



Peace Church United Methodist



The English-Speaking Methodist Congregation in Munich

The Lockdown Collection of Sermons & Meditations



*Sermons, meditations and reflections
shared at Peace Church during the Corona-virus pandemic*

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Contents

		Page
1.		How to find hope in the midst of a pandemic
2.	Genesis 6-8	What if Corona was the Ark?
3.	Genesis 24: 62-67	Rebekah & Isaac: A Love Story?
4.	Genesis 32: 23-33	Jacob wrestling with the angel
5.	Genesis 37-50	'Splitscreen reality': Joseph's story
6.	1 Kings 10: 1-10, 13	The Queen of Sheba
7.	Psalms 98	Finding joyful ways to praise God in a pandemic
8.	Jeremiah 1: 4-10	Jeremiah is called by God
9.	Jeremiah 29: 10-14	Multiply, and do not decrease
10.	Matthew 4: 1-11	Jesus and the Devil
11.	Matthew 5: 13-16	Salt of the Earth
12.	Matthew 8: 5-13	Pain overcomes boundaries
13.	Matthew 26:17-30	The Last Supper: a reflection for children and adults
14.	Matthew 27: 57-61 & 28: 1-10	Dying to be resurrected
15.	Mark 1: 14-20	Life is simple
16.	Mark 10: 13-16	Do small things with great love
17.	Mark 14: 3-9	Only Jesus was worth it
18.	John 21: 15-18	Strange behaviour
19.	Acts 8:26-40	Who is being converted?
20.	1 John 3:16-24	On compassion fatigue and being the Beloved
21.	1 John 5: 9-13	God's testimony about us

Foreword

Dear Peace Church sisters and brothers,

As I write, it feels like the summery weather is reflecting at least some of the hoped-for changes that we've been longing to see for such a long time. Places are opening up, we can meet together again, we can sing in church (albeit behind a mask!)

It reminds me of the opening liturgy we used in the Sunday evening service last year in the early stages of the pandemic:

*Watch! Wait! The day of God is at hand.
Like the bud on a tree,
God's possibilities are about to blossom.
Stay awake! The reign of God is very near.
We are here, watching and waiting with hope...*

We spoke those words in the midst of a worsening situation, when many plans were dashed and sometimes it felt like hope was very hard to find.

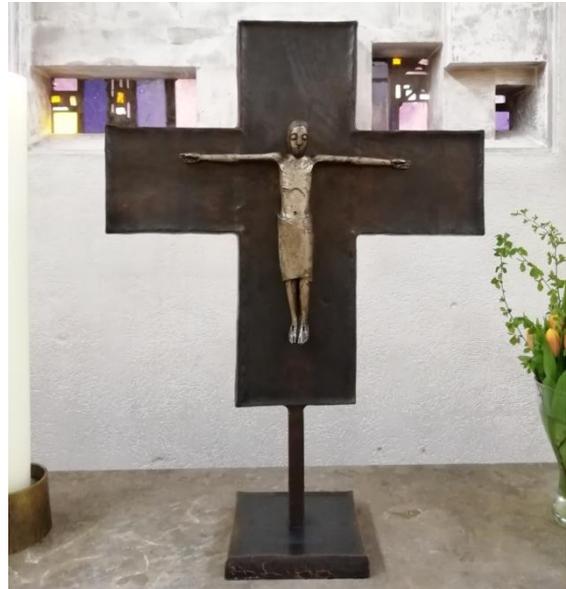
Over the last few months we have celebrated Easter and Pentecost. We have reflected on Jesus' death and his time in the sealed tomb. We have marvelled at his resurrection, and celebrated the coming of the Holy Spirit to shake up and refresh our lives.

In a way, this is our lived reality too. Now that we seem to be emerging from lockdown (as if walking out of the ark or out of the tomb), what is God teaching us? How is God leading us into new ways of living?

You will find many of these themes in the sermons and meditations in this latest booklet. I hope you find inspiration, encouragement and hope!

With love and hope,
Kat Wagner

June 2021



1. How to find hope in the midst of a pandemic

A reflection by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



Is this the end of the world, I asked myself.
And I thought: Never!
What we are living through for over a year
now is not the end of the world.

Finding hope in the midst of a pandemic – is
the theme I gave myself for this meditation.

There are so many voices in these strange
times... too many. Often, we don't know
what to make of it all. Often these voices
frighten us, distract and paralyze us. We
don't know anymore, what to think, what to
believe and how to live.
Sometimes it seems clever to be pessimistic.
Optimists are regarded as naïve...
But somewhere in between, we have got to
live, to cope, to make ends meet...

In an article in the German weekly magazine
Der Spiegel I read that the future belongs to
those who are realistic. To those who still
believe that humankind is going the right
way... to those who still see hope because
they understand hope as work, work for us
to do. Hope as a process.

Of course, these sad times of the pandemic
can rob us of our hopes and visions. The

world is turned upside down. Governments
failed in their tasks. In many places life
became unbearable. A prominent impression
was and is that we are living in dark times.
The photos of mass graves, the tears shed
over Corona deaths, the desperation in
intensive care units, the silence in the streets
during lockdown and “Ausgangssperre”, the
loneliness of young and old are all
experiences that have shaped us and will
remain with us.
But what we are living through right now is
NOT the end of the world!

“Health, prosperity, education, life
expectancy, peace, democracy, security –
everything has been developing for the
better for a long time, but nobody talks
about it,” says the Canadian American
psychologist Steven Pinker. The pandemic
does not deny or destroy that. Poverty,
starvation, diseases, even wars – all were
worse decades ago. Human beings
(scientists, philosophers, teachers, politicians,
journalists, human rights activists and many
more) are constantly working for the better
in the lives of humankind. This is a fact. It's
just that nobody tells us about it. Not the

news, not the newspapers. This silence must be overcome!
We must begin to talk about hope.

At the beginning of this pandemic, my old friend and former professor and bishop Walter Klaiber, chose hope as the main theme of his first public statement to the pandemic. 1 Cor 13: 13 was his Bible text. “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

In the past, when we interpreted this text and used it, we emphasized love. Of course, we did. The past 13 months or so have taught us that, above all, it's hope that counts... Hope expected with love and in faith. How perspectives can change...

Hope is not something that falls in our lap. Hope is something we must work for. The history of humankind is full of people who helped human life to improve. This fact is not ending, just because we are living through an awful pandemic. Great minds have shaped the good in our existence in the past; they will also do it in the future!

Hope is powerful!
In hope lies the power to carry on, to not give up. Hope does not ask us to sit and wait for it. Hope wants us active; “hope wants us to throw ourselves into what is becoming,” I read in the philosopher Ernst Bloch's book “Principle of Hope”. Bloch also writes, “search in the world itself for what will help the world, you can find it.”

Those who created the first vaccines against Covid-19 did exactly that. A double share of courage and knowledge worked the miracle. Within a few months the impossible was possible! Since then a new hope is in the world. Besides all organisational and political failures and mistakes, a hope has been born that does not only bring in sight an end of the pandemic, but also the human capability of shaping and saving the future.

What we need are people with knowledge, values and the sincere wish to improve the lives of all on this planet.

Could we be among those?

Us Christians?

What do we have to offer through our faith?

We realize how fragile and vulnerable we are to outbreaks of infectious diseases. None of us were prepared for this outbreak. In times like this it is normal and natural to ask where God is. But this is not a time for Christians to retreat from their faith. This is, however, a time to wait patiently for hope to spring from our life of “social distancing” and “self-isolation”. We can come to terms with our fears and difficulties in the belief that God cares for us despite of the pandemic and its effects... that God is in there with us and gives us strength to bear the trials and tribulations of life.

The suffering that came over the whole world, the enormity of pain and despair, the misery and the sense of loss are beyond words. But I want to hold fast to the perspective that we can still have faith in God.

Denying the existence of God does not diminish the problem in any way. But faith in God can give us strength to bear the suffering and bring us hope that things will change for the better.

I also believe that God dwells among his people and never leaves us alone.

Our world is far from perfect. The present pandemic is a crisis delivered by nature. We must accept the simple truth that we sometimes suffer not because of our own mistakes, but because of other's faults, too. Suffering is part and parcel of life.

This world is no heaven... but heaven begins here, when we let God's kingdom shape and infuse our lives. Something better is always to come! We are equipped with the means to help bring it about.

Even when life is sad and dark, faith lends a light dimension to it.

Faith can make our lives worth living. It overcomes despair and depressions and brings peace. It brings us ethical values and helps us live in the storms. It asks us to love our neighbour... even if in some cases this can be only lived out spiritually.

It's God's spirit that saves us and connects us – even if we have to stay away from each other and distance ourselves physically. This

spirit is not locked down. There is no night curfew for the holy spirit and the power of prayers.

Let's hold fast to God in his abundant love for humanity. And if we find it hard to find God, God will surely find us and give us hope.

Amen.

2. What if Corona was the Ark?

A meditation on Genesis 6-8, by Reiner Kanzleiter



I want to share with you some maybe unusual thoughts on a Bible text. Here is a short history of why I came along this passage...

Normally, there is a service in the Hospital where I am working. It takes places on Friday evenings at 7pm. So Friday's are always very long days for me with some longer breaks in between.

Two years ago I started a small project. I took a Bible text from the daily readings and gave me 30 minutes to write a 'Friday Meditation' on this text... Just writing down what came into my mind without reading

any commentary or articles... Meanwhile I have a small collection of meditations at home...

Two weeks ago I came along the text about the Great Flood and Noah's Ark when I checked the Methodist lectionary... and I thought: "Well, why not writing a 'Friday Meditation', let me take 30 minutes..." In the end it took me three times 30 minutes for three meditations... and the result is the one merged meditation tonight. It is a sort of a poetic meditation... not always logically stringent... that wasn't the idea. As always, it is up to you whether you like it or whether you like it.

Flooded the Earth
in former times
in the times of Noah
after the announcement there were 40 days
or, in a different verse of the story,
150 days of a rising water gauge.

Lockdown in the narrowest family circle,
quarantine in the ark,
a locked-in cosmos.
Not knowing
nor even suspecting
for how long the numbers would rise
if
after a break
there would follow more
even heavier and longer rainfalls.

When will we arrive at the summit?
When will we be able to release,
open a window,
send out winged messengers,
hoping for reliable news
and a perspective for the future?

But
it takes time
sending out the winged messengers
once
twice
three times.
What will rise faster:
numbers
hopelessness
despair
depression
behind the shakily walls?

The olive leaf in the beak of the dove
only has the colour of light.
The window can remain open.

*4 And in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day
of the month, the Ark came to rest on the mountains
of Ararat.*

As if the ark had become tired
it came to rest
reposes
respires
happy about having found

solid floor under the keel again.

One year of lockdown,
one year of quarantine,
one year of worrying,
of prayer
of doubts and despair
until the Earth keeps them / us
grounded again

But then
another extension,
again a time of waiting
fifty-seven more days.

Not till then
go out of the ark
not until then
as long as the Earth endures
not until then
I have set my bow in the clouds.

At the end of all patience
the seven colours of hope,
recurrent until today,
lest it will never again become
as it was before.

What if...

What if Corona
was the ark?
What if Corona
saved us from the floods
of destroying nature,
of permanent mental stress,
of the nervous fear our hearts
shock-excited by the sound of a driven leaf,
of the absolute performance requirements?
What if Corona
was the ark?
Quieting us,
saving us from
always more,
always louder,
always more beautiful.

What if Corona
was the ark?
The cave,
the womb,

the womb of mercy
gently rocking us
helping us to slow down
and slow down
and...

What if Corona
was the ark?
Opening our eyes for the
olive leaf of peace,
for the future
after the waters have gone down
and life is no longer the same
as before.

What if
every rainbow reminds us
that Corona
might be the ark
and all of us will only survive
as long as the floods do not return,
as long as we remember
again and again
and change?

What if
every rainbow reminds us
and
what if Corona
was the ark?
And then...

And then

Suppose,
just suppose,
we will survive
and start looking back
like Noah
and Isaac
and Lazarus

All of them survivors
of their individual catastrophe.
What will be.
How will we be?
Who will we be?

Noah

If you read the Biblical text

about the flood,
which is not only a story about survivors
but also a story of death and victims,
you will discover
that
there is not a single word
spoken by the surviving Noah.
God announces the disaster,
Noah remains silent.
During the whole process
of building the ark,
Noah remains silent.
Sending out and expecting the birds,
Noah remains silent.
Building an altar and giving sacrifices
to God after the flood,
Noah remains silent.
Not even a prayer.
The new covenant and the commandments,
silence.

But then
the one who survives gets drunk
until he is comatose
and after being awakened again
his very first word in the whole story is
a curse.
He has survived,
most of the others did not.

What will be.
How will we be?
Who will we be?

Isaac

After the experience
of nearly being sacrificed by Abraham,
his own father,
Isaac falls silent
for nearly the rest of his life.
Wrapped in silence and melancholia.
The melancholia of the one
who cannot cope with such an experience,
of having survived at the last minute.
What remains is
being a lonesome creature,
left-behind,
slower and slower,
nothing but silence between
him and Abraham.

The mighty shadow of his father
goes along with him.
It is the father looking for a wife for Isaac:
Rebecca.
Isaac remains silent.

How can one survive as a survivor?

What will be.
How will we be?
Who will we be?

Lazarus

Being aroused,
being brought back into life
after four days:
already there is a stench.

Being brought back into life:
what for?
Bringing back someone from death,
bringing back someone into vivid life,
only once,
only for some hours...
Could we catch up
on what we have missed before?!
Could we talk about what we did not talk
before?!
Could we finally sort
what never before had been expressed?

What if
we would delay death from day to day?
We would delay
tears,
pain,
loss,
just for a while
until death comes back
and then things and feeling will be the same.
Still pain,
still unexpressed feelings,
still unresolved problems.

Lazarus,
called back into life
remains silent.
Not a single word spoken by him.

What remains is one sentence about him:

*So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death
as well, since it was on account of him that many of
the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.
(John 12, 10-11)*

What is going to happen
if someone comes back from death,
if someone comes back who has been
touched by death?

The gospel remains silent.

What if Corona
was the ark,
opening our eyes for the
olive leaf of peace,
for the future
after the waters have been abating
and life is no longer the same
as before?

What if
every rainbow reminds us
that Corona
might be the ark
and all of us will only survive
as long as the floods do not return,
as long as we remember
again and again
and change.

What of
every rainbow reminds us
and what if Corona
was the ark?
And then...

What will be.
How will we be?
Who will we be?

At the end of all patience,
at the very end,
the seven rainbow-colours of hope,
recurrent until today
lest it will never again become
as it was before.

3. Rebekah & Isaac: A Love Story?

A sermon on Genesis 24:62-67, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



Abraham's wife Sarah had died and Isaac, their son, was still grieving her death. Father Abraham decided that it was time for Isaac to have a wife. He sent a trusted servant to find a suitable bride for Isaac, but she had to be from Abraham's homeland.

Genesis 24 is a rather long chapter. So, I will look at it in sections.

Find a Bride for My Son! (v. 1-9) ...is more or less what Abraham tells a servant at the very beginning of chapter 24.

The custom of parents finding suitable partners for their children goes back a long way. We are not told what or whether Isaac knew of all this. It's simply obvious when I look at Abraham's story throughout Genesis that he never spoke much and never shared much. Not with Sarah, his wife, nor with Isaac, his son. Abraham was the boss and decided for those who were with him.

Abraham gave the servant two specific conditions. First, he said, "Do not choose a wife for Isaac from the women where I'm living." We don't know exactly why he

wanted that. It seemed a tradition to get wives from a people close to you. The Canaanites still seemed strangers to Abraham and his family.

There was second condition. The servant asked if he should take Isaac back to the land where Abraham came from (v. 5) and Abraham promptly said No! In other words, he said, "Don't even think about it."

I sometimes wonder why Abraham wanted to keep Isaac close to himself and away from the old home country... Was Abraham afraid? ...afraid of something happening to Isaac? ...afraid of Isaac becoming another person as he travels?

Remember: God had told Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering years before. Only at the last minute an angel prevented Abraham from sacrificing his own son. Abraham was a rich and powerful man, but did he maybe fear Isaac would free himself from his father as he'd spend time away from him? ...that Isaac would not come back but stay and live a new life away from

the family bonds and the power of his father? We will never know.

Abraham also gave the servant an end to his mission. The servant would be free from his task if the elected bride refused to come back to Abraham and Isaac's new home. What a task to do! We can imagine how many questions must have gone through the servant's mind.

One of them surely being: **How Will I Know if She's the Right One?** (v. 10-32)

The servant did a wise thing here. He prayed! He certainly prayed a lot before and during the trip; after all, he had 10 camels loaded with the best Abraham had to offer. They needed God's protection to make it safely to Mesopotamia, Abraham's home country.

The servant set his own conditions. How would he know which young woman would be the best for Isaac? So, he prayed: If she's willing to provide water for the animals, she was bound to be the right one.

We're not told how long the servant or the caravan waited for the water, but Rebekah appeared—before the servant finished praying... And not only did she give the servant some water, but she drew enough water for 10 camels – which must be a lot. We don't know how much water she pulled from the spring, but there was enough for everyone and everything. Rebekah must have been strong, self-confident, open minded and welcoming.

The servant no doubt was pondering if Rebekah was truly the right one, but she had a kind spirit. So, the servant gave her some gifts, perhaps rewarding her for her kindness and hard work. These gifts included a gold ring and two wrist bracelets. Then he asked, "Whose daughter are you, and is there room

for us at your father's house?" (v. 23). She said there was room and plenty of straw and feed for the animals.

One other thing Rebekah said was that she was the daughter of Bethuel, so she was Nahor's great-granddaughter! Nahor was Abraham's brother (Gen. 11:27), who had remained in Mesopotamia with their father, Terah, while Abram, Sarai, and Lot left for Canaan (Gen 11:31). So, she was a distant member of Abraham's family. This would fulfil Abraham's first condition.

But, what would Rebekah and her family say? (v. 33-60) The servant had to let them know why he had come all the way to them. This section is quite a long story. The servant shared with them who he was and why he had come so far. He also explained how Rebekah had met the very test he had hoped for.

Then he made a request. He wanted to know if Laban and Bethuel, Rebekah's brother and father, would "deal kindly and truly" (v.49) with Abraham, his master and his wish to find a wife for his son. He begged them to be honest with him, so that he knew whether to stay or to leave. I can imagine those two men looking at Rebekah's new gold jewellery and wondering if the servant had more goods he was willing to give...

Laban and Bethuel replied to the servant's request. We might expect them to say, "It's OK with us but...wait a bit, won't you? And maybe ask Rebekah who is here before you." But according to verse 51, they said, "Here she is. Take her and go." We are in Old Israel or even before there was an Israel – so most probably women were not asked what they wanted. They belonged to the men: fathers, brothers and so on.

The servant saw that he had fulfilled the task and showered Bethuel's family with the gifts he had brought along from Abraham. After a night which he spent with Bethuel's family, he wanted to set off. But obviously the family had changed their mind a bit. They requested to keep Rebekah for a little while. They wanted her to stay for 10 days. Did they really want her to go?

The servant wouldn't agree to her staying longer, however. I can see him, perhaps mounted on his own camel, saying, "No, we're leaving now. Send me away, that I may go to my master" (v. 56). Now the family decided to ask something they probably hadn't asked Rebekah before, and it's a beautiful question: "Will you go with this man?" Will you leave the land of your birth, your family and friends, your sheep and the other animals? Will you leave all you ever knew and go to a place you know nothing about? Will you leave us and marry a man you've never seen before?" There were many emotions in that question... And knowing about the ancient world, we know that Rebekah's departure may mean that she will never see her family again. However, Rebekah had made a decision, and it's a simple, three-word response: "I will go."

As Abraham himself had left his home country, so did Rebekah. Abraham had left to follow God's call; Rebekah was leaving to become his daughter-in-law. Rebekah may not have been the first bride to leave her home country and marry someone she never had seen before, and she wasn't the last.

The journey to a new land and a new life (v. 61ff)

The writer gives some very fast-moving, vivid descriptions in the last verses. First, we see Rebekah and her maids getting on the camels and heading to the land of Abraham.

How much they knew of it, we're not told, but I'm sure the servant told her stories about Isaac and Abraham and the new land in which she would soon live.

Then we're told about Isaac himself. It seems as if Abraham had not told Isaac that he had sent a servant out to find a wife for him. Isaac was out in the fields. He was still grieving over the loss of his mother. His mother's death must have affected him a lot. Maybe he even had a very special relationship with her after the incident of his father almost killing him. There is no place in the Bible where we are told what that whole incident had done to Isaac and his mother. Who are you, after your husband had tried to kill your only son – the son you had waited for so long and who you'd named Isaac – God laughs, because you were so happy about his late birth? Who are you, after your father had raised the knife against you? How wounded must mother and son have been?

After Sarah's death Isaac had moved down south, into the desert. He'd chosen loneliness over the company of his father and his father's household. Here we picture him, lonely, full of melancholy, maybe depressed, certainly brooding, - a survivor of a terribly sad family tragedy.

Here he sees a camel caravan coming and starts walking toward it. Rebekah's already dismounted from the camel, and she's asking the servant, "Who's he, walking in the field heading this way?" The servant says, "That's Isaac, my master!"

Rebekah took a veil and covered herself.

Only then Isaac learns through the words of the servant that Rebekah is his wife-to-be. All a bit hard to take, isn't it? Where is

Isaac's life? His independence? His self-determination?

What must a man with a story like Isaac look like? How much sadness must there be around him? How much loneliness and despair? How much closeness to darkness and death? What does a man look like who was a victim and only just about survived?

Luise Schottroff, a German theology professor, claimed in one of her essays that she thinks Rebekah did not dismount her camel but fell from it, when she saw the desperate man full of pain who was her husband-to-be. And that Rebekah covered her face in order to not let Isaac see the shock in her eyes about his life-long aching...

So, what do those two see when they look each other in the eye for the first time?

Rebekah sees pain and grief in Isaac's eyes. And in Rebekah's eyes there is sympathy and a mix of pity and mercy, and maybe shock: shock at the heart-breaking loneliness of the man she is supposed to live with. The quality of Rebekah seems to be that she doesn't step away from Isaac's suffering. She goes in there with him and leads him out of grief and pain into new life.

We read that Isaac took her in his mother's tent, made her his wife, and began loving her. Comfort enters Isaac's so far petrified life. Rebekah brings the blessing which seems to have gone, lost through Sarah's

death – or maybe long before. It is not Rebekah who seeks safety at Isaac's side, but Isaac who finds shelter in the life with Rebekah.

Isaac's growing love for Rebekah enables him to leave death and mourning behind and enter a new life.

Isaac and Rebekah's story is certainly not a story of love at first sight. Their love for each other is growing gently and slowly... Isaac, the survivor, needs time to trust the new love. Rebekah deals with farewell and letting go. She can share her experience of leaving things behind and trusting in new beginnings with Isaac. And thus, help him leave the darkness behind and see in his life the light.

Rebekah comes into Isaac's life like an angel. Like the angel who met Hagar in the desert, or God's messenger who fed Elijah when exhaustion and disappointment had taken over...

She is a God-send who meets him at a well and brings back the water of life in his story of wounding and breaking. She shows him that God sees his pain, hears his cry, and turns his hardship into joy.

Rebekah has the love that brings Isaac back to life.

Amen.

4. Jacob wrestling with the angel

A meditation on Genesis 32: 23-33, by Christian Schreiber



I want to let you into a secret: I am not a particularly good chess player. In fact, I am rather mediocre.

However, a few years ago when I was working in science, I shared an office with a colleague, Martin, who I knew was playing in the highest German chess league and who is by now well on his way to becoming a chess Grand Master. Not wanting to pass up the opportunity of losing a game against a really good player, I asked him whether he would be up for a game of chess.

After what must have been about five minutes of playing, I made a move that I thought was quite smart. I felt cocky and asked Martin what he thought of that move. His response was that I would lose in eight moves. I felt a bit annoyed and did what I thought was a smart move. The consequence of this was that I did not lose in eight moves but in three.

Clearly, when you are competing with somebody who is massively out of your league, you should expect a quick defeat. In most situations, if a David faces up against a

Goliath, Goliath wins, quickly and decisively.

In the story that has been read to us, we are faced with a different account. A lone stranger, Jacob, is on the way home to meet his estranged brother whom he has not seen for some twenty years that he had to spend in exile. As he is about to meet his brother the next day, he sends his whole family and copious gifts ahead of himself to appease his brother. He himself stays all alone at a river and – most likely anxiously – awaits the next day.

It is at this point where he is all alone, where his family and his wealth are no longer with him that he is attacked by who turns out to be God. In such a situation, you should expect that God will win, quickly and decisively. Jacob should not even be allowed to land as much as a punch.

Instead, what we are told that they wrestle until daybreak and that Jacob could not be overpowered. Only right at the end does God touch Jacob's hip joint to thereby disable him and end the fight. If that was the "winning move" of sorts, why did it not

occur earlier? Why did God not defeat Jacob outright and thereby saved Jacob lots of effort?

In my opinion, this way of looking at the story may miss the point by focussing on the end result, rather than the process Jacob went through. Maybe God was not there to defeat him but to make him experience something through the fight that he would not be able to learn any differently? It seems that this experience – or maybe the experience of the years in exile – had changed Jacob's character. As a consequence, from then onwards, he would be known as "Israel", "he who struggles with God".

For me, a "struggling with God"-story was moving to the UK to study in Cambridge and trying to find ways of living my faith there. I come from a rather typical German Lutheran background, and whilst church has definitely been a big part of my life, my faith was never a black and white issue.

Coming to Cambridge, I found that the Christian scene was definitely quite different, and it seemed to me that the loudest voices were those that advocated a conservative evangelical Calvinistic type of Christianity. I distinctly remember having a chat with a curate who casually informed that a friend of mine who had killed himself would end up in hell unless that friend had managed to convert to Christianity in the last few minutes of his life.

Whilst I did try to discuss things with friends, those conversations did not lead anywhere. To me, it seemed to be the case that I either had to swallow those facts and get on board with that way of thinking or to give up completely on faith, even though it was certainly an important aspect of my life.

This seeming isolation, and the struggle with something that was threatening a big part of who I am, reminds me of Jacob being all by himself at the Jabbok river and struggling with God. And, like that struggle with God,

it took me a long time to come to terms with those topics that bothered me so profoundly.

In the end, the struggle left me with a greater appreciation for other ways of approaching faith topics, whether those approaches are more conservative or more liberal, more Catholic or more Calvinistic, than my way of thinking and believing.

What are your struggles with God?

There is another aspect of the passage which makes it my favourite Old Testament story, and that is to do with the sheer physicality of Jacob's encounter.

I'll be honest: Most of the time, I have a rather sanitized image of God. I am happy to say the creed, and I believe that God created the world and what is in it. I am willing to pray for people and hope that those prayers will be answered. However, if the answer is too dramatic, I get a tiny bit suspicious. I am happy to acknowledge the triune nature of God and that God became human – probably because I have said it so many times that the enormity of those statements gets lost on me. However, any experiences of God that are more unusual than that get a bit suspicious. In most circumstances, the world as I perceive it is a world of scepticism. A world that has, as Bonhoeffer put it, "come of age".

This passage that we have been read is a direct challenge to that way of perceiving the world. We have an encounter between a human and God. God is not portrayed as a disembodied spirit or as a divine supernatural being. Rather, he is portrayed as a wrestler. As a person who physically engages Jacob.

Reading through those passages as somebody who played Judo for several years, you can almost feel the intensity of the struggle and smell the sweat of the two persons struggling to grip the other person, trying to wrestle each other to the ground.

There is nothing dignified about a wrestling fight. You are left with scratches and bruises and utterly exhausted, and there are few things that are as physical as this. It is a primordial encounter.

It is hard for me to imagine anything more remote from the sanitized “come of age”-image of God that I have grown so fond of. And yet, maybe that is the lesson for me, a 21st century theoretical physicist working in

an obscure area of law: God is wholly other than the image that I cherish so much. And, in the same way, I should be prepared to revise – or even throw overboard – any other images that I got used to.

In our lack of an understanding of who God is, let us all appreciate that God will transcend any images that we have got ourselves used to.

5. ‘Splitscreen reality’: Joseph’s story

A meditation on Joseph’s life (Genesis 37-50), by Jonas Bedford-Strohm



There are good years. And bad years.

I readily admit: There was much *good* in my life this past year, but in the rougher moments of lockdown fatigue... I can’t help but agree: this was a *bad* year.

One of stress, uncertainty, worry, loneliness, depression, anxiety, depletion.

A year, where even the best moments couldn’t patch over the underlying exhaustion - mental and physical - for very long.

There are *good* years and *bad* years.

All those who’ve had many good years... to store up joys, and wealth, and health, and safety nets... they’re coming through fine.

But all those who were struggling already - their struggles have been amplified.

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

- With new appreciation for abundance and privilege taken for granted.

- And unbelievable vulnerability and suffering for far too many.

The story of Joseph is full of such splitscreen realities.

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

Joseph is oblivious and takes his position for granted. They disabuse him of that notion by abducting him and selling him.

He goes from top to bottom in no time. But their violence brings them no peace. And they have nothing stored up from the good years when the bad years come, while Joseph had managed to reinvent himself.

He'd worked his way back to the top, becoming a trusted advisor of the Pharaoh in Egypt. And unlike his brothers, Joseph and the Pharaoh did store up wisely in the good years and are prepared for the bad.

Joseph's prophetic dream shows extraordinary intuition for the ups and downs of life. Maybe because he lived it personally.

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

Joseph learned that the hard way. He isn't surprised by ups and downs. He factors them into his daily habits and life. And this makes for great advice. Joseph has matured.

And then his brothers come. They violently took their place at the top. They didn't learn to plan for the bad times, they just took violently what they wanted. And now they're unprepared for the hard times.

Begrudgingly, they have to accept: they are now at the bottom.

It's like Jesus said: "Whoever fights to find their life will lose it, and whoever is willing to lose their life for my sake will find it." (Paraphrased Matthew 10, 39)

They violently forced their way to the top, and they lost everything.

They come to Egypt to ask for food. And then they realize: they're asking Joseph.

Knowing they deserve punishment, they're afraid of retaliation. But Joseph has matured.

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

He remembers. He knows.

And this gives him great strength. It gives him a mighty power. The power of empathy.

Jens Spahn said last year: "Wir werden einander in ein paar Monaten wahrscheinlich viel verzeihen müssen."

We're likely gonna have to forgive each other a bunch a few months in – he couldn't have been more right.

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

But self-righteous condemnation isn't the way of Jesus. As Matthew 7 points out:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

Or John 8:

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

Or Romans 14:

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

Joseph had stopped passing judgment long ago, when he finally met his brothers again.

He chose not to put any of the stumbling blocks that his brothers had put in **his** way into **theirs.**

He overcame evil with good.

So Romans 12 asks of us:

“Repay no one evil for evil ... If possible ... live peaceably with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Joseph forgives his brothers. He, who has been alone and isolated for years, will never take their special presence for granted.

He rises above all his grievance and forgives them, because he appreciates their very presence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Tutu children’s bible summarizes Joseph’s spirit of generosity to his brothers and has him say to them:

“What you intended for harm, God intended for good. ... Bring our family here so they will be safe.”

So, with Tutu, we can pray today:

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

Give me a spirit of forgiveness and generosity.

Amen.

6. The Queen of Sheba

A meditation on 1 Kings 10: 1-10, 13, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



We have this story of the visit of the Queen of Sheba at the court of King Solomon. Solomon is his father, King David's, successor to the throne in Jerusalem. His mother was Bathsheba. David had had Bathsheba's first husband Uriah killed in battle in order to hide an affair he had with Bathsheba, or, actually, to be honest, to hide the fact that he had abused Bathsheba and betrayed Uriah, one of the most faithful leaders in his army. As a widow Bathsheba was free, and David made her his wife.

So, Solomon is not King David's first son, but the first son King David had with Bathsheba. Bathsheba becomes David's favourite wife, and Solomon becomes the favourite among David's sons.

King Solomon initiated the building of the first temple in Jerusalem. In the tradition of the Bible he is regarded as the image of a wise and just king.

There is no evidence of Solomon in history. No word can be found about him outside the Bible. Historians cannot prove his existence.

So, is the story a mere tale?

Can one invent such an outstanding figure without a real role model? I guess so. We will never really know.

What counts is that the figure of Solomon is important and of great interest to the biblical narrator and it is the same with the Queen of Sheba.

There is an interest in royals... today and in Bible times. Kings and queens draw people's attention. Their splendour, their power, their beauty too, are things people like to see.

King Solomon is the brightest royal in the Bible. He had established the temple. He'd possessed a glorious palace. He avoided wars and built on the politics of peace. His name lives on in words like Shalom or Salam.

When young Solomon began his reign, he'd asked God for a listening heart so he could be a blessing to his people.

God, so we read earlier in the book of Kings, not only granted him wisdom but also wealth. Solomon seems to have it all: personal abilities, enormous wealth,

international prestige and power. No doubt, says the narrator, that Solomon was chosen by God.

In today's story another fascinating royal enters the stage. The Queen of Sheba. A great queen visits an unusually gifted king!

As is Solomon, the Queen of Sheba is a figure with a fairy-tale quality. Sheba was a kingdom in South Arabia, where Yemen is today. There are also hints which could locate the Queen of Sheba in Ethiopia. Nothing is sure here, not even the times of the two kingdoms coincide. Sheba as a nation existed probably much later than the kingdom of King Solomon. But again, the assumption that today's story is a legend without historical evidence is no problem. What counts is that the tale exists. What is of interest is the message it transports.

We have this foreign queen with fabulous wealth and outstanding beauty visiting a similarly rich king and asking him "hard questions". There is evidence of a queen, or queens ruling in the North of Africa and Solomon was engaged in international trade. Sheba was a centre of trade – with spices and other precious goods.

Maybe the core of the tale is that there was a rich and wealthy trade delegation visiting Solomon's court, led by a woman – a trades woman – queen or not.

Apparently, the Queen of Sheba had heard of King Solomon. He was famous beyond the borders of his kingdom.

This foreign queen wants to know if this is really true. She comes to get to know Solomon, to test Solomon with a form of speech that has its tradition in the wisdom literature of the Bible. She wants to see him and witness his reign with her own eyes.

Who is this woman who travels an enormous journey to test a foreign king? How selfconfident, smart and curious must she have been?

Was the meeting of king and queen of political interest? Were there trade arrangements between their countries? Political and strategic interests and maybe the need or the desire of cooperation?

My take on this is the following: We have a state visit. The Queen of Sheba comes with loads of gifts and goods to Solomon's court in Jerusalem.

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the LORD, she came to test Solomon with hard questions. 2 Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. 3 Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. 4 When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, 5 the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. (v1-5)

The queen is impressed with both the richness and the wisdom of Solomon.

What the story certainly wants to show is, how famous Solomon was, how glorious his reign, how outstanding his personality. And the visit and encounter with this wise, rich and beautiful queen, - even the length and distance of her tremendous journey – emphasise the might and glory of the fascinating king!

The narrator lets her say:

"The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. 7 But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. 8 How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and bear your wisdom! 9 Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and

placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.” (v6-9)

A great king is praised by an even greater or equally great queen!

Outside the Bible love stories of the two are told. Art and music have been inspired by those two awesome royals. Their image, their royalty, the rich and fantastic world in which the two must have lived, were the stuff of the narrators' and the people's dreams...

What, however, does the story tell us? Why did biblical editors decide to have it in the book of Kings? In our Bibles? What for?

I think, I can discover three significant themes which we can learn from.

The first is about wisdom and justice, the second about diversity and respect, and the third about a heart ready to listen.

Let us look at wisdom and justice first.

Solomon's exemplary wisdom and righteousness cannot be overlooked. Here, wisdom does not mean sheer intelligence. Wisdom means an obedient heart that is ready to listen, that is a heart that takes God's commandments seriously, that doesn't think too much of itself, but knows its own capabilities as well as its own limits. This is what makes Solomon great. Only in this way does he become a just judge who sees the welfare of the people and not his own enrichment. To this day, Solomon is the image of a good ruler. How much better would the world look if Washington or London were led by rulers like Solomon! And how much more peaceful would the world be if we ourselves were less hasty in judging others, if we seriously sought peace and justice around us as our foremost interest. Something to seriously meditate on...

Let's take a look at the next point. Diversity and respect.

There is this interplay of diversity and respect in the encounter between the two royal figures. The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are truly exotic flowers in God's garden. But instead of competing against each other, instead of making the others bad in order to appear in a better light and shine more, the two royal figures can admire and appreciate each other without reservation. Both shower each other with compliments and gifts. Without any reservations they can recognize each other's greatness. They both are figures of the splendor and wisdom. Both see each other's tradition not as a questioning of their own or an attack on their own, but as an enrichment and a blessing. The two royal figures are the embodiment of the exotic in the ancient world. The world becomes more colorful, diverse, more beautiful and richer through their meeting and cooperation. Solomon's meeting with the Queen of Sheba is an early example of successful globalization. Their attitude, their mutual respect are models for how people can live together.

The last of my three points is: A heart ready to listen.

King Solomon has a heart that is ready to hear. Solomon is said to have a listening heart, and the Queen of Sheba also seems to have it. Ready to listen means being able to accept other people without reservation. It means to be able to emphasize with each other, to see what is important to the other person. To be able to hear or listen in this sense is a form of loving one's neighbor.

People understand and accept who the other person is and what he or she needs.

It doesn't happen often that someone listens to you so intensely – but when it happens, it is wonderful. Solomon was able to listen in such a way that those who spoke to him felt this was a gift and went home happy. I wish

and hope that we too can experience the privilege of meeting people who can listen like this. And my prayer for myself is to ask God for such a listening heart as Solomon had it. What a blessing it would be if we all had a listening heart...

Admittedly, the visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon has fantastic features. It's like a fairy tale but the encounter is still a good example. From the royals and their behavior, like in a mirror, we can see how our society, how the coexistence of peoples, could function all together: We could treat others with respect and be wise in our

judgments about others. We could look forward to the diversity we experience and see the differences in others as an enrichment. We can ask for an open ear so that we can really see and understand other people. We can ask for encounters that make both sides happy. That make all people happy. So, let's be wise and just, respectful and open minded, and over all be prepared to listen. Let's be queens and kings in the land of our everyday lives.

Amen.

7. Finding joyful ways to praise God in a pandemic

A meditation on Psalm 98, by Nico Kanzleiter



*⁴ Make a joyful noise to the Lord,
all the earth;
break forth into joyous song
and sing praises.*

*⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.*

*⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise
before the King, the Lord.*

Reading this felt really weird, almost inappropriate, considering that for the past few months we have been specifically told not to sing or make too strong joyous noises, to put it in the words of the psalm. No choirs, no trumpets, no horns, nothing of that description is allowed right now, if not performed under very strict conditions.

I remember more than one occasion when someone would say that performing a service without singing doesn't feel the same, doesn't feel right. As if something important was missing. As if we couldn't live up to certain expectations right now.

Made me wonder. Why does it feel that way? Why do we sing in worship? And why is it so important to us?

We sing in the name of the Lord, sure. But WHY do we SING?

I for one don't even enjoy singing that much. But I do enjoy listening to people singing, which makes Peace Church a pretty good place to be.

That gave me an idea. We sing in the name of the Lord because we think that God might like it just as much as we do, judging by our own experience. And this, our very own experience, is all we have to come to that conclusion.

The psalm that we just heard, telling us to "sing praises to the Lord" wasn't written by the Lord himself, but by human beings just like us, in the name of the Lord. Which means that it is not a direct statement by God. So there is no way for us to know if God even likes music. And if he does, we still don't know if we hit the right spot by singing gospels and hymns. For what we know, God might just as well prefer Smooth Jazz, Heavy Metal, Experimental Techno or complete silence.

We perform in the name of the Lord what we consider valuable and worth sharing. And for most of us music is pretty high up on that list so it makes sense to include it in a service.

As I said, I feel no way to be sure about Gods opinion about music. But I feel pretty sure that, whatever we enjoy, God enjoys. If I think about myself there isn't much that I

enjoy more than listening to someone talking about a topic he or she is genuinely excited about. And if we were really made in Gods image, I believe the same counts for him.

But that also means that music is not the only way to show our respect, our excitement. We can share whatever we think is worth sharing and it will be good.

There's all kinds of cultures in this world with all kinds of different traditions. Every tradition has its own ways to honour its gods or important people. And some of those traditions may seem strange or alienating to us. But they are still an honour to witness, participate in or even receive. And again, I have no reason to believe that the same doesn't apply for God.

I know not being able to sing right now is sad because singing and listening to people singing is such a beautiful thing to do. And I'm not trying to say that you mustn't feel that way. But maybe the thought that we can worship in other ways and not having to worry about not meeting expectations helps a little on the way.

We can play music, light candles, share our joys and concerns, include each other, just as we have been doing until today. And there's still creativity in us to find new ways, as we keep proving to ourselves.

Let's keep proving to ourselves. Let's keep finding joyful ways to celebrate even, or especially, during these times of waiver and waiting. Let us stay excited and show that excitement. Let us make God and the people around us happy by doing so.

We can share, we can laugh, we can pray. And so far nothing could stop us from doing that and nothing will.

Amen

8. Jeremiah is called by God

A meditation on Jeremiah 1: 4-10, by Pastor Christine Erb-Kanzleiter



Today it is all about young Jeremiah and God talking to him: *I know you.*

And it is not only God talking to a person, it is God talking himself into somebody's life.

Jeremiah hears it, is touched by it, tries to escape from it, and is surely reminded of so many situations in his life.

I know you.
I know who you are.
I know where you come from, and where your paths will lead you.
I know the places of your past and your future.

5 "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you."

I know your successes and your failures.
I know your dark and your bright sides.
I know your guilt and your courage, your dreams and your tears... and I need you.

Before you were born, I consecrated you, I appointed you. I have a job for you, a mission, a purpose in life.

Isn't that poetry to our ears?

Promising plain beautiful poetry?

I know you and I need you – spoken by nobody less than God?!

And what does Jeremiah answer?

6 Then I said, «Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.»

I am only...

He tries to get away without fulfilling the task God has already given to him.

5...I appointed you a prophet to the nations.»

...a prophet to the nations, this was just too much for Jeremiah, and he says: No, thank you!

But God wouldn't be God, if he didn't immediately respond.

7 Do not say, I am only a boy...

Don't do this.
Don't say this.
You will do it... you'll go and speak – and I will be with you.

We have heard God saying this to other great leaders. Remember Moses and the

burning bush? Joshua at the river and so many others...
You'll do it!

In Jeremiah's case God goes even further. It is not only that God is with Jeremiah. God promises to provide what Jeremiah will need.

9 ...«Now I have put my words in your mouth.

...and he even touches him. The encounter is more than just an intellectual one. God touches... physically... raises up and strengthens – just as Jesus did in so many of his stories of healing.

It is God's touch and tenderness that eventually help Jeremiah to see beyond the burden to God's promise!

We don't hear Jeremiah express his change of mind! But obviously he lets God continue to speak and describe the mission he has chosen Jeremiah for.

*9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,
«Now I have put my words in your mouth.
10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.»*

There is so much to do – and nothing nice and easy ...
pluck up and pull down
destroy and overthrow
build and plant...

I know you, God says. You can do it!

And Jeremiah who just a few moments ago tried to talk himself out of the commitment, must somehow feel these confirming sentences of his God which embrace and

cover him like a coat of promise. God will be with him. God will show him the way. God will give him words to speak – whatever happens.

If you know Jeremiah's story, you know that he's got to go through a lot.

More than any other prophet Jeremiah suffered as the mouth of God. He had to speak out God's truth; he suffered the people's disgust and disbelief. He must have wanted to tear his heart out of his body, when the terrible things he had predicted came true. In the end Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple torn down, and Jeremiah taken a prisoner of war in his own country.

Good that he didn't know all that right from the beginning. Good that we don't always know everything right from the beginning...

“Do not be afraid, for I am with you...”

No matter what harsh things came in Jeremiah's life, he continued to be the prophet of God. Even in captivity he kept on preaching and proclaiming, encouraging others and holding fast to God's good plans for the future of his people.

God had known him, before he even formed him in the womb. And God had done well by appointing this young man who pretended to not be able to speak...

We may find it difficult to imagine the depths of Jeremiah's story with his God. But maybe some of what Jeremiah lived through is not at all far away from what we and others experience or have experienced?

What does it mean to us to be called by God, consecrated and appointed?

God's words to Jeremiah are words for us, too. Including the: do not be afraid... because I have made you and I know you.

We may never hear God's voice as clearly as Jeremiah did. But especially when we look back at our life stories, I am sure we can identify many threads that were held together by God without us noticing it...

...when you go through hell – now in this pandemic, or in terms of a relationship, your marriage, your family life, catastrophes – at the end of it all you can see that it has not only wounded and marked you, but it has also made you a survivor. You have grown strong. You learn from the experience who you are!

The same is true for illnesses, accidents, misfortunes...

God's promise to be with us, to provide what we need in life, because he has made us, called us, and appointed us, doesn't necessarily mean that we will only live on the sunny side of life!

Babylon – where Jeremiah was sending words of encouragement to, to support those Israelites in captivity there – had rose gardens, but not for Jeremiah's people. Jeremiah's rose gardens were in his heart and mind, in the thoughts he shared, in the faith he held fast, and in the beautiful poetry of his famous letters with which he encouraged generations of Israelites to live and carry on!

If it is true that God knows us... that he's made us in the womb (and this is not a scientific but a philosophical statement. The question is not so much, where I come from – physically – but where I belong – emotionally).

...if it is true that God knows us and needs us, then it is also true, as it was for Jeremiah, that we can stick to God's appointment for us and fulfil our calling.

As Jeremiah had poetry, beauty, comfort and hope in his heart, we can have it, too.

And as Jeremiah could share all this with others – even in the most difficult and dangerous situations – we can share it, too.

However uncertain and nervous, however disappointed and sad, however desperate and weak we feel, the "I know you" God speaks to us, wants to lift us up and make us strong – just as Jesus lifted up people and made them free.

"Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I know you; I need you"

Take this as God's personal approach to you today. Hold fast to it and discover who you are in God's eyes... and who you are meant to be. Amen.

Prayer

Call us, God,
as you called Jeremiah.
Know us, God,
better than we know ourselves.
Consecrate us, appoint us and use us.
And if we try to get away without fulfilling
the task you give us,
forgive us and encourage us.
Put out your hand and touch us,
so that we may touch others.
Fill us with courage and wisdom
to say and do
what you want us to do.
Amen.

9. Multiply, and do not decrease!

A meditation on Jeremiah 29: 10-14, by John LaMaster



This beautiful, vibrant, steadfast temple. They gathered there in Worship and Fellowship, to celebrate joyous occasions, and to share in their mourning. Until one day when life as they knew it came crashing down. The Babylonians returned and laid siege to the city for a second time. Only this time, the siege ended when they pillaged and plundered the city and its people before ultimately burning everything to the ground. Almost 500 years of normalcy was wiped out, and those few with prospects who weren't slaughtered, were forced to flee into exile.

But they didn't give up. They had hope and faith that one day they would return to the life they knew in their homeland. One day they would be reunited back in Jerusalem. And 50 years later, Cyrus II welcomed them back and built the Second Temple. Life returned as they once knew it. And for almost 600 years, they freely practiced their faith and came together in fellowship back in their homeland.

In 66 CE, the Jewish-Roman wars brought this chapter of Jewish history and their religion to an end. The Second Temple was

destroyed and these wars ended some 70 years later with the Jewish population of Central Judea being utterly wiped out. After the First Temple was destroyed, they came back as a community of faith and rebuilt it. With the destruction of the Second Temple, it was no longer possible to reunite like they had before. But it didn't mean the end of their faith community. It didn't mean that God had abandoned them. Even as far back as the Babylonian exile, we know that God didn't want them to waste away living in the past. "...to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf..."

Things like Community, Fellowship, and Love are not limited to what we are accustomed to, simply because it is all we know. Just as God opened the minds of his People so long ago in their time of despair

in order to give them hope and comfort as they embraced their new normal, we too cannot lose sight. God doesn't want us to give up during this tribulation we are suffering through. Not being able to meet and share Fellowship here in this church like we used to, or not being able to travel or visit with friends and family like we used to, not knowing what the future holds nor being able to make plans like we used to does not mean that we should put our lives on hold until we can go back to the safety and comfort of how things were. Build houses! Plant a garden. Multiply, and do not decrease. Multiply... and do not decrease.

Think about how much we have grown personally. Everything that you have survived until now that you never imagined you would have to overcome. Think about how much more accessible we are as a Church and a People of God now that we have things like the PeaceCast and Vanda and Rino's weekly virtual prayer group. My Faith Partner back home now livestreams and publishes her services online for everyone. Look how common virtual coffee breaks are nowadays, and we're in Bayern, a Videochatbier. I am in closer contact now with my family and friends back home now

than I was before this all started. God constantly surrounds us with opportunities along this journey of ours. Unfortunately if you are not looking for them, they can be hard to recognize. Multiply and do not decrease. Multiply!

This pandemic has stopped many of us in our tracks. The whole world hit a stand still with no warning about how long this would last or how bad it would be. But instead of focusing on everything we are missing out on, why don't we take this chance to multiply? To grow? To change course and refocus on what's important in our lives. To re-evaluate our priorities. To look for the opportunities God is providing us. I know very intimately that life does not always turn out the way we plan or how we expect. But sometimes when everything is falling apart, God is actually putting them into place. Let's seize the opportunities God is giving us. We must acknowledge our pain and our trauma. But do not despair. As Amanda Gorman wrote:

*For there is always light,
If only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

10. Jesus and the Devil

A meditation on Matthew 4: 1-11, by Nico Kanzleiter



Imagine yourself in the situation Jesus found himself facing the devil. What would you have done? I'll be honest with you: I probably would have agreed. Just think about it, being able to do whatever you want, end world hunger, greed, hatred, bring peace to the nations, do whatever it takes to improve everyone's life, to name just some possibilities.

If someone approached me offering all this and more, I can see myself considering it, thinking of all the good deeds I could do and that maybe, just maybe, I might actually do a good job. But what if I don't? I think it's fair to assume that any of us would start out with the best intentions. But eventually most of us would slowly descend. Call it curiosity, selfishness, laziness, greed, boredom... Turning rocks into bread soon wouldn't be enough anymore.

It won't hurt anyone if I made myself a little taller, a little more handsome or smarter, right? And while we're at it, let's quickly adjust that bank account and let my hair grow back. World peace can be achieved tomorrow, no need to hurry. Before we'd notice we'd have turned into medieval alchemists, not turning rocks into bread but gold.

Being trusted with such powers is without a doubt tempting. Which is exactly what the

devil was going for, as the story clearly implies. So why did Jesus not accept his offers? He probably saw through the temptation right from the start, given that he immediately started resisting. He could have tricked the devil. He could have done what the devil wanted him to do, take his powers and then still do what he thought was right, ignoring their deal. The almighty son of God should be able to do that.

So again, why didn't he? I don't think he was scared. There were angels watching over him the entire time, so there wasn't really any reason to be scared. I also don't think that he was being stupid or naive about it. Admittedly, he was a bit uncreative simply citing 'What is written' but I guess getting into an actual argument with the devil simply would have been too tedious for him to put up with after 40 days of fasting.

No I think he had a very clear idea in mind when he decided not to embrace the temptation of the devil.

Four or five years ago, Robin Hut, a British Methodist minister, Christine's former mentor, now friend and my grandfather by choice, visited Peace Church and did a workshop on how to approach the stories of and around the Bible. One of the stories he chose was the one we just heard. And one sentence stuck to me until today. To the

question why Jesus didn't turn stones into bread and end world hunger once and for all, Rob's answer was: „Because nobody else would do it.“

And that is perfectly true! Sure it would be nice to have someone to simply solve all our problems with a snap of his fingers. But would that really make us happy? For a short period yes, but not on the long run I think. From childhood on, step by step, we are learning to take care of ourselves and, ideally, others. We watch, we listen, we learn by following the examples of people that inspire us, that we, for quite some time literally speaking, look up to.

What's very important though is the feeling, that we can in fact reach that goal. Trying to achieve the impossible most of the time is simply frustrating and not very healthy. We end up disillusioned and reluctant, with a feeling of helplessness. We need realistic goals to feel confident. And by realistic I don't mean easy. I mean realistic. Turning stone into bread is not realistic though.

Had Jesus decided to do it, his people surely would have worshipped him, applauded him for his generosity. But to put it in the words of Clark Kent, whom you might better know as Superman:

„It's easy to be brave if you're bulletproof.“ What a convenient excuse that would be for us. „Sure, I'd love to help, but what do you expect me to do? Catch a bullet? Turn rocks into bread?“ We would just lean back, let the gifted do the hard work and probably even complain if they didn't serve us gluten free products.

I don't know about you but I can't fly like Superman. If I saw him flying by I surely would think that that's a pretty neat ability to have, but I could never picture myself doing it, no matter how hard I tried. So why should I?

And another thing: would we really be proud of it even if we could do all these

things? I still think it would be amazing to be able to do whatever I can imagine, but don't you feel good about where you are right now because of where you came from? At least half the fun about homemade food is the making. Every skill needs to be learned and trained and that's something to be proud of.

We need that sense of achievement, otherwise life would feel pretty hollow. It wouldn't hurt if life was a little easier and less scary, a bit more predictable, but at the same time we have all it takes to face the adversities that come with all the good things.

Jesus knew that. He knew that doing what nobody else could do wouldn't inspire anyone. It would make humanity dependent, and should for whatever reason, Jesus not be around anymore, vulnerable. He decided to adjust his actions to his human appearance to give us the impression that we could do the same.

There are miracles Jesus performed, that none of us will ever be able to. But being kind to each other, welcoming strangers as friends, sharing food and shelter doesn't require divine powers. Each and every one of us can do it, just as he did. He showed us what needs to be done to make the world a better place.

I have another movie quote in mind this time from the movie 'Bruce Almighty': *You fixed your life and you gave everyone what they wanted Bruce. But since when does anyone have a clue about what they want?*

Parting the red sea is not a miracle. It's a magic trick. A single mom who's working two jobs and still finds time to take her kid to soccer practice, that's a miracle. A teenager who says "no" to drugs and "yes" to an education, that's a miracle. People want God to do everything for them. But what they don't realize is *they* have the power. You want to see a miracle? Be the miracle.

Let's finish with a prayer by our friend Rob:

Thank you, Jesus:
for not turning stones into bread,
for not jumping off the temple roof,
for not being the wonder boy.

Thank you, Jesus:
for not accepting the golden crown,
for not taking authority over earthly
kingdoms.

Thank you, Jesus:
for choosing the way of service
rather than domination,
for choosing the long, slow road
rather than that of instant solutions,

for choosing loyalty
to your Father's Kingdom
rather than personal acclaim and approval.

Thank you, Jesus:
for facing hot and cold,
good and evil,
life and death,
yes and no,
forty days and forty nights.

Thank you, Jesus:
for showing the evil the door
and make us free
to face our wilderness decisions
with greater vision and courage.

Amen

11. Salt of the Earth

A meditation on Matthew 5: 13-16, by Eromhonsele Bright Ekigho



Thinking about these Bible verses, you can understand what Jesus Christ was trying to explain to the crowd. Not only to the crowd but also, to us, as children of God. In many ways, we can reflect this Bible verse in our individual lives. From my perspective, I think that Jesus Christ was trying to make us

understand our worth and value as children of God.

We all know the value of salt and its importance. Besides being a preservative and a condiment, salt preserves food against putrefaction and gives it flavour. So, by calling us “the salt of the earth” God is

trusting you and me to preserve and bring flavour to our world. It also simply means: let your life have a positive impact on the world.

I would like to use my senior brother, who is in Nigeria, as an example. I admire him a lot, the way he plays his role in any group he finds himself in. And especially the positive contributions he provides and his devotion to making things better.

God loves everybody and he also placed in us a taste and flavour which we can use to affect our surroundings. No matter the situation or the position we find ourselves in. God's children need to be able to impact their surroundings positively. It could be with your family or friends, at school, or at your workplace. It could even be among your brothers and sisters.

How would people know that you are a son of God or that you believe in God? In the same Bible chapter, Matthew 5:14 refers to us as the light of the world. We all know the importance of light in our day-to-day lives. We all need light, and we all have one or two friends in our life who serve as a source of light to us. Knowing who you are in Christ makes you realise this benefit of being a Christian.

But what would happen when you don't know about all these abilities in Christ. Just as Jesus Christ said to the crowd about the salt that loses its taste, it is not useful anymore. We all need to know about these responsibilities as Christians. So that God can entrust lives to our hands. Because God loves us, and Jesus asks us to remember our worth and value to ourselves and to others.

12. Pain overcomes boundaries

A meditation on Matthew 8: 5-13, by Reiner Kanzleiter



Dear sisters and brothers, the world is full of walls. Dividing walls, separating people from people.
"I'll never talk to you again". The wall starts being built.
"You never understand me". The wall gets bigger.

"You've never really been interested in me!".
Accusations on accusations, stone on stone.

The world is full of walls. Sometimes you can see them immediately. Sometimes you run up against them without having noticed them. Sometimes it takes some time to discover them.

People are separated from people. In Korea. In Israel. In Ukraine.

There are walls between black and white. Between rich and poor. Between Protestant and Catholic. Between man and woman. Within a country. Within a relationship. Within a congregation. Walls. Visible and invisible. But always separating. They are signs of alienation and harm.

When he entered Capernaum, a Centurion came to him, appealing to him and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.' And he said to him, 'Shall I come and heal him?'

The story begins with walls. Dividing walls, separating people from people. The Centurion is a representative of the Roman government. An occupier. He is the one who makes the Roman government visible. He represents the system of violence, the so-called "Roman peace", which was established over and over again by violence and bloodshed and merciless cruelty.

"With this person I'm not going to talk a single word. You better get out of the way when she comes along. With this one you better not mess, it will end in disaster." The wall between Jews and Romans. Between subjects and masters.

The first point in this text is a wall.

Even between Jesus, the Jew, and the Centurion, the Roman: "Shall I come and heal him?"

"I know I'm not good enough that you enter my house..."

The wall. Visible, noticeable for all, every day, with every small action. Also in Jesus' question and the Centurion's response. You are the master - we are on different sides of the wall. In the first point of this story is a very high wall.

And the rest of the story tells us how the wall slowly disappears. It tells us that walls only exist to be overcome. It tells us that

walls are not monuments built forever and certainly not monuments built by God.

"Lord, my servant is paralyzed at home and suffers horrible agony".

Possibly lumbago. Those who have ever suffered from it know how bad this is. Standing - impossible. Sitting - hard to endure. Lying - pain at every turn. A torment. There is nothing that helps. You are unable to move.

The Centurion is used to commanding and to others obeying. He has not learned how to ask or request. His report is short, brusque, military. My servant is sick. He is paralyzed. He is at home. He's in pain. In huge pain.

Who, what, where.

But: He says "Lord" to Jesus. In fact, he says "Lord" to a Jewish Rabbi. He has stepped outside his comfort zone, he takes the first step.

And the wall shrinks.

Both of them, Jesus and the Centurion, approach each other carefully. The fronts are about to move. People start talking to each other. Listen to each other. Ask questions. Clarify positions. Give up claims. And in time are able to make a request. And the wall becomes smaller and smaller.

What is the starting point of this healing process? It is the pain of a human being!

Someone suffers great pain, perhaps screams in pain, which means he is alive. You are in pain not as a Jew or as Roman. You are in pain not as an Israeli or Palestinian, but as a human being. You are in pain not as a Russian or Ghanaian, not as a German or a Nigerian, not as a Christian or a Muslim, but as a human being.

Pain comes before boundaries. Pain is more significant than national identity, social or religious walls.

The pain of the servant brings the Centurion to Jesus, makes him forget all that divides, all prejudices, all warnings, all possible risks and dangers. The pain of his servant touches the powerful man, lets him go down a road, that didn't exist for him until then, puts him into a conversation with the Jew Jesus, whom before he would have considered as subordinate.

There is movement in the story: because of the important and exclusive focus on the pain. Because of the all-dominant look at the suffering of a fellow human being.

How much healing could there be among us, if we'd allow the Holy Spirit to turn our views and our thoughts: How much pain is there in the life of the person next to me?

I need not ask how much the others bother me and state that we won't find together anyway. But I need to notice their pain. I may then consider how to decrease their pain and, of course, also the wall which is there between me and my neighbor.

"Lord", the Centurion says to Jesus. And hereby he states not only a position and a relationship; he removes more stones from the wall.

He who is the master, who reigns over the Jews as a Roman, he says "Lord". And he says: "You, Jesus, are more than I. You're bigger than me." And he says: "I am a limited human being. Jesus, you are now my measure! I can only command. But you can heal."

In the encounter with Jesus he is encouraged to take a serious step forward. He is encouraged to admit to his humanity and say: I am not omnipotent. I'm helpless. I need someone bigger than me to heal my servant. I am dependent. I need you, Jesus! Lord!"

How much healing could there be among us all, if we could let go of all our thoughts and

wishes of being almighty. How much healing could there be among us all, if we could say to each other and before God these simple words: I have limits. I'm weak. I make mistakes. I need others. I need you! Many of us think that needing others is a weakness. But it is a sign of strength, a sign of a mature personality, and a sign of an adult and mature faith to be able to say: I need you, God. I need you, brother, sister!

How much the Centurion trusted in Jesus, we can hear in one short sentence: "Only speak the word!"

The Centurion knows: he can command, but in this situation commands don't help. It needs something else, another word. A more powerful, healing word. A word that creates something new.

The Centurion's request to Jesus to only speak the word, reminds us of what is written at the very beginning of the Bible: "And God said: Let there be! And it was so!"

It is an echo of creation, which we recognize: When someone is healed by God, healed in body or soul, a healed person is a new creation.

And that doesn't work by command. It requires the healing power of other words. "Let it be done for you..." replied Jesus. 'And it was so' we read in the creation story - 'And it was so' we read in this story. The life of the servant is newly created and changed and so is the Centurion's.

"Only speak the word!" The word that heals.

How many wounds could be healed among us, if we could do that more often: Speak the healing word, which can be: Excuse me. Forgive me. Let's start once again. Yes. No. I. You. I love you. I need you. Stay with me.

We know all the words that do not come out of our mouth, although we know how healing they could be. We know the things we could say but too often don't. We know

how walls suddenly start to shrink, as soon as the first word is spoken. The word that brings God into play.

The word that helps me to accept my limits and to restrain my power. The word which God speaks through me. The word that becomes a prayer.

"Let it be done for you..." says Jesus to the Centurion. And in addition to the story of the creation there is also a resemblance to the Lord's Prayer: your will be done!

Probably you can hear the word of Jesus like that: "You will experience the will of God." Which means that a suitable headline for the whole encounter could be: The prayer of the Centurion.

Approaching Jesus, realizing the pain of his servant, accepting his limits in front of Jesus, expressing his requests...all of this is an attitude of prayer.

Sisters and brothers, the world is full of walls. Dividing walls, separating people from people. But walls are not everlasting monuments.

Walls can break when people see each other's humanity and pain.

If you can say before God and without any fear: I have limits. I'm not omnipotent. I am

dependent. I need you. Help me! -then life starts being healed.

As soon as we pray with confidence in the creativity of God: Only speak the Word!, as soon as we open all our senses to hear God's word and let it grow among us, walls become smaller, wounds heal and a new creation emerges: A sign, a taste of God's new world.

One day there will be no more walls; there will be nothing that divides people. All will come and dine together and celebrate an abundant feast.

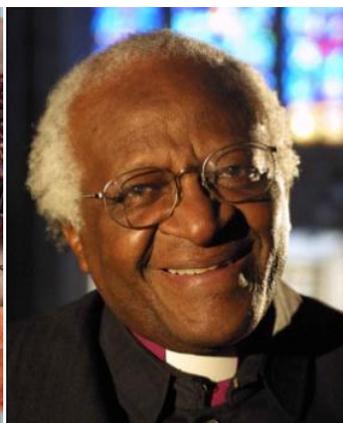
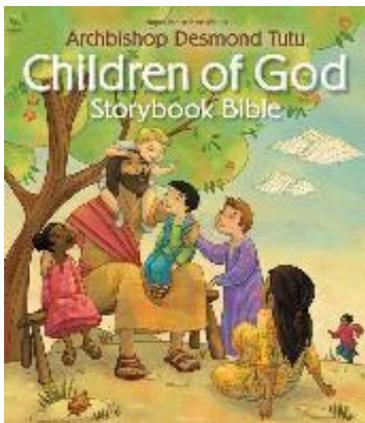
But besides this promise of Jesus to make us new, we will also have to hear his warning that we, as Christians, sometimes have to work harder than others, to remove the walls, admitting that we depend on each other and that we all need the love and grace of God.

As long as there are people in pain, God's new world is not present yet. We still have to remove walls, and we still have to learn more about ourselves and the power of the prayer: Only speak your healing word, Lord Christ.

Tear down the walls we have built up.
Free us from ourselves.
Make us free for each other.
Amen

13. The Last Supper

A meditation for children and adults on Matthew 26: 17-30, by Cathy Williams



Hello Peace Church! Lovely to speak to you! So many pictures come into my head when I think of us all worshipping together.

What a wonderful story Christine has read from Bishop Desmond Tutu's beautiful bible story book. It tells of an exciting time in Jerusalem – Passover. Passover is a really important celebration in the Jewish calendar. A time many people would look forward to. Jesus wants to share a Passover meal with his friends but it's a very difficult time for him. He knows that he has to say "Goodbye" and he knows what lies ahead for him.

Imagine for a minute that you're meeting some friends for a meal. Where would it be? At your house, at church, in a Biergarten or perhaps more likely at the moment outside for a picnic.

Whenever you meet with others there is always a buzz of conversation.

Two people talking here,
A group of three over there,
Different languages,
Some people loud,
Some quiet,
Some people just listening,
Some people with lots to contribute,
People moving around to talk to others.
I imagine it was a bit like this at "The Last Supper" and although Jesus knew he was

about to be arrested I think he would take comfort in having others around.

Continuing to think about our imaginary meal with friends.

What would you have to eat?

Pizza, sweet potato curry, burger, fufu?

Or are you a person who likes desserts?

How about ice cream, strawberries, Black Forest gateau?

A Passover meal was a celebration and would undoubtedly have contained many favourites to be enjoyed together. As well as enjoying each other's company, I feel sure the disciples enjoyed the Passover food.

But during this meal Jesus commanded everyone's attention. In my mind I see silence descending in the room as Jesus talks to his disciples. Then he takes, blesses and shares bread and passes a cup of wine around his friends. Jesus tells them that whenever they want to remember him they can break bread and drink wine and share it between themselves. I wonder what the disciples were thinking. The atmosphere must have been tense. I wonder what happened next. How did the disciples feel - sad, uncomfortable, anxious? Did they ask Jesus questions or did the talking and eating continue in a more subdued manner. Soon after Jesus went on to wash the feet of the disciples.

Today we still share in the ritual of communion and come together in the presence of God to make space for him at the centre of our lives. As we eat and drink together we remember Jesus and God's dreams of sharing friendship, love, care and compassion.

At the moment sharing with friends is more difficult in many of the traditional ways. Remember though that the first time Jesus shared communion was a desperately difficult time for him. Peace Church has remained a focus for many of us and there are lots of opportunities to share. Amongst other things we have the opportunity for face to face worship two times most Sundays, a prayer wall where we can share joys and burdens and don't let's forget the online opportunity to meet on Tuesday evening, the Peacecasts and the recorded services. Peace Church is very much alive and a place where we can share with others and seek help.

I have also been sharing on Sunday mornings in a service from London, from Methodist Central Hall Westminster. At that service, as in Peace Church, I'm able to worship with God's worldwide family. People tune in from around the globe, the USA, Ghana, India, Italy, Sierra Leone and

many other countries. At the end of the service we chat in small groups, linked together from across the world by Zoom. During services we sometimes have a love feast together. Everyone brings something to eat and something to drink and we share together how God's grace has been working in our lives. It is wonderful sharing the love feast just as it is wonderful sharing communion together at Peace Church.

As we share together I love the words from our story by Bishop Desmond Tutu. "Whenever you break bread and drink wine like this, remember me and remember that someday God's Dream – of everyone sharing and caring, loving and laughing – will come true".

I'm wondering what small thing I can do today to share God's Dream:
Say "Hello" and smile at someone I pass in the street?
Send a WhatsApp message?
Offer to help someone at home?

Perhaps some of you would like to do this too?

Thank you for listening to and sharing with me. Lots of love to you all Cathy xx

14. Dying to be resurrected

An Easter Meditation on Matthew 27: 57-61 & Matthew 28: 1-10, by Kat Wagner



The Easter story is one we probably all know so well. But this year, as our lives continue to be impacted by the pandemic, I feel more of a connection to the Easter story than ever before.

During Holy Week and Easter, we mark Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion, death and burial, and then we celebrate the wonder of his resurrection. In some ways in this Corona-time, Easter is our lived reality: daily suffering; deaths of loved ones; burial of hoped-for plans; but are we yet catching glimpses of hope?

...hope for friendships refreshed with hugs, hope for family reunions, hope for job security, hope for a rest and a holiday, hope for a new kind of life. We have been through a lot, it has been tough. Many people have had their hearts broken. Many have reached the end of their resources. Many are crying out for relief. Many are exhausted from the worry and the uncertainty.

The women and men who followed Jesus through his arrest, and his trial, and his barbaric execution must have been exhausted, distraught and heart-broken too.

They reacted in different ways. Some were overwhelmed by fear and ran away. Some were overcome with grief. Some were pragmatic, others were panicked. For them, there was no sense, no reason, no clarity, only death.

I would like us to take the opportunity to accompany Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (as she is referred to in our passage) in their experience of the very first Easter.

Luke tells us that the women who saw Jesus buried went home and rested on the Sabbath (Luke 23: 55-56). This *time between* Good Friday and Easter Sunday is a threshold moment, a liminal space, a true Sabbath, a time of rest and waiting.

Let us dwell here awhile – with the Easter Saturday mourners. For we cannot celebrate Easter resurrection without first dying and lying in the tomb.

I would like to lead you through an Easter Saturday contemplative practice:

In our gospel reading from Matthew (Matt 27: 60-61) we read: *Joseph (...) rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went*

away. ⁶¹ *Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.*

Picture yourself, like Mary Magdalene, sitting outside the tomb of the buried Christ:

... watch patiently

... notice the large stone across the entranceway, but do not try to move it.

... in the presence of ‘nothing’, or even ‘death’, fill the tragic gap with pure presence.

... wait without answers.

... hope without evidence.

... accept your ‘not knowing’.

... hold the space, without resolution or consolation.

What did you see?
What did you notice?
How did it feel?

Maybe it was uncomfortable.
Maybe, you didn’t want to be there.
Maybe, some ‘negative’ feelings arose: anger, frustration, hopelessness, emptiness, numbness.

This for me is a key message of Easter Saturday, that we must stay in the tomb, in this posture of prayer, until resurrection comes. Until our anger, fear or hopelessness is released; until they are exposed to the light, and we let them die.

Dag Hammarskjöld, who served as the second Secretary-General of the United Nations (1953-1961), wrote this poignant reflection, which I feel describes the Easter Saturday experience so well.

He says:

When all becomes silent around you, and you recoil in terror – (and you) see that your work has become

*a flight from suffering and responsibility, your unselfishness a thinly disguised masochism; bear, throbbing within you, the spiteful, cruel heart of the steppe wolf – **do not** then anaesthetize yourself by once again calling up the shouts and horns of the hunt, but gaze steadfastly at the vision until you have plumbed its depths.*

... until you have plumbed its depths.

In Romans 6 (v3-8), Paul explains: when we are baptised into Christ, it means that we let our old self be *crucified* with Christ; that the part of us that is ruled by sin *dies*; we have been *buried* with him into death; all in order that we might *live a new life*.

During his ministry, Jesus said, “A single grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die, in order for it to yield a plentiful harvest” (John 12: 24).

This seems to be the pattern of life that Jesus taught and demonstrated. Death is part of life. We cannot shortcut to a heavenly state. There is a gate that we must pass through. The road is narrow! We must go through Easter Saturday.

After resting for that long and sad Sabbath, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary returned to the tomb. Just to be close to the one they loved. But with no warning, there is an earthquake! A bright dazzling angel! The stone is rolled back. Light floods into the empty tomb. And the words of the angel confirm what they see with their own eyes: “He is not here. He has risen”.

Alongside the creeping grey light of dawn, lightning-brightness illuminates a new resurrection reality.

So, here we are, with Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, marvelling at the empty tomb. Wondering how life can come out of death.

And maybe, like Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, we will leave the empty tomb

and move forward feeling “afraid yet filled with joy” (Matt 28: 8).

One example of this pattern of death and resurrection is the water cycle. Think back to your geography lessons, and observe the journey taken by the water. As you listen, you may want to imagine how this journey of the water translates into your own life:

A droplet of rain falls (from a cloud), smashes into the ground, sinks, and is absorbed into its new world. It has joined the other fallen raindrops as groundwater, usually unseen and unnoticed, eventually making its way into a river: a channel flowing into something greater – into the sea. And on a hot sunny day, that droplet (no longer separable from its companions) evaporates from the surface of the ocean through the air and transforms once again into cloud form.

The rain drop is changed in its nature by Nature itself. Form is *transformed*. Life is resurrected by Life itself. Resurrection is our universal pattern of life. Resurrection is our gift and our hope.

Psalm 30 v 5: “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning”.

And as the dawn sun grows stronger, with our mixed emotions of fear and joy, we are suddenly met by Jesus, who says: “Greetings! Do not be afraid. Go and tell...”. Here is the risen Christ showing us that love is stronger than death!

Maybe we have to die a thousand small deaths in our daily lives for us to see this.

So, what are we rejoicing in at Easter? For me...

- **Easter** is a sign that death never has the last word.
- **The crucifixion** is a sign that God knows and shares our pain and suffering.
- For me... **The occupied-and-then-empty tomb** is a sign that we

must die in order to be released from death.

- **The resurrection** is a sign that we live forever with God.
- **Jesus’ *bodily* resurrection** is a sign that our bodies matter.

Even though our current day-to-day situation may still feel like we are in Easter Saturday (with Christ’s body waiting inside the closed tomb), let us be those people who hope in resurrection.

Let us be those who plumb the depths, and go deep enough to discover flowing groundwater: fallen water flowing together in unison to the sea.

Or as Martin Luther King Jr said, “With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountains of despair a stone of hope”.

Let us be those who see love and life and potential in the fabric of the world around us.

Dag Hammerskjöld again:

The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside. And only he who listens can speak. Is this the starting point of the road towards the union of your two dreams – to be allowed in clarity of mind to mirror life and in purity of heart to mold it?

And this is our great challenge. How do we then live in the world in the light of resurrection? As the long night of Easter Saturday dawns into Easter Sunday, let us anticipate what it will be like to walk out from the darkness of the tomb (and the constraints of Corona restrictions) into a new way of life.

- How do we want to live?
- What have we learned ‘inside the tomb’?
- How do we live as Resurrection People?

Now is a time to give thanks for all we have,
and to celebrate:
Easter is here!
The long night of sadness is over.
The tomb is empty.

Christ has been raised from the dead!
Love lives!
Happy Easter!

15. Life is simple

A meditation on Mark 1: 14-20, by Sabrina Gill



Your heart beats, your lungs fill with air all by themselves, without any effort, without a conscious thought being sent to the organs. The blood flows through one's body, just as rivers flow and can't be stopped. Life is a perfect construction whereby everything falls into place the way it needs to.

Of course, this claim of mine only works when one views it on the basis of the absolute simplest aspects. Breath and the workings of the body is one example. A lot of people would disagree with my statement of life being simple. Sickness, bills, work and raising children can make this claim of simplicity unstable. I'm quite sure that many people amongst us would in fact say that life is very complicated. Full of twists and turns, full of mysteries and frustrations. Full of time feeling lost or stuck or both at the same time.

Jesus and his disciples show us how simple life can become, when you follow God. Jesus sees Simon and his brother Andrew whilst they're fishing. Jesus only had to say one sentence to them and immediately they followed him. James and John even leave in the presence of their father. In the middle of their task of fishing for food they get up and follow Jesus.

There probably were farewells. Maybe they had time to quickly fetch their favorite blanket before leaving their home, but they probably didn't do much more. The bible wouldn't have documented it so short and simple hadn't it occurred in this way. At least that's how I choose to see it, because in this story the simplicity of choosing God, choosing to follow something deeper and more meaningful than even food or family is beautifully demonstrated.

Before the action of following comes the action of choosing. This is also theoretically simple but not easy. It means saying “yes” every day in as many moments of one’s life as possible. This can seem impossible when dealing with strong emotions inside oneself. Anger, disappointment, resentment and many other strongly negatively charged feelings can lead to doubt in our power of choice. We can get so worked up, our minds can be so loud that we don’t hear the voice of reason and wisdom anymore because our inner child is screaming for attention and making our inner life extremely chaotic and messy like a kid throwing a tantrum banging, shouting, scraping, knocking and kicking. No, it is definitely not easy but always simple.

Jesus is saying “follow me” to all of us and the disciples of Jesus show how this is done.

Through simplicity. Simply by realizing the choice we always have at our disposal and then saying yes. That’s all it is. That’s all one has to do. To live a life with God you just follow him. The rest will sort itself out. Just like the breath flowing in and out, life will flow and be ok.

A lot of people probably don’t want to believe this. They think about all the work they have put in to have things or to keep up this mask of a persona that they have worked so hard at obtaining. They don’t want to admit or realize that it was all in vain, because there is no secret to a perfect life. The perfect life is to follow. Call it what makes sense to you. You can say that you follow your heart, your intuition, that true voice inside you. It all means the same. It all means following God.

16. Do small things with great love

A meditation on Mark 10: 13-16, by Megan Bedford-Strohm



Good evening, Peace Church. So good to be with you.

So, I would everyone to take a moment to imagine with me this scenario: you have a special little friend in your life who is about 4

years old — maybe he is your nephew, a friend’s child or your own — and you get to spend a lovely afternoon together. You fly a kite in the park, you see some butterflies and a fluffy dog, you sit on a sunny bench and eat strawberry ice cream.

A few days later, you get to pick the child up from kindergarten, but before entering the classroom, you pause on your way to look at a wall decorated with childrens' drawings. Your eyes are drawn to one where you notice: two stick figures, with big goofy smiles drawn on their faces. It is a little hard to make out at first, but after studying for awhile, you also see a kite.. and is that a butterfly? Oh there is a scribbly dog, and two cones of drippy, pink ice cream. A smile creeps to your face.

By then, the child has peeked out the door and seen you. He runs to you and tells you he has made you a surprise. The teacher tells you how excited he has been all day to give it to you, as he runs, pulls down the picture, and places it in your hands.

By any standard, this is not an exceptional drawing: a wild color palette, some indistinguishable objects mixed in with the ones you could make out, even some holes from pressing down on the paper too hard, smudgy finger marks. The child has not yet learned about perspective, proportion or color theory, and yet ... your heart swells. As you hold it to your chest and bend down to look the child in the eyes, you have never meant anything more, when you tell him, "I will treasure it."

There is a beautiful aspect of Christian theology which recognizes that our Creator, God, has bestowed on us a gift and privilege of being *co-creators*. We build and paint, we write and compose, we invent new technologies and machines; we form things like families, communities, institutions, governments and societies. Many of us take this responsibility very seriously.

You will notice that our language incorporates phrases like: "I want to *make* something of my life," "I want to *make* good use of my time." And as we come into adulthood, we often tend to measure our

lives more and more by the visible *impacts* of our actions. We start thinking of our days in terms of efficiency, of input and output, we dream of *building* a worthwhile life.

One thinks of biblical images, such as in Hebrews: "let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" and we hope to be told by God what the master says in the parable in Matthew: "well done, good and faithful servant."

I've heard that our lives could be thought of like masterpieces that we create and give to God.

While there is beauty in these images, I want to also bring a corrective reminder.

I have spent plenty of time awake in the night, tossing and turning, thinking thoughts like: "what have I really done with my life yet?" "how will I make a worthy enough return on all that has been invested in me, all that has been given to me?" "I am almost thirty... and .. where am I headed? have I done enough, *am I* enough?"

I think it is valid and worthwhile to take stock of your life: to reflect on where you have been and where you are going, what goals you have and *especially what kind of impact your actions and life is having on other people*. That **IS** part of the Christian life. We see a beautiful prayer in Psalm 90 that says, "teach me to number my days, O God, that I may have a heart of wisdom."

...
And **YET**, and yet.

I ALSO believe, there is a critical *flaw* in the framework or ideology underlying those late night, worried thoughts I've described.

I want you now to imagine for a moment that you do live your life to the very fullest. You accomplish *so much more* than most anyone else in the short time you have. You start organizations, change policies, you raise tons of money for good causes. Your impact is enormous.

If your life were a painting, it would be Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. The best of the best.

Now, I want you to imagine what that masterpiece looks like to God: the Creator of the Universe. The one who made the galaxies, who MADE the human form that Michelangelo tried to capture in paint and stone.. The One who made waterfalls and rain storms and a bajillion little purple crocus buds...

To look at my life from that perspective... is like putting a child's drawing up next to a Michelangelo, except the contrast is unfathomably more extreme.

When I think about it like that, what I am reminded of, is:

The very *best* of our best is like a child's drawing to God. Which does *not*, by any means, make it meaningless or insignificant. Remember in the story at the beginning? Why does that little sketch of the figures and the kite and dog... why does that picture have the potential to *move* the receiver? and those who see it? Maybe even more than the most impressive painting at MoMA?

I would say, it is because of that little drawing was made with so much love.. Made completely out of love.

It makes me think of Mother Theresa, who liked to say, "do small things with great love."

Because the reality is, in the grand scheme of things, actually most things, or all things we do are *small*. A drop in the ocean, Mother Theresa says.

But this isn't meant to discourage us. Actually, it is OK.

Children are small. And most of what they make is small. And Jesus says, a number of times in the Gospels, things like this:

"Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for to *such* belongs the kingdom of heaven."

"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God *like a child* shall not enter it."

"Out of the mouth of *infants and nursing babies* you have prepared praise?" and

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become *like children*, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (!)

Wow. What does it mean? There is so much to reflect on here...

And remember, also, the story of the two sisters Martha and Mary. Martha was working so hard to *make* and prepare things for Jesus, and she felt so angry with her sister, Mary, for not doing the same, *or not doing it in the same way as she*. But **Jesus** praised Mary for sitting at His feet and listening, and learning.

Of course this is not a fundamental rebuke against working hard or making things: Of course not! **God** is the one who gave us those abilities and the privilege and the call to be able to do such things.

But *sometimes*, we get the order wrong, or the emphasis. Sometimes we — or *often*, we — start to believe we are little gods and we overestimate our own importance.

Probably everyone here has heard one of the most famous lines in Scripture, from 1 Corinthians 13:

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not *love*, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have

not *love*, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not *love*, I gain nothing.”

How many times have I heard that, and yet how easy is it to forget?

I have to laugh at myself sometimes, when I imagine some conversation at the end of my life, where I say to God:

Megan: “*well, God, I worried a lot about making the best use of my time for you.*”

God: “*Ok, I see... Um, did you see the parts where I say ‘do not to worry?’*”

Megan: “*Well, And I really built a lot of stuff and was very efficient.*”

God: “*That’s great... but did you hear me inviting you to spend time with me, just with me, listening, enjoying each other?*”

Megan: “*I was very mature, made connections with some very important people...*”

God: “*Wonderful... but remember the part about hanging out with children, and having faith like them?*”

Of course, I am being a bit silly or creative with this image : I don’t know that there will *actually* be any conversation like that, but it is a good reminder for me, and maybe for many of us who live in a culture and time that has a lot of measurements for worth and success that are, simply, so different from those within the Kingdom of God.

Often we unconsciously imbibe and embody them without even realizing it, because it is the water we swim in..

But there are a lot of problems with this, because,

For one:

- 1) it can impact how we view other people and their worth.. or worthiness —

people who may be differently-abled, who do things or see things in a way that is not the same as how as how we do.. Who are ‘too young’ or ‘too old’ or ‘too slow’ or ‘too different’ to really take seriously... by society’s standards. This is deeply problematic

And secondly:

- 2) our ‘best’ efforts can actually do more harm than good when we get the order of importance of things mixed up.

The Gospels seem to show us that Jesus wants **us** first: our ears to listen, our hearts to love, our *time* to be in his presence. And the rest — our treasure, our service, our ‘gifts’ — are to flow from *that place* of good alignment. From a place of love.

Children — as much as we may try to bend and change this, *heaven help us* — live outside the ‘grown-up’ sense of time and value. They haven’t ‘been taught’ yet what or whom to see as beautiful and impressive, what is a ‘good’ use of time or ‘worthy’ object of affection.

We can learn from them.

John O’Donahue (36) writes, “*In contrast to how a child belongs in the world, adult belonging is never as natural, innocent or playful. **Adult belonging has to be chosen, received and renewed. It is a lifetime’s work.***”

For us, in a way, it is *work* to return to the faith, the love, the belonging in the world that children seem to possess naturally. But *this* is a work we are called to.

So *yes*, let’s make a masterpiece of our lives for God. But let’s keep in mind, that to God it is a children’s drawing, and the *great worth* of it is found not in how impressive or skillful it is, but in the love and longing and alignment with which it was created.

17. Only Jesus was worth it

A reflection on Mark 14: 3-9, by Becky Yebuah



Hello Brothers and Sisters,

So, today I will tell you my side of the story – a story you read and heard over 100 times, maybe I need to explain myself and a lot to you, what I had in mind. Mark really tried his best, by writing his view, but you know a coin has two sides.

But first let me introduce myself to you. You know me as the crazy woman, the woman out of her mind pouring expensive oil over Jesus his head...

My Mother named me Moriah (seen by God) I never really know why she gave me that name until that day. I never told people what my name was, if people asked me, I was silent. I was ok with people calling me names and knowing it better. But I think this is not the reason why you are here today. I can't tell you what came into my mind on that day years ago, what I can say is, I would do it again and again.

In the 'Town where I lived, I heard people talking that Jesus would go to Simon's house with his friends. Simon was my neighbor, but we never spoke a word with each other. No one really spoke a word with me, - welcome to my neighborhood.

I was at home and preparing myself, for I can't really member what I was doing... I had a feeling - a moment – I felt like God knocked at my door, saw me and gave me the spirit to do something unbelievable and unforgettable as I can now see. I looked around my house and found the little alabaster jar full of precious oil. Something told me to give it to Jesus. That I would pour it over his head was not the plan in the beginning. For Jesus was the only one holy and worthy, for there was no one else I could have imagine doing this to. Wasn't a bad idea at all doing this, you people still talking and reading about me after so long. But let's get back to my story...

While I was on my way to Simons house I started panicking, wanted to turn around, I couldn't, something was holding me back. The only thing I could do was to sing. So, I started singing a song my mother used to sing all the time:

*Take me home with you my Lord
When my life is through
Take me home with peace my Lord
Let me rest with you
When I've fought the fight
And I've kept the faith
And my race on earth is won
All I ask is that you say well done*

Lord please let me hear you say well done

That was all I was asking for in that moment – that the good Lord would one day say to me “My Child – well done”

I did not knock at the door – ok, it was open, so I took it as an invite to enter in without knocking. As I entered Simons house, everyone in the house looked at me. Some of them started whispering, some of them said “what is she doing here”, “get out of the house crazy woman”. I didn’t care to be frank – it was something I was used to. No one liked me – they always wanted me gone. Sometimes I think, they wished I wasn’t a person in their hometown. But I was and there I was, Moriah with the alabaster jar.

I looked through the room and saw Jesus on the other side of the room, sitting at the table with his friends. Without hesitating I went straight to Jesus. I felt power and motivation – I wasn’t afraid even though everyone was looking at me. I wasn’t 100 percent sure about what I was going to do, I thought I would walk to him and give him the jar and turn around.

I was holding my alabaster jar tight, no one could take it from me. One of the men in the house tried to hold me back, but I pushed him away and walked step by step – stood in front of Jesus....and opened my alabaster jar and poured it over his head. Can you imagine my face after I saw what I was doing? You can’t imagine, I was happy!!

Now the men in the house shouted, “what a waste”, “why are you wasting this pure and expensive perfume?” “Couldn’t you sell it and give the money to the poor?” “You are indeed crazy for doing this”.

The house was filled with anger, until Jesus told them to be quiet, for I had anointed him. That I was the only one who did something very good before he would be gone. There would be many chances to do good for the poor but for him, there won’t.

At first, I smiled, I was proud what I had done – but then my eyes filled with tears. I looked at him and he gave me a smile, and, in that moment, I understood that he was trying to tell us, that he was going to die, he would be gone. How could he have known? I didn’t want him to be killed, I didn’t want to anoint him for death, but I did, and it was right and good.

So, was I really wasting this expensive oil for bad? I didn’t. Some of them didn’t understand what Jesus was trying to say. I still looked at Jesus and my heart were heavy, was he sad that they didn’t see him as precious like this perfume? That I was the only one who acted and showed him how precious he was?

That was the moment I understood my name – I was seen by God and the people of God and God wanted me to do this for his son. For he was worthy an expensive anointment. I was seen by God in the right time and right place. For I had been silent for too long.

Ha-ha was I really wasting this perfume? I was not, I mean who if not for Jesus would I spend and use it for. They never really thought about what they were saying. I always ask myself if Jesus was offended in his heart? He told them to let me do what I was doing.

I had done the undoable, I turned around and walked straight to the door. Before going out of the house I told them “I am not crazy, my name is Moriah it means *seen by God*” what I did was crazy but right and God saw what I did, and it was good.

They stared at me with open mouths, and I left.

On my way home – I started running. Never had I run this fast in my life. I was full of joy and happiness, even though I was heavy hearted because Jesus would die.

This perfume was expensive yes, and I did not have much money – but what I did, felt worth 1000 denarii. I mean, look, you are listening to my story and I hope we can agree – I did a great job.

I ran into my house closed the door and danced, smiled and then cried. A voice in my head said, “Well done!” and I wiped my tears.

I packed my things – took as much as I could, and I decided I would leave town and never come back. The townspeople hadn’t heard of the story yet – but I knew they would, and I didn’t want to be asked so many questions.... So, I left.

That is why you never heard of me again. Little did I do – but it was unforgettable. I know God spoke to me that day, and one day he will hold me in his arms and tell me “well done” again.

I know you have a lot of questions, but I think I said enough – let me find my way. For I told you, what no one ever heard of me. The story of the crazy and unnamed woman Moriah who worked for God and was seen by God.

Bye.

18. Strange behaviour?

A reflection on John 21: 15-18, by Reiner Kanzleiter



Sisters and brothers!

Sometimes the way other people act or behave seems very strange to us.

What they do or what they say makes us angry, at other times it makes us smile, sometimes we think or say: He must be

completely crazy! What’s the matter with her?

Lots of stories could be told...

Mr. F., 89 years old, always switches to the other side of the street, as soon as he sees someone in a uniform coming along. He

suddenly becomes very agitated and nervous. Strange.

Mister K., a former member of the Friedenskirche congregation, died 25 years ago. He was a widower. He had been married for more than 50 years. When I visited him some weeks after his wife's funeral, I realized that there wasn't a single photo of his beloved wife in his flat. Very strange, isn't it?

Mother and daughter M., former members of Friedenskirche as well, also died nearly 25 years ago. In their shared flat in Obersendling every spare place in the cupboards, under the beds, on the shelves,...was filled with tinned food, pasta, tea and coffee. Enough supplies for years. Very crazy.

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... But only until you learn something about their background...

Mr. F. is Jewish. He survived a concentration camp in 1945, but lost the rest of his family. Whenever he sees a uniform he remembers his sad family story and becomes very agitated and nervous. Not at all a strange behaviour.

Mister K. had cared for his wife for more than 30 years because she was very ill. He had to make a lot of sacrifices, because he didn't want to move her into a nursing home. He was at her bed day and night until he was completely ex-hausted. Only once he left for the bakery. When he came back, she had died. He felt incredibly guilty. The only way to manage his feelings was to put away the pictures of his wife, because they always recalled his feelings of being guilty. Not so strange any more...

Mother and daughter M. had been starving during World War II. The mother had nearly died of hunger even in World War I. Never again did they want to go through the same experience. So they provided for the future. For years. For you never know. And as a

visitor you suddenly know which story you are part of.

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... until you learn some-thing about their background...

Another one of these stories?

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know eve-rything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'
(John 21: 15-18)

To be honest: Wouldn't it get on your nerves, if your husband or your wife started asking three times in a row: Do you really love me? Finally, when you are asked for the third time, you'd answer: Can't you stop it? Is there some-thing wrong with you? Has the record got stuck? What's going on?

Unbelievable stories which make you shake your head.... until you learn some-thing about their background...

This biblical story as well can only be understood when you learn about the different background stories, hidden between the lines.

When they had finished breakfast – at a charcoal fire, as the text told us...

It sent hot and cold shivers up and down the spine of Simon Peter, when he saw the charcoal fire. He immediately remembered: Shortly before that day there was another charcoal fire. Closely linked to the fire was how he had be-trayed the Lord three times: Jesus?
No idea, who that is! Of course I don't belong to him.

A background story – suddenly far too vivid!

Then the calling of his name: **Simon, son of John!**

Exactly the same name as three years ago, when Jesus had called him to be-come his disciple. Cephas, the rock! Totally enthusiastic he had left everything behind. Remembering the “rock” he suddenly felt very bad. He was anything but a “rock”!

Next this question, three times: **Do you love me?**

Three times he had betrayed Jesus, and three times he is now asked for his love. No chance to avoid all the memories. Every single question lets the cock crow again.

Do you love me more than these?

What we may find doubly strange has its own background story as well.

“Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you”, these words of Peter were full of self-confidence. “I am better!”

And now: **Do you really love me more than these?**

Background stories – suddenly far too vivid!

What comes out into the open through these background stories? What comes out into the open through these questions about love? What are we really talking about when we talk about love?

Being loved and to love always means: I am precious. You are precious, just the way you are! I don't have to be, you don't have to be

Superman or Super-woman. Just be who you are. You don't have to prove anything!
I appreciate you, the way you are!

Is it easy for us to accept and to believe that? To accept and to believe that we are loved by God the way we are?

That the main point in loving is, that we are allowed to be human beings?

Human beings, just as we are, without any need to prove anything, without any need to be Superman – just being loved!

Jesus asks Peter: **Is there such love in you?** And there are still more background stories hidden in this question.

They show how much Peter, as we do today, tries to remain in control instead of being open to the adventure of faith and love. How much pressure do we feel upon us, that we always have to be the winner; that we have to be part of the competition of the fastest and the best and the most beautiful, the most successful and most prosperous.

Do we still realize how much our character and our personhood are infected and changed by this weight of expectation: to be in control of our lives, to participate in everything, to not just let life happen.

Do we still realize which price we pay for being a winner, which price our fam-ilies are paying, our kids, what that means for our health, for our inner peace...

Aren't we like Peter?

He always wanted to be the best, the first of all, the one who wanted to walk on the water, the one who wanted to build huts on the mountain top, the one who wanted to sit next to Jesus, the one who couldn't accept a suffering Je-sus, which of course would mean a loser-Jesus. Peter, the one who calculated how often one had to forgive before it is enough, the one who promised the world, who wanted to be an extraordinary faithful believer. Peter, who always wanted to be the winner!

To be always a winner, to be in complete control of life, to manage the world, to be my own savior...in the end Peter has gained nothing. And we are so of-ten like him.

Walking on the water – he sinks.
He has to be corrected by Jesus all the time.
There are no huts to be built on the mountaintop.

There are no first places to be assigned, just last ones.

Forgiving can't be limited, life has to stay open.

In the very end Peter is totally exhausted by always wanting to be the winner.

In the most important hour in the garden he falls asleep, he isn't able to stay awake and pray with Jesus.

All of his love for Jesus, which he had promised, has got lost under this pressure: I have to be the winner!

He had lost everything: his faith, his courage, his confession, himself. He had become a refugee. This pressure "I have to be a winner!", "I have to be in control", "I cannot let go!" – This pressure produces nothing but defeats. Nothing but victims. This pressure destroys life, my own and those of others, too.

**Could you stop that?, Jesus asks.
Are you able to love? Do you love me?**

This threefold-question of Jesus leads Peter back into the fellowship.

His answers sound very miserable, sheepish and sad.

Yes, of course! Surely you know that I love you.

And with every answer all the effects are felt, the effects of his obsession to be the winner, the best, the first...and the effects of his defeats...on the water, at the charcoal fire, in the garden...

How much do we need it, to be brought back by the grace of Christ into his fellowship!

How much do we depend on the grace that Christ's measure is not, what we had

promised and what we wanted to do, but how much we need him!

How much do we need what we call "grace": We don't have to be in control of our life all the time. We don't have to produce the worth of our life. We don't have to be the masters of our life. We don't have to guarantee for ourselves. We don't have to justify ourselves.

We don't even have to know how to pray.

We cannot produce, we cannot organize and buy, we cannot enforce whereof we deeply live: love and friendship, forgiveness, redemption and salvation!

God's grace releases us from the pressure to produce and to guarantee our own lives, his grace releases us from the pressure always to be a winner.

The grace of God lets me know, that I am precious beyond my usability, beyond my efficiency and beyond my fitness.
I am allowed just to be! I don't have to justify myself. I can hand over my life, I can entrust myself to the greater love of God.

God's grace upon Peter's life, God's grace upon our lives says:

You don't have to be always a winner.

You don't have to be able to walk on the water.

You don't have to avoid suffering all the time. You can accept it from time to time.

You don't have to be in control of life, you don't have to fight to be first.

You don't have to calculate forgiveness and love.

You don't have to be God!

You are allowed to be a human being. You are allowed to live within limits, you don't have to be an all in all person.

What a relief it could be – to live in this grace of Jesus Christ.

Let it be! Jesus says to Peter.

You shall not win, you shall love!

And then the loser, the one who always wants to be a winner, the failure, the one

with the small faith, the one who is in doubt all the time...and then all of us, who are like Peter again and again are entrusted with a new task – three times lest we forget:

Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep

We shall not win at any cost. We shall not waste all our energy to save our life...we shall serve the community. Tend, feed, shepherd, care about the life, watch and pray, let no one get lost.

Simon Peter shall be and remain “the rock” by serving the fellowship, the church of Christ.

Only in that way.

Let people feel, how the grace of God takes away all pressure; that the grace of God says: You are justified just as you are!
You don't have to be the best. You don't have to walk on the water. You don't need to try that. Let it be!

How many people are looking for a church, that doesn't put pressure upon them but takes away all burdens in the name of Christ! How many people are looking for such freedom, such relief – not to be measured, not to be evaluated, not having to justify themselves...but to feel, and to listen to and to meet the grace of God.

All those background stories we carry with us can become as vivid as they want. All our pain can become as dark as it wants.

In the German and Latin tradition the name of this Sunday is *Misericordias Domini*, which is translated: The heart of God is with us in our misery.

The heart of God and his love lead us into a new life, following the principle:
It is not about winning- it is about loving and being loved!

Amen

19. Who is being converted?

A meditation on Acts 8: 26-40, by Christian Schreiber



Have you ever been on a long journey which turned out to be entirely in vain? I have on a number of occasions.

One such occasion was when I had freshly moved to Munich and wanted to prepare for a half-marathon. I was looking for a running club and in the end found one that would be meeting at a school gym close to where I used to live. Not wanting to be late, I left work half an hour early and arrived just before the club was going to meet. I rushed into the changing room to change into my running gear, I did my stretches and I then went to the place where people were meant to gather.

Except that they didn't. After about ten minutes, a friendly gentleman appeared. He informed me that the running club was not going to meet thanks to the Bavarian school holidays. He, however, saw my sorry state in being in full sports outfit and kindly suggested that I could join his gymnastics classes for senior citizens. So, instead of going for a vigorous run, I was doing rolly-polies with the grannies – who appeared to be way more flexible than me!

It must have been a similarly frustrating appearance for the eunuch who is mentioned in the passage that was just read. He travelled all the way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem on what must have been an extremely exhausting journey. If you check on Google Maps, a trip from the then capital of Ethiopia to Jerusalem would cover about 2400 km and thus must have taken weeks to complete.

Imagine then how the experience of being in Jerusalem must have been. Clearly, being there must have meant a lot for him since otherwise he would not have made that journey. He was probably looking forward to what may well have been a “once-in-a-lifetime” experience. As a passionate traveller, I can imagine what it must have been like for him to be approaching Jerusalem and to be heading to the temple he probably heard so much about.

But here comes a disappointment. Having arrived at the temple, he was only allowed into the forecourt, since eunuchs, as well as foreigners, were not allowed into the inner courts. Yes, they could bring their sacrifices, and yes, they could pray, but they were not

allowed into the inner sanctum. Basically, they were just about tolerated.

If I were that eunuch, I would probably find that experience, for want of a better word, “underwhelming”. You are a second class worshipper, and you are made to feel it, and no matter how much effort you spent on coming to Jerusalem, no matter how long you travelled, you are kept on the fringes – because of who you are, in terms of nationality and in terms of your sexuality. It is a bit like going to a party only to find out that you are welcome to bring a present but won’t be allowed to join.

It is in that framework that the intervention of Philip is remarkable.

At that point, the church is still squabbling about whether it should see itself as just a Jewish sect or whether it should take a broader view. The apostle Paul, who is credited with taking the gospel to the wider world, has not yet been converted. Another leading apostle, Peter, is still more than hesitant to enter the house of a Roman centurion because of Jewish purity laws.

It is in that context that God’s intervention can be clearly seen. The eunuch is a person who is, because of his nationality, and because of his sexuality, very much at the fringe. It is to such a person that Philip is led. And it is just fitting that the eunuch is studying the book of Isaiah. The passage that he read was from Isaiah 53. Just a few chapters later, we find the verses:

Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,

“The Lord will surely exclude me from his people.”

And let no eunuch complain,

“I am only a dry tree.”

The message could not be clearer: no matter what your nationality is, you are not excluded. And maybe there is also a hint that a person’s sexuality and sexual identity

does not exclude that person from God’s kingdom.

I could stop here. But I think there is another aspect that we should not overlook, and that is more with the unlikely chain of events that unfolds.

Why did the encounter happen in the desert? Would it not have been much easier for Philip to encounter the eunuch in Jerusalem. It would have been much less travelling. Further, from reliable resources, I have been informed that water for baptismal purposes is much more easily accessible in Jerusalem than in the desert.

So why did the encounter happen in the desert? Why all that effort?

I think that one reason could have been to drive the message home to Philip, as well as to the rest of the church, that also people on the fringes are part of God’s kingdom. Had Philip met the eunuch in Jerusalem, this encounter could have been understood to be by mere chance, and little significance would probably have been given to it by Philip and the wider church. It probably would have been regarded as one encounter among many.

However, the mere chain of unlikely events that the story reports may have been chosen to point out the importance of this one encounter to Philip. Let us just look at the sequence of highly unlikely events that took place according to the story:

- An angel appears to Philip
- Philip encounters a eunuch who has just been to Jerusalem
- The eunuch has a keen interest in theology and reads a passage of a book that can be read onto Jesus
- The eunuch, who is a high ranking civil servant, is open-minded enough to acknowledge his lack of understanding
- There is water for a baptism in the desert

- Philip disappears and suddenly reappears somewhere else

Taking those events at face value, and given this chain of unlikely events, it must have been clear for Philip that the events he was experiencing were of significance. And, clearly, it must have primed him for accepting the fact that foreigners, and people who are at the margins of society, do have their place in God's kingdom.

Maybe in that day and age, the church had to learn to accept people who are outside of its comfort zone so that it could start engaging with them. Maybe the church had to be "converted" to a wider acceptance of people before it could start spreading the gospel?

I wonder what this means for us today? Would, for us today, a similar approach be beneficial?

I think that thanks to the advent of social media like Facebook and Twitter, with their algorithmic newsfeed, it is all too easy to be fed the kind of news that only serve to reinforce your views. If you are a die-hard liberal, you will get a different newsfeed than a Trump supporter. If you are a climate change denier, the news you read will be different from those of a supporter of Fridays for Future. Whatever your beliefs are, they will be reinforced.

What I have personally found is that with that kind of self-reinforcing cycle, it becomes difficult to engage with people who have widely different views. I am in

contact with a fair few people who have views I passionately disagree with. What I find is that when those topics we disagree on come up – which they do, invariably – it is just so hard to assume the best intentions. It is so hard to respond in a kind way. It is ever so tempting to "shout back" and write messages all in capitals to state your point. To drive your message home. To stand your ground.

Except that probably, the number of people who have been convinced by a Facebook or a WhatsApp-argument that their point of view is wrong is almost certainly close to zero. Except that, probably, this way of responding is the best way of making sure that you are not heard.

Maybe the best way will be to try to assume the best intentions in those people who cross our paths. Coming back to the story, Philip did not worry about the differences in theological background between the then rather Jewish church and the non-Jewish background of the eunuch. Instead, he focused on the needs of the person he encountered and on the shared interest in scripture. And, whilst this may not be a guaranteed way of really engaging with people of different viewpoints, it is, in my opinion at least, the best way of making sure that everybody is heard.

I pray that, in the week ahead, we would seek to find common ground with people and that we would dare to be changed by people who disagree with us.

20. On compassion fatigue and being the Beloved

A meditation on 1 John 3: 16-24, by Megan Bedford-Strohm



Good evening, everyone.

When I looked up the lectionary readings and read these words we just heard from 1 John 3, they struck me, challenged me, viscerally. I want to share with you my process of re-encountering this passage, in case it resonates for some of you, too. It came at just the right time for me — so much so that it now feels like a gift. But that isn't exactly what it felt like upon my first reading.

Let's look again at the first section of the reading, verses 16-18:

16 *“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”*

Upon my first reading, what I saw were these things:

We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.. We ought to share with those in need.. We ought to love in actions and in truth.

I felt so convicted, immediately seeing and feeling the thousand ways I am falling short of what this passage calls me to.

While, thank God, most of us have not yet been in a situation of needing to decide whether or not to physically take a bullet for someone, or jump in front of a wild animal, or anything like that... The message of this passage, to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters// — who I interpret to mean any other child of God, or person made in the image of God, which is every person — // obviously extends beyond the giving of our physical lives in one, dramatic moment ... though for some it may come to that. There are many ways that we lay down our lives for each other. The passage even goes on to, basically, name one: if you have anything at all to share, share with those who are in need. *Love is action.*

This applies to all of us here. There are clearly *so* very many people in our world today in need, in *great* need. That is why the passage makes me feel convicted.

For many of us, we are absolutely inundated with awareness of need... Even my Instagram feed, along with the news, documentaries in the mediathek, books, friends... all inform me of large-scale suffering being experienced by different people around the globe: people who are starving, who are victims of all kinds of violence and oppression, who are being impacted by climate change and... the list goes on and on. This is not even to mention our own immediate surroundings: the person on the street asking for money, those in our lives whom we know are suffering from sickness, from financial struggles, from mental illness.

I am just going to come out and say it: sometimes it feels like TOO MUCH to bear.

I have used the term 'compassion fatigue' before here, in a prayer request. It is a phenomenon that has been studied in connection to the study of trauma. It can be linked with burnout and Wikipedia defines it as “a condition characterized by *emotional and physical exhaustion* leading to a *diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion* for others, often described as the *negative cost of caring*.”

While it is something that people in helping professions — such as therapists, doctors, others who work with people who are victims of trauma and disaster, etc. are particularly susceptible to...

I think that in our extremely globalized world, *particularly* after a year of a pandemic that has touched everyone's lives near and far, if you are an empathetic, caring, even somewhat tuned-in person... you might have felt 'compassion fatigue' at one point or another lately.

Even in pre-pandemic times, spiritual writer and priest, John O'Donahue, wrote,

“There is a huge crisis of compassion in contemporary society. This crisis has nothing to do with our inability to feel sympathy for

others. It has more to do with the numbing of our compassion through our image exposure to so many of the horrors that are happening around the world. We feel overwhelmed and then hopeless. It is important to remember that a proportion of our numbness is convenient. We avoid the harrowing images or allow ourselves to be immediately overwhelmed. Most of us continue our privileged lives within our complacent cocoons ... When we succumb to indifference, we blaspheme against the gifts that we could never earn that have been so generously given to us.”

Sadly, I see myself, at times, in this description by John O'Donahue. I want to change this, but at times, feel at a loss.

Maybe, at points lately you have felt like you are running on fumes: emotionally, financially, even physically in terms of energy... and you wonder how you can possibly find resources within yourself to even HEAR *one more sad thing*. Let alone, actually do something to help.

Or maybe, you've been trying to help where you can: donate to this charity, lend a listening ear to this friend, raise awareness for this issue... but it feels like it doesn't even scratch the surface of the need. It is never enough. You feel guilty for not doing more, to the point where you barely even feel like trying anymore.

I've had nights where the only thing I was willing to watch on TV was comedy. Sometimes I pass a person on the street or scroll past some cause on social media, basically going through a bunch of reasons (or excuses?) in my head, for why I can't help...

1 John 3:17 says, again,

“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on

them, how can the love of God be in that person?"

I *know* that this is speaking to me. I *want* the love of God to be in me... So why is my compassion numb sometimes?

Though I know that it's impossible to help every single person, or to fight for every cause, I *pray* to God that — in spite of being overwhelmed or tired myself, in spite of hardly even knowing where to begin, or knowing that I may not do it right, at least not the first time — that I will not become that person with 'no pity,' that I will not become hard of heart.

After the first reading, if I am being honest, and I am tired, the passage might lead me to ask: 'God, if I can barely find the resources within myself to *learn* about what that brother or sister is going through, how could I possibly bring myself to 'lay down my life' for him or her?'

If I were to stop after that first reading, I might walk away from this passage feeling sad, weary, full of self-loathing.

BUT ... and this is a big BUT

That is when it is time to go back and read it again. It is as if the passage anticipated where my thoughts might go.

Because not *only* does this passage give us instruction, or a *call*, it **ALSO** gives us *resources*...

In a first reading, I might forget to put those first verses together with the verses that come right after them. **EXACTLY** the feelings I was describing, from my first reading, are addressed.

Starting with verse 19, the passage goes on to say:

19 *"This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in*

his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

21 *Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.*

And back up to the top, verse 16 once more:

16 *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us*

So, before we are asked to lay down our own lives, we are reminded that Jesus laid down his life for us, out of love.

We are called to love and to bless, but out of a place of *belovedness* and *blessedness*. Our hearts may feel weak and even fail us, but **GOD is greater than our hearts**, and God dwells in us.

God has the resources we lack, and we can ask for them. We have been given the Spirit of God to live in us... which moves us to compassion, to generosity.

Henri Nouwen was a priest and spiritual writer who spent the last ten years of his life living and working in a place called L'Arche, where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together in community. In his book, 'Life of the Beloved', Henri Nouwen writes:

"Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us *the 'Beloved.'* Being the

*Beloved expresses the **core truth** of our existence.” ///*

The more we come to understand our *belovedness* and the *more we claim our blessedness*, the more capacity we have to love others.

And how do we claim our blessedness?

Nouwen makes two suggestions: through prayer and through cultivating presence.

On prayer, he writes,

*"The movement of God's Spirit is very gentle, very soft — and hidden. It does not seek attention. But that movement is also very persistent, strong and deep. It changes our hearts radically. **The faithful discipline of prayer reveals to you that you are the blessed one and gives you the power to bless others.**"*

And on cultivating presence, he writes:

"The problem of modern living is that we are too busy — looking for affirmation in the wrong places? — to notice that we are being blessed."

The summary is

*"It is remarkable how easy it is to bless others, to speak good things to and about them, to call forth their beauty and truth, **when you yourself are in touch with your own blessedness.**"*

—

When I am tired, when I am overwhelmed, it is so hard to be generous. I can hardly bring myself to give anything at all, much less my very life. I feel like hoarding. I can find myself operating out of a *mindset of scarcity*, thinking that is what I need to survive and thrive.

But this mentality is backwards. A scarcity-mentality is the mindset of the world: I have to protect what is mine, or I will lose. But a Kingdom-mindset is one of *abundance*. Where the world sees a mustard seed, God sees a mighty tree. Nouwen writes,

"The world and its strategies may help you to survive for a long time, but they cannot help you live because the world is not the source even of its own life, let alone yours."

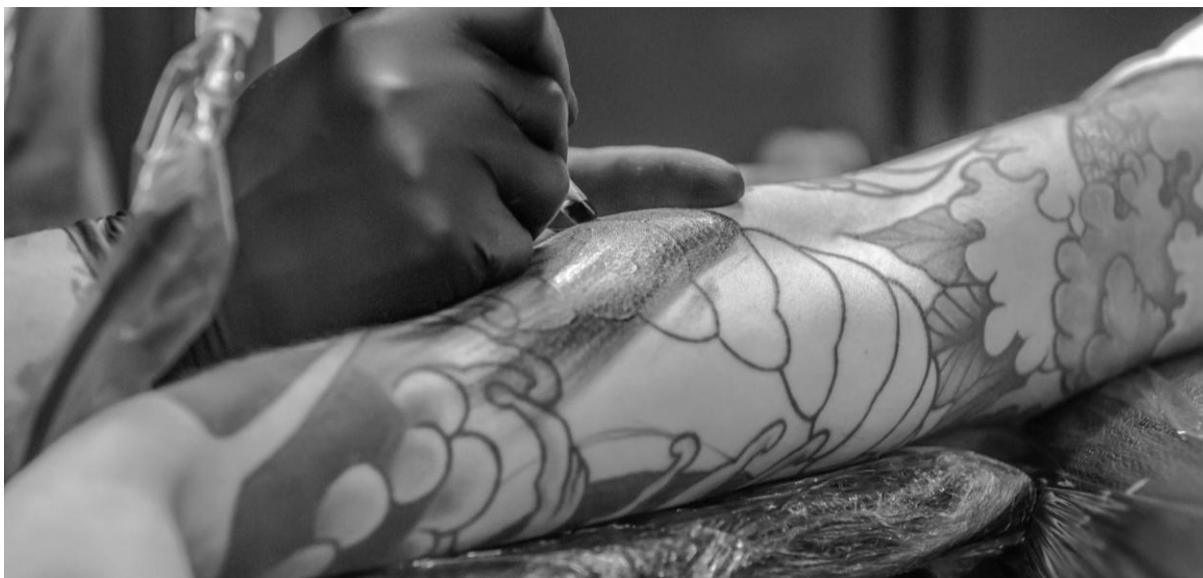
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Neither Nouwen nor John are saying we can do *everything*, that we can be everything to everyone, but we can try to keep our hearts open to loving the next person we encounter, we can try to do the next right thing, the next faithful thing, however small it may be. Not out of a place of self-condemnation, not even out of our own strength and might and ability, but out of a love that flows from deep knowledge and that we are *beloved*.

Amen.

21. God's testimony about us

A reflection on 1 John 5: 9-13, by Sabrina Gill



Recently a friend of mine has taken up doing Tattoos. She is still practicing and so she does it for free. She always makes sure that the people who come to her are aware of her ability or lack thereof. Overall, she knew that sooner or later she would have to be confronted with critical opinions. And yet when one comment arrived, she lost control of her emotions. Hurt and almost vengeful she discussed the matter with her opposing critic, accusing her of sabotaging her success.

I think we can all relate to the feeling that overcame my friend.

Our senses notice something and almost as soon as the brain has processed it, it sinks into our emotions. It stings and burns. At times we believe it's unbearable. We have exposed ourselves. Been vulnerable. The consequence of that is usually that we are seen by other people and that however has the inevitable effect of judgement.

That is the feeling of human testimony. Even when the words are positive, it can move us into a space of dependence. The danger of any words are the reactions that follow. We have the possibility to stay calm but often we try so hard to cover our shame,

we don't realize when we shame others. We mask our hurt feelings by saying you're worse.

At this point I should clarify what testimony means. In courts of law, it describes all statements under oath. Generally, one could define testimony as a written or spoken statement, that is decided to be true.

It feels set in stone. Inflexible. Encaging. When we are confronted with judgement our logical rational thinking often hides away from us and we automatically without question believe that these statements are true and incredibly important. That is what our passage is trying to tell us. We value human testimony, we take it seriously, even though God's testimony encompasses the truth.

God's testimony is a different kind to the one of humans. It is the testimony of life. Eternal life for us. Life encloses all things and beings. You can trust that you exist. That you're alive. And God is allowing you to live. Whatever that may look like.

However, if we live, we will undoubtedly make mistakes. This is unavoidable. We will

be beginners, learners over and over again. We will have to handle people's judgements and categorization, because human brains are wired that way. They automatically categorize as a means of making sense of the world. Our egos throw in a little judgement on this path of wanting to know things. Deeper down into ones being though is God's judgement, God's testimony. And all it says is yes you are life. I gave you life because I deem you worthy of life. As I do all.

In this space we are all of the same worth. We all consist of the same attributes. We can be one in God's testimony.

Realizing this can be extremely liberating. If we only have to trust that we are alive and we are worthy of this life and of the possibilities it grants us, life is easy. It's an affirmation that can motivate a person to be oneself and trust in God.

I do want to acknowledge the fact, that when we do forget this and we shake and stumble, that we remind ourselves of compassion. To be strong all the time and have unshakeable faith is unrealistic and so I suggest to be kind when you or others in one's circle begin to react to other people's words.

Even our human judgements are something that god has given space and time for, otherwise it probably wouldn't exist. The question arises of the practical use of human judgement. I've come to the conclusion that we learn from these situations. The great thing about life, about messing up is that we take on board what we need and analyze what we don't to become wiser and surer of our faith. This path entails ups and downs. But only by ups and downs can there be mountains and only then can there be views from the top, where one has to stop and stare at the wonders of nature.

It is human to be unsure, to be angry, to feel disappointed or mistreated. All we can do as bystanders or when we are consumed by these emotions, is remind of the unshakeable worth of soul.

Also, we so often dramatize the accusations and see the negative so much clearer than the positive.

My friend soon realized all the people who were satisfied with her work. Who support her and believe in her ability. She soon found that this was more significant and also much closer to the truth.