the flourishing of the life of God in and through us. If you would like to engage in fasting or other spiritual practices during this season, feel free to listen to the [February 14th sermon](#) that starts our season for more comments on how to engage with the practices of Lent. Meanwhile, we'll be encouraging the spiritual practices of Scripture reading and prayer in community. Attend our Sunday services [and join a community group](#) for the season if you're able. You could also find a friend to touch base with on your own if you would like. May your Lent be a place of warm encounter with God and with others, and may it be a time of rich learning, discovery, and formation.

We're so grateful for our church's heritage of powerful Lenten seasons together and our great team that carries that practice forward for us. This season, may you find that God is with us, deeply and passionately engaged with us and our world. And may you discover or rediscover what is most important and the way to get there.



AMOS & Matches

WEEK 1

Week 1, Day 1

Amos 1:2-5, 2:6-8

- ^{1:2} He (Amos) said:
The Lord roars from Zion.
He shouts from Jerusalem;
the pastures of the shepherds wither,
and the top of Carmel dries up.
- ³ The Lord proclaims:
For three crimes of Damascus,
and for four, I won't hold back the punishment,
because they have harvested Gilead
with sharp iron tools.
- ⁴ I will send down fire on the house of Hazael;
it will devour the palaces of Ben-hadad.
- ⁵ I will break the fortified gates of Damascus,
and eliminate the people from the Aven Valley,
including the one who rules from Beth-eden;
the people of Aram will be forced to live in Kir,
says the Lord.
- ^{2:6} The Lord proclaims:
For three crimes of Israel,
and for four, I won't hold back the punishment,
because they have sold the innocent for silver,
and those in need for a pair of sandals.
- ⁷ They crush the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way.
Father and son have intercourse with the same young woman,
degrading my holy name.
- ⁸ They stretch out beside every altar
on garments taken in loan;
in the house of their god they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.

Points of Interest

- From Robert Alter: "In the 760s B.C.E., a cattle herder and arborist from a small village near Jerusalem makes his way from the kingdom of Judah to the northern kingdom of Israel and begins to inveigh, in powerful poetry, against the moral and economic crimes of its inhabitants." We'll come back to Amos' biography on Thursday, but this gives us a start.
- The word "Lord" in this passage and many places in the Bible is an English translation of a Hebrew name for God, spelled with no vowels as YHWH. Scholars guess it was said "Yahweh," but an old Jewish tradition developed of never saying this name out loud, as it was so holy. Thus, in almost all English translations, the bland title "Lord" is used rather than the personal name of God, which means something like "I am who I am" or "I bring into being all that is."

- In Amos, when God looks around at life on earth, God roars like a lion. God isn't distant or calm. God is engaged and passionate. God has an emotional life, and at this moment, at least, God is angry.
- Amos isn't from the northern kingdom of Israel; he's an outsider from the South. It would be like a native of rural Alabama travelling to Boston to tell us what God had to say about life here. There might be some trust or credibility issues. So Amos first critiques all of Israel's surrounding neighbors, starting with far off Damascus, before circling around to what he has to say to Israel.
- However they were first spoken, the prophets mostly wrote their words down in poetry. The phrase "for three crimes, and for four..." isn't Amos being indecisive or an odd way of saying "seven crimes." It's a poetic way of introducing a list of problems.
- Here are two snapshots of the crimes that make God angry. In Damascus, there is a farming image of environmental devastation and degradation - something like "clear cut foresting." It's also a metaphor for brutal war crimes done by Syria to Israel that leave the land and people barren. In Israel, there is what the prophet labels incest (perhaps family members who visit the same prostitute) and other forms of exploitation - through debt slavery, criminally low wages and harsh treatment of the poorest residents of the area. The prophets insist that when people cause suffering - suffering to the land and especially suffering to those who are most vulnerable or have least - God reacts with horror and anger.
- The violence Amos attributes to God - burning things on fire, eliminating people, and the like - will make most of us uncomfortable. Yet we know God doesn't literally send fire and break gates; people do these things. For the prophets, the language of violence is a way of expressing God's anger and dramatic call for change.

Spiritual Engagement: Matches and Anger

- REFLECTION: What makes you want to roar and shout, push and crush today?
- OBJECT: Strike a match* to express your holy flame of anger. (**as many as you need*)
- PRAYER: Inhale: Yah | Exhale: Weh | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: As you blow out each match, draw your attention to God who is with you and your anger in this moment. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Seek me and live."

Week 1, Day 2

Amos 5:4-5a, 14, 21-24

- ^{5:4} The Lord proclaims to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live.
- ⁵ But don't seek Bethel,
don't enter into Gilgal,
or cross over to Beer-sheba;
- ¹⁴ Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of heavenly forces,
will be with you just as you have said.
- ²¹ I hate, I reject your festivals;
I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies.
- ²² If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food
I won't be pleased;
I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals.
- ²³ Take away the noise of your songs;
I won't listen to the melody of your harps.
- ²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Points of Interest

- Bethel, Gilgal, and Beer-sheba were all sites of sacrifice, worship, and other religious practice. Amos draws a distinction between religious practice and seeking God. God gives life; not all religious practice does. Along with ill-treatment of vulnerable people and vulnerable land, the difference between healthy and unhealthy religion, true and false religion, is very important to the prophets.
- Religion without justice is always an offense to God. When we worship God but don't do our part to make sure vulnerable people are treated with dignity, kindness, and equity, God is offended. God loves religion that's part of a communal fabric of right relationships and just dealings. God hates religion that isn't.
- There's some evidence that at these ancient temples, worship of Israel's god was intermingled with that of other regional gods: gods of sex, war, and weather, among other things. I think of how today we can aspire to follow Jesus but instead be shaped by ideas and influences that have nothing to do with Jesus. What prevents me or my community from being profoundly loving, joyful, just, and content? Am I devoted to people or ideas that dilute God's life giving influence?
- The Hebrew words for God's ethical vision of life are *tsedaqah* and *mishpat*, translated as "righteousness" and "justice." While both words are similar in meaning, *tsedaqah* has more to do with who we are, and *mishpat* with what we do. Those who have *tsedaqah* - the righteous - are motivated by love, by interest in everybody's well being. Those who have *mishpat* - the just - act in ways that achieve well-being for others. God wants us to become good people who achieve

good outcomes for people and for creation. God smiles over beloved communities of fairness and flourishing. Intentions and actions and ways of being that promote wellness and wholeness make God happy.

- We enter Lent not long after our annual celebration of the life and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was famous for quoting this final verse. In his critique of American white supremacist religion and his call to just and generous policies and practices in public life, King faithfully channels the anger and yearnings of the God of Amos.

Spiritual Engagement: Matches and Anger

- REFLECTION: What becomes visible as you invite God to be with you in your anger?
- OBJECT: With a match, light a candle. Allow the light of God to reveal the full landscape of your anger.
- PRAYER: Inhale: See | Exhale: Live | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Name with God what you see attached to your anger. What evil you hate and reject, and what justice and righteousness you seek.
Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Seek me and live."

Week 1, Day 3

Amos 5:11, 6:3-7

- ^{5:11} Truly, because you crush the weak,
and because you tax their grain,
you have built houses of carved stone,
but you won't live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you won't drink their wine.
- ^{6:3} Doom to those who ignore the evil day
and make violent rule draw near:
- ⁴ who lie on beds of ivory,
stretch out on their couches,
eat lambs from the flock,
and bull calves from the stall;
- ⁵ who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and, like David, compose tunes on musical instruments;
- ⁶ who drink bowls of wine,
put the best of oils on themselves,
but who aren't grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
- ⁷ Therefore, they will now be the first to be taken away,
and the feast of those who lounged at the table will pass away.

Points of Interest

- Amos spoke to ancient Israel in what may have been its period of greatest prosperity. Things seemed to be going well for Israel's wealthy and middle classes. The markets were up, we might say! But Amos says they have no idea what to do with their wealth. The passage is full of imagery of extravagant luxury: houses of carved stone, pleasant vineyards, beds of ivory, meat-eating, singing of idle songs, bowls of wine, the best of oils for skin. Before we assume this passage speaks only to billionaires, it would be worth noting that the average American knows levels of luxury that would have been unimaginable even to the wealthiest of Amos' contemporaries, while others here and abroad lack basic needs. Amos diagnoses this consumption not as a sign of a healthy economy, but as a sign of an unhealthy, unjust society.
- For Amos, economic injustice that makes God angry comes both from attitudes - lack of grief over those in ruin - and from action - regressive tax policies and other practices that keep weak people weak and poor people poor. What do you notice in your life or society that dulls compassion for those among us who suffer? What do you notice in your society's economy that hinders prosperity for those who have least?
- The God of the prophets is angry over our lack of *tsedaqah* and *mishpat* - our unrighteousness and injustice. The prophets' God insists that the harm of all this will catch up with us in time. Behind God's angry words about all this, there's an invitation to what's called repentance, to change our minds and take a different path forward. For those of us caught up living in 21st century American capitalism, what does repentance toward more loving, more restrained, and

more just participation in our economy look like? As you ask that question of yourself or of God, what comes to mind today?

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.

Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____

EXHALE: _____

**repeat as needed*

Week 1, Day 4

Amos 1:1, 7:10-15

^{1:1} These are the words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa. He perceived these things concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, in the days of Judah's King Uzziah and in the days of Israel's King Jeroboam, Joash's son.

^{7:10} Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, reported to Israel's King Jeroboam, "Amos has plotted against you within the house of Israel. The land isn't able to cope with everything that he is saying. ¹¹ Amos has said, 'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will be forced out of its land.'"

¹² Amaziah said to Amos, "You who see things, go, run away to the land of Judah, eat your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's holy place and his royal house."

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, "I am not a prophet, nor am I a prophet's son; but I am a shepherd, and a trimmer of sycamore trees. ¹⁵ But the Lord took me from shepherding the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"

Points of Interest

- Amos tells us God is angry over life in Israel. Amos demands that a society that has lost its way rediscover what is most important. Amos doesn't tell us all that much about himself. But we do learn a couple things that are interesting.
- Amos comes from a small town. He would not have an impressive resume. He's certainly not a religious professional. He's a part-time shepherd and part-time tree maintenance guy. Or maybe he was in one of those lines of work when he was younger and then switched from one field to the other. He is decidedly working class.
- Then as now, it would be unusual for a person with this background to speak God's truth to kings and priests. Why is this? Why don't we respect the voice and insights of ordinary people? Who do we think can hear God best? Who can know what's most important? Who can speak for God? Amos indicates that any person can lose their way. And any person can speak for God to help us find what's important again. Truth we need to hear flows from insight and the courage to share it, not from position or status.
- Additionally, we learn that Amos began his prophetic ministry right after an earthquake. Out of national calamity comes a window to rediscover what's most important. In 2021, as we have endured our own various national and global calamities, how might this be a good time to ask again what is most important in our lives?

Spiritual Engagement: Matches and Anger

- REFLECTION: Who are you? And who are you not?
- OBJECT: With a match, light a candle. Allow the shadows cast to represent aspects of yourself that you tend to hide. Move your candle into light, God's light, and watch the shadows dissipate.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Light | Exhale: Shadows | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Allow God's truth of who you are to settle within and ignite your true self. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Seek me and live."

Week 1, Day 5

Amos 7:4-6, 9:11-15

^{7:4} This is what the Lord God showed me: The Lord God was calling for judgment with fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up part of the land. ⁵ Then I said,

“Lord God, I beg you, stop!
How can Jacob survive?
He is so small!”

⁶ The Lord relented concerning this:
“This also won’t take place,”
says the Lord God.

^{9:11} On that day I will raise up
the meeting tent of David that has fallen,
and repair its broken places.

I will raise up its ruins,
and I will rebuild it like a long time ago;

¹² so that they may possess what is left of Edom,
as well as all the nations who are called by my name,
says the Lord who will do this.

¹³ The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when the one who plows
will overtake the one who gathers,
when the one who crushes grapes
will overtake the one who sows the seed.

The mountains will drip wine,
and all the hills will flow with it.

¹⁴ I will improve the circumstances of my people Israel;
they will rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them.

They will plant vineyards and drink their wine;
and they will make gardens and eat their fruit.

¹⁵ I will plant them upon their land,
and they will never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the Lord your God.

Points of Interest

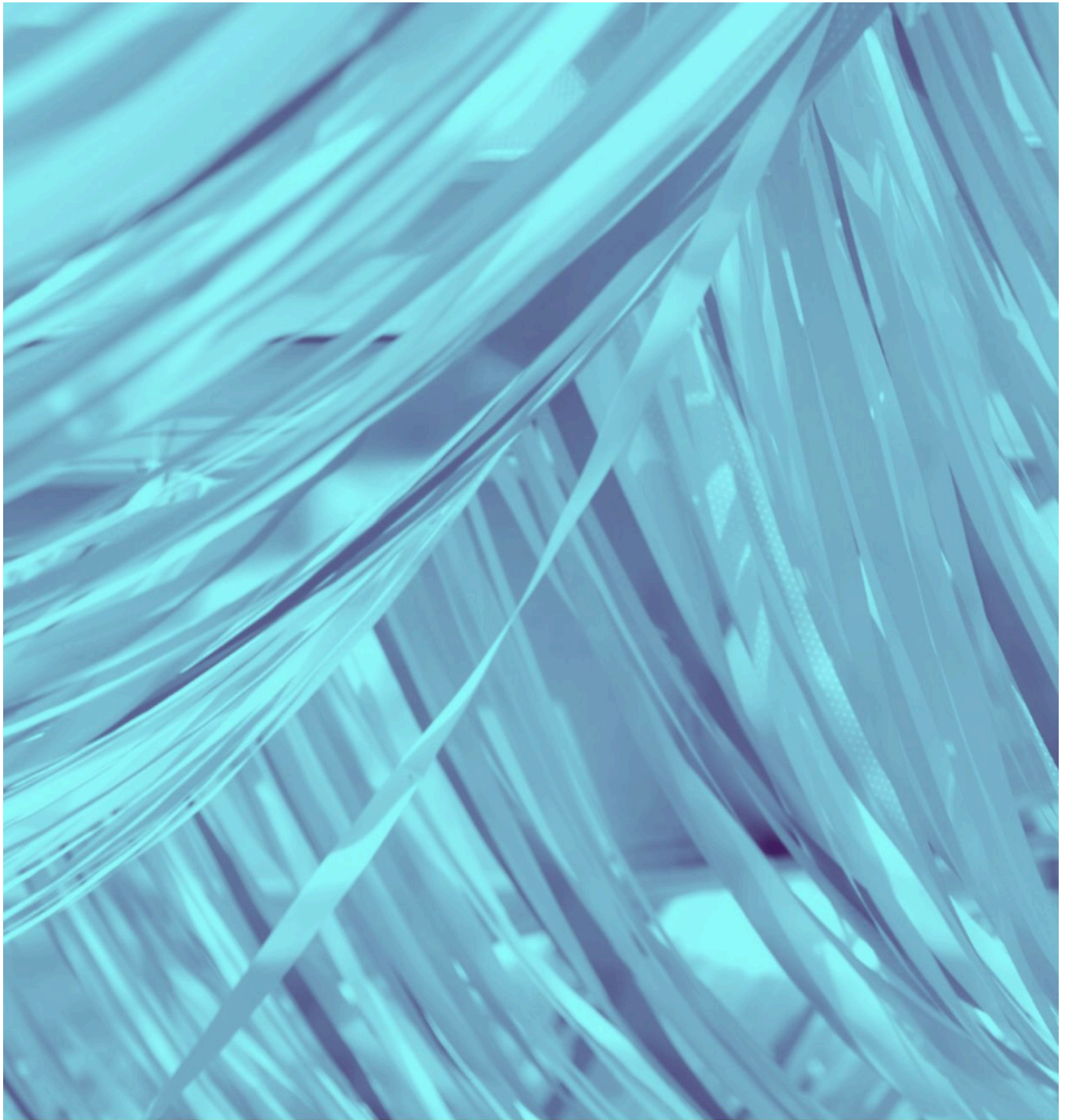
- Before Amos ends, we return to themes of repentance and hope. People can change their ways, and their futures can become more just and hopeful.
- Amos 7 is one of many places in the Bible that portrays God either relenting or repenting. God changes God’s mind and changes God’s plans. Most of us aren’t used to thinking this way about God. But the God that the prophets and the whole Bible portrays is not abstract, static, or distant from God’s whole creation, our lives included. God is relationally engaged with all that God has made. God is attentive to our concerns and requests. And God is creative and adaptive in how God relates to us all. Amos prays for God to take a constructive, not destructive, approach in helping Israel grow and change, and God agrees to give this another shot.
- The prophets have a lot of language about punitive justice. They threaten all kinds of disasters that will befall people who don’t become more loving and just. Best as we can tell, this language

doesn't speak to God's intentions, though. It shows us God gets angry and highlights that actions have consequences. But almost all the prophets highlight, as Amos does here, that God's justice is restorative. God wants people and communities and institutions to notice what is wrong with us and to choose to be more healthy, loving, just and fruitful. God is deeply invested in all our efforts to do so, both big and small.

- The anger of God in Amos gives us permission that we, too, can be angry over things in our world. We can even want vengeance for people that have been done wrong and punishment for the wrongdoers. Most deeply though, the God of the prophets encourages us to long for and work for restoration and healing.
- Sustainably fruitful land, broken institutions made healthy and whole, economies of abundance for our own nation and culture as well as for others, land rights and security for all people - these are concrete and beautiful signs of just, flourishing societies that make God happy, both then and now.

Spiritual Engagement: Matches and Anger

- ACTION: Take 5 minutes to walk, or look out a window with God today.
- OBJECT: Before you go, take a match, light a candle. Hold your neighborhood in the light of God's promise, "I will improve the circumstances of my people." Blow out your candle, and imagine the smoke as the Spirit of God filling your neighborhood.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Partner | Exhale: World | *repeat with each step*
- CLOSE: As you circle your neighborhood or gaze out your window, be attentive to what God illuminates. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Seek me and live."



HOSEA & *Ribbons*

WEEK 2

Week 2, Day 1

Hosea 1:2-9

^{1:2} When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to him, "Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution, for the people of the land commit great prostitution by deserting the Lord."³ So Hosea went and took Gomer, Diblaim's daughter, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. ⁴ The Lord said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will destroy the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the Jezreel Valley." ⁶ Gomer became pregnant again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, "Name her No Compassion, because I will no longer have compassion on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷ But I will have compassion on the house of Judah. I, the Lord their God, will save them; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen." ⁸ When Gomer finished nursing No Compassion, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. ⁹ Then the Lord said, "Name him Not My People because you are not my people, and I am not your God."

Points of Interest

- Who is Hosea? Hosea spoke to Israel's leaders just one generation after Amos. Like Amos, he is concerned about healthy and unhealthy religious and national life, but he focuses less on economic injustice and more on God's desire to have a loving relationship with people.
- What's happening here? Hosea believed that God commanded him to marry a prostitute, who either would not or could not be faithful to him. Bummer for Hosea, and maybe a bummer for his wife, Gomer, to be used in this way. We have no idea whether this is a fictional metaphor or Hosea's lived historical experience. For the sake of everyone involved, I certainly hope it didn't happen.
- What's going on for Hosea? We have no idea. Hosea keeps his feelings private. Perhaps he thinks he's doing a noble but tragic thing. He's marrying a partner who is not faithful. She bears three children that he isn't sure are his. And the kids are given names that are as painful and bleak as is his love story. That's heart-breaking, and it's how God apparently feels sometimes in trying to love our messy, violent, faithless human family.
- How about for Gomer? We learn even less about her life than we do Hosea's. And the Bible's use of prostitutes as metaphors for spiritual unfaithfulness to God can be both messy and misogynistic. Grappling with these issues, director Ryan Daniel Dobson released a powerful film in 2019 called *Hosea*. It reimagines the prophet's opening story in modern times and from Gomer's perspective. Like a number of prostitutes, Gomer's history includes childhood sexual abuse, adult drug addiction, and trafficking by a fellow user. Even a marriage to a childhood sweetheart (the Hosea character) doesn't immediately change her life. Our addictions, our wounds, and our pasts aren't always easy to shake. The film does suggest a version of this love story that is tender and humane. It also suggests that in a scenario such as this, no one is fully a hero, just as no one is fully a sinner, and learning to love faithfully and well asks a lot of us all.
- What does all this have to do with God? The names of the three kids give us a hint. One is named Jezreel after the site of an infamous war atrocity in Israel's national history. The other two are

named “No Compassion” and “Not My People,” after the feelings God has for Israel these days. God’s relationship to God’s beloved people includes the wounds of love not fully requited. God is connected, bonded, and passionate, and God is also angry, wounded, and yearning. We’ll see this week that God’s frustrations and disappointments with people are never the end of God’s love story. God steadily woos and creatively and continually offers Godself to everyone God loves.

Spiritual Engagement: Ribbons and Love

- REFLECTION: In the last few days, when have you felt God’s love near? And far?
- OBJECT: Tie knots* in your ribbon, for both the close and far moments of God’s love.
**as many as needed*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Love | Exhale: Knots | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Allow your finger to run along the full length of your ribbon, bumps and smooth. A reminder of God’s presence with you always. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "You are my people."

Week 2, Day 2

Hosea 2:14-23

^{2:14} Therefore, I will charm her,
and bring her into the desert,
and speak tenderly to her heart.
¹⁵ From there I will give her vineyards,
and make the Achor Valley a door of hope.
There she will respond to me as in the days of her youth,
like the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.
¹⁶ On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, "My husband," and no longer will you call me, "My Lord." ¹⁷ I will take away the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they will not be mentioned by name anymore. ¹⁸ On that day, I will make a covenant for them with the wild animals, the birds in the sky, and the creeping creatures of the fertile ground. I will do away with the bow, the sword, and war from the land; I will make you lie down in safety.
¹⁹ I will take you for my wife forever;
I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice,
in devoted love, and in mercy.
²⁰ I will take you for my wife in faithfulness;
and you will know the Lord.
²¹ On that day I will answer, says the Lord.
I will answer the heavens
and they will answer the earth.
²² The earth will answer the corn, the new wine, and the fresh oil,
and they will answer Jezreel;
²³ I will sow him for myself in the land;
and I will have compassion on No Compassion,
and I will say to Not My People, "You are my people";
and he will say, "You are my God."

Points of Interest

- What's going on? God is wooing the object of God's love, which here is the nation of Israel, personified by the faithless spouse Gomer. In this metaphor of a second honeymoon, the couple travel to the desert. They visit the site of a painful period in their past. (Achor Valley is a desert site that commemorates a shameful episode in Israel's early national history.) There the couple renew their vows, the bride promising faithful love and the groom promising, well, everything.
- What is a Baal? Baal was the name of a Canaanite fertility god. In agrarian societies like ancient Israel, good weather, fertile soil, and fertile wombs were matters of life and death. Fertility religions, where gods allegedly blessed these things in exchange for sacrifices and worship, were popular. Both the Bible and archaeology indicates that devotion to gods like Baal was practiced alongside devotion to the God of Israel. The prophets say this offends God, that worship - like marriage - is only good for people and for God when it is monogamous. In a time and place where polytheism isn't so common, does this still feel relevant to you? Do you have objects or worship or love that lessen your interest in or commitment to God?
- What kind of partner is God? I'm calling God a partner, not a husband, despite the persistent husband/bride language here and elsewhere in scripture. Husband is a gendered word, which

implies God is male, which God isn't. God's bride is also never an individual, but - depending on your interpretation - a huge group of people on earth or all people on earth. So I call the faithful and loving God our partner, my partner. While faithful love predominates in this description of God our partner, there are other qualities. God our partner charms, woos, and speaks tenderly - it's kind of seductive. And God, our partner, has righteousness and justice - those words *tsedeqah* and *mishpat* we talked about last week. God is motivated by love and interest in our well-being, and God is interested in really achieving well-being for us all as well. If people talk about God and it doesn't sound like this kind of God, they are not telling the truth.

- Who is answering whom? I love all this language of "answering" - the heavens and the earth; the corn, wine, and oil; even the old site of the massacre. Clearly this is poetic, not literal. God is speaking to the skies. (In ancient cosmology, the sky and everything above it was "the heavens" where God lives.) The skies are speaking to the earth. The earth is speaking to the crops. The abundant harvest is speaking to past moments of suffering and shame. God is in relationship with an abundantly relational earth, where all things, all people, all matter is connected, and God is nudging it all toward fertility and life and joy and redemption.
- Can God really do all these things God is promising? Most of us think God can do whatever God wants. But we've seen religions - including Christian practice of what's called the "health and wealth" gospel - that believe God can bless people with good lives and abundant material prosperity if we have enough faith. And you could read this passage that way, as if God's saying: be devoted to me, and I'll give you all the things you want. But our lives and the facts of this world tell us this kind of religion isn't true. God doesn't just single-handedly bless and curse. There are lots of other forces and wills in this world. Who causes what is complicated. We can love God very, very much and still face hard times. The prophets are singers, not scientists; they are poets, not lawyers. Hosea communicates God's intentions for the earth and its people - to experience God's love through prayer, worship, and the abundant goodness of the natural world. All of this is meant to function as signs of God's loving faithfulness that invites and calls out our love for God in return.

Spiritual Engagement: Ribbons and Love

- REFLECTION: In what ways are you waiting for a door of hope to open up in your life?
- OBJECT: On your ribbon write a word or phrase from God that would speak tenderly to your heart. Hang your knotted ribbon in a doorway or on a doorknob as an encouragement.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Tender | Exhale: Waiting | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Touch your ribbon as you open your door, praying, "You are my God." And listen for God's reassuring response, "You are my people."

Week 2, Day 3

Hosea 6:1-6

- ¹ “Come, let’s return to the Lord;
for it is he who has injured us and will heal us;
he has struck us down, but he will bind us up.
- ² After two days he will revive us;
on the third day he will raise us up,
so that we may live before him.
- ³ Let’s know, let’s press on to know the Lord;
whose appearing is as certain as the dawn;
who will come to us like the showers,
like the spring rains that give drink to the earth.”
- ⁴ Ephraim, what will I do with you?
Judah, what will I do with you?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
like the dew that vanishes quickly.
- ⁵ Therefore, I have attacked them by the prophets,
I have killed them by the words of my mouth,
and my judgment goes forth like a light.
- ⁶ I desire faithful love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God instead of entirely burned offerings.

Points of Interest

- What does it mean to “know the Lord”? Many languages have different words for “knowing,” words for knowing facts or knowing about things, and other words for knowing through relationships. The Hebrew word here, “yada,” can mean mental knowledge, but it also means relational knowledge. It is used as a word for sexual intimacy as well. There’s a kind of knowing that requires a relationship; this is knowing as loving, and this is what it means to know God. It is not knowing about God, but staying in relationship with God, where we welcome God’s total knowledge of our thoughts and ways, and we seek to know God’s thoughts and ways as well.
- Why doesn’t the song in the first three verses satisfy God? The song expresses hope in the future, confidence in God’s compassion, and a desire to know God. Yet God seems to detect a fickle tone here. The people say God will reliably be present, like the dawn. And God says the people’s interest in God is temporary, like the morning dew. God is interested in people who cultivate dispositions of steady, loving faithfulness in their actions, not people who just say nice things about God or their devotion to God.
- Does God really attack and injure people? You’re going to tire of reading this, but may I remind you that this is poetry. When the prophets warn people of the consequences of ignoring God’s life-giving wisdom, people feel attacked. Sometimes the prophets also preach the brand of religion that we were rejecting yesterday, religion that says God always rewards people who do right and God causes or allows harm to people who do wrong. Again, I personally believe these are the prophets’ less insightful moments. We may feel God is attacking us or abandoning us

when life goes poorly for us. There's room for feeling that way. Maybe God even feels like acting this way sometimes too! But the God who is righteous and just, loving and equitable, is in the end steadier than this, more loving than this.

- “Faithful love and not sacrifice, knowledge of God instead of offerings . . .” Why do these words sound familiar? Jesus quotes this line twice in the gospel of Matthew. These words are important to Jesus. Jesus reiterates that God is not interested in performative religion, “playing church” just right. And God is repulsed by the judgmental legalism that can be common among religious people. What God is attracted to and looking for in people is relationships of love and trust and kindness.

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.

Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____

EXHALE: _____

**repeat as needed*

Week 2, Day 4

Hosea 11:1-9

- ¹ When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
- ² The more I called them,
the further they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and they burned incense to idols.
- ³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.
- ⁴ I led them
with bands of human kindness,
with cords of love.
I treated them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks;
I bent down to them and fed them.
- ⁵ They will return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria will be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
- ⁶ The sword will strike wildly in their cities;
it will consume the bars of their gates
and will take everything because of their schemes.
- ⁷ My people are bent on turning away from me;
and though they cry out to the Most High,
he will not raise them up.
- ⁸ How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart winces within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
- ⁹ I won't act on the heat of my anger;
I won't return to destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a human being,
the holy one in your midst;
I won't come in harsh judgment.

Points of Interest

- What is going on here? This is another love poem, this time from the perspective of a parent, rather than a marriage partner.
- What is God's emotional life like? Maybe you find that a strange question, but the prophets insist God is not a distant, cold, aloof monarch. God is not what Aristotle called the "unmoved mover." God is more like a loving parent, one whose emotions toward God's children are sometimes overwhelming. This poem is meant to give us a window into God's emotional life as a parent.
- Egypt? Ephraim? Assyria? Who are all these people? The poem is a love poem of national history. Israel is the northern kingdom of a divided nation, and Ephraim is one of its northern tribes. The

whole nation has an epic backstory of deliverance from slavery in Egypt. But in the future, they risk returning to captivity there or being overrun by Assyria, the superpower to the North. The latter is what happened within a generation of Hosea's career.

- What makes God different from people? Most of us would probably say that God is more powerful than people. Or perhaps we'd say that God is immortal, or that God is spirit, not embodied like us. All this may be true. But in Hosea, God says that the most important difference between God and people is that God is more loving and compassionate than we are. God gets angry but doesn't lose control and lash out in anger. God does not judge harshly as we do or give up as we do. God's constant loving affection - this is what it means that God is "the holy one in our midst."
- What are Admah and Zeboiim? They are ruins of long-ago destroyed cities. They represent life that had no future, life without legacy, the foil or opposite of God's intention for us all.
- I encourage you to move into a moment of compassionate meditation on this passage, to let it help you know God with you, not just know about God. Recall that God fondly remembers your childhood and youth - your first steps, your first words, your messy eating. And imagine God as an attentive and loving parent to you now, even though you are older. God is compassionate and kind to you today. God is not giving up on you. God is invested in your future.
- And now consider that God has this same relationship not just with you personally, but with the communities you are part of. How can you believe in and welcome God's faithful, loving parenting toward your family, your culture, your race, your country? Where is that easy for you to imagine? Where is it hard?

Spiritual Engagement: Ribbons and Love

- REFLECTION: What emotions, voices, commitments, etc. have you been bending toward lately? How do you feel as a result?
- OBJECT: Tie a ribbon around your wrist as a way to orient to God's strong cords of kindness and love that are always formed around you.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Bend to | Exhale: The Holy | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: As you pray, bend toward the floor and listen for God's voice. Bend toward the sky and listen for God's voice. Bend to yourself and listen to God's voice within. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "You are my people."

Week 2, Day 5

Hosea 14:1-7

- ¹ Return, Israel, to the Lord your God;
you have stumbled because of your wickedness.
- ² Prepare to speak
and return to the Lord;
say to the Lord,
"Forgive all wickedness;
and receive the good.
Instead of bulls,
let us offer what we can say:
- ³ Assyria won't save us;
we won't ride upon horses;
we will no longer say, 'Our God,'
to the work of our hands.
In you the orphan finds compassion."
- ⁴ I will heal their faithlessness;
I will love them freely,
for my anger has turned from them.
- ⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel;
he will blossom like the lily;
he will cast out his roots like the forests of Lebanon.
- ⁶ His branches will spread out;
his beauty will be like the olive tree,
and his fragrance like that of Lebanon.
- ⁷ They will again live beneath my shadow,
they will flourish like a garden;
they will blossom like the vine,
their fragrance will be like the wine of Lebanon.

Points of Interest

- What's going on here? Hosea encourages Israel to faithful, loving relationship to God and insists that God's own faithful love will have healing, flourishing effects.
- What do Assyria and horses represent? The most powerful nation in the region at the time, and the most powerful weapon of war at that time in history. They are what people thought would save a nation. We think that if we make an alliance with power, things will go well for us. We think that if we arm ourselves, we will be strong. God says otherwise. History says otherwise. Powerful people and nations usually look out for themselves. And the things we think will protect us more often than not only do us harm. Far more people are hurt by guns in their home, for instance, than the number of people who are actually made more safe by those same weapons.
- How does a nation or any community return to God? How does a person return to God? I don't want to turn this poetry into a formula, but it does seem there is a pattern to follow here.
 - Don't try to impress God.
 - Don't offer God something (in this case, bulls - sacrifice) that God doesn't want or need.

- o Do ask forgiveness.
- o Do offer God what is good: your own loving loyalty.
- o Admit that people or forces that look like they'll save us - all the politicians we support, all the consumer brands marketed at our dissatisfied, hungry selves - will not in fact save us.
- o Tell God that you know that stuff we can make - money, power, success, etc. - won't love us or make us secure.
- o Tell God you know that God loves you and that God loves everyone who sees that they are weak and could use God's love.

Are there any aspects of this prayer of return that you would like to pray today?

- What is God's vision of human flourishing? The poetry speaks of nourishing waters, blossoming flowers, and deep roots. It speaks of growing things that are strong, abundant, useful, and beautiful. I think God wants people and families and churches and communities of all kinds and sizes, even nations, to be strong, abundant, useful, and beautiful. Which of these qualities would you like God's help to see in yourself or in a community you are part of? Which of these qualities would you like God's help in growing in you or in a community you are part of?

Spiritual Engagement: Ribbons and Love

- ACTION: Take 5 minutes to walk outside or look out a window with God today.
- OBJECT: Notice the ribbons of God's love in your neighborhood and city, in the branches, leaves, exposed roots, and tendrils of wind. Also notice where there are fractures, potholes and abandoned lots.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Heal | Exhale: Flourish | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Ask God where you can partner in planting, uprooting, or resting in the world that you see. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "You are my people."



MICAH & Rocks

WEEK 3

Week 3, Day 1

Micah 2:1-3, 3:1-4

^{2:1} Doom to those who devise wickedness,
to those who plan evil when they are in bed.
By the light of morning they do it,
for they are very powerful.

² They covet fields and seize them,
houses and take them away.
They oppress a householder and those in his house,
a man and his estate.

³ Therefore, the Lord proclaims:
I myself am devising an evil against this family
from which you will not be able to remove your necks!
You will no longer be able to go about arrogantly,
for it will be an evil time.

^{3:1} But I said:
Hear, leaders of Jacob,
rulers of the house of Israel!
Isn't it your job to know justice?—
² you who hate good and love evil,
who tear the skin off them, and the flesh off their bones,
³ who devour the flesh of my people,
tear off their skin,
break their bones in pieces,
and spread them out as if in a pot,
like meat in a kettle.
⁴ Then they will cry out to the Lord,
but he won't answer them.
He will hide his face from them at that time,
because of their evil deeds.

Points of Interest

- Micah lived and spoke in the late 8th century B.C.E. He was a contemporary of fellow prophets Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. Amos and Hosea spoke to the northern kingdom of Israel. Micah, like Isaiah, lived in and spoke to the southern kingdom of Judah, where Jerusalem and its palace and the Temple were located.
- Micah has positive things to say that we'll get to. But he also spends a lot of energy letting Judah know how they are messing up their lives. Speaking for God, sharing in God's frustration, he's like: This is why you people can't have good things! Micah matches the message of his contemporary prophets and Jesus centuries later. They all insist that if we ignore God's wisdom and do not embrace God's just loving kindness as our way of life in the world, we will not be able to experience a close connection with God. Jesus said: Forgive others, or God will not forgive you. Micah says: Treat others cruelly, and God will not listen to you when you pray. In fact, God will hide God's face from you. This is just the way the world works. God isn't asking us to earn

God's love or affection. But God is saying that love of God and love of neighbor are tied together. You can't have the one without the other.

- The details of the prophetic rage against injustice are specific to a time and place very far from us. But let's take a stab at some contemporary equivalents. Here are some ways to be far from God. Here are some ways to mess up our lives.
 - "Devise wickedness," "plan evil when they are in bed": Set harmful intentions for anyone or anything God loves. Make plans that your best self knows aren't right.
 - "Go about arrogantly": Walk, talk, drive, or otherwise be in the world like your personhood or your time are more valuable or important than anyone else's.
 - "Covet fields and seize them": Want something that isn't yours and then take it or buy it, without thought to the financial or environmental cost to others.
 - "Oppress a householder": Vote for people or support companies or causes that are connected to fear, anxiety, or lack that others experience while inside their own homes.
 - "Devour the flesh of my people": Engage in activity or industry that causes physical harm and suffering to others.

In a modern, capitalist, globalized society, our enmeshment in injustice is sometimes obvious, sometimes subtle. Consider sitting with Micah's list for a moment and asking if you're walking away from God in one or more of these ways. If so, consider saying "sorry" for that and asking God for openness this week to discover how to walk with God justly, lovingly, and humbly.

Spiritual Engagement: Rocks and Paths

- REFLECTION: In what ways have you intersected with arrogance, oppression and power?
- OBJECT: Hold the rock in your hands. Allow the weight to represent your feelings* at this intersection. Write your feelings on one side of the rock. **perhaps numbness, frustration, weariness*
- PRAYER: Inhale: [*Your feeling] | Exhale: Help | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Draw your attention to God's closeness, God's hands holding the rock with you. Close your prayer with intention, "I will walk in the name of the Lord my God."

Week 3, Day 2

Micah 4:1-7

- ¹ But in the days to come,
the mountain of the Lord's house
will be the highest of the mountains;
it will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.
- ² Many nations will go and say:
"Come, let's go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of Jacob's God,
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God's paths!"
Instruction will come from Zion
and the Lord's word from Jerusalem.
- ³ God will judge between the nations
and settle disputes of mighty nations,
which are far away.
They will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.
Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.
- ⁴ All will sit underneath their own grapevines,
under their own fig trees.
There will be no one to terrify them;
for the mouth of the Lord of heavenly forces has spoken.
- ⁵ Each of the peoples walks in the name of their own god;
but as for us, we will walk in the name of the Lord our God
forever and always.
- ⁶ On that day, says the Lord,
I will gather the lame;
I will assemble those who were driven away
and those whom I have harmed.
- ⁷ I will make the lame into survivors,
those driven away into a mighty nation.
The Lord will rule over them on Mount Zion
from now on and forever.

Points of Interest

- Micah presents his vision for life as it should be. It's easy to read these passages as a fantastical hope for some far-off idealized future. But I believe Micah is channeling God's vision for life as it should be and could be in any generation. Micah is poetically describing "God's will on earth, as it is in heaven." This is one version of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, what others call the beloved community. We'll linger over some of the most arresting, hopeful, and important images.
- In the Beloved Community, people walk together toward God, signified here by walking toward Jerusalem. On the journey toward God, and in worship of God, we learn to walk in God's paths, to live as God would have us live.

- In Beloved Community, we make and welcome shalom: wholeness, wellness, justice and peace. There is shalom between nations and people. There is wholeness, wellness, justice, and peace not just between countries but between ethnicities, between races, between cultures.
- Habits and dispositions of war and violence are replaced by active peacemaking.
- Everyone has the right to experience safety and security, symbolized by sitting under one's own grapevine and eating from one's own fig tree. This is an important image in American history, cited by George Washington in his peaceful departure from power, as the musical *Hamilton* and inaugural poet Amanda Gorman reminded us all. And this vision is as much for BIPOC Americans as for white Americans; it is as much for the global poor as for the industrialized world.
- We earnestly pursue our own faith while practicing religious tolerance as well, welcoming any good fruit that comes when people "walk in the name of their own God."
- All people have access to gathering in joyful, inclusive communities of profound belonging. Those who have been othered, excluded, and kept from belonging aren't just welcomed but are healed and centered.
- A day of redemption comes for all who have been wounded. Victims become survivors. The chronically weak grow in strength.
- Which of these images speak most to your longings for yourself or your loved ones? Which aspects of this vision can inform your prayers? Which aspects of this vision can you partner with God in making true this day, this week, this year, this life?

Spiritual Engagement: Rocks and Paths

- REFLECTION: In what ways are you longing for beloved community?
- OBJECT: Write the points NSEW* on your rock. Spin the rock, making a deep bow in the direction it lands. honoring God's presence that stretches in every direction. **North, South, East, West*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Shalom | Exhale: To all | *repeat 4 times*
- CLOSE: Add dots to the rock to represent yourself and others. This rock - now a visual of beloved community. Where God's love reaches everyone regardless of orientation, location or status. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "We will walk in the name of the Lord our God."

Week 3, Day 3

Micah 5:2-5a, 7-11

- ^{5:2} As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.
- ³ Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.
The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.
- ⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great throughout the earth;
- ⁷ Then the few remaining in Jacob will be amid many peoples
like dew from the Lord,
like spring showers upon the grass,
which does not hope for humans or wait for human ones.
- ⁸ Then the few remaining in Jacob will be among the nations,
amid many peoples,
like a lion among the creatures of the forest,
like a young lion among flocks
of sheep, which when it passes by, tramples and tears to pieces
with no one to deliver.
- ⁹ Your hand will be lifted over your foes;
all your enemies will be cut off.
- ¹⁰ On that day — says the Lord—
I will cut down your horses in your midst;
I will destroy your chariots!
- ¹¹ I will cut down the cities of your land;
I will tear down your defenses!

Points of Interest

- Following up on yesterday's vision for the Beloved Community, Micah imagines how God will help Judah get to the promised land. We can listen in to this conversation and see if there is anything that might more timelessly speak to how God can help us experience God's kin(g)dom among us and how we can achieve the beloved community.
- Micah's path to the better future comes through good leadership and through the removal of the influence of enemies external and internal. We'll take these paths to a better future one by one, first in Micah's historical context and then in ours.
- Micah hopes for his country Judah to get a better king, one who like King David, is born in the small town of Bethlehem, but leads his country justly and kindly in ways that honor God. If this occurs, those left in Judah may be few in number but powerful in reputation and impact in the world.

- Under new leadership, Micah also dreams that his country will be free of its curses. Here these curses include enemies that want to hurt them, as well as false reliance on military weapons (horses and chariots) and defenses. Just at this level, there's a model to follow for members of any nation. Pray that God raises up humble, kind, wise, effective leaders for our country and for all other institutions. Pray that our enemies don't get their way. And walk with God by spending less money and energy on aggression and defensiveness in all forms. This is timeless wisdom from God.
- Now we'll reframe these areas in another light as followers of Jesus. Since the gospel of Matthew was written, followers of Jesus have seen another level of fulfillment of this prophecy in the life and teaching of Jesus. Jesus was born in obscurity in the town of Bethlehem. Jesus grew up to become the Good Shepherd of God, the human whose teaching and life lead toward life, both for his contemporaries and for all of us to follow. The teaching, example, and life of Jesus are the Way to achieving beloved community, God's ways on earth.
- Jesus also invites his followers' allegiance to him, to (in prophetic terms) serve God and not our idols. Jesus' teaching and example and help will bring us security and well-being. This would include, for instance:
 - active love for others rather than defensiveness;
 - active peacemaking with others rather than aggression;
 - generous sharing, rather than hoarding, of our resources;
 - and cultivating inner contentment and gratitude, in the face of endless marketing and news that stir anxiety.

This is just the start of my list. What would you add for yourself?

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.
 Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____
 EXHALE: _____

**repeat as needed*

Week 3, Day 4

Micah 6:6-8

- ⁶ With what should I approach the Lord
and bow down before God on high?
Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings,
with year-old calves?
- ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with many torrents of oil?
Should I give my oldest child for my crime;
the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?
- ⁸ He has told you, human one, what is good and
what the Lord requires from you:
to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

Points of Interest

- Micah says that God is eager to walk with us, to join us and guide us on the path to God's good, just ways on earth, to join and guide us on the path toward freedom. And God invites us to walk with God. So how does God want us to walk? What does God want in our lives? Micah takes a simple, straightforward approach to those questions here. First there is a negative - what God *doesn't* want - and then the positive - what God *does* want.
- First the negative. God's primary desires are not for more worship and religion. Maybe this surprises you, maybe not, but I think it would have been a surprise for Micah's contemporaries in ancient Judah and for many others then and now. Let's fill this out a bit. What does God most want us to build more of? Not churches or temples. What does God most want us to give God? Not offerings or sacrifices. What does God most want us to do with all our time, money, and other resources? Not just more religious practice. And God *definitely* wants nothing to do with certain kinds of "worship," any worship or religious practice that does harm to others. So God does not want people to make human sacrifices, as adherents of some ancient Canaanite religions did. God also wants nothing to do with churchgoers that claim to love God but don't love their kids. God wants nothing to do with pastors or churches that indulge in or cover up sexual impropriety, financial indiscretion, or abuse of power. God wants nothing to do with religious ideals that lead men to subjugate women, or straight parents to ostracize their LGBTQ children. You get the idea.
- What God does want is simply put: that we do justice, that we embrace faithful love, and that we walk humbly with God. A rabbinical colleague of mine in our city made this the theme verse of his bar mitzvah and, with his parents' blessing, added the phrase "and with your fellow humans" to the end of the verse, as fits the context. Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and your fellow humans. This is one of my life mottos, as it is one of God's. In any human life, in any endeavor, in any company or vocation, we'd do well to ask: how can I do justice? How can I embrace and practice faithful love? And how can I humbly walk with God and my fellow humans? May it be, friends. May it be.

Spiritual Engagement: Rocks and Paths

- REFLECTION: How do you feel constricted in your life? How do you feel free?
- OBJECT: Put your rock in your pocket, a reminder of your real feelings and God's real, encompassing presence (NSEW). Touch your rock at any point you feel your body constrict, and you need help navigating how to engage humility, embody mercy, or do justice.
- PRAYER: Inhale: God in me | Exhale: God in you | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Honor the image of God in you, so that you can freely honor, and recognize the image of God in another. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "We will walk in the name of the Lord our God."

Week 3, Day 5

Micah 7:8-9, 18-20

- ⁸ Do not rejoice over me, my enemy,
because when I fall, I will rise;
if I sit in darkness, the Lord is my light.
- ⁹ I must bear the raging of the Lord,
for I have sinned against him,
until he decides my case and provides justice for me.
He will bring me out into the light;
I will see by means of his righteousness.
- ¹⁸ Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity,
overlooking the sin of the few remaining for his inheritance?
He doesn't hold on to his anger forever;
he delights in faithful love.
- ¹⁹ He will once again have compassion on us;
he will tread down our iniquities.
You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea.
- ²⁰ You will provide faithfulness to Jacob, faithful love to Abraham,
as you swore to our ancestors a long time ago.

Points of Interest

- Micah's final chapter charts more of God's paths for our renewal. Micah tells us about God's desires for our well being and what that says about God. Today we read this final chapter in part. You'll notice that this Lent, we are only sampling little bits of most of these prophets. That's partly for time and length. And it's partly for accessibility reasons. If you read the 12 minor prophets, and you don't have extensive background knowledge and skill with ancient Near Eastern culture and religion, there's a lot that is confusing and off-putting. The Bible is awesome, and it is accessible. But it is not always easy. We hope that this year's excerpts in the prophets enrich your life and faith and leave you wanting more, while appreciating the work it takes to access this ancient poetry.
- Mostly, I wanted to quote Maya Angelou's famous and beautiful poem "Still I Rise." God believes in your resilience, my friends. You can find the whole poem online easily.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Angelou's personal history, and the story of her whole African American culture and people, give testimony to the renewing power of God and the resiliency of humanity. When we cultivate, celebrate, and empower resilience, we are on God's side.
- You'll notice that God our shepherd doesn't always lead us out of darkness. Here God is light even while one sits in darkness. God is with us to illuminate, strengthen, comfort, and care, even while we face pain and limits and difficulty.

- Another way God leads us through difficulties, even difficulties we've made in our own folly, is when we "see by means of his righteousness." I think this means that we make God's loving, faithful intentions our own, and they help us see everything with better, truer perspective.
- Reminiscent of Hosea 11 that we looked at last week, Micah says that what makes God unique isn't power but God's forgiveness, compassion, and steady, you-can-count-on-it-always love. God's inheritance for God's kids is unique too. God doesn't shower us with money from the sky; it's not that kind of inheritance. As God's kids, people made in God's image, God wants us to know the love and joy and freedom that God knows.
- I think Micah knows that forgiveness and second chances aren't intuitive to most of us. We tend to believe that there is a straight line from the worst of our past to the destiny of our future. So Micah uses active, aggressive language for God's relationship to the worst we have done and the worst that has been done to us. God will "tread down" iniquities and God will "hurl sins" into the sea. All these worst actions, all these big mistakes and failings aren't just things God moves past. God removes their power to determine our present and our future. God practices a kind of forgetting. It's gone, it's over. Be free. Be loved. Rise.

Spiritual Engagement: Rocks and Paths

- ACTION: Let God bring you out into the light today. Take 5 minutes to walk outside or sit in the sunshine with God.
- OBJECT: Where you walk or sit, leave your rock in a spot where the sun will touch it. Let this be a marker along your path, of God's light that will renew, warm, and reach you.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Light | Exhale: Resilience | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Name folks in your neighborhood who are light to you, and give thanks to God for them. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "We will walk in the name of the Lord our God."



JONAH & *Water*

WEEK 4

Week 4, Day 1

Jonah 1:1-6

¹ The Lord's word came to Jonah, Amittai's son: ² "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it, for their evil has come to my attention."

³ So Jonah got up—to flee to Tarshish from the Lord! He went down to Joppa and found a ship headed for Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to go with them to Tarshish, away from the Lord. ⁴ But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, so that there was a great storm on the sea; the ship looked like it might be broken to pieces. ⁵ The sailors were terrified, and each one cried out to his god. They hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to make it lighter.

Now Jonah had gone down into the hold of the vessel to lie down and was deep in sleep. ⁶ The ship's officer came and said to him, "How can you possibly be sleeping so deeply? Get up! Call on your god! Perhaps the god will give some thought to us so that we won't perish."

Points of Interest

- Jonah is really different from the other minor prophets. The book of Jonah is a fictional fable about a prophet, rather than the collected poetry and teachings of a historical prophet.
- Fun fact, though: the only other possible reference to a prophet named Jonah is in II Kings 14:23-25. Here Jonah is like the anti-Amos. He is a religious nationalist, a "homer" who enables a bad king, instead of making good trouble like real prophets do.
- In case it is a new idea for you, there is broad consensus among scholars that Jonah is a fable, not history. There is funny and dramatic language and story-telling. There are unlikely, dramatic things that happen between people and animals. And there is a major national spiritual revival that history has no record of. Just because Jonah isn't historical, though, doesn't mean it isn't true. Real and true are very different things. From Jonah, we learn a lot about what God is like and we learn a lot about what is most important.
- In Jonah, chapters 1 and 3, we see Jonah interacting cross-culturally with non-Israelites. And in chapters 2 and 3, we read about Jonah's prayers and interactions with God.
- Jonah is a story of psychological and spiritual examination. Jonah knows God wants Jonah to do something hard - to travel to a city and a people Jonah hates and to engage with them on behalf of God. The words Jonah is asked to say are critical, not affirming. God wants Jonah to highlight Nineveh's evil, in the hopes they might change. Still, Jonah doesn't have the time or the stomach for this. Imagine the place you would least like to go, and the people with whom you would least want to spend your time. For Jonah, this is the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh, in modern day Iraq. Jonah is understandably resistant to God. Rather than travel to Nineveh, he gets on a boat heading in the opposite direction. And thus begins an arc of descent in his life. Literally, the text repeatedly says "Jonah went down . . ." Metaphorically, this describes the descent into distance, self-pity, and death when we resist goodness and truth.
- There are so many ways to hate God. A professor named David Dark uses this phrase on Twitter. When he sees public behavior that he considers offensive to a loving, just God, he retweets an

article or picture with this phrase: “There are so many ways to hate God.” Isn’t that true? Jonah hates God by resisting God’s generous compassion, by refusing to participate in God’s message of awakening for others.

Spiritual Engagement: Water and Crying Out

- REFLECTION: What have you been crying out against these days? How do you notice this in your body?
- OBJECT: Vigorously shake the container of water. Allow the fullness of your cries to disrupt the calm water.* Breathe with God, as the bubbles, swirls and spirals settle in the water. **repeat as needed*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Settle | Exhale: Aaaargh! | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Draw your attention to what floats and sinks in your spirit. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Get Up! Cry Out!"

Week 4, Day 2

Jonah 1:7-16

⁷ Meanwhile, the sailors said to each other, "Come on, let's cast lots so that we might learn who is to blame for this evil that's happening to us." They cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they said to him, "Tell us, since you're the cause of this evil happening to us: What do you do and where are you from? What's your country and of what people are you?"

⁹ He said to them, "I'm a Hebrew. I worship the Lord, the God of heaven—who made the sea and the dry land."

¹⁰ Then the men were terrified and said to him, "What have you done?" (The men knew that Jonah was fleeing from the Lord, because he had told them.)

¹¹ They said to him, "What will we do about you so that the sea will become calm around us?" (The sea was continuing to rage.)

¹² He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea! Then the sea will become calm around you. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon you."

¹³ The men rowed to reach dry land, but they couldn't manage it because the sea continued to rage against them. ¹⁴ So they called on the Lord, saying, "Please, Lord, don't let us perish on account of this man's life, and don't blame us for innocent blood! You are the Lord: whatever you want, you can do." ¹⁵ Then they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased its raging.

¹⁶ The men worshipped the Lord with a profound reverence; they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made solemn promises.

Points of Interest

- We left Jonah midway through the first chapter and midway through his descent. As the storm worsens and the sailors worry, Jonah's descent continues.
- There is a great irony in Jonah's self-identification. He says he "knows" God. Jonah knows about God. He knows facts about God, and he associates his identity with God. "I'm a Hebrew. I worship the Lord," would be like a contemporary person saying, "I'm Christian," or "I'm Muslim." But these supposedly pagan sailors are the ones here that actually know God, in the sense of having a connected relationship. The sailors treat Jonah with restraint and compassion, which Jonah has refused to practice with his call to Nineveh. And the soldiers pray to and worship God with "profound reverence" while Jonah is running away from God. Core to our church's practice and belief is this idea: God is less interested in your religious identity or association than God is interested in your movement toward or away from God. There are so many ways to hate God, and so many people who do - inside and outside of religious affiliations. And there are so many ways to love God, and so many people who do - inside and outside of religious affiliations.
- The teaching of the prophets is embodied in this passage. Will God be pleased with our religious activity? That's really for our sake more than God's. God wants people who do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with their God. God wants loving mercy, not sacrifice. Let justice

(*mishpat* - equitable outcomes) roll down like water, and righteousness (*tsedaqah* - loving intentions) like an everflowing stream. One point for the sailors; not so much for Jonah.

Spiritual Engagement: Water and Crying Out

- REFLECTION: Who is God to you?
- OBJECT: Write every descriptor of God that comes to mind on the glass bottle. Either at the water line, or at the bottom of the bottle. Which descriptors feel more surface level and which ones are more deeply known to you?
- PRAYER: Inhale: To be known | Exhale: To know | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Draw your attention to which descriptor(s) feel most grounding to you today, in the waves of life. Close your prayer with God's assuring words, "Get Up! Cry Out!"

Week 4, Day 3

Jonah 1:17-2:10

^{1:17} Meanwhile, the Lord provided a great fish to swallow Jonah. Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

^{2:1} Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish:

² "I called out to the Lord in my distress, and he answered me.
From the belly of the underworld I cried out for help;
you have heard my voice.

³ You had cast me into the depths in the heart of the seas,
and the flood surrounds me.

All your strong waves and rushing water passed over me.

⁴ So I said, 'I have been driven away from your sight.

Will I ever again look on your holy temple?

⁵ Waters have grasped me to the point of death;
the deep surrounds me.

Seaweed is wrapped around my head

⁶ at the base of the undersea mountains.

I have sunk down to the underworld;

its bars held me with no end in sight.

But you brought me out of the pit.'

⁷ When my endurance was weakening,

I remembered the Lord,

and my prayer came to you,

to your holy temple.

⁸ Those deceived by worthless things lose their chance for mercy.

⁹ But me, I will offer a sacrifice to you with a voice of thanks.

That which I have promised, I will pay.

Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"

¹⁰ Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto the dry land.

Points of Interest

- I love the little hinge word here, "meanwhile." The sailors are praying, and Jonah is falling to his watery grave at the bottom of the ocean. But meanwhile, there's this great fish. Awesome. This is the famous part of the book of Jonah - the bit with the big fish, which is often called a whale. This will be God's first attempt at saving Jonah. It won't really stick, so there will be a second attempt in the final chapter, but we're getting ahead of ourselves.
- Jonah's metaphorical descent is now complete. He must have won all the "hold your breath in the pool" competitions as a child (kidding, did I mention this was a fable?), since he remains conscious and lucid even as he descends to the seaweed-covered, mountainous, rocky bottom of the Mediterranean. (Side note: Ancient Israelites had no idea what the ocean was like, as they were land-lovers, petrified of the open seas.) Jonah's moral and spiritual descent is so thorough, the text says he even descends to the Underworld. (In Hebrew, this word is Sheol: a kind of watery grave of an underworld where people's souls descend after death.) You could read this as what Alcoholics Anonymous and the recovery community often call "rock bottom." Jonah gets

about as far from God, as far from goodness and compassion and truth, as he could possibly get. Have you ever hit rock bottom in your life? What got you there? What happened next?

- Once Jonah hits rock bottom, God reaches out again with help, as God so often does when we hit rock bottom. The fish here represents a lot of things. The fish is part of the fable that makes for a great magical story. The fish is a means by which God rescues Jonah rather than punishing him, just as God wants to rescue Nineveh rather than do to them whatever bad things Jonah wishes God would do to them. And the fish represents a kind of death and resurrection, just as Jonah's three days and three nights have for Christians prefigured the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- God appoints things to act on God's behalf in the Book of Jonah. Here God appoints the fish to rescue Jonah. We read that God talks to the fish, and the fish - unlike Jonah! - does what God asks. How does God speak to God's creation? Through many, many means. And how does God act in and upon the earth? Also through many, many means. God is Spirit, not a physical presence on the earth you can find in any one, particular place. But God is able to communicate with us in many ways. And God is eager to enlist all of God's creation, you and me included, in doing God's work, if we are willing and interested.
- Jonah is a good, religious man, who grew up as a good, religious boy in a good, religious family. He knows how to pray all the right words. His prayer sounds like a short psalm. In fact, I've heard that his prayer is a mash-up of lots of short phrases you find throughout the Psalms, the Bible's prayer book. Jonah knows his Bible. Jonah knows how to pray.
- And yet, we'll see soon that although Jonah is vomited onto dry land by the fish, Jonah is not yet saved or delivered. This is only the beginning. Prayer and religious participation are not signs of a flourishing life. The fruit of a God-honoring, good life is always evidenced in love of God and love of neighbor as ourselves. There is no bypass. There are no shortcuts.
- In Jonah's case, he still needs to go to Nineveh. What is God calling you to today?

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.

Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____

EXHALE: _____

repeat as needed

Week 4, Day 4

Jonah 3:1-10

¹ The Lord's word came to Jonah a second time: ² "Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and declare against it the proclamation that I am commanding you." ³ And Jonah got up and went to Nineveh, according to the Lord's word. (Now Nineveh was indeed an enormous city, a three days' walk across.)

⁴ Jonah started into the city, walking one day, and he cried out, "Just forty days more and Nineveh will be overthrown!" ⁵ And the people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast and put on mourning clothes, from the greatest of them to the least significant.

⁶ When word of it reached the king of Nineveh, he got up from his throne, stripped himself of his robe, covered himself with mourning clothes, and sat in ashes. ⁷ Then he announced, "In Nineveh, by decree of the king and his officials: Neither human nor animal, cattle nor flock, will taste anything! No grazing and no drinking water!" ⁸ Let humans and animals alike put on mourning clothes, and let them call upon God forcefully! And let all persons stop their evil behavior and the violence that's under their control!" ⁹ He thought, Who knows? God may see this and turn from his wrath, so that we might not perish.

¹⁰ God saw what they were doing—that they had ceased their evil behavior. So God stopped planning to destroy them, and he didn't do it.

Points of Interest

- God hasn't saved Jonah yet. But in Chapter 3, God saves Nineveh. Though Nineveh had the reputation in Israel of being enemies of God, Jonah was the one who was much harder to reach.
- Jonah gets a do-over. I've heard a kind of conventional wisdom in Christian circles that if we don't welcome and learn the lessons God is seeking to teach us, God will continue to engage us in these things until we do. I don't know if this is always true, but it has been true for me and others and unlike much conventional religious "wisdom," this does seem right to me. After all, God is patient and persistent about our growth.
- Who are these people of Nineveh? And why does God care? Nineveh was the largest city of the regional superpower of Assyria, the same nation that violently wiped out the northern kingdom of Israel in the late 8th century B.C.E. and threatened the tiny southern kingdom of Judah for generations afterwards. That's who these people are. We'll find out in chapter 4 that God cares about them because there are a lot of people and animals in Nineveh, and God loves people and animals. That's what it says.
- In Hebrew, Jonah's message is a five word sermon. Have you ever heard a five word sermon? "Forty days more, Nineveh overthrown!" That's it. Somehow, though, it's persuasive. The king of Nineveh and all his people and all his animals repent. They seek to change their ways and turn to God. I'm being a little cynical here, but this is more evidence that Jonah is a fable. When, ever, have people been told, "You are evil!" and responded, "Wow. Thank you. I hadn't realized how evil we are. Let me go take care of that"?

- In Nineveh's response and in God's responsiveness to them, we see again the point of all prophetic warning and judgement. God never intends to punish or harm people, groups, or nations. God always wants people and groups and nations to turn to God and to be healed and made well.
- God stops God's plans. God changes God's mind. Once you're open to believing this is a thing God can do, you start to see it all over the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. Theologically, believing that God is loving, that God does not singlehandedly control the future, that God engages with people and adapts what God does based on our response, is called an open and relational view of God. That is not an official Reservoir Church belief or policy, but it is my theological framework.
- I hope you are finding Jonah as fun and delightful as it is meant to be. I love the emphasis on the animals here. Even the cattle and flocks of birds fast to draw near to God. God loves and cares about all that God has made, not just people. If you're fasting during Lent this year, this is a great picture of the value of that practice - depriving ourselves temporarily of a comfort or necessity - so that we can become more hungry and receptive to the living God.

Spiritual Engagement: Water and Crying Out

- REFLECTION: What is something you would like God to change God's mind about?
- OBJECT: Change the makeup of your water today. Add juice, or tea, or lemon, or ice, or seltzer to it. Pour a cup for you and God.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Open | Exhale: New | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: As you share this drink and your heart with God, notice any new names* that come to mind and write them on your bottle. **God of Second Chances, Holy Turnabout, Amend-er*
Close your prayer with God's invitation to, "Get Up! Cry Out!"

Week 4, Day 5

Jonah 4:1-11

¹ But Jonah thought this was utterly wrong, and he became angry. ² He prayed to the Lord, "Come on, Lord! Wasn't this precisely my point when I was back in my own land? This is why I fled to Tarshish earlier! I know that you are a merciful and compassionate God, very patient, full of faithful love, and willing not to destroy. ³ At this point, Lord, you may as well take my life from me, because it would be better for me to die than to live."

⁴ The Lord responded, "Is your anger a good thing?" ⁵ But Jonah went out from the city and sat down east of the city. There he made himself a hut and sat under it, in the shade, to see what would happen to the city.

⁶ Then the Lord God provided a shrub, and it grew up over Jonah, providing shade for his head and saving him from his misery. Jonah was very happy about the shrub. ⁷ But God provided a worm the next day at dawn, and it attacked the shrub so that it died. ⁸ Then as the sun rose God provided a dry east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint. He begged that he might die, saying, "It's better for me to die than to live."

⁹ God said to Jonah, "Is your anger about the shrub a good thing?"

Jonah said, "Yes, my anger is good—even to the point of death!"

¹⁰ But the Lord said, "You 'pitied' the shrub, for which you didn't work and which you didn't raise; it grew in a night and perished in a night. ¹¹ Yet for my part, can't I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than one hundred twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

Points of Interest

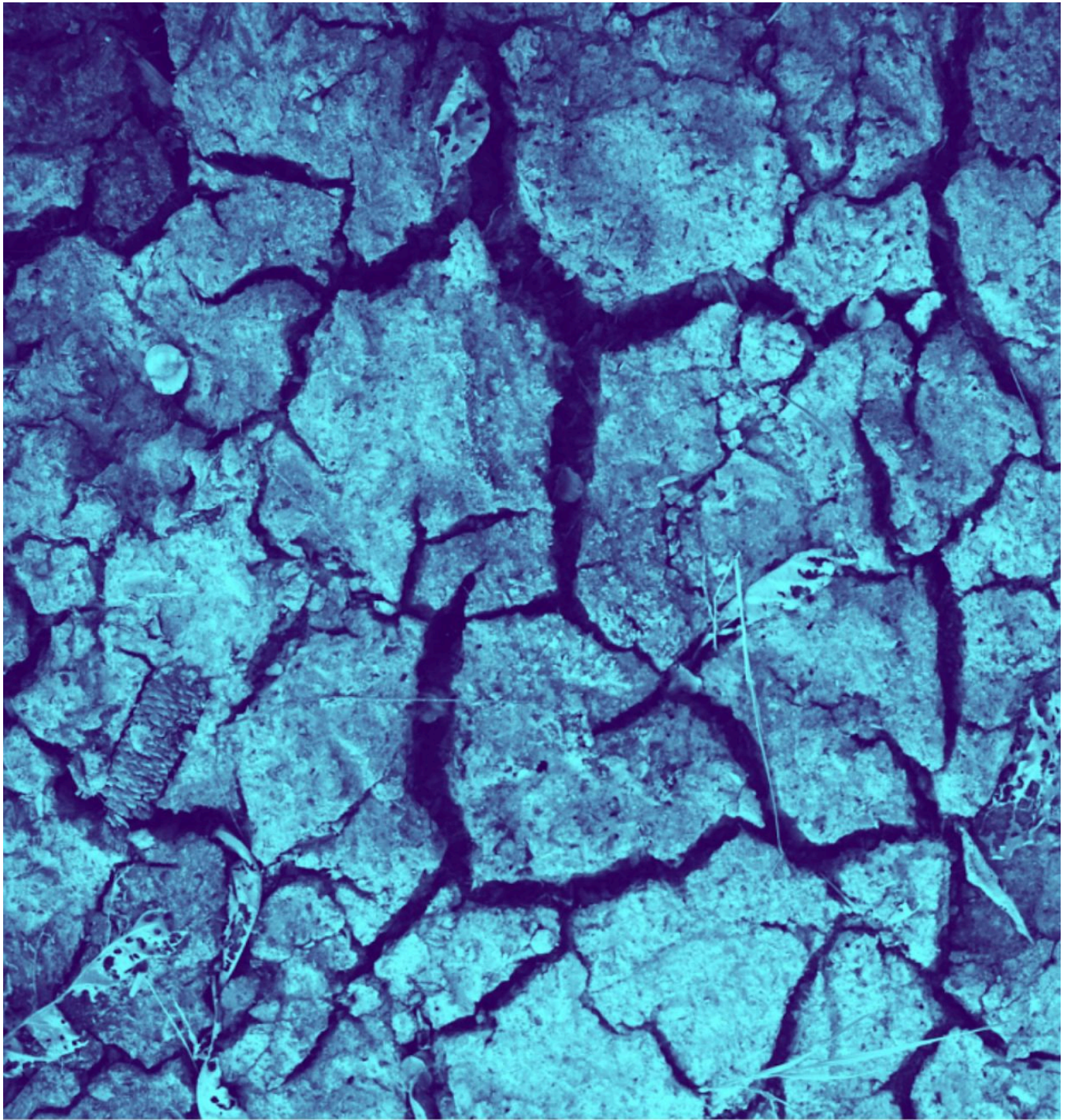
- Here we have God saving Jonah, part two. First there was the fish. Now here are the less famous but equally memorable and important shrub and worm!
- Jonah closes with all the big lessons of the story's fable. God teaches Jonah to see how God sees and to love how God loves. After Jonah's descent, God gives Jonah the opportunity to ascend from hard-hearted resentment to life-affirming compassion and love.
- Jonah's story teaches us that it is really important to love like God loves. It's hard for God to love God's creation without our help. And it is impossible for us to be close to God without loving as God loves. God's love includes compassion and forgiveness. To walk with God, our circle of loving compassion needs to be wide enough to include our enemies.
- Jonah returns to the language of God appointing and providing. Comically, God appoints a shrub to offer Jonah shade beneath the hot, equatorial sun. Then God appoints the worm to eat the shrub, so Jonah can empathize with what it's like to live without shelter or protection. (He didn't learn compassionate love through his dealings with Nineveh, so God returns to this lesson!) And then the next day, God appoints a hot, desert wind from the East, making Jonah

miserable, in hopes that he will learn some empathy or compassion. I think we can learn at least two things here.

- o One, It is very difficult for people to move beyond our angry resentments. We've seen that with very powerful people in the world. And perhaps, if we're honest, we've seen that in ourselves.
- o Two, God's activity in Jonah can give us insight into how to pray, and why some prayers are answered and others not. God doesn't have God's own physical body to just do things in the world. God works through God's material creation. So we can pray that God woos, inspires, encourages living and non-living creation to participate in the liberating, loving, redemptive work of God we hope to see in the world. But we can also remember that living and non-living creation sometimes agrees with and participates with God, like the shrubs and animals and Ninevites do in this story. And sometimes living and non-living creation does not agree with and participate with God, as Jonah mostly doesn't in this story. And sometimes there is nothing any of us can do about that.
- Who and what does God love? Everyone and everything that God has made. That's what God shows us through Jonah. The story ends as a parable. God is determined to see love through, to guide people on right paths. God asks Jonah - and us - a question that remains unanswered. "Shouldn't I love and tend lovingly to all I made? Shouldn't you join me in that?" And God waits for Jonah's answer and ours as well.

Spiritual Engagement: Water and Crying Out

- ACTION: Take 5 minutes to walk or sit somewhere new today, with God.
- OBJECT: Put a dab of water from your bottle on each wrist, a sign of God's holy presence with you.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Wide | Exhale: Love | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Holding your arms out wide, pray that God's mercy, compassion, patience and faithful love be poured out, saturating this new area around you, beyond your familiar and comfortable location. Draw your wrists together and close your prayer with God's invitation to, "Get Up! Cry Out!"



HABAKKUK & *Dirt*

WEEK 5

Week 5, Day 1

Habakkuk 1:1-11

- ¹ The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.
- ² Lord, how long will I call for help and you not listen?
I cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you don't deliver us.
- ³ Why do you show me injustice and look at anguish
so that devastation and violence are before me?
- ⁴ There is strife, and conflict abounds.
Justice does not endure
because the wicked surround the righteous.
Justice becomes warped.
- ⁵ Look among the nations and watch!
Be astonished and stare
because something is happening in your days
that you wouldn't believe even if told.
- ⁶ I am about to rouse the Chaldeans,
that bitter and impetuous nation,
which travels throughout the earth to possess dwelling places it does not own.
- ⁷ The Chaldean is dreadful and fearful.
He makes his own justice and dignity.
- ⁸ His horses are faster than leopards;
they are quicker than wolves of the evening.
His horsemen charge forward;
his horsemen come from far away.
They fly in to devour, swiftly, like an eagle.
- ⁹ They come for violence,
the horde with all their faces set toward the desert.
He takes captives like sand.
- ¹⁰ He makes fun of kings;
rulers are ridiculous to him.
He laughs at every fortress,
then he piles up dirt and takes it.
- ¹¹ He passes through like the wind and invades;
but he will be held guilty,
the one whose strength is his god.

Points of Interest

- With Habakkuk, we move forward in time. By the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E. the Chaldean Babylonians east of Assyria had emerged as the region's superpower. They were threatening Habakkuk's country of Judah's safety, security, and very existence.
- Habakkuk gives us insight into how to pray and how to live when the world has gone bad, when we are threatened and afraid. The opening of Habakkuk is a prayer of lament. Habakkuk is sad, angry, and afraid; on top of that, Habakkuk doesn't see God doing anything to help. You may or may not have faced a national cataclysm or existential threat as large as this. But you have lived during a massive global pandemic, and surely you have experienced or at least witnessed other threats.

- Habakkuk will invite us to consider the rise and fall of mighty, arrogant, prideful humans and nations. Habakkuk believes that this historical pattern includes ancient Babylon. A faith informed by Habakkuk believes this fall will one day include the country from which I write today, the United States of America. How are we to see God's justice in this? It's complicated. But Habakkuk seems to indicate that the inevitable fall of great, violent powers is part of how God undermines and even mocks human pride and violence.
- Habakkuk models and teaches the discipline of lament - saying or writing or singing or shouting our fear, sadness, rage, and anger before God and waiting for God to respond, insisting that God respond. Lament is a really important and liberating spiritual practice and disposition when we are threatened and afraid.
- The poetic imagery of Habakkuk invites empathy, compassion, and connection. You probably can't imagine horses faster than leopards, quicker than wolves, charging from afar to attack you and all whom you love. But what are the "Chaldean horses" that you dread? What most threatens you and your security? What forces do you fear might harm those you love? Consider naming those before God and lamenting this threat.

Spiritual Engagement: Dirt and Doubt

- REFLECTION: How long have you been calling to God for help, with no answer? How is your heart?
- OBJECT: Hold the compressed and dry soil disk in your hand. Etch a "!" or a "?" with a pencil or the end of a match. Allow this mark to express your lament to God for such fallowness.
- PRAYER: Inhale: How long !/? | Exhale: Oh Lord. | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Allow God's presence to hold and penetrate the compressed and dry parts of you. Close your prayer with the promise that God's "radiance is like the sunlight."

Week 5, Day 2

Habakkuk 1:12-2:5

^{1:12} Lord, aren't you ancient, my God, my holy one?
Don't let us die.

Lord, you put the Chaldean here for judgment.

Rock, you established him as a rebuke.

¹³ Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;
you are unable to look at disaster.

Why would you look at the treacherous
or keep silent when the wicked swallows one who is more righteous?

¹⁴ You made humans like the fish of the sea,
like creeping things with no one to rule over them.

¹⁵ The Chaldean brings all of them up with a fishhook.
He drags them away with a net;
he collects them in his fishing net,
then he rejoices and celebrates.

¹⁶ Therefore, he sacrifices to his net;
he burns incense to his fishing nets,
because due to them his portion grows fat
and his food becomes luxurious.

¹⁷ Should he continue to empty his net
and continue to slay nations without sparing them?

^{2:1} I will take my post;
I will position myself on the fortress.
I will keep watch to see what the Lord says to me
and how he will respond to my complaint.

² Then the Lord answered me and said,
Write a vision, and make it plain upon a tablet
so that a runner can read it.

³ There is still a vision for the appointed time;
it testifies to the end;
it does not deceive.
If it delays, wait for it;
for it is surely coming; it will not be late.

⁴ Some people's desires are truly audacious;
they don't do the right thing.
But the righteous person will live honestly.

⁵ Moreover, wine betrays an arrogant man.
He doesn't rest.
He opens his jaws like the grave;
like death, he is never satisfied.
He gathers all nations to himself
and collects all peoples for himself.

Points of Interest

- Habakkuk moves from lament to doubt. He wonders what God is doing in the world and whether or not God will act on behalf of the people God claims to love. When Habakkuk says that God's

eyes are too pure to look at evil, it is not a fact or a compliment; it's more of an accusation. God, if you hate evil so much, why don't you do something about it?!?

- The predatory relationship between the fisherman and the fish is an image for how unjust societies work. The powerful take from the powerless. Those who can, steal and harm with impunity. If we are honest, we find these predatory stories throughout the histories and economies of many, if not most, powerful people, corporations, and nations.
- This dog-eat-dog, might-makes-right way of the world provokes anger, despair, and doubt. This is one form of what is known as the Problem of Evil. Given the prevalence of evil in the world, how is it possible that there is a good and powerful god?
- There are many responses to the problem of evil. Some speculate that evil isn't real or that it isn't that bad. Some people minimize evil, calling it the necessary flipside of everything good. Others minimize suffering and evil by suggesting it's all part of God's greater plan. None of these attitudes honors the trauma, fear, suffering, and horror that our worst experiences illicit.
- One faithful response to the problem of evil is to admit that while there is so much that we do not understand, we believe God is working to bring evil to an end. That is the response Habakkuk believes God is providing. Habakkuk believes God is saying that the end will come. If it delays, just wait for it. There are audacious, cruel, violent people and forces. Like thirsty drunkards, they never seem to get enough. But one way or another, their time will end. God guarantees that.
- Habakkuk provides two pictures of faithful living in contrast to the aggressive violence of the Babylonian invaders. One is Habakkuk's taking of his post in 2:1. Like a night watchperson surveying the territory beyond a fence, Habakkuk waits for God's answers to his prayer. To question God, to wrestle over our struggles and expect God to respond to us are faithful acts. In 2:4, Habakkuk also says that unlike audacious, arrogant evildoers, people of loving intention live honestly. To live with honest integrity is faithful too. This line is more commonly translated as: The righteous will live by faith. Or: The righteous will live by faithfulness. In the New Testament, Paul builds part of his argument in the book of Romans around this line. Honest integrity and humble trust in God are powerful alternatives to violent, self-seeking, cruel ways of being in the world.

Spiritual Engagement: Dirt and Doubt

- REFLECTION: How are you troubled as you think of your personal, national, and global spheres?
- OBJECT: Put your soil disk on a plate. For every trouble that comes to mind, add a small dose of water* to the disk. Let any accompanying feelings of grief, sorrow, doubt, or fear expand the soil.
**up to one cup*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Expand | Exhale: Waiting | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Gather up your dirt, saturated with faith (your feelings and the presence of God), and put it in the pot. Close your prayer with the promise that God's "radiance is like the sunlight."

Week 5, Day 3

Habakkuk 2:6-14, 18-20

- ⁶ Won't everyone tell parables about him
or mocking poems concerning him?
They will say:
Doom to the one who multiplies what doesn't belong to him
and who increases his own burden.
How long?
- ⁷ Won't they suddenly rise up to bite you?
Those who frighten you will awaken;
you will become plunder for them.
- ⁸ Since you yourself have plundered many nations,
all the rest of the peoples will plunder you
because of the human bloodshed
and the violence done to the earth,
to every village, and to all its inhabitants.
- ⁹ Doom to the one making evil gain for his own house,
for putting his own nest up high,
for delivering himself from the grasp of calamity.
- ¹⁰ You plan shame for your own house,
cutting off many peoples
and sinning against your own life.
- ¹¹ A stone will cry out from a village wall,
and a tree branch will respond.
- ¹² Pity the one building a city with bloodshed
and founding a village with injustice.
- ¹³ Look, isn't this from the Lord of heavenly forces?
Peoples grow weary from making just enough fire;
nations become tired for nothing.
- ¹⁴ But the land will be full of the knowledge of the Lord's glory,
just as water covers the sea.
- ¹⁸ Of what value is an idol, when its potter carves it,
or a cast image that has been shaped?
It is a teacher of lies,
for the potter trusts the pottery, though it is incapable of speaking.
- ¹⁹ Doom to the one saying to the tree, "Wake up!"
or "Get up" to the silent stone.
Does it teach?
Look, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
but there is no breath within it.
- ²⁰ But the Lord is in his holy temple.
Let all the earth be silent before him.

Points of Interest

- Verses 6-12 continue Habakkuk's lament over the greed and violence of Babylon, represented by the "arrogant man" we met yesterday. Anytime societies face scarcity, disruption, or violence, there are many losers and a few winners. The global pandemic economy of 2020-2021 has been no exception. When success is accompanied by wanton greed (verse 6). or a lack of generous

concern for the common good, God stands against that success. The image of a nation or a region as a household is striking. We are connected to one another; we shouldn't imagine we can make a nest of protection for ourselves (verse 9) without seeing others around us flourish as well.

- Habakkuk believes God sees all we do and more. The God “of the heavenly forces” is present to help restore justice, working through seemingly small actions of healing and resistance (verse 11). As people grow weary of suffering (“making just enough fire”) while others prosper, God will help them empower change. I can't help but wonder if there is a message here for our global economy which has been spectacularly enriching some while leaving most with barely enough and making our earth sick. The substance of God's response is beyond my fields of wisdom, but one core message of the prophets is that God sees and is inflamed by injustice and inequity.
- One of God's big hopes is that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God's glory, just as waters cover the sea. The sea is of course all water, and our earth is mostly covered by the seas. Imagine what it would be like if almost all the peoples and creatures of the earth spent most of their days conscious of God's goodness and love and abundant blessing for us all. Imagine the joy, the love, the delight in which most of the earth could live most of the time. God longs for this to be so. God invites us to make it be so within us and around us.
- Habakkuk ends by contrasting different forces we look to for strength and help when we face trouble or fear. Idols are things or forces that are not God but that we imagine will define us or help us when we're insecure or afraid. In ancient times, idols were usually physical representations of gods of nature. In our times, our idols tend to be abstract ideals represented tangibly in our lives: idols of success represented by titles or promotions, idols of wealth represented by account balances, idols of social significance represented by social media followings, etc.
- The biblical, prophetic problem with idols is not that they are evil but that they are powerless. They lie to us. We think they will make us secure, but they don't help us.
- By contrast, God is present. God's temple is not just a building but the whole earth. God is present everywhere. We are invited to stop the anxious worry of idol-making and be silent and still with the God who is here to guide and to help.

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.

Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____

EXHALE: _____

repeat as needed

Week 5, Day 4

Habakkuk 3:1-8

^{3:1} The prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth:

² Lord, I have heard your reputation.
I have seen your work.
Over time, revive it.
Over time, make it known.
Though angry, remember compassion.

³ God comes from Teman
and the holy one from the mountain of Paran. *Selah*
His majesty covers the heavens
and his praise fills the earth.

⁴ His radiance is like the sunlight,
with rays flashing from his hand.
That is the hiding place of his power.

⁵ Pestilence walks in front of him.
Plague marches at his feet.

⁶ He stops and measures the earth.
He looks and sets out against the nations.

The everlasting mountains collapse;
the eternal hills bow down;
the eternal paths belong to him.

⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan under duress.
The curtains of the land of Midian were quaking.

⁸ Was the Lord raging against the rivers?
Or was your anger directed against the rivers?
Or was your fury directed against the sea
when you rode on your horses
or rode your chariots to victory?

Points of Interest

- In the third and final chapter of Habakkuk, the prophet pivots from lament to hope. Having imagined the knowledge of God's goodness covering the earth, having exhorted us to know God is with us and to listen, Habakkuk takes a moment to suggest what we might hear and see if we pay attention to God's presence, still with us even in times of upheaval and crisis.
- We begin with a prayer. We've heard of your reputation, God, and we've seen you in times past. Now revive your work again, God. Let us see you again. The prophets personify collective trouble and suffering as "God's anger" and collective renewal as "God's compassion." For a variety of reasons, I don't find this to be a helpful image anymore. Instead, I find the image of Hosea speaks to us more helpfully: remember, God, that we are small and weak. We need your compassion expressed in renewal and help. Turn things around for us all, especially for those who have suffered most.
- Habakkuk leans into two images to encourage us: God's help like the sunrise and God's deliverance as in the Exodus.

- One way to remember “God is in his temple” and “to be silent before God” is to watch a sunrise. Habakkuk watches the sunrise from distant mountains. We can do this anywhere. As the sun rises, we remember God is still present and alive, illuminating and warming the earth, ourselves and all living things.
- Another way to remember God’s presence is through God’s greatest help and salvation in the past. For Habakkuk and the whole Bible and for Jews still today, the Exodus of their ancestors out of bondage in Egypt into freedom in the promised land was and is their great memory of God’s saving help. In verse 5 all the way through verse 16, Habakkuk remembers and imagines a recapitulation of the Exodus. The Exodus is a pattern for God’s good work in the world, again and again, delivering people personally and collectively from patterns and experiences of restriction, destruction, powerlessness, and pointlessness into freedom, flourishing, and purpose.
- We can enter the great tradition of the empowering inspiration of memory anytime we remember God’s good help to people in the past and hope and trust God will continue to help again in the future. Memories from the Bible, from history, from our ancestors, and from our own personal past will serve. For instance, if we despair at how awful the church and Christian witness looks today, we can remember that the compassion and commitment to healing in communities of faith in Jesus are why we have hospitals in the world today. What memory of God’s work in the past can encourage you today?

Spiritual Engagement: Dirt and Doubt

- REFLECTION: Over time, what has God shown you to be true of God? Throughout all seasons of despair and hope.
- OBJECT: Hold your pot with dirt. Allow the gratitude for what you know to be true of God to cover all of your soil. Write a word on the bamboo tag that represents this knowing of God. Perhaps, “over time.”
- PRAYER: Inhale: Time | Exhale: Covers | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Stand in a sun-lit spot with your pot and praise God. Close your eyes and let the radiance of God revive your soul/soil like the sunlight.

Week 5, Day 5

Habakkuk 3:17-19

- ¹⁷ Though the fig tree doesn't bloom,
and there's no produce on the vine;
though the olive crop withers,
and the fields don't provide food;
though the sheep are cut off from the pen,
and there are no cattle in the stalls;
- ¹⁸ I will rejoice in the Lord.
I will rejoice in the God of my deliverance.
- ¹⁹ The Lord God is my strength.
He will set my feet like the deer.
He will let me walk upon the heights.

To the director, with stringed instruments

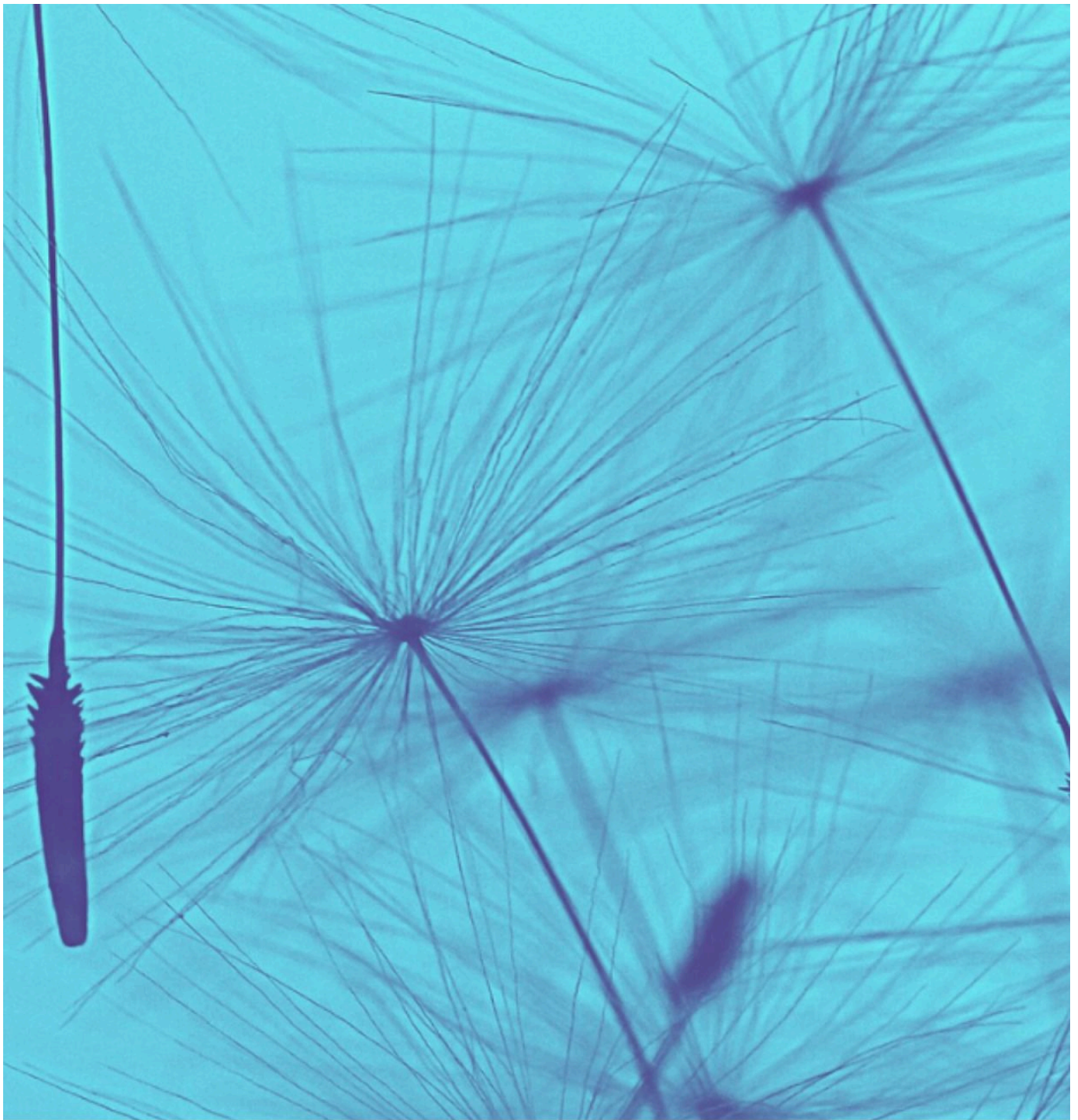
Points of Interest

- Habakkuk ends with a short song that is a prayer and a vow and a long-form mantra all at once. This prophet, this person who has suffered and suffers still will live by trust, by hope, and by faith. Trust, hope, and faith have a few things in common; you need them when you still don't have what you're looking for. They involve seeing things you can't yet see. They bank on joy that comes not from what you have and what you can do, but who you are and who is coming to help.
- How do we rejoice in seasons of unblooming, unproduction, withering crops, barren fields, lost sheep, and empty stalls? Most of us have had times in our lives like this. We all will have times like this ahead of us. Many of us have lived these un-blooming seasons of loss over this past year. Habakkuk is a prophet for our pandemic.
- What does deliverance look like? Sometimes we are delivered as God walks us out of our emptiness. Sometimes we are delivered as we discover God is with us and we are not alone amidst our despair. Sometimes it's some combination of those two things.
- The strength this prophet finds isn't from circumstances changing, it's from the hope and faith that grow right where we are. The strength this prophet invites us into is the gift of persevering as we trust and hope in God.
- There is a fun double meaning in a hard-to-translate preposition at the end of this poem. Translators aren't sure if Habakkuk writes "walk upon the heights" or "walk upon my heights." It's a small difference, but "the heights" means God will help us walk out of the valley up onto the mountainsides, as do the deer. We will find our way out of low places, sunken places into times and places of joy and victory. "My heights" implies something more subjective perhaps. We will find the places within where we can see clearly, where our outlook isn't clouded by despair, where we can take the long view of our lives and of God's redemptive work in them.
- At the very end of this little book of the Bible is an editorial note that reminds us this poetry was set to music, to be sung with an orchestra or a band. Which part of Habakkuk is the song? Is it

just the hopeful end? Certainly this three verse conclusion could make a beautiful anthem of hope. But it's not just that. No, the whole three chapters of Habakkuk - all the hope and despair, all the lament and longing, all the confusion and clarity - it is all a song. It is all the music we need to take to heart, the tune we need to express and sing.

Spiritual Engagement: Dirt and Doubt

- ACTION: As you go out for a walk or sit with God today, call to mind the full story of the streets around you. Where you see emptiness, remember times of convivial life; people walking, talking and gathering. Where you see barrenness, remember seasons of blooming trees, verdant vegetation, and flowers breaking through the earth.
- OBJECT: Pick up a rock*, as a reminder of your strength in God, when nothing visibly changes.
**perhaps from Micah week*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Strength | Exhale: Emptiness | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Place this rock near your pot. Close your prayer with the promise that God's "radiance is like the sunlight."



FOUR MINOR PROPHETS & *Seeds*

WEEK 6

Week 6, Day 1

Joel 2:23-29

- ²³ Children of Zion,
rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God,
because he will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
he will pour down abundant rain for you,
the early and the late rain, as before.
- ²⁴ The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.
- ²⁵ I will repay you for the years
that the cutting locust,
the swarming locust, the hopping locust, and the devouring locust have eaten—
my great army, which I sent against you.
- ²⁶ You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God,
who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame.
- ²⁷ You will know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists;
never again will my people be put to shame.
- ²⁸ After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone;
your sons and your daughters will prophesy,
your old men will dream dreams,
and your young men will see visions.
- ²⁹ In those days, I will also pour out my
spirit on the male and female slaves.

Points of Interest

- For the final week of Lent, rather than reading a single minor prophet, we will read short excerpts from four of them. Each excerpt presents text that is quoted in important moments in the New Testament, takes on significant meaning in the life of Jesus, or otherwise speaks powerfully to what followers of Jesus called learning to walk in the Spirit. Followers of Jesus believed God was present not only in the person of Jesus Christ but also in the Spirit of God that Jesus promised would live with his followers. This week, we'll look at prophetic promises of the restoration and healing of people and all creation that come through the Spirit of God.
- Word of context: There is no consensus on the exact date and occasion for the prophecy attributed to Joel, son of Pethuel. Earlier in the book, there is discussion of a plague of locusts that may be literal or may represent any number of possible enemies. As people turn to God in this crisis, Joel promises a wide range of blessings.
- Word of hope: The two areas of blessing Joel focuses on are agricultural flourishing and profound personal experience of God. The early and late rains have to do with different seasonal rainfalls that were necessary for fertile ground and abundant crops. God's promise to "repay you for the years" fascinates me. Joel attributes the aforementioned locust plague to God but says that God will more than make up for the troubles God used for some redemptive purpose. In our

case, when locusts strike our crops, or when pandemics or structural racism or economic woes grieve our hearts or pile up losses in our lives, it's not like God owes us anything. It is not God's fault. And yet God seems interested in restoring experiences of abundance to people who have known hardship.

- Word of connection to Jesus Christ: On the day of Pentecost, recorded in the book of Acts, Peter quotes the end of this passage as he explains that God's Spirit is available to those who love and follow Jesus. The promise is of a universally available, rich experience of God, regardless of age, gender, sex, or status. One of the most radical claims of Jesus-centered faith, and one of the most radical experiences available to humankind, is that the same God who dreamed the universe before it began billions of years ago is interested in personally communicating to you and me.
- Word of relevance to us: God is interested in speaking with each of us through many means. If this isn't a familiar experience to you, consider a short prayer in which you welcome God's communicative presence in your life as well as in the lives of people whom you might least expect to hear from God or feel God close to them.

Spiritual Engagement: Seeds and Hope

- REFLECTION: What blessings and losses feel piled upon your heart?
- OBJECT: Write all your losses and blessings on the seed paper heart, trusting that both are fertile ground from which God's presence grows. Pause to notice the seeds in the paper, flecks of God's abundance still to come.
- PRAYER: Inhale: Spirit | Exhale: Grow | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Hold this paper heart close to your own heart, honoring all that your heart can hold and grow. Tuck your heart back in its envelope for now. Close your prayer with God's reassuring words, "I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone."

Week 6, Day 2

Zephaniah 3:14-20

- ¹⁴ Rejoice, Daughter Zion! Shout, Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem.
- ¹⁵ The Lord has removed your judgment;
he has turned away your enemy.
The Lord, the king of Israel, is in your midst;
you will no longer fear evil.
- ¹⁶ On that day, it will be said to Jerusalem:
Don't fear, Zion.
Don't let your hands fall.
- ¹⁷ The Lord your God is in your midst—a warrior bringing victory.
He will create calm with his love;
he will rejoice over you with singing.
- ¹⁸ I will remove from you those worried about the appointed feasts.
They have been a burden for her, a reproach.
- ¹⁹ Watch what I am about to do to all your oppressors at that time.
I will deliver the lame;
I will gather the outcast.
I will change their shame into praise and fame throughout the earth.
- ²⁰ At that time, I will bring all of you back,
at the time when I gather you.
I will give you fame and praise among all the neighboring peoples
when I restore your possessions and you can see them —says the Lord.

Points of Interest

- Word of context: Zephaniah wrote in the late 7th century B.C.E., speaking to the Southern kingdom of Judah, under the reign of a celebrated king named Josiah. He's a rough contemporary of the more famous prophet with the much longer book, Jeremiah. In the original context of this prophecy, there was warning that Judah would face a terribly difficult time called the Day of the Lord, a time of consequence for faithless, sick religion and public injustice. Zephaniah, along with the rest of the prophets, encourages the people not to give up on their future, though, as God will never give up on them. National restoration and redemption are ahead.
- Word of hope: Before reframing this prophecy in light of the life and teaching of Jesus, let's focus on what I find to be one of the most beautiful verses in one of the most beautiful passages of the whole Bible. There is so much beauty tucked into this obscure prophecy: freedom from fear, compassion for those cast aside, shame turned to redemption, and more. But my very favorite image is God singing love songs and lullabies over the people that make God happy. Picture God singing a calming song over a person, or a whole people, gripped with anxiety. Picture an exultant God serenading a person, or a whole people, with a love song. I love this vision of what God is like and how God relates to us all.

- Word of connection to Jesus Christ: When Jesus entered Jerusalem the week before his death, on the day Christians now celebrate as Palm Sunday, people sang words like verse 14. Rejoice, Jerusalem - blessed is the one who has come to you! These songs invite a reframing and repurposing of this prophecy. Jesus is the new king of Jerusalem. Unlike an ancient king of Israel, or a then contemporary emperor of Rome, Jesus enters the city on a donkey, not a war horse. He achieves no military victory, sets up no system, religious or economic or political, to dominate or restrain anyone. Instead, he reforms religion to make it a source of blessing, not burden. (You wouldn't know that from what Christianity has become, but this *was* the intention!) Jesus practices a ministry and launches a movement of radical inclusion. And he inaugurates a kingdom, or family, or community marked by healing and redemption.
- Word of relevance to us: God wants us to listen to, believe in, and sing ourselves songs of love and redemption for individual people, whole communities, and the earth at large. What song is God singing over you or over us today? What song would God invite you to join in singing?

Spiritual Engagement: Seeds and Hope

- REFLECTION: What is a song that brings you a sense of calm and joy?
- OBJECT: Take your seed paper out of the envelope and place it just on the surface of the soil*. Pour out a splash of water to moisten the surface of the seed paper and soil. **from Habakkuk week*
As you do offer this prayer:
- PRAYER: Hum: You are | Hum: In my midst | **to your own tune, repeat as needed*
- CLOSE: Tune your ear to the songs of God all around you. Perhaps a song of voices near and far, water leaving a bottle, traffic passing by. Close your prayer with God's reassuring words, "I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone."

Week 6, Day 3

Malachi 3:10, 13-15, 4:5-6

^{3:10} Bring the whole tenth-part to the storage house so there might be food in my house.

Please test me in this,
says the Lord of heavenly forces.

See whether I do not open all the windows of the heavens for you
and empty out a blessing until there is enough.

¹³ You have spoken harshly about me,
says the Lord;
but you say,
"What have we spoken about you?"

¹⁴ You said,
"Serving God is useless.
What do we gain by keeping his obligation
or by walking around as mourners
before the Lord of heavenly forces?"

¹⁵ So now we consider the arrogant fortunate.
Moreover, those doing evil are built up;
they test God and escape."

^{4:5} Look, I am sending Elijah the prophet to you,
before the great and terrifying day of the Lord arrives.

⁶ Turn the hearts of the parents to the children
and the hearts of the children to their parents.
Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.

Points of Interest

- Word of context: Malachi is the last of the prophets of the Old Testament, both chronologically and in its placement at the end of the twelve minor prophets in both Christian and Hebrew Bibles. Malachi may or may not be the prophet's name; in Hebrew, it just means "my messenger." Malachi prophesied in the 400s B.C.E., after Persia had conquered Babylon and allowed Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple there. After an initial period of enthusiasm after their return, a generation has lost their morale. Malachi is written to people who are losing interest in their faith, who doubt that God is good, and are no longer investing in their community's religious and spiritual life.
- Word of hope: Malachi sets up a dare to the 5th century residents of Jerusalem. Instead of focusing on the glory days of a distant past or the seeming good fortune of evildoers who prosper, Malachi dares his contemporaries to invest in their community's religious and spiritual life again and to see how God will bless them as they do that. The means of Malachi's dare is the tithe - to give 10% of their harvest to the Temple and see how God will in turn be good to them. There are many ways we could opt into this dare in our times. Some of us reconstruct this scenario rather literally - giving 10% of our incomes toward our church as part of our trust that God will shape God's goodness in our lives and communities through that investment. Others of us participate in this dare on other terms. Regardless of how we invest, Malachi suggests that

God is interested in a relationship of trust and investment from us that will return an experience of goodness and blessing to us and to our communities at large.

- Word of connection to Jesus Christ: The gospels are written into this prophetic heritage that left off with Malachi. From the start, they argue that Jesus is a sign of God's faithfulness to God's promises both to the people of Israel and to the whole earth. Jesus isn't the start of a brand new story but rather another sign that God doesn't want to be God without us. God is deeply invested in the human story. Malachi ends with a promise that the first great prophet Elijah will in some way return before God's next big action in history. Jews have their own way of interpreting this promise. Followers of Jesus, following the gospel writers, believe that Jesus' cousin John the Baptist carried the spirit and shared the character of Elijah. John encouraged his contemporaries to prepare for Jesus' life and teaching.
- Word of relevance to us: The very final verse of Malachi is like a riddle. Sometimes it's translated as saying that the new Elijah will renew relationships between people, so that people will know God's blessing, not God's curse. And sometimes it's translated - like it is here - as a command. Make things right in your intimate, central relationships in life, or else things will not go well for you. In some ways, the message is the same for us. We are not passive participants in God's work of renewal, restoration, and blessing. As God encourages us and speaks to us through God's spirit of love, God invites us to invest in God's renewal through actions of hope: planting seeds, giving ourselves toward what we see to be God's work on earth, doing our best to restore relationships that have grown cold.

Mid-Week Pause

Pause with God and ask what is most important for today.

Fill in your own breath prayer.

INHALE: _____

EXHALE: _____

repeat as needed

Week 6, Day 4

Zechariah 13:7-9

- ⁷ Sword, arise against my shepherd,
against the man responsible for my community, says the Lord of heavenly forces!
Strike the shepherd in order to scatter the flock!
I will turn my hand against the little ones.
- ⁸ Throughout all the land, says the Lord,
two-thirds will be cut off and die;
but one-third will be left in it.
- ⁹ I will put the third part into the fire.
I will refine them like one refines silver;
I will test them like one tests gold.
They will call on my name, and I will respond to them.
I will say, "They are my people."
And they will say, "The Lord is our God."

Points of Interest

- Word of context: Zechariah was written shortly before Malachi, during the period when most descendants of Israel lived under Persian rule. The final chapters are an example of early apocalyptic literature: dramatic writing, full of symbolism, about God's involvement in big things that will happen in history. In this section, Zechariah is one of many prophets who not only speak to their own generation but also include hope that a great messenger of God, called the Messiah, will in some future time complete God's restorative, healing work in and around Jerusalem and eventually, throughout the earth. The shepherd referred to here is a king/shepherd (perhaps patterned after the great king David, who was a shepherd as a teenager) who will lead God's work on earth at some point in the future.
- Word of hope: Even in some of the most hopeful points of prophetic visions of the future, some people still suffer. Others die. The prophets are honest about human life and history. God can be present and at work through a human being, and that human being can still be rejected. Sometimes God is involved in something great, and a majority of people who see it don't get it. Even the minority who engage can suffer. While I don't believe that God is the direct cause of such suffering and death, the way the prophets sometimes say God is, I do believe that God invites us toward goodness and love even while we're suffering. Hard times can be like the fire that purifies silver or gold, burning out impurities so that it will shine brighter and become stronger. I wonder what refining God is trying to work among us in our own times of scattered, more lonely living.
- Word of connection to Jesus Christ: The night before his death, Jesus watched his top apprentices - some of his best friends - fall asleep while he wrestled in prayer over his impending suffering. The gospel of Matthew tells us that just before this, Jesus quotes Zechariah, identifying himself as the Messianic shepherd. He lets his friends know that when he's struck, they will scatter, abandoning him in his time of need. Jesus also tells them this won't be the end of his

story or their friendship. He lets them know that after he rises from the dead, he'll meet them again in their hometowns.

- Word of relevance to us: This passage, and Jesus' use of it, fit a broader pattern of how God brings life in the world: death followed by resurrection, loss followed by redemption. I wonder where you have seen new life after death, where you have seen possibilities and goodness come out of hardship. Like dead-looking seeds we plant in the dirt, Jesus' death and resurrection teach us to hope and pray for life to grow out of every death.

Spiritual Engagement: Seeds and Hope

- REFLECTION: Where do you feel under fire or stuck these days?
- OBJECT: Gently push the seed paper ¼ inch below the surface of the soil and water. Allow God to cover you, like dirt that blankets seeds. In this shelter, what is your call to God? Listen for God's response.
- PRAYER: Call: _____ | Response: _____ | *repeat as needed*
- CLOSE: As you pray, allow God's voice to continue to emerge and speak to you, calling you into greater life. Close your prayer with God's reassuring words, "I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone."

Week 6, Day 5

Zechariah 12:10-13:1

- ^{12:10} But I will pour out a spirit of grace and mercy on David's house and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
They will look to me concerning the one whom they pierced;
they will mourn over him like the mourning for an only child.
They will mourn bitterly over him like the bitter mourning over the death of an oldest child.
- ¹¹ On that day, the mourning in Jerusalem will be as great as the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon in the Megiddo Valley.
- ¹² The land will mourn, each of the clans by itself:
the clan of David's house by themselves, and their women by themselves;
the clan of Nathan's house by themselves, and their women by themselves;
- ¹³ the clan of Levi's house by themselves, and their women by themselves;
and the Shimeites' clan by themselves, and their women by themselves;
- ¹⁴ and all the remaining clans, each clan by itself, and their women by themselves.
- ^{13:1} On that day, a fountain will open
to cleanse the sin and impurity of David's house and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

Points of Interest

- Word of context: As we mentioned yesterday, the final three chapters of Zechariah contain visionary poetry that imagines Jerusalem at the center of a new kingdom, where God's justice replaces evil throughout the surrounding nations, where the Spirit of God leads people to turn back to devotion to God, and where people near and far experience great healing and renewal from God. A Spirit-filled person called a Messiah, in Greek "the Christ," will lead this great work of God. Sometimes the Messiah sounds like a person of great strength, at other times like a victim of injustice himself.
- Word of hope: When Jesus engages with these Old Testament texts, he tends to selectively quote them and really change their original meaning. Early in Jesus' career, he quotes Isaiah where it is written that there will come "the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus only quotes the first half of the verse: "the year of the Lord's favor." From this passage, Jesus seems to embrace being part of God pouring out "a spirit of grace and mercy," but not the material just beforehand in verse 9 that talks about God slamming the enemies of Jerusalem. Quite the opposite. From the moment of Jesus' death, enemies of Jerusalem, like Roman soldiers and other non-Jews, begin to listen to Jesus' words and follow his teaching. Jesus teaches us that God isn't really interested in some of the punishment and vengeance that the prophets imagine, while God is very invested in the healing and new life they envision.
- Word of connection to Jesus Christ: In describing a Roman soldier's piercing of the side of Jesus' dead, crucified body, the gospel of John quotes verse 10. On this day when we remember the death of Jesus, it is appropriate to call the day "Good Friday," glad for the depth of God's self-sacrificing love for us. It is also appropriate to mourn that we killed Jesus, that we live in a

foolish, violent world that destroys so much life and has such difficulty accepting God's loving, just ways of peace and wholeness.

- Word of relevance to us: For Christians, the day of death and mourning envisioned by Zechariah included Good Friday, the day of Jesus' death. On this day, we also affirm God's loving, cleansing fountain of life. As Jesus hung dying, he whispered: Forgive them father, for they know not what they do. Ever since, where people have truly sensed and welcomed God's Spirit with them, we have had profound interior awareness of God's love, forgiveness, acceptance, and power.

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- ACTION: Take 5 minutes to walk or look out a window with God today. Where the pandemics of racism, Covid, isolation and mental distress have touched your neighborhood, allow the fountains of grief to flow in and through you.
- OBJECT: Write a word of hope* on the flip-side of your plant tag that you want to see emerge from the cracks of collective grief. As you water your seeds allow the fountains of God's mercy and grace to flow in and through you. **life, resilience, healing, connection*
- PRAYER: Inhale: Into me | Exhale: Unto everyone | *repeat 3 times*
- CLOSE: Sprinkle your hope* as seeds, in all your breath, words and action. Close your prayer with God's reassuring words, "I will pour out my Spirit upon everyone."