

air

LENT | A SPRING SEASON

IMAGERY

A JOURNEY OF
SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS
VIA FEATHERS

SCRIPTURE

EXPLORING THE CREATIVE
LIFE FORCE OF THE SPIRIT
THROUGH THE LENS OF AIR

PRAYER

AN INVITATION TO
BE STILL WITH GOD

Contents

- 01 Introduction
Ways to Engage
- 05 A Prayer for Lent
- 07 Week 1 | Be
Taking a Breath
- 21 Week 2 | Be Still
Breath & Spirit
- 35 Week 3 | Be Still and Know
Wisdom & Spirit
- 49 Week 4 | Be Still and Know that I Am
God's Closeness
- 63 Week 5 | Be Still and Know that I Am God
Breath of Life in God's Family
- 73 Week 6 | Winds of the Spirit
Passion Week
- 86 *Acknowledgements & Resources for the Curious*





“Hope” is the thing with feathers /
that perches in the soul.

EMILY DICKINSON

Air *an introduction*


Each year, in the weeks before Easter, many churches embark on a season of spiritual formation. We take time and attention to look reflectively at our lives, to welcome God's guidance and teaching, and to see what growth may come. 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.

At Reservoir Church, we are completing a four-year Lenten cycle inspired by the elements of water, earth, fire, and air. This cycle has been a chance to tap into some powerful grounding metaphor in the Christian scriptures alongside other voices of wisdom about God and life and matters of the spirit.

This year's theme is Air.

This is the last in a four-year Lenten cycle of the four traditional elements of Water, Earth, Fire, and Air. These have been the inspiration for the great 1970s band Earth, Wind, and Fire and the modern animated classic *The Last Airbender*. They also are the great symbols of antiquity when most of the Bible was written and edited into its current form. These symbols have guided us through an exploration of spiritual insights from the Bible alongside poetry, art and wisdom from other sources as well.

In biblical languages, the same words can be used for air, breath, wind, and spirit. We can't see the air - it's the element we most take for granted. Yet our lives depend on the oxygen in the air we breathe. Our boats can't sail, feathers can't float, our kites can't fly, our turbines can't produce clean energy, our weather patterns would never change without the winds that swirl about and blow. Similarly, all of the great spiritual traditions of humanity affirm that our quality of life, and even life itself, is dependent upon the creative life force that we call Spirit.



In this guide, we explore themes in the Bible as a whole and the Way of Jesus in particular related to air, breath, and spirit. We will be guided by a single line from a prayer written for times of great chaos and calamity: *Be still and know that I am God.* (Psalm 46:10)

We will try to take a moment as Lent begins to catch a breath, to be still.

We will reflect on gaining spiritual knowledge and wisdom, in addition to the overabundance of facts and opinions that come our way daily. And we will wonder about the spiritual being who made and loves us all, the creative life force we call God.

As we begin this season, we remember the surprising, comforting, and stirring words of Jesus:

“COME TO ME, ALL YOU WHO ARE STRUGGLING HARD AND CARRYING HEAVY LOADS, AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST. PUT ON MY YOKE, AND LEARN FROM ME. I’M GENTLE AND HUMBLE. AND YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOURSELVES. MY YOKE IS EASY TO BEAR, AND MY BURDEN IS LIGHT.”

MATTHEW 11:28-30



Jesus affirmed that life is full of heavy loads. He also told his students that life isn’t meant to be so hard and burdensome. He offered them rest and a way toward a more suitable, more joyful way of life. He promised to be gentle and humble about helping us learn the way too. This is the opposite of the bossy, cocky, mean, and strident voices some of us have come to associate with religious leaders.

We offer you this guide in faith that through the Spirit of God, Jesus can still offer us all this. We try to offer this guide in the same gentle and humble spirit, in hopes that your Lent will be a place of warm encounter with God and with others. May it be a time of rich learning, discovery, and formation.

Ways to Engage

scripture. wonder. poetry

The best way to start Lent will be to join a community of worship on Sundays. Lent formally begins on the holiday of Ash Wednesday, this year on March 5, 2025. We'll introduce the season and its themes in our worship services on the Sunday beforehand, and this guide will formally begin on the Sunday after Ash Wednesday and continue through Easter, on April 20th.

This is a weekly guide that covers the six weeks of Lent. Each week contains stories, Bible readings, reflections, and prayers. The Bible readings are all presented in the Common English Bible. Each week, use this guide's readings and reflections in your personal prayers. 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!

THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE YOU'LL FIND THE FOLLOWING ACCOMPANYING COMPONENTS:

Wonder

You'll find a handful of wondering questions, inviting you to explore the scripture, connect your own story, and embrace mystery and awe, starting with the simple prompt, "I wonder."

Images

There are a variety of feather images designed to draw you back to the theme of 'air.' As John O'Donohue says, "air is the most hospitable of the four elements. Air lets things fully in and will not in any way damage them. The generosity of air allows each object to emerge and to 'just be.'" We hope the images of feathers will invite you to 'just be', too - with the spirit and presence of God.

Poetry

You'll also discover pockets of poetry sprinkled throughout - excerpts from one poem, *The Birds Wrote Me a Poem*, by Andrea Gibson and also a couple by Reservoir-poet-friends. Allow these components to be in conversation with the scripture and your story, offering potential connection points that were unseen prior.

Voices

You will also find contemporary accompanying voices sprinkled throughout the guide, namely: Grace Ji-Sun Kim, a Korean-American theologian, author, and scholar known for her work in the areas of theology, race, gender, and justice, and her recent book, *Reimagining Spirit: Wind, Breath, and Vibration*; John O'Donohue, an Irish poet, philosopher, and Catholic priest known for his works on spirituality, nature, and human experience, and his book, *Four Elements: Reflections on Nature*; and, finally, Thor Hanson, who wrote a book called *Feathers: The Evolution of a Natural Miracle*.

Prayer

Traditionally, Christians have sought to deepen their faith during Lent through giving, fasting, and prayer. We are not emphasizing giving or fasting so much this year. If you feel led to deepening those practices, bless you in that, and feel free to reach out to a pastor or a trusted friend for prayer, advice, or guidance in that. This guide is anchored in ancient traditions of spiritual formation that accompany this season but designed with 21st century experience and lives in mind and as such will focus more on the practice of prayer.

This Lenten season we will be inviting you to explore a prayer nestled within Psalm 46, “be still and know that I am God” (verse 10). You will be invited to form this prayer in an increasing manner each week. Starting with the simple word, “be.” Just as air surrounds us and sustains our breath, we hope that, as this prayer expands in your heart, so too will your connection with God's presence — which moves within and around you.

Be
Be still
Be still and know
Be still and know that I am
Be still and know that I am God



A Prayer

for you this lent

We hope this will be a time of renewal and strengthening for us all. Just as we need healthy food and exercise for the strengthening of our bodies, so it is we need spiritual lives for the strengthening of our minds and souls.


We hope this guide will also be material that you can read and talk about with someone else. Spiritual lives are not precious, private, hidden things. We need friends and companions to talk and learn with as we seek to grow in faith, hope, and love. Attend our Sunday services and find a friend or join or form a group with whom you can share about your experiences.

As you enter into this time of Lent, allow this prayerful poem to welcome you into what we hope will be a season of rich discovery and refreshment, helping inspire us to breathe more deeply and notice the gentle breeze of God's spirit.

Let us bless the air,
Benefactor of breath,
Keeper of the fragile bridge
We breathe across.



Air, perfect emptiness
For the minds of birds
To map with vanishings,

In the name of the air,
The breeze
And the wind,
May our souls
Stay in rhythm
With eternal
Breath. 



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE

When Emily Dickinson wrote, "*Hope is the thing with feathers / that perches in the soul*", she echoed an age old sentiment linking feathers and bird flight with a sense of portent, longing, and the spirit.

THOR HANSON





01 | be

LET EVERY LIVING THING
THAT HAS BREATH
PRAISE THE LORD!

Psalm 150:6



TROPICAL KINGBIRD | CAPE COD, MA

To earthbound humanity, the ability to fly is inherently otherworldly, revered for its sheer proximity to the heavens. And if flight is sacred, then birds, wings, and feathers are its most potent symbols, appearing again and again in a dizzying range of rituals, beliefs and customs.

THOR HANSON

Story



When I studied singing as a young adult, I was surprised to learn how much of the work was in the breath. Voice lessons regularly began with stretching, light yoga, and a variety of breathing exercises. Things like strength of sound and the length of phrases I could sing were dependent upon the way I learned to breathe more fully, more deeply. Adjustments to sound quality were so often made by visualizing the outflow of the air differently.

The human voice, after all, is a wind instrument. The air we breathe flows through our larynx, and our brain sends signals to our vocal chords to move and vibrate, creating sounds that leave our body, shaped by the movement of our tongue and everything else that air encounters as it exits us. We can't directly control the tiny vocal chords where sound is made. We also can't change the shape of the cavities in our mouth, nose, and throat where the sounds resonate as they leave our body. But we can learn better ways of taking a breath. And we can learn to reshape how that breath leaves us as well.



So singing, like speaking, is breath work.

So is life itself.



We breathe around 20,000 times a day, roughly 7.5 million breaths per year. We don't think about almost any of these breaths, but if we miss just a couple hundred of them in a row, we die. One of the tell-tale signs that someone is at the end of their life is the irregularity, and the slowing, of the breath. Because our life depends on it.

Human bodies are wind instruments. And not just any wind will do. The just-right mix of nitrogen and oxygen in the earth's air sustains our lives, as it does most life on earth.

We begin this year's season of Lent with an invitation:

To take a breath.

Just like we don't pay attention to our breath most of the time, we don't pay attention to most of the activities and pace of our lives. Things move very quickly from task to task, hour to hour, season to season, often without much careful attention or redirection.

Lent comes with an invitation to slow down and pay attention.

The prayer book of the Bible, called the Psalms, is full of invitations to be still and take a breath. Scattered throughout its prayers, we see an untranslated word *Selah*, which is left in Hebrew because no one is quite sure what it means. It might be a musical direction - a call for an interlude or a change of rhythm. Or it might refer to a pause - a moment to take a breath before continuing. We don't know.

But in the words of the prayers themselves, there are a lot of moments where we are invited to slow down, to stop scurrying, to live within our limits, and to redirect our breath. The focused attention that can come with stillness is a major theme of these prayers.

Scripture

Let's look at five quick examples and see where they take us.

01

Psalm 4:6-8

*Many people say,
"We can't find goodness anywhere.
The light of your face has left us, Lord!"
But you have filled my heart with more joy
than when their wheat and wine are everywhere!
I will lie down and fall asleep in peace
because you alone, Lord, let me live in safety.*

We are not the first or last generation of humans to experience discouragement, doubt, or despair. Two simple antidotes to all this are memory and despair. If at night we put our phones aside and slow down for a moment, we can remember past seasons of joy or abundance. And we can welcome a peaceful night's sleep hoping that God is looking out for us still.

02

Psalm 37:7

*Be still before the Lord,
and wait for him.
Don't get upset when someone gets ahead—
someone who invents evil schemes.*

We are not the first or last generation of humans to see bad people succeed. One response to the injustice of that is to be still and imagine that we and all the rest of the earth live under the attention of an eternal and wise God. With this perspective, we remember that history is long, but human lives are very short. Good things may not last forever, but neither do bad things. Evildoers will soon be dead and will not be well remembered.



AMERICAN YELLOW WARBLER

We sing after the storm.
 We sing during it.
 We sing through the blizzard.
 We sing through the percussion of the hail.
 We sing through the lightning.
 We harmonize with the thunder.
 What are you doing with your vocal chords?
 Why on earth are your eyes still closed?
 It's dawn and our song is on your Aspen tree's radio.
 Feather your hair and get out here with your high notes, hot stuff.
 Why stay in bed when you could be high-fiving the sunrise?
 Human awe is an endangered species.
 Do not let your astonishment go extinct.

ANDREA GIBSON
 An excerpt from *The Birds Wrote Me a Poem*



Scripture

03

Psalm 62:5-6

*Oh, I must find rest in God only,
because my hope comes from him!
Only God is my rock and my salvation—
my stronghold!—I will not be shaken.*

This psalm invites us to rest in God, as if God is like a tent or a blanket into which we can tuck ourselves. This psalmist mentioned three specific ways this psalmist “rests in God.”

- She pours out her heart to God - speaking out her unfiltered thoughts and emotions in spoken prayers or written thoughts in a journal.
- He takes perspective - tries to see human events through God’s longer view.
- And they conceive of God as a shelter or refuge, taking a few quiet moments at night to breathe deeply and imagine again that God has not left us.



*I have calmed and quieted myself
like a weaned child on its mother;
I'm like the weaned child that is with me.*

04

Psalm 131:2

This psalm uses the metaphor of a weaned child for the life of faith. Picture a child old enough that it is not nursing and not crying very often, but young and small enough that it can happily and peacefully sleep in its mother's arms. That mother is our God and that child can be us.





05

Let every living thing praise the Lord!

Psalm 150:6

The phrase translated here as “every living thing” is more traditionally rendered in English as “everything that has breath.” Our breath is meant to praise God - to produce thoughts and words and songs of the steady kindness and goodness of our creator. For all of us who have fallen out of habitually remembering the constant love of God, we are invited to redirect some of our breath in this direction.

Together, these psalms express some of the texture of a life of faith in God amidst hard times.



The Psalms invite us to take a breath and to slow down.

To take a breath and be still, and to deepen our lives of faith, most of us find there things we need to take out of our life and things we need to put in.

Lent is traditionally a season of spiritual reformation, shaped by what we take out. We might take out one meal per week or one kind of food for the whole season through *fasting*. We might increase our charitable giving, taking some more money out of our pockets and redirecting it toward the common good. We might take out some busyness through a weekend retreat, or a couple hours of silence and solitude each week. We might just take our phones away from our beside, to help us sleep a little earlier and more peacefully.

Lent is also traditionally a season of spiritual reformation, shaped by what we put into our lives. We add in a daily or weekly rhythm of prayer or reflection. We offer these guides as a means for doing this, for instance. Or we might increase our church attendance or participation to be a little more deeply formed by our community of worship. The psalms introduce us to many other meditative practices to help us take perspective and remember the presence of God with us.

Could you take a breath this week and wonder with me:

wonder

| What might need to be taken out of your life for a while?
What might you need to put in a little more of for a season?

Story

In 2003, I suffered a traumatic break to my larynx and underwent emergency surgical repair. Most people who suffer this traumatic injury do so through bar fights, car accidents, or sports injuries. Blunt force trauma to the lower throat crushes the windpipe. Wrong place, wrong pressure can lead to permanent vocal damage or death. In my case, the trauma was self-induced, as some are. Bad equipment, bad safety precautions, and just bad common sense led to a heavy barbell landing on my throat.

Had it been a half inch lower, I might be dead. Had I not lived in Greater Boston or not had good health insurance or not contacted my doctor the next day, I might have lost all use of my voice. For someone who loves to sing, and for someone who's made a living talking to people, this would have been a bad thing.

It took a lot to repair the injury. There was a spouse who encouraged me to call the doctor, classroom students who teased my weird-sounding voice and helped me realize maybe there was a serious problem. There was a primary care doctor who answered my call and referred me to the right hospital, a world-class surgeon on call who specialized in top notch vocal repair, an anaesthesiologist who knew how to bring me in and out of consciousness so I could talk and sing for a while before they screwed my throat shut again, and a caring and skillful team of nurses and other medical professionals. It also took two weeks after the surgery of total silence and low physical activity to let everything heal properly.

I think a lot about the public trauma we have all witnessed or suffered in recent years. We've lived through a global pandemic. We've witnessed and been complicit through our taxes in devastatingly violent wars.



We've watched videos of horrifying police brutality — moments where lives were violently cut off from the very source of life, like Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," pleading for air. We endure toxic and polarizing politics. There have been social movements that have exposed sex-related and race-related violence and other forms of oppression and abuse. Some of us have lost sleep. Some have lost family or friends. Many of us know people who have lost their lives. It's all been a lot. It's all been enough to knock the wind right out of us.

Psalm 46 is a balm for such a season. Before we end our first week, we'll read it in its entirety. It will give us some context for a prayer we are working with this year.

06

Psalm 46

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah
Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.
"Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth."
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*



Reflection

How is God our refuge, our strength, and an ever present help in trouble?

- Through perspective taking, remembering that amidst turmoil and change, some things do not change.
- Through the rivers God provides - literally our sources of water for drinking, bathing, cooking, and refreshment and metaphorically as well - anything in our lives or environments that brings refreshment and joy.
- Through God's voice - how through the scriptures, through our prayers, through our communities of worship, through the wisdom of children and friends and mentors and artists, God communicates wisdom and help.
- Through God's steady commitment to peace-making and justice, providing inspiration to interrupt our cycles of injustice and violence.
- And through stillness, through taking a breath and remembering.

Repair, help, salvation, and healing begin with stopping, with stillness, with taking a breath.

prayer | be

We'll lengthen this prayer of *Psalm 46:10* each week, but we start Lent with just a single word:

Be

Be, friends.
Just be.

Take a pause, take a breath, and see what comes. Be.

be

02 | be still

GOD FORMED THE HUMAN AND BLEW LIFE'S BREATH
INTO HIM THE HUMAN CAME TO LIFE

Genesis 2:4-7





EUROPEAN ROBIN

Those feathers impacted every aspect of her life. They protected her from the weather ... they kept out thorns, thwarted insects, and above all gave her skies, allowing a flight so casually efficient that our greatest machines seem clumsy in comparison. I was reminded of the natural miracle, feathers, as common around us as a robin preening and taking flight.

THOR HANSON

Story

Have you ever witnessed a birth? I wonder how well you remember it and what it was like for you.

All of us have done more than just witness a birth. Many of you have given birth yourself, one or more times. Your body and mind and spirit have been shaped by that experience. And all of us were present for our own births. We don't remember it, of course, but all of us squeezed our head shoulders and all the rest of us out of a groaning, pushing, mighty mother's body and breathed our first little gasps of breath into our lungs. Shortly after, we exhaled into our first cries, as we practiced that steady inflow and outflow of breath that will be a constant life force until the moment of our deaths.

When I think about births and first breaths, a lot of stories of life come to mind.

There are the stories of my own birth, how I wanted to come out early. My mother was at risk for preterm labor. Back in the early 70s, her doctor prescribed a daily shot of alcohol in the evening to keep everything relaxed and to keep me inside. (Maybe this explains some other things too? No comment.) And then when the time came, the eagerness and the rush continued. That Sunday morning, my parents met two of their parents on the side of the road, half way between their houses, to quickly pass my older brother off to his grandparents, before barely making it to the hospital in time for my birth. The eagerness, the rush, the surplus energy have continued.

I didn't grow up on a farm. But it seemed like our family kept trying to turn our little one floor suburban home into one. We kept so many pets. At different times in my childhood, we had dogs and cats and fish and birds and hamsters and guinea pigs. And now and then, one of them would have babies. I remember how disgusting it was to learn that hamsters sometimes eat their own babies. And I remember how magical it was when one of our dogs birthed a litter of puppies in a corner of my parent's bedroom. So messy and earthy and beautiful all at once, and I was so impressed by the strength and skill of that momma dog. How did she learn everything she had to do to birth and sustain all that life?

Mostly, though, I remember the births of my three children. Blood and sweat and tears and all kinds of mess. Hairy heads, bleating lamb-like cries, busy medical professionals, this weird mix of elation and shock and sleepless fatigue and worry and joy - is everything OK? Who does she look like? How is he so beautiful, and so tiny and so weird and so perfect?

My wife was heroic. Really. Maybe everyone feels this way about their partners who give birth, but her stamina and strength, the capacity of her body and the generosity of her spirit in nurturing our babies within for nine months, birthing them into the world, and continuing to take a leading role in their early nurture and feeding - all this is the greatest miracle of life I have ever witnessed. All I could do in the big moments was cheer her on and coach her breath. You're doing so great. OK, breathe in, honey. OK, big push, you've got this. Breathe, push. In and out. Breathe, push.

Now and then, though, things go sideways, and we remember life isn't promised. Life is indeed a miracle.

I have a relative who was born at just a little over 30 weeks, before his lungs had matured. Neonatal technologies and care have improved a great deal since then, but at the time, he had less than 50/50 odds of survival. For every couple of babies born that age at the hospital, one would go home a few weeks later with its parents and one wouldn't make it. My relative's lungs were still full of fluid. He left his mother's womb, opened his mouth, and could not breathe.

Our lives are so vulnerable and dependent. Without air, without breath, there is nothing. Perhaps this is why life and breath and air and wind and spirit have always been connected, deep in our psyches and deep in our faith. This week, we explore our dependent, intimate relationship with our Creator through the lens of air, breath, and spirit.

Our prayer is: Be still. Breathe in, breathe out, remember that it is not just our breath that sustains us but the spirit of God with us as well. Breathe. Be still.

prayer | be still 



Scripture

01

Genesis 2:4-7

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. On the day the Lord God made earth and sky—before any wild plants appeared on the earth, and before any field crops grew, because the Lord God hadn't yet sent rain on the earth and there was still no human being to farm the fertile land, though a stream rose from the earth and watered all of the fertile land—the Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life.

The Bible's early creation stories don't teach us geology or biology or history as we understand these fields today. They do something that was more important to its first readers. They tell us moral and spiritual and relational truths about who we are and where we come from. The story of human life here has two plays on words that help us understand who we are.

The name for humans - adam - is also the word for earth, *adamah*.

We are all earth creatures, made from the same elements of all creation. From dust we come, to dust we return.

But we are also filled with spirit. The words used for breath and life in the first two chapters of Genesis together capture a cluster of related ideas - breath, wind, spirit, life, and soul. Our breath keeps us alive. And our breath is a sign of God's spirit within.

We are earth and breath, body and soul, dust brought to life by Mother God.

*In whose grasp is the life of every thing,
the breath of every person?*

02
Job 12:10

*God's spirit made me;
the Almighty's breath enlivens me.*

03
Job 33:4

In this book about suffering, the main character Job and his terrible friend Elihu agree on one thing: that breath and spirit are two ways of getting at the same thing. Humans are utterly dependent upon the air that fills our lungs and on the God who has made and sustains us.

We can receive this tradition personally - our every breath a reminder of God's spirit within, affirming worth and strength, prompting gratitude and courage. And we can receive this tradition more cosmically as well. Many philosophers and theologians, both ancient and modern, have called God the soul of the world. God is the animating force of all things, the source of all life. We are all dependent on God and we are all connected in God as well.

“Just as chi is ambiguous, the biblical words for Holy Spirit - ruach in the Old Testament and pneuma in the New Testament – are also ambiguous: wind symbolizes a powerful force in nature and breath symbolizes the power of life in living things. Without chi, life does not exist, and similarly, if there is no Spirit, nothing can live. So it seems that there is a significant overlap between the Western-Christian notion of Spirit and the Asian understanding of chi.”

GRACE JI-SUN KIM





Scripture

The gospel of John is organized around the idea of new creation in Jesus. Let's take a look at where just a few excerpts lead us in our exploration of spirit and breath.

04

John 3:8

God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The word *pneuma* means both spirit and wind. God's spirit, God's wind, God's breath blow wherever they want. So it is with us. A spirited life, an inspired life, a life full of all the fullness of God looks like any other life. But you can feel the difference.

05

John 14:15-17

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can't receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.

Jesus calls the spirit of God the one who comes alongside, here translated as the Companion. The spirit of God encourages. The spirit of God tells the truth. The spirit of God convicts us. God as close as our breath, here to steady, to tell us the truth, to show us the way, to remind us we are not alone.

06

John 20:21-22

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." Then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

After his resurrection, when Jesus first sees his closest friends and followers, he does four things that are all the same thing. He breathes on them. He fills them with the Spirit. He offers them peace. He empowers them.

Breath, peace, spirit, empowerment all bound together as God lives within, accompanying and sustaining us.

Be still.

Breathe.



wonder

| What is God stirring inside you?
What is God offering you today?

“An understanding of the Holy Spirit as wind can bring us back to a primordial, earthy reality. We can be in touch with nature again and realize that the Holy Spirit as wind is found in everything and is everywhere. The association of ruach as the Holy Spirit in the imagery of wind continues in the New Testament with the Greek word pneuma. The Spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8) and at Pentecost, the Spirit comes like a wind (Acts 2:2).”

GRACE JI-SUN KIM




prayer | be still

We continue to lengthen the prayer of *Psalm 46:10* 'Be still, and know that I am God' each week, this week our prayer is:

Be still.

Breathe in.
Breathe out.

Remember that it is not just our breath that sustains us but the spirit of God with us as well. Breathe.

Be still. 

be still



BIRD FEATHER MACRO

i am breath

I am the first thing you claim in this
physical world
A gasp of Spirit flooding in
Filling the empty vessel that is your being
Awakening the flesh activating life

I am the last thing you release upon transition
A whispered surrender dissolving into the unseen
Carrying you back home to the vast expanse
From which you came

Each inhale brings in life
Not just air but essence
Spirit, light, love, the unseen Soul of the Divine
I am prana, I am chi, I am the sacred pulse of
existence
That moves through all as Spirit embodies

Each exhale let go
Shed the injury, shed the damage, shed the
weight
Release all that no longer serves
I take your shame, I take your grief, I take
your fears
And I return them to the wind

I am the silent rhythm that sustains you,
A spiritual dance of in and out
A sacred dance of give and receive
In harmony with our sister plants and mother
trees
Every inhale, drinks in their gift
Every exhale yours is offered in return
And they dance in this exchange unseen yet
ever present
Swaying in the breath of the Earth herself
As she sighs with each gust of wind
And she whispers with every gentle breeze

And as Father Sky holds the unseen
An endless manifestation of our physical
existence
Where Spirit moves through all
And the breath rises and flows with the
essence of the cosmos
The great exhalation of all that was and all
that is
Blowing the winds and moving the currents
Carrying the song of existence from one soul to
another

I am the breath of Divine Consciousness
The invisible thread that weaves through all that
lives
I flow through your lungs as I flow through the
forest
I move within every creature, every wave, every
leaf
The silent unity between souls
Reminding you to center, to ground
And to always come back to the breath

So breathe dear soul
Breathe with intention
Breathe with reverence
Inhale the love and the light
And all that is good
Exhale all that is heavy
Exhale and center
Exhale and come back

For I am with you
For I am within you
For I am Breath.



Scripture

Isaiah is the longest book of prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures. It was so important to Jesus and to the early church that some people have called it the fifth gospel, a companion to the four stories of the good news of Jesus with which the New Testament begins.

Isaiah is a prophet of many things, including a prophet of Spirit and peace.

07

Isaiah 26:3

*Those with sound thoughts you will keep in peace,
in peace because they trust in you.*

08

Isaiah 30:15

*Therefore, the Lord God,
the holy one of Israel, says:
In return and rest you will be saved;
quietness and trust will be your strength—
but you refused.*

09

Isaiah 40:31

*...those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength;
they will fly up on wings like eagles;
they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary.*

The first two of these excerpts were written to a tiny nation facing the possibility of military defeat, exile, and cultural extinction. To a people in dire circumstances, the prophet believes God can give them peace. Sound thoughts and trust in God are key to this peace.

We live in very different times. In our fast-paced distracted age, knowledge is abundant. Sound thoughts, wisdom, feel hard to come by. So does peace.

Isaiah, channeling what he senses is the voice and wisdom of God, says the things that make for peace are critical in hard times. Returning to oneself, returning to God, returning to one's center is a precursor to salvation. So is rest.

A synonym for salvation in this poetry is strength. Weak, worn out people find out saving strength through quietness and trust.

This sounds like something different than doom scrolling, something deeper than frenetic reactivity.

I wonder how we'll all keep returning to our center and returning to God. I wonder how we'll cultivate sound thoughts. I wonder what forms quietness and trust and rest will take in our lives. Because this is part of how God will strengthen and save us.

Rest is renewal, and rest is resistance.

The last verse lets this insight soar into imaginative poetry. The context is long fatigue. Not just: I'm tired at the end of this day. But more like: I'm tired after all these years. Isaiah promises that hope in God - hope expressed in rest, in prayer, in an increase of faith will stir profound resilience and vitality.


I've tasted that, friends. I want to live more in that zone.

Return.

Rest.

Trust.

Breathe.

Be still. 

03 | be still & know

THE SPIRIT SEARCHES EVERYTHING,
INCLUDING THE DEPTHS OF GOD.

I Corinthians 2:10





BARN OWLS

When owls pass overhead, their eerily silent wing strokes seem otherworldly, and they've long been linked to mythologies of the spirit realm. The complexity of airflow around bird wings continues to inspire aeronautical engineers.

THOR HANSON

Reflection

Think of the wisest person you can. I'm not talking about the so-called smartest person, the one with the best test scores or most polished resume. I'm talking about what we heard Isaiah called sound thoughts in last week's material. I'm talking about people who haven't just been shaped by the prevailing winds of their culture, but people who stick out for their grounding in the truth, their deep perception, and their ability and desire to be helpful.

The wisest people I know are not the smartest or most successful people I know. They aren't the wealthiest, most powerful, or most popular either. They are also very different from one another in their personalities, preferences, and life stories. But they have four things in common.

The wisest people I know have all suffered. They've faced public humiliation, untimely deaths of loved ones, dreams unfulfilled, rejection by friends, traumas of various kinds borne. Most of us suffer. These people have faced their suffering with honesty, surrender, and humility. With the help of God and friends, they have had uncommon resilience and hope.

The wisest people I know are also down to earth. They have simple loves they spend time on. They love a good meal, an entertaining story, and a funny joke. They are authentic - they spend very little energy managing their image. But they aren't just sensible folks with good common sense. They also have insights and commitments that are radically counter-cultural. A vision of justice, or the good life, or God has captivated them. They have deep moral commitments and courage and full spirits.

The wisest people I know have open hearts and open minds. They've changed their mind on some important things during their adult life because they kept learning and growing. And they have big hearts, open to new friendships, new experiences, and big feelings. Their openness helps them listen well and see clearly.

wonder

| Who is one of the wisest people you know?

Lastly, the wisest people I know bless and encourage other people a great deal. They don't force their opinions on others, but they are delighted when people ask them for questions or help. They affirm the best in others, help people see possibilities in themselves that they haven't yet seen. They have words to say, things to give that come beyond themselves. Their spirits have been shaped from things beyond themselves. They've stayed open to life and open to the God who sustains all life, giving them a growing reservoir of wisdom to draw upon.

These are people we treasure knowing, people we dream of becoming.

This week, we look at the spirit side of last week's spirit/breath pairing. We'll read a few excerpts of the apostle Paul's two letters we have to the house churches in the ancient Greek city of Corinth. Corinth was a well-educated, important, wealthy city. But Paul isn't interested in how smart or successful or rich the members of the churches could become. Instead, he encourages them to become spiritual and wise.

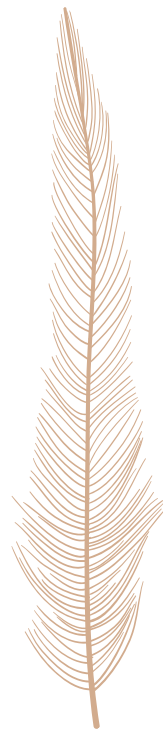
Our prayer this week continues to grow from Psalm 46:10, "*Be still and know that I am God*".

We say to spirits:
Be still and know.

We imagine the spirit of God calling to us:
Be still and know.

We wonder together, what we can know through the Spirit.

prayer | be still and know 



Scripture

01

I Cor 2:6-16

What we say is wisdom to people who are mature. It isn't a wisdom that comes from the present day or from today's leaders who are being reduced to nothing. We talk about God's wisdom, which has been hidden as a secret. God determined this wisdom in advance, before time began, for our glory. It is a wisdom that none of the present-day rulers have understood, because if they did understand it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory! But this is precisely what is written: God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being. God has revealed these things to us through the Spirit. The Spirit searches everything, including the depths of God. Who knows a person's depths except their own spirit that lives in them? In the same way, no one has known the depths of God except God's Spirit. We haven't received the world's spirit but God's Spirit so that we can know the things given to us by God. These are the things we are talking about—not with words taught by human wisdom but with words taught by the Spirit—we are interpreting spiritual things to spiritual people. But people who are unspiritual don't accept the things from God's Spirit. They are foolishness to them and can't be understood, because they can only be comprehended in a spiritual way. Spiritual people comprehend everything, but they themselves aren't understood by anyone. Who has known the mind of the Lord, who will advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.



Paul critiques the present-day wisdom he encountered in Corinth. When he thinks about the best educated, most prominent Roman citizens of his day, he is not impressed. He sees an empire that destroyed the city of Corinth in one century only to rebuild it again in the next. He sees leaders who didn't recognize the light of God in Jesus Christ, but tortured and killed him instead.

The first century house churches scattered about the Mediterranean world included small numbers of the Roman educated elite. But they worshipped and ate alongside ordinary illiterate laborers and large numbers of enslaved people as well. To this community, Paul says: God has prepared things for you. The Spirit of God offers to you the depths of God's wisdom.

What is this wisdom from the depths of God like?

It is hidden. People earn PhDs and never acquire wisdom. Industry leaders in government, business, biotechnology, software development reach senior leadership and flush incomes without finding it. Certain kinds of wisdom can only be acquired through spiritual transformation - new ways of seeing, new ways of loving, an inner revolution.

I think of myself as a young man in college. I was enrolled in an elite institution, and I'd been praised for some of my intellect, talents, and promise. And yet there were ways I misunderstood and looked down on so many types of people - rich people, queer people, immigrant people, people of color, disabled people, people of other religions, and weirdly, even myself. I had a lot to learn about one of the core spiritual insights of my faith and its sacred texts - that all people are made in the glorious image of God, that this glory can manifest itself in many places and many forms, that to be incurious about this glory in oneself or another was both foolish and degrading. I needed a revolution of spirit in the unspiritual way in which I saw and judged people.

What else is God's wisdom like? It looks like Jesus. Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah reflecting about how no human understands the deep wisdom of God. But he says that God's spirit knows the depths of God and that by faith, we can better commune with God's spirit who lives among us and within us. He says that to be a person who loves God and following Jesus is to have and to foster what he calls the mind of Christ. So when we read the gospels and witness how Jesus asks questions, how Jesus interacts with the sacred texts of his faith tradition, how Jesus prays, how he loves and heals, his profound compassion and curiosity and creativity in every situation, his preternatural calm in troubled times, we are seeing what God's wisdom looks like and what the Spirit of God seeks to develop within us.

"The Spirit liberates, transforms, reconciles, empowers, and assures. The Spirit is powerful and uses its capacity to empower us to do God's work. The church is reminded that to be 'in Christ' is the same as being 'in the Spirit.' I Cor 12:3."

GRACE JI-SUN KIM

Spirit of the living God, please cultivate the mind of Christ in me.
Loving God, if I can be still, what would you like me to know?

Scripture

02

I Cor 6:19

Or don't you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you? Don't you know that you have the Holy Spirit from God, and you don't belong to yourselves?

The Corinthian churches thought that to be really spiritual was to live a life above the regular flow of this earth. It was to pray and see a steady stream of miracles. It was for God to give you access to deeply emotive worship and spectacular experiences. Throughout this letter, Paul tries to shift their thinking. To be really spiritual, he tells them, is to be aware of the indwelling Spirit of God, who is seeking to make all places and all people and the whole earth itself a temple of God's presence. To be a secure human is to own one's own body and life - my life and my body are my home. At the same time, to be a spiritual human is to acknowledge that my life and my body are not only mine, they are also God's.

I do not only belong to myself.

Crappy holiness teaching gives you a huge list of little things to not do, lest you disappoint and anger God and maybe drive God away from your polluted self. Healthy holiness teaching tells you that God has chosen to live within you, and that God would like to help your life become a better and better home for God to live in and a better and better home for you to live in as well.

Theologian Grace Ji-Sun Kim reminds us that our life energy and vitality itself, understood as *chi* in some East Asian cultures, is a sign of the Spirit of God always with us.

Spirit of the Living God, help me remember you are always with me. Let every movement, every thought, every feeling, every breath be a reminder of your living presence. Help my life be the best possible home for you and for me.





BARN OWL

Write this down with a feather pen: My emotions are doors opened by my willingness to feel them. You can feel sad without chaining yourself to sadness. You can feel fear without believing fear is the truth. If that feels difficult at first, just wing it. (That's our motto. Just wing it.) It is absolutely possible to make a nest of a hurricane. To make a clearing of the fog. Ask yourself, "What love can I make of this loss?" Humans, remember, are nightshades. They grow in the dark.

ANDREA GIBSON
An excerpt from *The Birds Wrote Me a Poem*



Scripture

03

II Cor 3:17-18

The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Lord's Spirit is, there is freedom. All of us are looking with unveiled faces at the glory of the Lord as if we were looking in a mirror. We are being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to the next degree of glory. This comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

04

II Cor 12:7-10

I was given a thorn in my body because of the outstanding revelations I've received so that I wouldn't be conceited. It's a messenger from Satan sent to torment me so that I wouldn't be conceited. I pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me alone. He said to me, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me. Therefore, I'm all right with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations for the sake of Christ, because when I'm weak, then I'm strong.

We'll close this week with a few more images of the wisdom, the spiritual life of God that can grow in us.

Freedom

A sign of the activity of the Spirit of God within is growing freedom. Think of the many ways in which most of us routinely lack freedom. We are emotionally reactive in stressful situations. We compulsively return to unhealthy habits that don't bring us joy or make us feel proud of ourselves. We manage our image around others or even inside our own mind because we don't love our true selves. Consider asking the Spirit of God to help you be more free.



That Ever Increasing Glow

To be a spiritual person is not to debase oneself. It is to shine with growing light. Deeply wise people, people of healthy and deep spirituality radiate beauty. Paul imagines the fully spiritual human as a glorious reflection of divine holy wisdom and beauty - looking more and more like one's true self as we also look more and more like God.

Strength in Weakness

At the start of the week, I shared that all of the wisest, most spiritual people I know have suffered and have suffered well. We all suffer, the apostle Paul included. Paul isn't specific in this letter, but scholars have speculated about the suffering that calls a thorn in his body. Some think it was eye problems that caused increasing blindness as he aged. Other scholars think it may have been epilepsy, which in Paul's time had no treatments. Others wonder if this was a persistent internal issue, a besetting temptation, addiction, or mental health struggle. We don't know.


We do know that Paul believes the Spirit of God told him he was good enough for God, just as he was. That his weakness was a reminder to him and others of God's strength.

Friends, think for a moment about where you are least free, or where your life is least glorious and beautiful, or where you are most weak.

Instead of hating or fearing these aspects of your life, what if these are places for the Spirit of God to love and help you and shine through you? What if your life is already a temple of the Spirit of God, a place where God is glad to live and speak and shine?

Be still, and know.





prayer | be still and know

We continue to lengthen the prayer of *Psalm 46:10*
'Be still, and know that I am God' each week, this week our
prayer is:

Be still, and know.

Breathe in.
Breathe out.

Remember that it is not just our breath that sustains us
but the spirit of God with us as well. Breathe.

Be still, and know. 

be still
and know



OWL

Panic

Take a deep breath, she says
But there is no room for breath
in my chest, it is filled

With every fear of every child within me
from the terror of birth
to the late night phone call

Take a deep breath, she repeats
But my lungs are made of reinforced steel—
anything softer would be unsafe

Take a deep breath, but my throat is tight
and the air outside is poisonous
with hate and others' fear

Breathe, she says
so gently, *breathe with me*
The air from my lungs is safe

She puts my hand on her chest
her hand on mine, and shows me—
In and out, up and down

My heart feels her heart and slows, quiets
The specters fade as I return
Breathe, sweetheart

Her touch turns steel to soft flesh again
and I breathe, clasp her hand, look around to find us
lying quietly together, safe and warm.

Panic

Created for Lent 2025

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A close-up, top-down view of a lush field of green grass. The grass blades are long and thin, creating a textured, layered appearance. Scattered throughout the greenery are several bright orange flowers, likely cornflowers, which stand out against the verdant background. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the natural colors and textures of the plants.

04 | be still & know that I am

“PLEASE SHOW ME YOUR GLORIOUS PRESENCE.”

Exodus 33:18



BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER

As humans our vision is inevitably myopic and limited.
But the bird's eye view is the larger perspective,
there are no confines to it.


JOHN O'DONOHUE





Introduction



Where do you go to be with God? What do you do to refresh your spirit, to bring you back into communion with your Creator?



I have a friend who takes a hike in the wilderness for a day or two almost every weekend. During the week, he works, shares life with a partner, and all the other regular things, but then he spends a long Saturday alone in the wilderness near where he lives. While I can't personally imagine spending that much time alone in the wilderness, part of me gets it. When I head up to the mountains or out into the woods, sometimes I think: I can breathe better here.

I know another person, an author and scholar Christena Cleveland, who has taken extensive pilgrimages to visit statues of the Black Madonna - artistic renderings of Mother Mary with dark skin. Their expression of humanity and divinity in the image of a Black woman have helped her find an empowering spirituality and faith that affirms her life, her body, her abilities have sacred worth.

For two or three years now, I've made a monthly prayer retreat at a local monastery, a place which over time my spirit has come to associate with hospitality, love, prayer, and the presence of God. One of the reasons I started doing this was the wisdom of an indigenous elder I respect who said that all our indigenous ancestors valued sacred spaces, and that all people need places they associate with the divine, so that no matter what's happening around us or in our spirit, we have simple ways of returning to God.



More than once, the Bible affirms that the whole earth is full of God's glory. (*Isaiah 6:3, Revelation 4:8*) It also says the heavens declare the glory of God. (*Psalms 19:1*) When the Bible talks about the heavens, it doesn't usually mean an alternative dimension where souls go after death. It's talking about the air and the skies, everything from the air we breathe and through which the birds fly all the way up through everything we see in the skies above us - clouds and sun and moon and distant stars.

Everything, everywhere is a temple for the living God - earth, sky, air, heavens. I know people who seek the glory and presence of the divine at weekly church services, at the oceanside, in the eyes of their children, and at Beyonce concerts. They are all on to something.

What would it mean at all times, in all things to be able to look around us through the air and see the ever-present glory and energy and love of God? In our sacred spaces, to be sure. And everywhere.



Our prayer this week, from the mouth of God, is the phrase:

prayer | be still & know that I am 



Scripture

We'll explore two passages of God's self-revelation in the book of Exodus, the great, ancient story of God's deliverance from bondage. We'll wonder together where we can find God, what God is like when God is found, and how it is we remember that God is always as close as our very breath.

01

Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was taking care of the flock for his father-in-law Jethro, Midian's priest. He led his flock out to the edge of the desert, and he came to God's mountain called Horeb. The Lord's messenger appeared to him in a flame of fire in the middle of a bush. Moses saw that the bush was in flames, but it didn't burn up. Then Moses said to himself, Let me check out this amazing sight and find out why the bush isn't burning up.

When the Lord saw that he was coming to look, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses said, "I'm here."

Then the Lord said, "Don't come any closer! Take off your sandals, because you are standing on holy ground." He continued, "I am the God of your father, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I've clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I've heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I've come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that's full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites' cries of injustice have reached me. I've seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I'm sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"


God said, "I'll be with you. And this will show you that I'm the one who sent you. After you bring the people out of Egypt, you will come back here and worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?"

God said to Moses, "I Am Who I Am. So say to the Israelites, 'I Am has sent me to you.'" God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me.




Let's talk about three things: Moses, God's location, and God's nature.

Moses 

becomes a singularly important spiritual and political leader, among the greats of humanity from the millennia past where we don't know how to separate ancient history from epic myth and legends. So the story of Moses is unique but can also be a proxy for any person who would seek God or from God's perspective, any person whom God would seek.

Moses was born to an oppressed people. The first great trauma of his life happens early, when his mother makes the terrible decision to give up custody for his own safety and well-being. Moses seems to peak in success at a young age until he makes a terrible mistake that drives him away from his family, his home, and his promise of greatness. When we meet him, he is living exile. He has married but he and his wife haven't yet moved out of his father-in-law's house. He works a low status, low pay job as a shepherd in his in-laws' family business.

Our life circumstances are not an obstacle to God's nearness or to spiritual renewal. They are the space where God will meet us. Reality is the friend of God. This day, this moment, these sets of circumstances are where God lives and reaches out to us with loving attention. Always. Always.


Where is God? 

Well, at this moment, God is in a bush in the desert that burns bright though the fire doesn't consume it. Is it an unusually bright desert flower? Is it the sun glinting off the dew at sunrise? Is it a small brush fire? We don't know. We know that Moses knew God was there, that Moses sensed God speaking to him with great clarity, that Moses sensed he was in a sacred place, took off his shoes, and was afraid to keep looking.

At the same time, though, God seems to be off to the west in Egypt listening to the cries of pain from the enslaved workers in that land. And God seems to also be up north in Canaan, this promised land of milk and honey where God also sees a future for the descendants of Moses and these heartbroken workers down in Egypt. God is listening, God is watching, God is calling and equipping a leader for the future.

God seems to love particular places where it's easier for us to pay attention to God. And at the same time, God seems to be everywhere all at once. This is the doctrine of the omnipresence of God, to which I very much subscribe. As Spirit, God can be everywhere all at once, doing many things simultaneously.

God's nature

Who is God? 

On the one hand this is a ridiculous question. How does a human begin to describe the everlasting creator of the universe? Yet central to our faith is that God has revealed Godself in many ways, at many times, to God's children. People have been calling God a variety of things at this time. The name El, a generic Semitic name for God, was used by many people and faiths in the Ancient Near East, including in the Bible. In the book of Genesis, founding father and mother Abraham and Sarah's scorned servant/concubine/sex slave Hagar meets God in the wilderness and names God El Roi, the God who Sees. Others call God El Shaddai, which is a motherly, nurturing name for God. It meant either God of the Mountains or God of the Breasts.

Here God reveals through Moses a specific Hebrew name for God. The name is a series of four consonants in written Hebrew. Later Germans mis-pronounced it as Jehovah. In Hebrew, it was more likely pronounced something like Yahweh.

Out of respect, Jews in ancient times through the present neither write nor say this name. In solidarity with this tradition, most Christians - myself included - also don't say the name. In English Bibles, it is almost always written as LORD in all capital letters. Whenever you see this word in your Bible's Old Testament, and you see it very often, know that the name there isn't a generic name for Master of the Universe. It is a personal name, and it means something like "I am who I am." Or "I will be who I will be." Or perhaps "I will become what I am becoming." It's beautiful, I think, that we can't nail down the meaning. God's too big, too dynamic for that. But it has something to do with the verb "to be" because more than anything else, God is, God will be, God is ever becoming. God is creator, origin, reality, energy, the great soul of the universe.

A beautiful, divine coincidence is that to breathe is to say this name of God. If you breathe deeply in and out, you can hear the noise of your breath. If you do so through your mouth, it can sound like the Yah on the inbreath, and the Weh on the out breath, Yah-weh, in and out, breathing. Being still and knowing that God is.

How can we carry God's name in our breath?

How do we remember God's steady, holy, loving, empowering presence with us always?

I heard once of a doctor who while doing rounds with patients would always briefly touch the doorframe on the way into the room. Each touch of the frame was a quick reminder that God was present, already there in the room before the doctor arrived.

This way, the doctor remembered dozens of times a day that everywhere they went, loving and nurturing, all-seeing God was already there.

Some of us wear or carry a little piece of jewelry we can see and touch - a cross around the neck, a crucifix or some prayer beads in our pocket. This too is an emblem of God's presence. The God whose co-suffering, forgiving love, in solidarity with every pain and suffering, is with us still.



"I remember as a child that whenever my father left home he always paused at the door and inhaled a last deep breath before he went out. No one ever commented on this, nor was it ever explained. But it was as if he wanted to inhale some of the spirit of the family before he left us."


JOHN O'DONOHUE

prayer | be still and know that I am

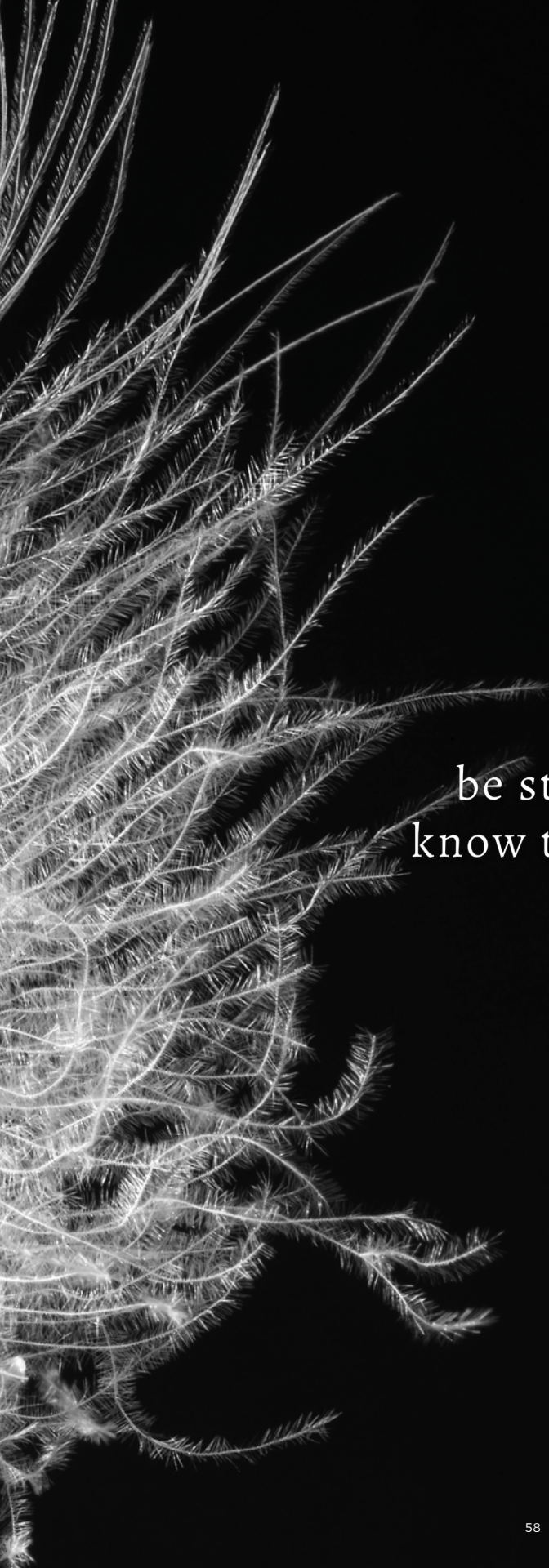
We can also learn very short prayers we say habitually throughout the day.

Come, Holy Spirit.
Christ, have mercy.
Be still and know that God is here.
Help, thank you, wow.

These are all little short prayers that remind us God is here, that remind God that we are trying our little best at loving attention.

Be still and know that I am. 





be still and
know that I am

week 4 | be still & know that I am

Scripture

02

Exodus 33:18-23

Exodus 34: 5-7

Chapter 33 | *Moses said, "Please show me your glorious presence." The Lord said, "I'll make all my goodness pass in front of you, and I'll proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord.' I will be kind to whomever I wish to be kind, and I will have compassion to whomever I wish to be compassionate. But," the Lord said, "you can't see my face because no one can see me and live." The Lord said, "Here is a place near me where you will stand beside the rock. As my glorious presence passes by, I'll set you in a gap in the rock, and I'll cover you with my hand until I've passed by. Then I'll take away my hand, and you will see my back, but my face won't be visible."*

Chapter 34 | *The Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him, and proclaimed the name, "The Lord." The Lord passed in front of him and proclaimed:*

"The Lord! The Lord!

*a God who is compassionate and merciful,
very patient, full of great loyalty and faithfulness,
showing great loyalty to a thousand generations,
forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
punishing for their parents' sins
their children and their grandchildren,
as well as the third and the fourth generation."*

It is not always easy to remember, let alone see, that God is with us.

One interesting thing is that it seems like the times we most need to encounter God are the times that it seems to happen more often. During times of portent or crisis, and during transitional times - the in-between moments some people call liminal spaces, we seem more likely to experience God more directly.

Moses was in a crisis leadership moment himself, and so for the first time since his original calling, decades ago back when he was a shepherd in the desert, Moses asks God to understand him better. "I've talked with you before," Moses tells God, but I need to see, to feel your full glorious presence.

There are a couple complicated things in this moment of revelation, and then the good news for us all. Let's take the complicated stuff first.

Even God here seems to recognize the difficulty of humans seeing God. God here speaks out of this ancient tradition that one cannot see God and live. Christians would later challenge this tradition. They'd say that the first generation of believers saw the face of God in Jesus Christ. The faith entrepreneur Paul the apostle compared the believers experience of the Spirit of God within to seeing God with an unveiled face, so that God's glory keeps rubbing off on our faces as we get to know God better. Still, in Moses' day, this was widely believed - that it might be possible to see the face of God, but that you'd die if you did.

So God proposes a kind of indirect sighting. Moses will tuck himself into a mountain crevice and God will pass by him, and Moses can look at God's backside. Interesting view, God? Seriously, in our scientific age, we don't think we'd be struck dead if we saw God face to face, but we are aware that God isn't exactly the kind of being we as humans can have direct, bodily sight of. So the idea that our experience with God would be indirect checks out for us.

The second complicated thing is that in Moses' encounter with God, one thing God reveals to Moses is that people are held accountable and that the accountability for human sin will carry forward across three or four generations. As a curse, this sounds very harsh. It is also in dynamic tension with other places in the Bible that say this is not true, that people are only held accountable for our own mistakes, not those of our parents. But as a statement of sociological and genetic truth, this seems to be a fact. Bad choices and the family culture and character that are informed by them impact us generationally. It is a mercy of God that these impacts fade over time.

Otherwise, what Moses encounters is extraordinary and beautiful. God is speaking or singing or chanting (what, after all, does God talking sound like?) as God passes by in the mountains. And God announces God's unchanging nature - compassionate, merciful, patient, loyal, and faithful. All of this gets past down in the truest adjective for God in the Hebrew scriptures. God is eternally hosed - steady in God's loving-kindness. This loving-kindness of God is so strong that though our sins may impact three or four generations, stories of God's goodness ripple across a thousand generations. What love did God express some 20,000 years ago that is still blessing us today? Moses' time period was only less than 200 generations ago, relatively recent history. God's profound goodness is still with us.



God

Everytime we see compassion, mercy, patience, loyalty, and faithfulness, we see an echo of the face and character of God. If you're having a hard time seeing, or believing in or experiencing God, look for compassion or mercy or patience or loyalty and faithfulness anywhere and trust that these are ripples of this goodness emanating from God. It's another version of Mr. Rogers advice to children (and caregivers of children) for staying humane and finding hope in times of tragedy or crisis. Children's educator, Christian minister, and TV personality Mr. Rogers often said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

Friends, I saw God in Bishop Marian Budde's inauguration day sermon, when she called for national unity formed in honesty and humility and called upon our president to lead with mercy.

And I saw God yesterday, when I ordered two slices of pizza that cost \$7, only to notice the cash only sign on the register while the owner was heating them up and I checked my wallet and saw only a \$5 bill. I told the owner I'd take only one slice. He said no way, gave me both slices, took my \$5 and told me to pay it forward somewhere.

God is in all the compassion, all the mercy, big or small.

And friends, everytime we partner with God in compassion, mercy, patience, loyalty, and faithfulness, we are God's children extending his light out into creation again.

Look for the helpers, look for the mercy, and be still and know that God is.

And be the helpers, be the compassion and mercy and patience and loyalty, so you can be God's light, God's hands and feet, and someone else can know God is too.

wonder

Where you are experiencing the goodness of God?
What ripples of goodness can you add to the air around you?
What is at the heart of your life?

“Air is an intimate element. It gets right into you through your breathing and your blood, into the heart of your life.”

JOHN O'DONOHUE

05 | be still & know that I am God

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN IS LIKE...





RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRD

The best guides to the possibilities of air ... are the birds. It has always been one of the deepest desires of the human heart to fly over the horizon, up out of the containment and boundaries that normal human living seems to impose.

JOHN O'DONOHUE



Introduction

At the start of this season, we said that Lent is a season of spiritual formation. In my early 20s, I was pretty sure I was doing this right, so sure that with just a little bit of on the job training, I started teaching people a few years younger than me how to do it too.

If my spiritual formation had an anchor, it was the phrase from when Jesus called the disciples. Repent and believe, he told them, which for the fishermen that he called matched a phrase that put legs behind those spiritual words. Jesus said: Leave and follow.

The fishers left their families and their jobs catching fish. I left all things that I thought God didn't care about - my academic and career ambitions, my hobbies and previous interests, money and possessions, and a career track above poverty wages. The disciples followed Jesus by walking around with him, learning from him, doing ministry with him. I tried to follow Jesus through a hard-core serious religious life: regular prayer and Bible daily, living simply with minimal possessions, communal living with other Christians, some early and naive commitments around economic and racial justice, and a religious job trying to convince other people to do the same. I was very serious, but I wasn't always very healthy. I was rigid and judgy too, and I still had a lot of growing up to do.

I've heard stories from many other people who now question or reject how they were taught to be more spiritual people. A small group I'm in was talking about our experiences as youth with evangelical sexual purity culture in churches. We remembered what we felt around what we thought about when words like temptation, sin, or holiness were used. The straight men said this mostly felt focused on the depravity of any sexually related thoughts. The message was, "Don't yield to temptation." The straight women said this mostly felt focused on not being the sources of someone else's sexually depraved thoughts. The message was, "Don't *be* a temptation." And the queer people, all closeted as teens in evangelical settings, said they mostly felt like their very thoughts and existence was a crime. The message was, "You're broken." Or, "You're evil."

We're trying to chart better ways forward in all this.



Healthy spiritual formation affirms the created goodness and dignity of us all. We are beautiful and valuable, images of the invisible God, sustained by the breath of life that is God's spirit.

And our spiritual growth isn't a rigid, single issue attack on our bodies, our loves, or our lifestyle.

Spiritual formation is a more dynamic, positive, and exciting journey. This week, we look at Jesus' primary lens for talking about spiritual formation, which was participation in what he called his kingdom.

In Mark and Luke's gospels, it's called the Kingdom of God. We usually translate this phrase a little differently. We call it a commonwealth, or a kin-dom, or - with the Rev. Dr. King and other leaders in the Black-led freedom movement in the U.S. in the 1950s and 1960s - a beloved community. All of these phrases get at the essence of Jesus' vision for community better. Matthew calls it the Kingdom of Heavens.

When we hear the word "heaven," we probably think of a place in some other dimension where you go after you die. But that's not mostly how the Bible uses the word heaven or heavens. The heavens are another word for the skies - everywhere from the air we breathe just a few feet off the ground, to the place birds fly, to way up high where you see clouds and sun and moon and stars. In ancient thinking, God also lived in the heavens, somewhere up in the skies above the clouds.

And so for Matthew, Jesus' Kingdom of Heaven wasn't about the afterlife at all, it was about the places in this world, in this life, where God is here and things go God's way. It's like what we'd have in mind if we were to say "heaven on earth."

So this week, we turn to what Matthew calls Jesus' kingdom of the heavens. Where is God at work among us? What is life like when things go God's way in life? What are our best chances at heaven on earth?

Our prayer this week is the full verse from Psalm 46:

prayer | be still and know that I am God



Scripture

Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like someone who planted good seed in his field. While people were sleeping, an enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat and went away. When the stalks sprouted and bore grain, then the weeds also appeared.

01

Matthew 13:24-30

"The servants of the landowner came and said to him, 'Master, didn't you plant good seed in your field? Then how is it that it has weeds?'

"An enemy has done this,' he answered.

"The servants said to him, 'Do you want us to go and gather them?'

"But the landowner said, 'No, because if you gather the weeds, you'll pull up the wheat along with them. Let both grow side by side until the harvest. And at harvest time I'll say to the harvesters, "First gather the weeds and tie them together in bundles to be burned. But bring the wheat into my barn."'"

So maybe this doesn't at first seem like Jesus' #1 most inspirational teaching. I've never seen any part of it on a bumper sticker, or crocheted into a wall hanging. But I think about this one a lot.

Later in Matthew, Jesus gives it a particular interpretation - about how churches and all kinds of other communities will be filled with people living side by side, some of whom are increasingly filled with love and goodness, and some of whom are increasingly filled with evil. Jesus uses violent, apocalyptic-sounding imagery for how spiritual beings will sort out the judgment of who is who in the next life. But the upshot is that the judging, let alone the violence, is never our job. Labelling people, purging them, searching for pure communities with no "bad guys" is never our job either.

That's good, but I think this teaching can go in many other directions.

It turns out that heaven on earth is never really "heaven on earth." Weeds end up planted in every good crop, and there's no getting rid of them all without hurting the plants we want.

Every family, every workplace, every neighborhood, every national government is going to have toxic people alongside the healthy ones. Sometimes we might be the toxic people. There's no avoiding this mixing, though. We can't weed out what we see as the problems. We have to accept a mixed bag in everything in life.

Heaven on earth is never a utopia. It's never a field that is 100% wheat or flowers or whatever. Difficulties, annoyances, even evil will show up everywhere. Our job isn't to fix all this but to accept it and for the things we can't fix, to trust God to sort them out in the future.

He told another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."

02
Matthew 13:24-30

Great things mostly come from small beginnings. When only 5% of you wants to call your mom on Mother's Day, and you make the call and try your best, that's a good thing. When you haven't prayed in ages, and so you learn a way to pray for five minutes each morning, that's a good thing. When your national government is attacking people and you can't stop them, but you're a good and loyal friend to someone being attacked or you're a good and loyal friend to yourself who is being attacked, that's a good thing.

God is with every small beginning. God smiles at the life inside of small beginnings. God sees the possibilities of where they might go.

And great things don't even need to be all that great. If Jesus wanted an image for truly impressive plantlife, he would have talked about the great cedars of Lebanon - mighty, majestic trees just to the north of his region of Galilee. Mustard bushes aren't even really trees; they are shrubbery, 5 or 10 feet tall at the most. Big and useful enough for birds to nest in and to harvest seed for species. But nothing jaw-dropping great. And that's part of the point too. God's work in us, and God's work on this earth doesn't always have to be mighty and great. Work that does some good for our community, love that encourages a few people, moving concerts that only 43 people attend, a row of bushes that provide a home for a few birds - these are all beautiful and important things to God.

Friends, do not despise small beginnings or unheroic goodness. God lives in these places and loves them.

Scripture

03

Matthew 13:33

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough."

Where is God? What is God doing? How can we partner with God in this life?

God is in the yeast. God is in that fungus that eats sugars and turns them into gases and alcohol. Maybe. Ben Franklin allegedly said, "Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy." (Hmm, maybe not. Historians tell us he said that about wine, not beer. And only once.)

Less literally, God is in every little positive influence that works its way through something bigger. Teach in a school where people treat kids like nuisances, and watch what happens if you treat them like the sacred images of God that they are. Hang out around sarcastic people, and watch what happens when you compliment and encourage people again and again. God is in the yeast.

And God is with every woman making enough food to share. (A bushel is many, many pounds. Here we see someone not just cooking for oneself or one's family, but for a party or for one's household and all one's neighbors.) Maybe spiritual formation isn't just learning to pray or learning self-control and health in your sexuality. Maybe spiritual formation looks like feeding people, and cooking tasty and sometimes even lavish meals, and doing chores or anything else mundane and useful with care and love.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.

04

Matthew 13:44-46

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.

In the end, though, God’s work is also dream shaping. It’s a treasure that you’d give up most anything else for. Our other parables - wheat and weeds, mustard seed, yeast in the bread - all honor God’s presence in imperfect, small, and humble daily life. That’s really important. We need a lot of stories that honor faith, hope, and love in small things.

Here, though, Jesus tells us that sometimes we come across the motherload of gifts from God. Spiritual formation, I guess, is looking for it and going all in when you find it.

Maybe you have some big dreams. Maybe you dream of a great love story. Or maybe you dream of a family where people keep coming back to each other. Maybe you dream of justice in some area. Maybe you dream of healing or freedom somewhere in your life, a great contribution or success in your work. Maybe you dream of someone’s flourishing, or even just someone’s survival. And maybe loving people so much that it hurts when they hurt is the big dream. None of us get all of our dreams, but maybe we get some, or even one, and God is in that treasure for us to celebrate. Maybe spiritual formation is taking a risk and going for it. Maybe spiritual formation is joy and gratitude.

prayer | be still and know that I am God



And maybe God being with us in all things is also the big dream. And so maybe spiritual formation is believing that God is with us every single day, hoping with us, loving us and daring us to love too. And maybe spiritual formation is getting a little more curious about where God is each day too.



be still and
know that I am God

week 5 | be still & know that I am God



06 | The Winds *of the Spirit*

I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD TO EAT.
I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME A DRINK.
I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME.
I WAS NAKED AND YOU GAVE ME CLOTHES TO WEAR.
I WAS SICK AND YOU TOOK CARE OF ME.
I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU VISITED ME.

Matthew 25:35-36

Introduction

This last week is the week before Easter. It's the week called the passion of Jesus Christ, when we remember each year the final week of Jesus' life including his death and burial, before we celebrate his resurrection on Easter Sunday. It's called the passion of Christ because, well, there's a lot of passion in this week. It's a week of big teachings, dramatic performance art and conflicts, a week where Jesus goes big and bold in just about everything he does. And it's a week of suffering too, which is the original root of the word passion.

We remember the passion in a year that is full of trouble. I'm writing these words in February of 2025, not yet able to imagine or predict what April will hold. But there are many threats on the horizon. It's a time when we really need resilience, when we really need purpose, focus, and courage. It's a time when we need the classic fruit of spiritual formation in the Way of Jesus.

Spiritual formation in the Way of Jesus, after all, is about increase in faith, hope, and love. (*I Corinthians 13:13*)

It is about a spiritual life that shapes what the scriptures call the fruit of the spirit in us: increases in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (*Galatians 5:22-23*)

It is about increasing inner strength that comes from knowing how much God loves us. (*Ephesians 3:14-19*)

It is about growing in whole-hearted love for God, self, neighbor, and even enemy. (*Mark 12:28-31, Matthew 5:43-44*)

This is good and beautiful inner work. But it's not going to just happen to us. To live this way means swimming upstream against the prevailing winds of our culture. It also isn't work we do alone, but with the help of God and friends.

This week, amidst complex, scary times, we remember the passion of Christ and we focus on some particularly stirring words and actions that can stir us toward bigger faith, hope, and love; zestier fruit of the spirit; and more abundant inner strength, resilience, and courage.

Think of these memories of the passion of Christ as the final breaths of Jesus, as winds of the Spirit from another very trying time that can fill our sails as we keep remembering them.

Scripture

01

Matthew 25:31-46

“Now when the Human One^[b] comes in his majesty and all his angels are with him, he will sit on his majestic throne. All the nations will be gathered in front of him. He will separate them from each other, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right side. But the goats he will put on his left.

“Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.’

“Then those who are righteous will reply to him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

“Then the king will reply to them, ‘I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.’

“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Get away from me, you who will receive terrible things. Go into the unending fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. I was hungry and you didn’t give me food to eat. I was thirsty and you didn’t give me anything to drink. I was a stranger and you didn’t welcome me. I was naked and you didn’t give me clothes to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.’

“Then they will reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and didn’t do anything to help you?’ Then he will answer, ‘I assure you that when you haven’t done it for one of the least of these, you haven’t done it for me.’ And they will go away into eternal punishment. But the righteous ones will go into eternal life.”

On the negative side, we can hear Jesus' prophetic critique.

Quoting my friend and colleague Zach Lambert,
"I was hungry but you took free lunch out of schools.
I was thirsty but you cut humanitarian aid for clean water.
I was a stranger but you sent ICE agents into my church to arrest me.
I was sick, but you took away my healthcare coverage.
I was in prison, but you left me there because you profited off of it.
Whatever you did to the least of these, my siblings, you did to me."

On the positive side, look at how in reach it is to love Jesus, to love with eternal values. Food and drink for those that need it, shelter for a stranger, accompaniment and friendship for one who is sick or imprisoned are all sacred. Radical hospitality is sacred love, of eternal worth.



TYSON PHILLIPS



Starlings wheel and fly before landing to sleep near the southern Israeli city of Rahat | January 4, 2016



STARLING

Stop clipping the wings of life's magic. Beneath your running mind is a heart that knows that kind of exercise is ridiculous.

Every day is a great day to hatch wonder... If that doesn't make sense right now, it will one morning, when you wake at sunrise, walk out to your porch, and see a flock of ten thousand starlings circling above your head.

There I am, you'll think, looking up at us. *There I am*.

ANDREA GIBSON

An excerpt from *The Birds Wrote Me a Poem*

Scripture

02

Matthew 26:6-13

When Jesus was at Bethany visiting the house of Simon, who had a skin disease, a woman came to him with a vase made of alabaster containing very expensive perfume. She poured it on Jesus' head while he was sitting at dinner. Now when the disciples saw it they were angry and said, "Why this waste? This perfume could have been sold for a lot of money and given to the poor."

But Jesus knew what they were thinking. He said, "Why do you make trouble for the woman? She's done a good thing for me. You always have the poor with you, but you won't always have me. By pouring this perfume over my body she's prepared me to be buried. I tell you the truth that wherever in the whole world this good news is announced, what she's done will also be told in memory of her."

One of Jesus' female followers pours the most expensive perfume over his head. It was the best way she knew to love him and honor him. Without realizing it, she is anointing him for burial. It is both tragic and intimate and extraordinarily beautiful. Jesus' male disciples thought it was inappropriate and impractical. Jesus tells them they are wronger than wrong.

The good news will not be told without honoring this woman's love. Why? For one, there are echoes of the communion meal here - the good news of Jesus broken and poured out, us eating and drinking in memory of him. She is an image of the love of God that holds back nothing from us, all of God's love and life into our dying bodies.

And also, more simply, extravagant love is always a good thing. God loves extravagantly. God loves it when we love extravagantly, when we turn up the volume, so to speak, with our compliments, gifts, affection and service.

wonder |

How have you been loved extravagantly?

How will you appreciate or honor that love?

How can you love extravagantly?

Big love is always a good thing.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take and eat. This is my body." He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from this, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many so that their sins may be forgiven. I tell you, I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way with you in my Father's kingdom." Then, after singing songs of praise, they went to the Mount of Olives. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Tonight you will all fall away because of me."

This is the Last Supper, that most famous guys night out, the first communion behind all First Communions. There's an infinite amount of little things to unpack in these few words. Let's try just a few:

This is my body – So much here. It evokes the unleavened bread of the ancient Passover meal, with its echoes of salvation. It evokes the manna, the bread of life, that fed the freed slaves in the desert, on their way to liberation. Jesus is determined to feed us, to sustain us, to strengthen us, to help and rescue us.

Blood of the covenant – This is a weird phrase for us, but an important one in its context. A covenant is like a sacred contract. It's a holy promise. Think wedding vows that make for a marriage covenant. In ancient times, covenants were sealed with blood, often the blood of an animal that was sacrificed for the occasion. Gross, I know. But work with it for a minute. Jesus imagines his own death, and this wine that prefigures his shed blood, as marking a new way, a new covenant for us with God. All is forgiven. We belong in God's family. We participate in God's kingdom, God's commonwealth, God's beloved community God's Spirit is growing on earth, through God's people, the Body of Christ.

Songs of praise – It's always a good day to sing. Church services, showers, weddings, funerals, dates, workplaces, mundane chores, your last night on earth, your last supper before your teacher and friend's arrest and crucifixion - these are all great places and times to sing, and to sing a song of praise to God.

You will fall away – Jesus feeds Peter, the disciple who will deny him. Jesus gives his body and blood, his whole self, to Judas, who will betray him. Jesus feeds and loves these 12 friends, most of whom will run away in fear, deserting him at the hour of his death. We can never earn God's love, just as we can never sin or fail our way outside of it. Love is like that.

Scripture

03

Matthew 27:45-46

From noon until three in the afternoon the whole earth was dark. At about three Jesus cried out with a loud shout, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," which means, "My God, my God, why have you left me?"

There are more inspirational, more beautiful last words of Christ. The gospel of Luke portrays Jesus praying, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they are doing." The gospel of John shows Jesus offering his grieving mother a spiritual son and offering his beloved disciple John and spiritual mother, as he tells them to look out for each other as family.

These last words of Matthew have eternal power, though, as well. One of the 20th century's greatest theologians, Jurgen Moltmann, met the spirit of Jesus, while locked up as a prisoner of war at the end of World War II. He was just a teenager. He'd been conscripted into the Nazi army in the last days of the war. His home and city had been destroyed. And while imprisoned in Scotland, he was learning more about all the great evils his country and his army had done. Reckoning with the weight of this, he was filled with shame and didn't wish to continue living.

But then he read these words from the gospel, and he thought: this Jesus knows what it means to be forsaken. Here is a brother who also knows what it is to be abandoned, to have lost God and lost all hope. I can entrust my life to him.

Jesus knows all about our struggles, the old song says. There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus, who has suffered in solidarity with all of our greatest suffering. The Spirit of this Jesus loves you with compassion, and will guide us all again and again into newness of life.

May the prayer of Psalm 46 continue to take shape for you, far beyond this Lenten season, breath by breath.

*God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult. Selah
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.
The nations are in an uproar; the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice; the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah
Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.*

“Be still, and know that I am God!”

*I am exalted among the nations;
I am exalted in the earth.”
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah*

wings

JOHN O'DONOHUE



Whenever a goose was killed,
My mother got the two wings.
They were placed on the rack
Over the black Stanley range
And taken down to sweep
Around the grate and the floor.

Local women said, no matter
How you sprinkled it, every time
You'd sweep a concrete floor,
You'd get more off it.
As if, deep down,
There was only dust.

Often during sweeping,
A ray of light
Through the window
Would reveal
How empty air
Could hold a wall
Of drunken dust.

Instead of being folded around
Each side of a living body,
Embracing the warmth
And urgency of a beating heart,
The wings are broken objects now,
Rubbed and rubbed, edge down
Into an insatiable floor,
Smothered and thinned,
Until they become ghost feathers
Around a cusp of bone
Polished by a motherly hand.

Never again to be disturbed
Every year by the call
Of the wild geese overhead,
Reminding them of the sky,
Urging them to raise the life
They embrace, to climb the breeze
Beyond the farm, towards horizons
That veil the green surge of the ocean.







PIPING PLOVER

RESOURCES FOR THE CURIOUS

poetry

Rosie DeAssis. *I Am Breath*.

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Andrea Gibson. Excerpts from *The Birds Wrote Me a Poem*.

Jessica Kantrowitz. *Panic*.

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Menahem Kahana / AFP / Getty

Macro Feather, Tyson Phillips.

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