

A decorative border surrounds the central text area, featuring various green leaves, stems, and colorful flowers in shades of pink, orange, and yellow.

draw near

Devotional

An invitation to Love

ANDREA EWER

For anyone looking to find rest

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Introduction

“Do you love your faith so little that you have never battled a single fear lest your faith should not be true? Where there are no doubts, no questions, no perplexities, there can be no growth.”

George MacDonald

* * *

“Why can I never hear God talk?” My son who is four years old at the time has just asked me this. I pull the blue comforter studded with white stars over him, tuck it around him and his teddy who he has cuddled tight beneath his left arm. I’ve just said a short bedtime prayer, something along the lines of “I pray you have a good sleep tonight with good dreams...” I’ve been saying this prayer almost every night, but lately the words are getting stuck in my throat. I hurry through them, out of habit, but thinking to myself, *do I even believe this anymore? Why am I praying for my kids when I don’t even know if there is a God to pray to?* I get text messages from my friends, *Can you please pray for...? I’m struggling with this right now...can you pray?* I respond with the most honest answer I can muster. *Sending love! Thinking of you...*

I didn’t like being in this place of not knowing. I wanted someone to tell me what to believe, which path was true? Deep down I knew I wanted to pursue God, to dive further into my faith, to read and learn and pray and discover what it meant to choose this life even when you are full of doubts. To say to my son, *“I’m not really sure, but what I do know is...”* and not have the unknowns throw me into a tailspin. I’m ashamed to say that the fear of being judged played a big part in holding me back. I thought about people I knew that had left the faith of their childhood behind them, a thing of the past. These were smart, accomplished people. Would they think less of me if I chose to take my faith more seriously?

But neglecting my faith was neglecting my soul. I was withering, unhappy, unloving. I knew it was time to listen to what my heart was telling me, to follow my curiosity instead of paying attention to what everyone else was thinking and doing. I decided to dust off my Bible that had sat untouched on my shelf for years, and opened to the Psalms. I had no words to bring to God yet, I didn't know what to say or pray so I turned to the ancient words of others. And on those pages I found my own heart, broken open and laid bare. Doubt and faith, desperation and hope, loneliness and love.

The words of Psalm 43:3 become a life raft for me, something to cling to during this season of feeling unsettled and out of place. As I rocked my youngest son before bedtime, in the stillness and quiet of his room, I would say the words into the darkness. *Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me. Let them lead me to your holy mountain, to the place where you live (NLT).*

As I cleaned up the kitchen after dinner the words would echo in my mind. *Send out your light and your truth; let them guide me...*

As I changed another diaper, folded another load of laundry, drove to another playground. *Send out your light and your truth...*

This was a beginning. A slight turning of my heart, towards the One I was longing for. Beginning to see that I was seen, and had always been seen. Pastor and author Brian Zahnd has described faith as “an ongoing orientation of the soul towards God.” I like the word *ongoing* here. It is daily, it is active, it is shifting away sometimes and turning back to the direction that I know is Life.

This book was born out of this journey, of learning to draw near to God after a long season of holding Him at a distance. I started writing this book in the middle of winter.

On quiet mornings when the boys were in school I would sit down on my living room couch to write. With a candle flickering, a second cup of coffee slowly emptying, I would stare at the screen and write words that I hoped would come together in some sort of meaningful way.

It is summertime now. Butterflies flutter past my lawn. My boys play down the street with their friends all day, coming home red-faced with hair stuck to the backs of their necks, full of smiles and stories and devouring every snack in sight.

I tell a friend recently that life is good, that all I really want right now in this busy season of summer with the boys home with me is to get back to those times of quiet and prayer that had been so precious to me over the winter. It feels like a small request, a little bit trivial. She changes my perspective. “Ya, just a little thing to ask. To have more time with God, the Creator of the universe...” I laugh, and she’s right. How incredible is it to be invited into a relationship with God, to let this communion mold and shape us. To discover what it really means to be humans made in His image.

This is a collection of my stories but it is not just that. My hope is that in the reading of it you will also feel the tug on your heart, hear the Voice of Love calling your name, encouraging you to draw close to our invisible but ever-present Father. I wrote this book as a devotional, to be read slowly, little by little, as you take the time to pause when something stirs you, reflecting on what God might want to reveal to you in this season, about yourself, about Him, about your life. Dare to pray, dare to listen. Dare to expect Him to do something new in you, and to give you the greatest gift we could ever receive — more and more of Himself.

I’m so happy you’re here.

xo Andrea

prologue: bread

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

Lao Tzu

* * *

I join the slow procession to the front of the room, pausing at aisles to let others enter the line, stopping and starting like cars merging in rush hour traffic. A man and woman stand at the front, one holds a wooden tray of cups filled with juice, the other a bowl of pita bread. I had done this hundreds, probably thousands of times before. When you grow up in the church, especially as a PK (pastor’s kid), taking communion is just as familiar and routine as watching the Sunday football game.

I make eye contact with my husband where he sits behind the drum set. He makes a silly face and I stifle a laugh. This is his second service of the morning, and there will be one more after this. I’ll go home with our two boys, give them lunch, and as they’re settling into their bedrooms for afternoon quiet time he’ll pull into the driveway, exhausted and famished.

My gaze turns to the three singers at the front of the stage, one holds a guitar and all have their lips pressed up close to the wire mesh of their microphones. Their hands are lifted out in front of them, heads tilted back slightly and eyes closed. *“And all the earth will shout Your praise, Our hearts will cry, these bones will sing, Great are You, Lord...”* The congregation is swaying and singing along with this familiar tune.

I finally reach the couple at the front of the line, tray and bowl extended out towards me, an offering, an invitation. I give a quick smile then carefully take a cup and piece of bread and walk to the corner of the room where others have gathered to chew and sip in silence.

I try to ignore the awkwardness I feel, the sense that every single eye is on me. I turn my back to the room and find an empty spot beside a window, fixing my gaze on the

bright blue sky outside, the snow-capped trees. For a moment I forget where I am and my self-consciousness slips away. I don't close my eyes like the others around me. What would I pray anyways?

My mind wanders to a memory when I'm eight years old, a scrawny red-head sitting cross legged on a countertop with my twin sister. The hallway outside the door leads to a large purple-carpeted meeting room where our father's church holds its weekly services. The service has just ended, and we can hear the metal of chairs clanging together as they are put away, stacked into towers of ten and pushed against the window-lined walls. A vacuum hums. The room is peaceful, serene, as prayers are finished in hushed voices.

An opened bottle of Welch's grape juice sits on the countertop beside me along with two goblets. A puddle of juice sits at the bottom of each cup filled with soggy bread crumbs that are now the colour purple.

My sister and I find the leftover communion bread and dive in. It's a beautiful homemade loaf, with a flaky crust and white fluffy inside. We tear off big chunks from the middle, rolling it between our hands until it becomes a moist, sticky ball then pop it into our mouths. It tastes like dough and we love it. Our mom's best friend peaks her head into the kitchen, scolds us with a laugh and shoos us away.

I blink and I'm thirty-one again. I look down at the mini cup of juice in my hand, the tiny rectangle of dry pita. *When did I lose that hunger?* I used to be ravenous.

I swallow it like every other Sunday and yet today it feels different. The juice surprises me as it slides down my throat, the sweetness is shocking. I suddenly realize how thirsty I was.

Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see. This Psalm pops into my mind. And since I haven't picked up my Bible in years I pay attention. *Is God the thing I am desperate for right now?* The truth is that I've been drifting away. On Sundays I show up at church with my family, I sing the songs, say the prayers, help in the nursery, but

inside I'm wondering, *Is this still what I believe?* I feel like I've been sitting on the fence for months now. One day I believe, the next I don't. What I want is for someone to tell me what to do, to tell me the right answer and the wrong one. Why do I trust every other person more than I trust myself?

But in this moment with the sour taste of grape juice still lingering in my mouth, I hear myself loud and clear. *I am so hungry for God!* I want to say yes in spite of my doubts, I want to say yes in spite of what others might think of me.

Yes. I want to say yes to faith.

I place a fingertip to the corners of my eyes where tears are puddling and I can feel my mascara smudging.

Author Emily Freeman writes, "Maybe our tears are tiny messengers, secret keepers of the most vulnerable kind, sent to deliver a most important message – *Here is where your heart beats strong. Here is a hint to your design. Here is a gift from your inner life, sent to remind you those things that make you come alive.*"

The tears have surprised me, and I try to keep them hidden from the people standing on either side of me. But they are telling me something, this I know. It's the idea of God being the one to quench my thirst — a thirst I didn't even realize I had. This is who I have always been, a seeker. *Seeking* is what makes me come alive.

The tears are telling me, it is time to come back home.

Day 1



*Today I embrace my longing
for more God.*

During this next season that I am entering,
I invite slowness. I resist the pull to rush, to achieve.

I want to create space for God to speak to
those weary and hungry places in my heart.

The world will try and convince me that

I must *do* more, that I must *be* more than I am,
but the heart of Christ beats at a different rhythm,

a heavenly one.

I lean in, I *wait*, as the sound of this kingdom song
begins to grow louder in my life.

longing

“Like an unborn baby in a mother’s womb

Before my lungs could breathe

I was alive in you.”

Jason Upton

* * *

Sometime after high school, when I became consumed with my university courses, and got married, and started a career, and had babies, my faith began to drift away. Though it didn’t happen suddenly, it was still a momentous shift in my life. Because I had been the girl who stayed up late reading her Bible, who memorized verses and journaled what God was speaking to her. I was the girl who would sit on her window sill late into the night, gazing at the stars and praying and wondering what big and wonderful things God would use me for in the future. While my friends spent their weekends at parties, I happily went to Friday night youth group. They listened to Spice Girls and N’Sync and I made up dances to hit songs by Out of Eden and Jars of Clay.

God was no little thing to me, and yet, somehow, other things rose in importance and took the place He had for so long held in my life. I became too busy and distracted to tend to my soul. I still went to church on Sundays, and prayed sporadically, but faith was merely something I *did*. It was not a way of *being*. Life became solely about doing, and slowly, little by little, I slipped off of that window sill and God slipped out of the picture. This is what author Philip Yancey describes when he writes, “In a fallen world, doubt feels more like forgetfulness than disbelief.”

I hadn’t gone out of my way to reject God, I simply and plainly just *forgot*.

But forgetting God meant I was ignoring the most important thing about myself. I walked around with a shadow hanging over me but couldn't put my finger on what it was. I remember sitting in the waiting room of a spa one day, flipping mindlessly through a magazine, glancing around at the women seated beside me, and all I felt was a deep, disturbing, loneliness. *I'm at the spa for goodness sake! Why do I feel so glum?!* I had slipped into a mild depression, like a flower cut from her roots I had started to wilt. Maybe I just need to work harder, accomplish more, be more social. But what I was starving for was love, acceptance, self-compassion. I had forgotten the core of my identity. As author Ann Voskamp writes, "Forget the face of God and forget your own name is Beloved."

Beloved? That certainly wasn't a word I would have used to describe myself.

This is a journey of coming home again. Of crawling back up onto the window sill and letting God hold me there, love me, heal me. Because I *want* to remember, I want to let God re-member me. Put me back together piece by beautiful piece, in the way I was always meant to be. To let Him remind me *who* I am, and *whose* I am.

We can easily get swept up into a life of just visible things — I run another errand, do another load of laundry, pack the school lunches and sweep the floors, cook dinner, watch another show on Netflix. And all of this is well and good, but where does God fit into all of this? How am I making time to listen to what He has to say? I have the chance to invite Him into each moment, to let His perspective grow in my heart and mind.

Every morning, every evening, we are gifted with reminders of hope, of God's eternal love and His majesty. But we easily fall into the habit of taking for granted what is so familiar — another sunrise, another sunset, another sky full of stars. Another day of the daily grind, another night to crash into bed exhausted.

What if we allowed the sun, the moon, the stars to remind us that God IS and we are His? To let them invite us into moments of awe and worship. Because He is nearer than we think, and His love is available for us right now.

Eugene Peterson wrote, “Prayer is a refusal to live as an outsider to my God and my own soul.” Returning to God, for me, meant returning to prayer. I learned to lean heavily on the words of others, those beautiful prayers from early Christians like Augustine, St. Francis, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Merton and the psalmists. In their words I found home again, and I began to discover prayers of my very own.

Prayer is a chance to reorient my heart to Him, to join with my soul and declare that this is where I belong. I let go of the belief that I am not enough, and embrace the truth that I am deeply known and loved. I don’t want to spend another minute forgetting that this is what I was made for — to live in beautiful communion with my Creator.

A moment for reflection

What might God want to pour into my life this season? How can I become more open and receptive to His gentle whisper? How might I learn to embrace a slower rhythm of heart, for unlike my natural tendency to speed ahead, to stay busy, there is no rushing with God. He works on Heaven’s time. This is a time to prepare my heart and trust in the slow work only He can do.

Don’t copy the behaviours and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NLT)

Day 2



*We love because
he first loved us.*

As I make space for quiet amidst the noise of life,
I hear my Spirit saying *YES* to God.
All along he has been calling me, beckoning,
drawing me to himself.

Come away with me, my beautiful one.

This is deep calling out to deep,
and I am finally listening.

called

*“You would not have called to me,
unless I had been calling to you.”*

Aslan

* * *

Before I discovered those meaningful prayers by others, reaching out to God resembled more of a plea of desperation. Mostly in the form of *Help!!* I would hide away in my bedroom and plead quietly through tears, but I doubted anyone was listening. All I heard in response was the echo of my own faltering voice. *He's left me.* This is what I believed about God at the time. I left Him, so He left me. I hadn't prayed for years, and I knew that the only reason I was trying now was because my life was a mess, because *I* was a mess. I certainly wasn't holding onto the belief that God saw me in this situation and cared. *God doesn't help people like me, people who are wishy-washy with their faith, people who just can't get their lives in order, who can't get themselves in order.* I didn't like the person I had become. I was angry and irritable and unkind to the people I cared about the most. I had no love for myself so how could I give it to others? I came across a very angry prayer in one of my old journals recently. *Are you proud of what you made God? I scribbled onto the tiny pages of my notebook. Why would you make me such a mess? All I do is cause pain to everyone around me.* I was pregnant with my first son at the time and wrote, *Will you create him better than you created me?*

Though it was a hard season to live through, I think God allowed me to experience this struggle so that I would realize my need for Him. I was miserable because I had tried to rely on myself for too long. As Bob Goff has written, “Sometimes God lets us lose hope for a moment so we'll retrace our steps and find Him all over again.”

With the clarity of hindsight, I can look back at this woman crying in her bedroom and know that God was there, tugging at my heart. Did I have that lovely “Footprints” moment where I realized He had been carrying me in His arms the whole time? Well, no. It felt more like I had been drowning in a sea of my own filth. It was messy and there was a lot of learning to do, but just because things hadn’t been easy doesn’t mean He wasn’t there with me. *You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.*

The next couple of years were the beginning of a journey of relearning what it meant to be the beloved. One of the most life-giving practices I started doing were what I called love soaks. It actually wasn’t my idea, I heard a pastor talk about this practice once and knew it was something my soul needed. When the kids were in their rooms for nap times I would light a candle and plant myself on the living room couch. Sometimes I would put on some instrumental music, other times I would just lie down in silence, meditating on a Bible verse or an image of God as Father. I imagined myself as a little child, sitting in her Father’s lap. I was a parent myself, I knew what it was like to love your child. When my boys were asleep sometimes I would tiptoe into their rooms just to catch a glimpse of their faces, and seeing them there would make my heart ache with a love so deep and strong I feared it might split me in two. I knew what it was like to hold them as babies, to nurse them at my breast, to have them twirl my hair around their little fingers, their blue eyes gazing up at mine. The most intimate staring contest I’ve ever known. Yes, I knew how to love deeply, even in my flawed, imperfect kind of way.

But I was not very good at letting myself *be* loved. That was a whole other wrenching open of my heart. To let love in meant I believed I was worthy of love...not something I readily accepted as the truth.

It was my turn to be the child, to let myself be mothered and fathered, held and cherished, seen and known.

This practice of love soaks helped me to let go of the idea of performing for God, of trying to earn His approval. I was learning to just be with God, to remember that I am loved just as I am, without having to do a thing, which was like a delicious feast for my starving soul. *What if God desires to be with me just as I desire to be with Him?*

Suddenly my relationship towards him felt different. *Wait, He wants to be with me? He delights in me? ...Me?!*

What a beautiful shift when we realize that this is always the Father's stance towards us — welcoming, inviting, drawing us towards Himself. He IS calling, and He waits for us to respond.

Slowly my perspective is changing — what if drawing near to God was not about getting somewhere, or achieving something, but of being *with* Him? This is where I come out from my hiding place, and let myself be known and loved. This is the greatest invitation of all.

A moment for reflection

How do you view yourself through God's eyes? Is it with disappointment, rejection, or deep love? Can you practice seeing yourself the way He truly sees you — as His beloved, His treasure and His delight?

When you turn to God, is it with fear, guilt, or joy? Can you believe that He wants to be close to you just as you desire to be close with Him?

I have loved you with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself.

Jeremiah 31:3 (NLT)

Day 3



Here is my heart, Lord.

I have stored up so many treasures on this earth,
pursued so many goals, desired countless things.

But they have not led me to You.

My soul longs for Heaven.

Here is my heart, I come broken open before you.

Won't you come and dwell here,
make this your resting place, your home,
so that it is no longer I who live but

Your beautiful light fully alive in me.

light

“The Kingdom of the Heavens

Is now advancing

Invade my heart

Invade this broken town.”

Jon Foreman

* * *

I love a good sunny day just like the next person. When the morning sun comes streaming in through my kitchen window I stand at the sink, where the bowls of leftover oatmeal wait to be washed, the coffee grinds swept from the floor, and close my eyes and let the light wash over me like a waterfall of warmth. *How kind of this morning light to travel all her way across the sky just to meet me here in my kitchen.* I’m like a cat as I follow the sun around my house, from room to room. Even if it means I have to plop myself down on the kitchen floor, I’m there for it.

But the sunlight does something else in my house too. It shines onto the baseboards and into the corners of the hallways and suddenly I see all the dust and crumbs that were hiding in the shadows and I race to the closet for the broom. *This place is a disaster!* And then all those dust bunnies in the air become visible and suddenly I am appalled — *is this what I’ve been breathing in this whole time?! Yuck.*

Light is nourishing for the soul but it is also revealing. The light of Christ fills me but it also unmask me. In His light I find out who I really am, and He doesn’t just shine a spotlight on my strengths. How would that ever help me grow? He shows me all that I *could* be as a child of his Kingdom. But becoming requires pruning, and Christ is the ever-loving, all-seeing, gardener.

My husband and I got into an argument on the weekend. A he-said, she-said situation. Round and round we went, the same hurts exposed, the inability to see another's perspective. And then I got a splinter in my foot. I was about to put the boys to bed and as I stepped down the hallway the pain shot into the sole of my foot so sharply that I had to sit down right then and there. It wasn't visible until a few days later when I shone a flashlight onto the sore spot and saw the speck of wood that had nuzzled its way into my skin. Five minutes with the tweezers and finally I had it, I danced into the kitchen singing my good news. *It's out, I'm free!*

And it was a little reminder to me that I had failed to examine my role in the argument, to practice pointing fingers less and saying sorry more. I had been stubborn and unwilling to own up to my mistakes. That whole "Take the plank out of your own eye" lesson Christ knew we needed to hear and remember. He is the light that can shine on my heart and show me the things that are there that I don't always see.

Christ shows me a new way of being in the world, a way of humility and love — a way that I couldn't live by my effort alone. For though I want to do good, I find myself stumbling and falling more times than I can count. Why do I feel like I'm trying so hard and yet still end up hurting others more than I'd like to admit? Why do I say beautiful prayers with one breath and shoot arrows with the next?

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it.

In the hard work of surrender, in the undoing, the de-splintering, and the letting go, I find a new sense of freedom. Because I'm not just relying on myself anymore, Christ is taking control of my heart. He is at work, changing me from the inside, with a vision for me better than anything I could dream up on my own.

A moment for reflection

Is there something I have been clinging to that God would like to gently pry away from my grasp? Can I ask Him to show me something I need to let go of so that there is more space for Him to dwell in my heart?

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:28-29 (NLT)

Day 4



Made by love, with love, for love.

When you think you are just a woman,
remember there is no such thing as *just*,
there is no ordinary.

For you were dreamed up by Love Himself,
given his breath,
created *to love and be loved*.

This is nothing less than extraordinary,
we are so much more than we know.

Now, can you hear the angels singing?

being

“I have been invited to participate in the mystery of being because God wanted me to be.”

Brian Zahnd

* * *

The alarm beeps and I groan, *is it really morning already?* I squint my eyes open, stretch my arms out and feel the emptiness of my husband’s side of the bed. As usual, he has gotten up long before me and the kids to enjoy a couple of hours of peace and quiet. I pull the covers up tight under my chin, roll to one side and curl myself into the fetal position. I don’t want to unravel, but the clock ticks on and the boys will wake soon asking for breakfast, and their lunches need to be packed and my hair needs to be washed and did I sign the permission slip? Did I find that missing mitten last night? And soon it will be time to walk them to school.

I don’t have the greatest mindset first thing in the morning. When one day rolls into the next, mornings can have me dreading the routine. Will I have anything good to write today? Will the kids drive me crazy? Will my husband and I find a moment for meaningful conversation or will we be ships passing in the night?

The other morning I wake up early, not a common occurrence for me, and reach over to my nightstand and grab the Mary Oliver book of poems I’ve just borrowed from the library. I open to the first poem, titled “I Go Down to the Shore.” I read it in the quiet of my bedroom while the boys are still asleep in their rooms:

I go down to the shore in the morning
and depending on the hour the waves

are rolling in or moving out,
and I say, oh, I am miserable,
what shall —
what should I do? And the sea says
in its lovely voice;
Excuse me, I have work to do.

And I almost laugh out loud because it's as if Mary Oliver has written this poem just for me, knowing how often I wake up grumbling. Her words remind me that grumbling gets me nowhere. That, like the sea, I have work to do. Work that is mine, and good, and holy. And showing up to that work with everything I've got, even if right now it looks like lacing up the boys skates once again or sitting down at the kitchen table with my five-year-old helping him write his All About Book on cheetahs, is precisely what I need to do.

This poem reminds me that just like the ocean, we are God's works of art and He has given us work to do that is unique to us, our talents, our characters. Does the ocean look at the heron wondering why she also wasn't made to stand tall on long legs? Or does she wish she were a crab crawling along the sand, or seaweed floating in the waves, or instead the sun radiating heat? I want to welcome my days with the steady spirit of the ocean, less of the grumbling, more of the wholehearted living. Showing up and doing what is mine to do.

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) says "For we are God's masterpiece." His handiwork, His creation, created on purpose with a purpose. You and I, we are not flukes or a product of random chance. We were breathed into being with grace and care and delight.

What if instead of dragging my feet I remind myself that this day matters in the Kingdom? That I — this tired, aging, wonderful me — matter *greatly* in the Kingdom?

When I have a Kingdom perspective, everything becomes important. The daily rhythms of my life no longer seem insignificant, because the mind-blowing truth is that wherever I am, God is. This is worth waking up for!

I'm not saying we have to bounce out of bed everyday, or live with forced positivity or feigned optimism. But to try and really ground ourselves in the truth that *we are not wasted space. We are breathing the breath HE has given us to breathe.*

Every day God invites me into the beautiful adventure of a life lived with Him.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal." When we start to wake up to the richness and holiness of our ordinary lives, we realize that we are so much more than just skin and bones.

I'm more than the grey hairs on my head and the number on the scale, the wrinkles around my eyes and cellulite on my thighs. There's a bigger story going on within us, something of the divine waiting to be revealed. This isn't just pretty talk and overused cliches, this is the reality of who we are. We are made in the image of a beautiful, creative, radiant God and there is absolutely nothing ordinary about this.

It is easy to get absorbed with the physical things. To become so focused on my flaws and imperfections, on the messes and all that is lacking, that I forget about the Kingdom of Heaven dancing over and around me. Christ is alive and at work and He dwells within me.

I want my eyes to be open to this realm of the unseen. I don't want to miss the beauty of Christ being revealed through someone else, giving me a glimpse of what God is like. And I want my life to be a place where Christ can reveal His glory. Rather than

trying to get others to see me as someone special and important, how can I help others see their own infinite value?

A moment for reflection

When I look in the mirror, do I only see the things that are wrong? Can I practice noticing the parts of myself that are unique, that could shine a light on God's character and help others know Him better? How might He want to shine through me today?

For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139: 13-14 (NIV)

Day 5



To be in the light.

God is not something from the past,
or somewhere far-off in the distance,
or a place that awaits me after this life.

He is, right now, filling everything with himself.

This world is *soaked with Christ*
if only I have the eyes to see.

Lord, help me to pay attention.

I don't want to miss the new things you're doing,
help me to be a part of
your Kingdom come.

presence

“Be sure to taste the moment to the full. The Lord always reveals himself to you where you are most fully present.”

Henri Nouwen

* * *

I wanted to be a mother more than anything else in my life. Before I had kids I always felt a little out of place, like I didn't really belong anywhere. Trying to make my way in the world, trying to figure out who I was and what I was supposed to be doing, but never really settling in. But when I gave birth to my first son at the age of twenty-six, and held his wrinkled, pink, slippery body in my arms, I knew this was what I was made for. I was a mother, and finally everything about myself, and my life, started to make sense.

As fulfilling as this role was for me, it also broke me. I had become an unhealthy mix of exhaustion and hormones — full of anxiety, underweight and unhappy, and my marriage was suffering. Which is why after my son's first year I decided it was time for another first — therapy.

I googled psychologists who specialized in perfectionism (what I had self-diagnosed myself with) and chose the one who was the shortest drive from my house. His office was on a street lined with quaint, old homes, and other than a small sign on the front door it looked just like the other houses. Still, I always felt self-conscious walking up those front steps. It felt a little bit like a walk of shame, where I was admitting to everyone passing by that I was suffering and in need of help.

But I was suffering, and I did need help, and this became one of the best decisions I have ever made. My psychologist with the kind eyes and warm smile was nothing less

than an angel disguised in a suit and tie. Through our conversations he helped me to adopt a more gentle and forgiving view of myself, a less rigid approach to life, a more balanced outlook on who I was, and where I was. It was in his office that I first learned about mindfulness. One afternoon he had me close my eyes and led me through a ten minute guided meditation. I forget the script exactly except for a few words: *Breathe in. Everything is okay. Breathe out. Everything is alright.* When the ten minutes were over and I slowly peeled my eyes open, he asked me how I felt. “I’ve never felt this peaceful in my entire life,” I responded.

I realized how often I was rushing through my days like a robot, detached and unaware. My psychologist asked me to schedule reminders on my phone to pause throughout the day and bring attention to what was happening. “Don’t place judgements on what you see,” he told me, “*just notice.*” And so I would plop myself down on the living room floor and watch my son build towers with his blocks then knock them down, and I practiced being there with him, noticing the way my mind wanted to distract me with every little thought, the way my body wanted to keep moving and stay busy, and noticing that when I didn’t let myself get pulled too far along with these impulses the moment I was in was actually quite nice.

Little by little, my life began to take shape. It was as if I had been living merely as a figment of my imagination, a ghost floating through each day not really alive, not really invested, and I was just now putting my feet on the ground, and entering my body. I was letting go of resistance, of the belief that the present moment wasn’t good enough, didn’t hold enough for me. I was always focused on the next thing, or on how the moment I was in was somehow lacking. I hate to think about how much I missed because of this mentality, how many times did I avoid a meaningful conversation, miss an opportunity to laugh, to smile, to share my heart with someone else?

As I practiced planting my feet right where they were, right there in the mess and the glory, I began to accept where I was, and who I was. Slowly I was starting to see what had been in front of me all along — a beautiful life, and a God waiting for me to look up.

A few years later I gave birth to my second son. Scene: He is two days old and we are home from the hospital. I'm in the bathroom sitting on that oh-so-glorious sitz bath, trying to balance my dollar store journal on my knees and create some meaning out of this postpartum mess. My stomach bulges and sags, and a host of newly formed purple stretch marks extend from my belly button like a tribal sun tattoo. It's not lost on me that the tribal sun represents strength, light, and creativity, all things I feel far from in that moment and yet fully embody — I had just brought a beautiful baby into the world. Childbirth amazes me. It's a strength and bravery I have never felt in any other area of my life.

I'm not thinking about all of that right now though. My newborn is crying from his crib across the hallway, and I want to cry along with him. The emotions are a powerful rollercoaster of happiness and sadness. The labour was fast, intense, and painful. My thoughts on the delivery bed where I was committed to another natural birth were *Holy cow, this sucks, I am never having another baby again.*

As I journal my feelings on my toilet seat throne, I am overwhelmed and exhausted. I have no idea if or when my body will return to its original state (it hasn't). When my house will ever be cleaned again (it has). Or if I will ever escape the aching tiredness that seems to have swallowed me whole (I will).

Yet I am not depressed, even with all that I feel I have lost. In that moment life felt good because it felt so incredibly real. I was feeling it fully, knowing it fully. As I write I begin to see that my job is to accept what is. Acceptance is my secret weapon, my key to survival in this new life with two young children. I wasn't to worry about what was on

the road ahead, how I would manage days with two little ones and lack of sleep. *Just be in the moment.*

Each moment, I write to myself, is good because they are moments of my life, no one else's. I accept it all, the overwhelming and the utterly joyful. I am not to try and change a thing.

My boys are much older now, now six and eight years old, and they have been my best teachers in mindfulness. Being their mother has been a practice of slowing down, of trying to live in the moment however mundane and ordinary it might be. Because this is how my boys live. When they are colouring at the dining room table or building Lego or playing floor hockey they are fully immersed in that thing. They aren't thinking about all of the other places they could be, or how that moment could be better, they are completely in their bodies doing that thing. Sure they have moments of boredom, wishing they were with friends, or somewhere they would consider more fun. But even in their boredom they are present. Whereas my boredom leads me to try and escape, by mindlessly scrolling on my phone, or numbing out with food, or watching too many episodes on Netflix, their boredom does not pull them away from life. They're still fully in it, fully engaged.

And I am learning to be there with them.

Too often I have been trapped by the lie that I must change my circumstances to see God. But I don't need to change where I am to get closer to Him, He is already right where I am, filling all things with Himself. Being awake to the present moment helps me to become aware of the gifts He wants to reveal. When my son crawls into my lap I am reminded of the way God loves and wants to be near me. When I tuck them into bed at night and they stare back at me with their big blue eyes and share with me what they're

thinking, I say a prayer of thanks for this task of raising kids, of loving them and watching them grow.

Being awake to the present moment means I am more open and receptive to God, I've made space for Him to show me things, to reveal more of Himself to me. And suddenly everything begins to remind me of Christ. His fingerprints are everywhere if only I have the eyes to see.

What might He be trying to grow right under my own two feet?

A moment for reflection

At the end of the day, try taking a moment to reflect on the question "Where was God today?" Let Him bring to mind moments of joy and peace, moments of grace and forgiveness. This practice of examen can help us see what God is already doing in our life, and the areas in which He is inviting us to grow.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:3-5 (NIV)

Day 6



*God has given us
nothing less
than himself.*

Why do we come expecting so little?
Open your arms wide,
cast pride and fear aside.
Let the Father of Lights delight in you,
and shower you with grace.

drink

“There have been times when I think we do not desire heaven; but more often I find myself wondering whether, in our heart of hearts, we have ever desired anything else.”

C.S. Lewis

* * *

It was a weekday when my husband and I moved from our first apartment into our first home just up the road. I was a grade five teacher at the time, so while I tried to explain long division to a room full of ten year olds, my husband loaded up the moving van. After the school day was over I walked the thirty minutes to our new place and opened the door to a hallway full of moving boxes where my best friend was folding towels and tucking them away neatly into a closet. “Welcome home!” She gives me a hug, and tells me she hopes I’m okay with where she has been putting things away. I scurry into the bedroom to change, but behind the closed door I plop down onto the bed and feel tears rising. The truth is that I feel completely overwhelmed. And I feel ashamed that I feel this way, because I *should* be excited. I should be skipping out there to help with the unpacking, excited to set up our first home, but all I want to do is crawl under the covers. My friend is one of those Martha Stewart types, cooking, cleaning, home decor, these are her jam. And here she was doing what I should have been doing — being an eager new homeowner — but I didn’t even know where to begin. I felt inferior beside her, when really I was just utterly exhausted and should have been thrilled that she was willing to help so that I didn’t have to do it alone.

It was my pride that was getting in the way. How easy would it have been to admit that I felt overwhelmed? To accept that I felt way over my head?

In many ways we find it harder to receive than to give. I am more than happy to offer a helping hand but to admit that I need one? That's a different story. Giving means I have a fullness to draw from. It means I am strong and able to help — we love to feel needed don't we? But to receive is to feel my own need, to admit that I don't always have the answer, or the strength...that maybe I'm just not as great as I thought.

Many times through my faith journey the words of C.S. Lewis have come to mind, "To what will you look for help if you will not look to that which is stronger than yourself?" I so badly want to feel strong, to feel capable, but I am learning that it is good and holy and beautiful to rely on others sometimes. Slowly the walls of my stubbornness and pride are being hacked away, and there is a softness emerging, a willingness to not always appear like I have it together, a graciousness for myself. I love what Bob Goff wrote about this — "Next to grace, I bet God thinks making us need each other was one of His best ideas." Needing others reminds me of my need for God. Receiving from others helps me open my heart to Him.

To receive is to let myself feel my own lack, to wake up to the poverty in my heart that only one greater than me can fill. When I am willing to be weak, to open my hands instead of holding them in closed fists at my side, I create space for God to enter with His strength, His grace, His love.

God's generosity demands that I let go of my desire to be self-sufficient. It is only when I have done this hard work of ripping away my ego that I can swim freely, like a child, in His beautiful ocean of grace. If I place too much emphasis on my independence, I lose out on what God can do through me. He offers me nothing less than Himself, water that will quench the deepest thirst of my soul.

Dare I drink it in?

A moment for reflection

In what ways do I try and distract myself from feelings of lack? Whether it be shame, loneliness, anger, insecurity, can I sit with the discomfort of these things instead of running from them, instead of trying to compensate with something else? Invite God into this place of emptiness and allow Him to meet you there and offer you a drink.

*If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me,
and I would give you living water.*

John 4:10 (NLT)

Day 7



Right where I am.

How can I experience God fully
if I am not fully here in this moment?

When I take a moment to pause,
to stop chasing the next thing,
maybe then I will start to hear his soft whisper.

What if I believe I am worthy, just as I am,
and he is waiting for me to awaken to his nearness?

I am here. And God is here.

I can never escape his love.

worthy

“When the eyes of the soul looking out, meet the eyes of God looking in, heaven has begun right here on this earth.”

A.W. Tozer

* * *

It was a Friday morning and my mom had just offered to take the kids to the park so I could have a few hours to myself. “Yes please!” was my response. It had been one of those never-ending weeks of mothering and I was spent. Every meal had been a flop, I was snapping at the kids, I hadn’t found any time for exercise. My self-confidence tank was running on low, and time alone to refuel sounded like a gift straight from heaven.

We switched cars to avoid the hassle of moving carseats, meaning I got to drive my grandmother’s big silver Buick which my mother borrowed during the week. It was a gorgeous autumn day and I knew exactly what I needed — a good dose of retail therapy. I pulled into the mall parking lot making a mental list of the stores I wanted to visit, but just as I started turning into an empty parking spot I froze...was it my imagination or had I heard a thud?

And then, the terrible thought flashed through my mind — *Did I just hit another car?!*

No, definitely not, I told myself. There was no way I could have done something so stupid. Not in my grandmother's car. Not when I finally had a moment to myself.

I slowly reversed the car and took a nervous peak at the black Honda beside me. And there it was, an ugly white scratch at least a foot long across the rear side of the car.

My hands turned clammy and began to shake. My stomach went queasy. My body temperature rose. The flight or fight response had been activated and I wanted to run. I needed to escape. Everything in me wanted to pretend this had never happened. I thought about how easy it would be to just drive away, and so I started to do just that. But after a quick loop of the parking lot I knew that running wouldn't make all of this disappear — the guilt would eat me alive.

I called my husband first and that's when the tears began to flow. Then I tracked down the security guard in the mall, voice trembling as I asked him for help in finding the Honda's owner. We didn't, so a note left on his windshield had to suffice. My endless apologies when I phoned my Dad were met with his gentle, reassuring voice. "It's okay, honey, I'm just glad you're alright."

A few hours later I received the dreaded phone call from the owner of the Honda. Would he yell? Track me down to tell me off? Try and wrestle as much money out of me as possible? But he didn't do any of this. He surprised me with his calmness, his understanding, his forgiveness. "No big deal!" he told me over the phone, and that was the end of it.

Where's the punishment? I thought. Where's the yelling and scolding? But it never came.

I had been so ashamed of my mistake. Sure, it was just a scratch, but the feeling of failure overwhelmed me just as strong as if it had been something worse. I was terrified of disappointing everyone. The flaws I had been trying so hard to keep hidden had finally been exposed. I felt ugly and unlovable.

This was a wake up moment for me. Though it wasn't a conscious decision, I realized I was living in a way that tried to hide any and all flaws because if they were seen, they would reveal the truth of who I was, and I would feel the unbearable pain of rejection. But in this mistake I found only acceptance — I was not perfect and yet I was going to be okay.

This was such a tangible experience of grace that it had me take a good look at my relationship with God. How many times had I distanced myself from Him because I believed myself to be unworthy? How many times had I neglected prayer because I felt like too much of a mess, thinking I would have to wait until I pulled myself together? Little by little I am unlearning these incorrect beliefs about God and entering into a truer union with Him. Because there is no ladder to climb to get to Him, there is no perfect state to arrive at, He has already come to us. Right where we are, and just as we are. He sees my mistakes and my brokenness and still He says, *Come child, I want to be near you.*

Though I may walk through dark and quiet and lonely seasons, this is not evidence that He has left my side. It is more likely that I have hid myself from Him. I let shame or pride hold me back from running into His embrace. Like the prodigal son I have forgotten my true home, and the Father waits for me to return.

A moment for reflection

Try bringing your shame to God instead of letting it build a wall between you:

Lord, I don't feel worthy of Your love today, I see all the times that I have messed up and chosen the low road. But I know that Your love for me is so much bigger than my feelings. I will let Your grace rest on me today. Amen

No power in the sky above or in the earth below — indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:39 (NLT)

Day 8



In you I put my hope.

The world will tell me that results are everything.

Take the shortcuts, just get to the finish line.

But you are a God of the process,
of the slow and sometimes painful act
of transformation.

I think I'm strong when I'm in control,
but You say

you're strong when you learn to let go.

It's in the hopeful surrender where
newness can grow.

hope

“Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

* * *

I left my job as an elementary teacher almost six years ago. It was after my second son was born that I realized, after much uncertainty and deliberation and conversations with friends (most of whom knew even before I admitted it to myself), I didn't want to return to the classroom. I hated dropping my two-year-old off at daycare while I went to work. I wanted to be home with him and his baby brother, taking them to the park, reading to them before nap time, cuddling them when they fell down and skinned their knees.

When my maternity leave was over I didn't start job searching again. Home was now my new office.

And just like that my entire identity was ripped away. Yes, I was a mother but was that enough? What did I answer on paperwork where it asked for “Occupation”? The blank space mocked me, intimidated me. The first time I wrote “Stay-at-home mom” on that line my pen hovered above the words and I wondered if I should erase them. Should I lie and write down teacher even though I hadn't stepped foot in the classroom for months? I was embarrassed. Is this all I was now? I used to pride myself on my accomplishments and achievements. I had soared through my two degrees with flying colours. My classmates looking at me wide-eyed, *How do you do it?* I was the smart one. The studious one. The one who didn't fail.

Now what did I have to show for myself? A garbage can overflowing with dirty diapers, a calendar full of play dates, a purse with enough snacks to feed a small village? No one was looking at me wondering how I did it all, no one was stamping my work with an 'A+'. No one was noticing me at all.

When I said good-bye to teaching, boxed up my books, recycled my lesson plans, donated my wardrobe of dress pants and blouses and high heels, I didn't really know who I was anymore. I dreaded the question strangers would ask me at gatherings, *And what do you do?* How many different ways could I spin the same old answer — *Oh, I'm just a mom.*

I loved this new life I was creating, I wouldn't trade it for anything, but I was experiencing the pain of letting go of an identity I had clung to. God was working in me, teaching me a beautiful lesson. The deepest part of me wasn't my list of achievements, it wasn't the identity I had been working so hard to create, it wasn't the way others saw me. I didn't have to be *something*. But he did want me to *become somebody*. And He is using my role as mother to continually teach me, shape me, and help me become a better version of myself.

I still don't know what lies ahead for me. I still wonder about what career path to follow, if writing is what I should be spending my time on. But I am not so concerned with the finish line anymore, at having something to hold up for others to see. I am more comfortable now in the in-between space, the waiting and the wondering, all the while knowing I have nothing to prove. There is boundless love for me right now, even if I feel unfinished and incomplete. I've found comfort in the words of Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu:

Do you have the patience to wait

Till your mud settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
Till the right action arises by itself?

Even if my life does not look the way I want it to, and I am not yet the person I want to be, I trust that God is still at work. He may not give me everything I desire, but I know that what He desires for me is good. He will let the mud settle in His good time.

A moment for reflection

Have I been impatient in certain areas of my life? Trying to skip past the necessary stages of growth, trying to rush to the finish line? Can I embrace the natural progression of things, let myself feel incomplete, and trust that God is still leading me where He wants me to go?

I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit.

For apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5 (NLT)

Day 9



Poor as I am.

Mary was a vessel all those years ago,
a space where God himself could dwell and be born.

Her life reminds me of who I am called to be,

A home for Christ.

Turning my gaze away from my flaws and imperfections,
and opening myself to God,
ready to receive him just as I am.

I don't need to have it all together
before I utter the words

Yes, Lord, come in.

grace

“Now, with God’s help, I shall become myself.”

Søren Kierkegaard

* * *

When my husband proposed to me and slipped that elegant ring of white gold studded with tiny diamonds onto my finger, I couldn’t stop beaming. *Somebody wanted me.* I was in university at the time, and as I sat in the auditorium of my intro level courses taking notes with my right hand, I would angle my left in such a way that the ring was visible in all of its dainty glory, and the students sitting in the rows behind me were certain to catch a glimpse. My thoughts went something like, *Look at me. I’m only nineteen but I’m already taken. I must be something special.*

Oh, the wise versions of our younger selves.

I clung to that identity until I was married the next spring. Then, as I entered my Bachelor of Education degree as a newlywed, I was now *the young married one* and loved the attention this brought me. I tried on other identities as the years rolled on. The one with the perfect GPA, the healthy eater, the runner, the skinny one, the elementary teacher with the pretty hair and pretty clothes.

All of these roles were attempts at feeling significant. Who was I if I wasn’t known for my grades, for my relationship status, for my weight, for my good fashion sense? I think deep down I feared that I would be rejected if people saw *just me*. Maybe the real me was too flawed, too uninteresting to be loved. If I just projected the right image to people then I knew I would be valued and accepted.

But none of these images were all of who I was. They may have been parts of me, but they weren't the most important parts. Growing up was a journey of recognizing and unlearning this need of mine to stand out in some way, and to enter into my quiet but unwavering identity as *the beloved*.

Who does God say that I am? What kind of life is He inviting me into?

As I cleared away the clutter in my mind, let go of these identities, I began to settle into the truth that I was enough. I didn't need someone else to validate who I was, I wasn't hopelessly flawed or missing something that others had, I was, like all of us, an image bearer of Christ.

Today I put aside the lies that I'm forgotten and overlooked, that I've made too many mistakes to be wanted by God, the doubts that He could ever use me for something good. He calls me just as I am. I'm enough in this very moment, because grace only asks for an open and willing heart.

How can I experience his grace if I already feel complete and perfectly alright? When I am not willing to feel the yearnings inside of me? Opening up to these places of emptiness, I create space for Christ to come and dwell. This is the way to my truest and fullest identity. I don't have to let feelings of inadequacy have the final say. Life with God means I am living in union with the one who can bring out the best in me. For it becomes His light shining through me, and not the image I have so carefully crafted for myself.

I come to Christ, broken and weary, and His eyes light up just to see me. His arms embrace me, in spite of everything I lack, and He calls me his own.

A moment for reflection

Can I see myself as a place where Christ wants to make His home? He is making my heart a better place, doing the work in me that only He can do. How can I remember that this is who I was created to be?

But by the remarkable grace of God I am what I am.

1 Corinthians 15:10 (AMP)

Day 10



A life made holy.

Jesus calls me when I'm weak.
When I've finally woken up to the
hunger deep in the belly of my soul.
Holiness is not arriving at perfection,
it's quite the opposite.
It's when I long for Christ,
a desire burning for him
and him alone.
And in my emptiness he finds a space
to make his home.

The eternal birth in you and me.

desire

*“Like a tree, we are torn between two worlds,
a part of us rooted in the soil,
another part reaching for the sky.”*

Ken Gire

* * *

I balance on one leg on my faded pink exercise mat, wiggle my toes to make sure my weight is in my heels. My other leg is bent and the sole of my foot rests against my inner thigh, hands in prayer position at my chest. I’ve never loved tree pose, balance is a struggle for me. Also, I really don’t like to fall. But my instructor, Julianne, reminds me that falling is okay, it means we’ve challenged ourselves. So I’m learning to feel more at home in this place.

“Tighten those bellies,” Julianne says. And so we do. “Push your thigh against your foot, you’ll feel steadier.” And so we do. “If you feel like you want a challenge, you can grow your tree.” A few of us start to slowly reach our arms up to the ceiling, our bodies begin to wobble. “Maybe even try lifting your gaze.” I start to tilt my head back, feel my body teetering, but I keep looking up until my eyes are on the ceiling, my arms outstretched. I’m doing it! The room is quiet except for our breath, the morning sun is pouring through the windows onto our faces. I feel so utterly strong and magnificent, can’t remember the last time I felt this way. Here in this pose I am reminded of who I am.

It’s as if my body was saying, *there is something about this posture, with your arms extended, your gaze turned upwards, that reveals a deep and true and important part of who you were created to be.*

When we are hungry to approach our faith beyond our intellect, or maybe we have drifted away and want to find our way back, or perhaps what we've always done just isn't nourishing us anymore, sometimes the best thing we can do is invite our bodies to teach us something about God, and about who we are in Him.

This particular morning as I stood in tree pose, my body was reminding my mind of something it so easily forgets in the humdrum of life — my desire for God, to reach for more of Him, to worship and delight in Him, is the deepest part of who I am.

I heard a similar story of embodied faith described by N.T. Wright on a podcast last year. After the fall of Communism there were many young people in Russia who had no faith because it had been drilled out of them in school, but who wanted to reconnect yet didn't know how. One of the pieces of advice some of them were given was to kneel down in front of a picture of the cross or another such icon, and to simply kneel and stay there. This was a way of letting their bodies communicate to their insides, saying to their emotions and mind, *there is something here about humility before the crucified Jesus which is actually going to be the centre of my life.*

I have used the posture of kneeling down in my own faith journey, and though it felt awkward at first, to be crouched over on my living room carpet with the kids' toys strewn about, I found this experience deeply powerful and moving. Letting my body remind me that awe and adoration is a natural response when we realize we are loved by a God so big, so good, and so close to us. Sometimes when I feel disconnected from God, from my faith, when I am finding it hard to pray, to find stillness, I kneel. And in the kneeling I remember that God is right here with me, always.

The Message translation of 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "Didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit?" Other translations call the body "a temple." People go to temples because they believe they can meet God there. What if our

bodies are not only places where God lives, but also places in which we can meet and notice God?

A moment for reflection

Is there an image of myself I have been working hard to create and for others to see and admire? How can I more fully embrace, and find joy in, my identity as one who desires after God? How can I let my body communicate the truth of this identity to me?

That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself — Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.

John 4:23-24 (MSG)

Day 11



The way of peace is Christ.

Peace is not a destination,
but a life lived in Christ.

I can have peace even as the winds rage around me,
and darkness looms above.

Even when discouragement rests on my shoulders,
and worries wake me up at night,
peace does not have to be a stranger to me.

*For I am held by God
and
my soul is well with him.*

held

“The secret to joy is to keep seeking God where we doubt he is.”

Ann Voskamp

* * *

A few years ago a young man from our church passed away very suddenly. He was a husband and a father to a little girl, and this news was tragic and devastating and shook us at our core. The days that followed I cried and prayed and cried some more. How could a good God let this happen? I wasn't sure if there was space in my faith for this sort of pain and heart ache. It just didn't make sense...

One day under a clouded sky I went for a walk down a gravel path that curved alongside the ocean. The air was bitterly cold against my face as I blinked away the tears welling in my eyes. I wrestled with my thoughts, the agony the family was going through. The sun, slightly hidden, poured onto my face every so often. *Hope? Is that you?*

The path ends at a marina and my gaze fell across the water to where the sailboats were wrapped for the winter and I took a breath. Each mast and its poles were in cruciform, the shape stood out so vividly against the backdrop of the grey sky. There were about fifty boats grouped together on the property, one cross, after the other, after the other.

And that image was a desperately needed reminder to me. In that image I heard the words, *I am here.*

Where was God in all of this pain and brokenness? Right there in the depths of it with us.

In Eli Weisel’s book *Night* he describes a heart-wrenching scene that he witnessed in a German concentration camp, where a young boy was being hanged for collaborating against the Nazis. “Where is God? Where is he?” Someone standing behind him asked as they watched the boy die an agonizingly slow death right before their eyes. Eli writes, “And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .’”

Christ is no stranger to suffering, and He doesn’t leave us to face our pain alone.

There may be days, weeks, or entire seasons when it is hard to believe that God is holding me, but faith asks that I keep holding on. Hands gripped around what I know to be true even when I can’t see the way ahead.

Perhaps God is asking for my trust, and my steadfastness. These times of feeling far from Him, and feeling far from peace, are opportunities to act in spite of my feelings. To draw closer still. To let him reveal to me who He is, on His timeline and not my own. It is when I look back on these times of struggle that I begin to see I was not alone at all, though it may have felt that way in the moment. The darkness and uncertainty are invitations to keep watching for the light, and trusting that it will return.

A friend and I sat down to breakfast one morning, and over coffees and eggs and toast we talked about Psalm 23. We had been spending time meditating on it over the past couple of weeks, and I told her that I was learning to pray it as a hope rather than a statement — “Lord *be* my Shepherd.” Because sometimes I don’t feel like the Lord *is* my Shepherd, I feel lost without guidance, I feel afraid. But I want His shepherding care in my life and so I use the Psalm as a prayer for this to be so. As I pray the words they form a little cocoon around my heart where God’s guidance has space to enter and grow.

I am beginning to understand that the peace Christ offers is not of this world. It's not a warm, fuzzy feeling but rather a kind of stubborn persistence. A trust in His goodness, believing that He is actively at work, redeeming all things and bringing all things to Himself, even when I can't see the results.

A moment for reflection

Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that we follow a Good Shepherd, even if we feel distanced from his voice and care. Where does your heart feel renewed? Maybe it is a walk along a beach, sitting beside a flowing brook, laying on your bed listening to classical music. Put yourself in a place that reminds you of the Father's heart towards you — what He desires for you is good, and even when His face feels hidden from you, you are never for a moment out of His sight.

He lets me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still and quiet waters. He refreshes and restores my soul.

Psalm 23:2-3 (AMP)

Day 12



My cup overflows with blessing.

My soul awakes to the wonders of this new day.

A bluejay at the window
reminds me of his gentle care.

Sunlight on my face
reminds me of his boundless grace.

Snow falls softly to the earth
as Christ fills all things everywhere with himself.

All good things come from above,
for the Father takes delights in his children.

He smiles over us today.

overflowing

*“Earth’s crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.”*

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

* * *

They say comparison is the thief of joy. The grass is always greener is a phrase that rolls off the tongue, an adage that’s easier to say to others when we notice their faces turning green with envy but much harder to notice and fix in ourselves.

I have a personality that is especially susceptible to envy. I could be feeling okay about myself, about my life, but the second I open up my Instagram account, or step foot into the mall, my good mood plummets. I see the people living lives more adventurous, ambitious, or successful than me. The homes that are cleaner than mine, kitchens more gleaming and living rooms more stunning. I see all the people that are prettier than me, who look happier, the marriages that seem better than my own.

My husband thinks this tendency to compare has something to do with me growing up being a twin. Having someone around you all of the time who is so similar to you, like a mirror being held in front of your face constantly, invites all of this comparing and contrasting. But I think it’s more deeply engrained. Comparing ourselves is certainly a human thing, but I think some of us do it more often than others. For me, it’s a personality quirk that happens automatically, a habit I have to bring awareness to and practice *not* doing. If I want joy, that is.

And when I notice and stop the negative comparisons (because that’s what they usually are, comparisons that leave me feeling less than, and wanting more), I begin to

see all the beauty that was right here in my life already. It doesn't mean my life is always void of the bad stuff, it means that I am more open to thankfulness even when things are imperfect.

This is the sweet spot of gratitude, when we can find it even when things aren't going perfectly. This is when it can teach us and help us grow. A posture of thankfulness no matter the circumstances is how I open my eyes to all that I have, to all that I have been given. How often I have missed out on the goodness right in front of me because I was not paying attention. I was caught in the lie that somewhere else would be better, would have more to offer me, when there is joy and laughter and love waiting for me in the very moment I inhabit.

Though his theology may differ from my own, author Rob Bell has pointed out something strikingly true about the society we are living in right now — “We are in an unprecedented machine called the modern world that is spending billions of dollars every day to program us for something other than the depth of the present moment.” That's just it, isn't it? The present moment is rich and full as it is, but we are so often pulled away from its depth. After watching the documentary *The Social Dilemma* I saw how cleverly my social media worked to suck me in and keep me there. I was the product, and my attention was being sold to advertisers, very successfully. I was being masterly manipulated. Though I hate to spend more than a few minutes on any social media platform, I am so often catching myself engaging in hours of mindless scrolling. This is one of the main reasons I don't see those bushes afire with God — because my eyes are glued to the screen.

I'm trying to be more mindful. To pause more, to view my circumstances through a lens of gratitude. The other night as I blow-dried the boys hair before bed, letting their brown locks slip through my fingers and laughing at the silly faces they made in the mirror, I realized I've often stood in this place thinking of where I'd rather be, of more

interesting things I could be doing. But on this night I thanked God for our health, that we were together, that I had the gift of raising these two boys and watching them flourish into the individual people they were becoming. Earth IS crammed with heaven, I was witnessing it right then and there.

In the Celtic Christian tradition there is a term for these moments. “Thin places” are those rare locales where the distance between heaven and earth collapses and we’re able to catch glimpses of the divine. As the Celtic saying goes, heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter.

Sure we might be able to stand on a mountaintop, see the sunlight cascading onto the valley below, see the wildflowers dancing in the breeze, and easily reach for these thoughts of the divine. But how might I discover thin places in the everyday, ordinary pace of my life? While I’m washing the dishes, packing lunches, emptying the compost, sitting in traffic. Could these mundane places and activities offer me a doorway to seeing Heaven?

God does not have to be a complete mystery to me, but I have to be awake enough to see. I can stomp through life ruled by my own agenda, distracted and aloof, or I can turn my gaze outward and upward, and experience the moments of barefooted awe at the glory shining through this world.

It’s time to put down the phone and take off my shoes. This here is holy ground.

A moment for reflection

Set a reminder for yourself to pause in the middle of the day, and just notice. Look around, what might God want to reveal to you of Himself? Was there a moment you rushed through in distraction that actually held a gift? What would it be like to live a life

so intimately connected with Christ that everything I see, hear, touch, and taste reminds me of Him?

There is one God and Father of all. He is over everything. He is through everything. He is in everything.

Ephesians 4:6 (NIRV)

Day 13



Draw near to Heaven's flame.

Life can feel cold sometimes,
full of loneliness and angst.
And yet there is an eternal warmth and light
waiting for me to draw near.
Christ is the fire I long for,
who will set all things aright.
We may be the lost and weary travelers,
in the bleak midwinter's chill,
but into this place he shines *his heart*
and offers our yearning hearts
a home.

draw near

*“When everything that's right feels wrong
And all of my belief feels gone
And the darkness in my heart is so strong
Can You reach me here in the silence?”*

Jon Foreman

* * *

I have gone through seasons, like many of you I'm sure, where I was full of uncertainty and doubt. When the voices of questions were louder than any sound of faith. Sometimes the world is too much of a mess, when suffering is everywhere and a good God, who is near to us, seems impossible.

During one of these tough seasons I was chatting with a friend as we lingered on the beach watching our kids climb over rocks and build sand castles. I admitted to her that everything about the Christian faith sounded so unbelievable at the moment. She listened, and was very nice about not making me feel judged or ashamed, and then she reminded me of a prayer I had forgotten to cherish — *Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!* “You know, you can ask God to help you with your doubts,” she said to me, “He can do that.” I had been avoiding prayer, avoiding God, because the questions and doubts were too consuming. They were like a wall blocking me from intimacy with Him, preventing me from reaching out. Her words were such a comfort to me, where suddenly I could imagine myself in the arms of God with my back-pack full of questions and uncertainties and not having it weigh me down. Our conversation, and the ones that followed, helped me to forge a new pathway in my mind, where doubt and faith could co-exist. Where I could notice each with gentleness, even kindness. Where I could feel the tug of war between them and yet not have the tension tear me apart.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. If I'm choosing a life of faith, well then doubt just comes with the territory. As Anne Lamott wrote, "Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." Can I be okay with this? Can I bring all of this unease and uncertainty to God as the writers of the Psalms did? My doubts and questions don't make God tremble, He isn't scared of them or anything I could throw at Him. He is more than capable of holding it all.

I may not know the way forward, but I can still draw near to the One who has promised to be faithful. I can doubt His goodness and still ask for light. I can doubt His presence and still call out for comfort. I can doubt His plan and still ask for guidance. Times of emptiness can draw me into a richer and deeper intimacy with the Father as I learn to lean on Him and not my own certainty.

A moment for reflection

Let us not allow our anger or disbelief to be a wall between our hearts and God. Honesty is a bridge, so open your heart — invite God into the struggle. He can hear you in your pain and welcomes you close. Take time to read through a Psalm of lament (such as Psalm 6, 10, 38, or 130) and be comforted that you are not alone in your suffering.

Lord, why are you so far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Psalm 10:1 (NIRV)

Day 14



By myself, nothing. In Christ, everything.

Today I let go of the list of 'shoulds' in my head
that are robbing me of joy.

I let the weight of having to perform
fall and crash to the floor.

I see this endless striving for what it is -
false attempts at earning my worth.

Christ pulls me close and whispers who I am -

*I have loved you with an everlasting love,
in you I am well pleased.*

enough

“The converted person says: ‘All is now clothed in divine light and, therefore, nothing can be unimportant.’”

Henri Nouwen

* * *

I’m at the mall shopping for something to wear to an upcoming Christmas party. The other people going intimidate me greatly. They’re smart, successful, beautiful people. They drive fancy cars and wear expensive clothes, their hair is flawless, their nails manicured. I look down at my own unpainted and chipped nails and dread the evening even more, feeling small and insignificant in comparison. Which is why I’ve found myself frantically digging through piles of clothes the day before, searching for something that I will never find on those store racks. I am trying to find the perfect top that will finally prove that I’m worth something, that will cover up and fill in all the places that I lack and make me feel complete. All the while the words playing over and over in my head like a broken record are *You are not enough*.

I am caught in this damaging pattern of judging my worth based on how I compare alongside others — the measuring stick a mere product of my imagination. As if this life is about climbing some mythical ladder, and my worth is solely based on where I am positioned on its rungs.

Can I take a break from all of this meaningless ranking and remember who I really am? There is no striving in the house of God. I enter its doors, imperfect but entirely worthy, and I am welcomed as I am. There is no need to hide, no need to pretend I am someone that I’m not. There is only the invitation to take off the mask of my false self, sit at the table, and find out who I truly am in Christ.

And the truth? I am a cherished child, clothed in his divine light. Just as worthy as the next person, no more, and no less. When I live from a place of inadequacy then I am refusing to take hold of the light that wants to emanate through me. Dampening my own flame doesn't serve anyone. It makes me bitter towards the brightness of others and it doesn't help me light up anyone else. But when I recognize that who I am is good, then I can offer this goodness to the world.

From this place I can go and be, not imprisoned by destructive comparisons and who I think I *should* be, but free to be me and do what is mine to do.

In the quiet of my own room, when I am hidden away from the world and it is just me and God, I hear the words whispered over me that I have been searching for in all the wrong places — *You. Are. Enough.*

A moment for reflection

Where do you see yourself on the ladder of worthiness? When do you feel higher up, and what brings you lower down? Practice letting go of one of these behaviours, and spend time instead sitting with Jesus and meditating on the phrase, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." This is who you are, before you ever do a thing.

See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

1 John 3:1 (NIV)

Day 15



*I let my life be transformed into
something higher.*

Even when I think I have nothing to give,
I let Christ have the final say.
He's the one that turns water to wine,
and feeds thousands with my little offering.
Today I believe that he can and will
make my life a blessing.
Not by any force or strength on my part
but by his wonderful Spirit alive in me.

water to wine

“Go where your best prayers take you.”

Frederick Buechner

* * *

After I drop the boys off at school, give the hugs and say the *see you later alligator*'s, I often head out for a walk. I love to start my mornings this way, it helps me shed the grogginess of sleep and leaves me feeling energized. I pass the same lady most days, who walks at a quick pace with her hood up and a scarf wrapped around her neck. As she approaches me, her going one way and I the other, she opens her arms wide, smiles and exclaims, “Beautiful!!” She lets the walk, the moving of her body, the trees and sky surrounding her, fill her soul. And so I let them do the same. I find it hard to pray when I first wake. But being here, outside in the fresh air, always pulls me to pray. And today the birds are chirping, the sky is brilliant blue. The snow is covering the ground in sparkling white. It really is glorious. As the morning sun shines down on my face and my legs transport me down the path, I start to talk to God. There's no one around so I do it out loud. *This place reminds me of who I am supposed to be.*

I realized not too long ago that I am not a hoarder of things, but of my time. I don't like to be interrupted, I am always looking for the most efficient way to complete a task and get frustrated when something feels too arduous, too time-consuming. I try and skip those things altogether. I was deeply challenged while reading the story of the woman with the Alabaster jar recently, who knelt before Jesus and wiped His feet with her tears and her entire jar of expensive perfume. Would I have done as she did, or would I have held onto the perfume for safe-keeping? How often I cling to the gifts I have. I want to keep them locked up and safe, used sparingly — just a little here, a little there — the smallest amount needed so there is no waste. I'm more like Gollum in the Lord of the

Rings, holding tightly to what I have, *my precious*, afraid of giving too much and not having enough for myself.

But this woman gave *everything*, all at once. In one beautiful expression of love and gratitude.

And in her story I sense Jesus showing me the kind of person He wants me to be. The best version of myself that I get a taste of when I walk on the path in the morning and I feel strong and close to God. Take the long route instead of the shortcut you always choose, He says. Invite that family over for dinner even though you're tired and don't feel like cooking. Listen to the cashier tell her story even though your to-do list is hanging over your head and your minutes are ticking by. *Let me help you see that I go before you. Wherever you're going? I am already there. Let me show you what I'm up to, and come be a part of it with me.*

When my time, my energy, my gifts, are gripped in my fists they stay small and confined. But when I open them up, offer them to God? Who knows the kind of things He will accomplish. His dreams are so much bigger than my own.

Because Christ is the dreamer, the doer, the redeemer and healer. He's the one who is calling all things to Himself. When I realize it's not about me but the holy task of drawing others home to Him, then it's easier to get out of the way. And I realize, then, that He can use me just as I am. Poor as I am. Because that's how God works — He doesn't ask for the wine, He asks for the water. He asks for whatever it is I have in my hands that He can make into something great. And when I can learn to be generous with all that I have, then I become a vessel from which His good things can flow.

A moment for reflection

Spend time with the Peace Prayer of St. Francis, which begins “O Lord, make me an instrument of your peace...”. Whenever you feel yourself caught in the lie that you don’t have anything to give, that God couldn’t use you to draw others to Himself, return to these words and trust that He will answer.

For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.

Isaiah 43:19 (NLT)

Day 16



I find holiness in the silence.

Even when I ask for answers and hear none,
even when I don't know which path to take,

I can rest in the nearness of God.

Before his face the questions die away.

I let the holy quiet of God be a place
of tenderness and intimacy.

This is his gift to me,

a place to *just be*.

A moment to be myself in his presence,
my soul rejoicing in who I am *in him*.

solitude

“When we sit with Jesus, we may not see Jesus, but Jesus sees us.”

Brian Zahnd

* * *

The beep beep beep of the coffee machine stirs me out of bed. I tiptoe past the boys rooms, still quiet behind closed doors, and down the hallway to the kitchen. I grab a mug from the cupboard and fill it, though it's still dark and I end up spilling some on the counter. The words of John O'Donohue's poem comes to mind, "All that is eternal in me welcomes the wonder of this new day." I don't feel eternal in this moment. I feel bloated and my eyes feel tired. But I whisper the lines anyway, knowing that what is true is not always felt.

I light the candle on the coffee table and the scent of vanilla and patchouli drifts into the air. I plop down on the couch and pull the blanket over my legs. The candle flickers in the early morning darkness and I stare at it in a trance. My mind tells me I should do something — *the boys could wake at any minute, you don't know how long you have, make this time useful!* Pray, journal, open one of the books stacked on the table. And I will, but not yet. I am letting myself do nothing for a moment. I am remembering that even in this place of non-doing, of choosing stillness over productivity, I am seen and I am held. I am remembering that this is the place where I give God space to do what only He can do. This is a moment not to rush through but to savour.

Henri Nouwen wrote, "This desire for solitude is often the first sign of prayer, the first indication that the presence of God's Spirit no longer remains unnoticed." These mornings of quiet are my humble attempt at reclaiming my time, at reclaiming my attention. This is where I thrust the stake into the ground of my life and say *these*

moments are holy and full of glory just as they are. This is where I remember that I am not alone — His Spirit no longer remains unnoticed.

All that is eternal in me welcomes the wonder of this new day.

Sitting with Jesus is such a vital part of my faith and yet something I skip too often. It is hard to *just be*. It is so much easier to be *doing*. But I am learning that these times of aloneness are where I make myself available for God to work in me. I show up as I am, tired or irritated or with a thousand things on my mind, and I open my heart to His hands. This is my soul in its happy place, resting in His nearness and His love.

I don't want to stay so busy and keep my mind so occupied that quiet is unable to reach me. I want to stop running away from stillness and the discomfort it brings. I am learning not to be scared of silence, but to sit in her presence, learn to breathe in her rhythm.

Inhale, *God is here*. Exhale, *I am here*. I'm coming back to myself here, realizing the gift it is to exist in this body. To feel the holy weight of me. Heart beating in my chest. Blood thrumming through my veins. It's a wondrous thing to be me, to be alive. To be alive means to be loved.

God invites me to step away from my addiction to busyness, my constant search for entertainment and distraction, and into His rest. To simply delight in His presence. This is a new way of seeing prayer — a space to be un-busy with God. The world bows down to productivity and achievement — I am not worthy unless I am *doing*. But the Kingdom of God asks something different from me. It asks me to *just be*.

This moment is mine to be un-busy with God. I don't need to try and make this moment holier than it already is, for I am in God and God is in me.

A moment for reflection

Am I making time to be alone with God? Start with a simple practice of sitting in quiet for 5 or 10 minutes. Set a timer if you need to. This is not about emptying your mind, but letting God do what only He can do in you. Let go of your desire to “get somewhere”, to “feel something”, and just be. These moments are sacred, even if they feel entirely ordinary or even boring. Let them be whatever they may be. He is with you.

My heart has heard you say, “Come and talk with me.” And my heart responds, “Lord, I am coming.”

Psalm 27:8 (NLT)

Day 17



*I'm on the lookout for joy,
waiting to be surprised.*

Today I let laughter erupt.
I release the stiffness in my shoulders,
the breath I've been holding,
I exhale and smile.
Laughter is grace, I drink it up.
I become like a little child,
not worrying about tomorrow but
with both eyes open right where I am.
Today is a gift, I am thankful to be alive.

joy

“Laughter is carbonated holiness.”

Anne Lamott

* * *

I stand in my swimsuit on the pebbled shore at my grandmother’s house, saltwater licking my freshly painted pink toenails. This is our favourite place in the summertime, a private beach on a quiet cove where boats are anchored about at bright orange buoys, the water sparkles turquoise and seagulls and the occasional eagle soar overhead. I’ve skipped the make-up today, a rare occasion for my face. My hair is unwashed, waiting to be sea-soaked. All I’ve thought about upon waking is this moment — to release the rigidity of routine and to feel that absolute freedom of the ocean’s embrace.

I take a few steps in, goosebumps popping up on my legs and arms, take a deep breath and dive in. I push my arms forward and sweep them back, again, and again, and when I can’t hold my breath any longer I pop my head up, shivering, smiling. I wave to my three-year-old who is watching me from the dock in his neon yellow swimshirt that reads “Life’s Better at the Beach”. He waves back and yells, “Go, Mommy, Go!” I lie back, close my eyes, the sun hot on my face.

This is it. This place, this happiness. Why does life have to be better here? I want to bottle this goodness up, take it home with me. Take big, long, swigs from it everyday. Because this joy, this lightness, it’s so easy to lose sight of in the dailiness of life. When I sink underwater at my grandmother’s beach all the heaviness I’ve been carrying washes away. I knew this most tangibly during my pregnancies, when the greatest relief was getting into the water where suddenly you couldn’t feel the aching in your back, the

swelling in your feet. You may be carrying around an extra forty pounds of baby weight, but in the water you were weightless.

I woke up from a dream recently where I had been rollerblading. I haven't been on a pair of rollerblades since I was ten years old, but in the dream I knew exactly what I was doing. When I woke up I wanted to fall back to sleep immediately, back into that place of complete and utter joy. It was a feeling I wasn't experiencing very often in real life...was my dream trying to tell me something? Maybe my brain was trying to help me get to that lightheartedness I was craving.

Poet Kathleen Norris writes, "I have come to believe that when we despair of praise, when the wonder of creation and our place in it are lost to us, it's often because we've lost sight of our true role as creatures — we have tried to do too much, pretending to be in such control of things that we are indispensable...The danger is that we will come to feel too useful, so full of purpose and the necessity of fulfilling obligations that we lose sight of God's play with creation, and with ourselves."

I so easily lose sight of this play, and despair of praise. But when I'm in the water I am reminded of my true role as creature — that I am not in charge nor do I have to be. Here I am one with the seagulls and the crabs crawling across the ocean floor and the seals sunbathing on the rocks and the herons standing tall and still like soldiers. Here I can let go. Nature is reminding me to play, to laugh, to feel light. *To be like a child.*

Today I roll my shoulders back. I stop holding my breath and let the air freely flow in and out. I make space for rest and I let myself smile. When laughter wants to bubble up from within me I don't hold back, this is a gift. This is a moment to experience more of God, more of His goodness and His love for me. Where did I get the belief that the most important and holy things are the most serious ones? Sometimes we need to feel light to remember that we are held, and that God's plan for us, and for the world, is good.

A moment for reflection

When was the last time I had a good laugh? Think about something that brings you instant joy. Is it snuggling with a little one, playing with a pet, watching reruns of your favourite show? Make time for one of these things and drink up the delicious, bubbly holiness. This moment is real and part of the Kingdom of Heaven. Savour it.

Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see — how good God is. Blessed are you who run to him.

Psalm 34:8 (MSG)

Day 18



O come let us adore him.

I have bowed down to many things in life,
placed them high on the throne
where only God should sit.

Today my heart comes face to face
with the beauty of my King,
and everything else starts to fall away.
Worship is my response to God's presence.

I can't help but sing.

sing

“The truth will set you free, but not until it’s done with you.”

David Foster Wallace

* * *

I was weeding in my front yard last summer, not something this brown-thumbed girl likes to be doing. My husband had dug out a garden bed on either side of our front walkway and planted some lovely little hostas but the weeds were out of control, their ugly heads popping up everywhere in his freshly laid soil. We called a professional to see what it would cost to tackle our entire front yard but after a quick look around he handed me his little paper pad where he had jotted down the names of various weeds he found and said, “I’m sorry to tell you but there’s no point in hiring us. There’s just too many weeds for us to do anything. You’re better off ripping it all up and starting fresh.”

Still, I wanted our hostas to thrive, so I pulled on my gardening gloves, knelt down in the dirt and got to work. The roots of these things were horrendous, they were long and deeply entrenched in the soil, stretching from one end of the path to the other. Everything was such a tangled mess it was nearly impossible to find the starting point of each one. I very quickly became a frustrated, sweaty mess myself. But, like many things in my life, the process became a metaphor. I suddenly saw these garden beds as my heart, and the weeds as all the ugly things that bring out the worst in me — my selfishness, pride, bitterness, anger...

I wondered to myself, *How many things live in my heart that God wants to get his hands on?*

I knew I wasn't the person I wanted to be. And sometimes I could pinpoint the reason but mostly I was blind to the weeds that were growing. But I knew God could see them clearly, all the things that were hidden under the surface that were choking out the life He wanted to grow in me, the good things He wanted to do in me.

I saw how I so often placed myself on the throne of my life. Yes I tried to be a loving, giving mother and wife and friend, but still I was self-centred. I too often wanted the story to be about me, I wanted the attention, the praise, I wanted to make a name for myself in the world. I was always wanting, wanting, wanting. More, more, more.

Weeds. Yes, my heart was full of weeds.

How healing and good it is to surrender ourselves to God, our Good Gardener, who sees all of us — our intentions whether good or bad, our desires whether holy or not. He sees it all but doesn't turn away in disappointment or disgust. He only knows what is best for us, and longs to make our hearts the gardens of life they can truly be when He is in the rightful centre.

When I step off the throne of my life and allow God to have this space, things begin to make more sense. As the catechism goes, “What is the chief end of man? *To glorify God and enjoy him forever.*”

Thankfully the weeds don't stop me from worshipping. I can delight in God and as I do, because this is my main purpose here on earth, and He is a God who is good, He will bring out the best in me.

A moment for reflection

What definitions have you heard for the term “worship”? Think about this one:
Worship is our response to God’s presence. How might you respond to His presence with you in this very moment?

Lord, teach me how you want me to live. Then I will walk in your truth. Give me a heart that doesn’t want anything more than to worship you.

Psalm 86:11 (NIRV)

Day 19



I let beauty lift my spirits.

In an ocean wave as it rolls onto the sand,
a sunset burning red,

a snow covered field glistening white,
is a gentle whisper of the heart of God.

I have created this, and I have called it good.

I am reminded that even in the chaos
and brokenness,

God so loves the world,
and his plan for us is good.

beauty

“Oh Lord, how shining and festive is your gift to us, if we only look, and see.”

Mary Oliver

* * *

On a day in late November my family took a pit stop at a beach on our way to the grandparents. The sun was shining bright and warm in a blue sky. The boys dropped their jackets at my feet, and spent the next half hour throwing rocks into the waves and letting the sea foam chase them up the sand. Their squeals filled the air and my heart. The sun warmed my tired face and settled deep into my bones. We ate peanut butter and jam sandwiches out of the picnic basket I had brought, and watched the seagulls circle above our heads.

I exhaled, and everything felt right and good in that moment. This was the year of the Coronavirus pandemic that stopped the whole world in its tracks. A year of unknowns and uncertainty, of anxiety and, for some, terrible loss. On this day I let the weight of it all fall from my shoulders, and I was reminded of God’s love. He smiles through all of this beauty, looks me in the eyes and says, *See what I am like?* Moments like these remind me that even though I can’t always see it, His goodness is shining and reigning. I remember that yes, He’s got the whole wide world in His hands.

Author Cheryl Strayed wrote about what her mother had told her once — “There’s always a sunrise and always a sunset and it’s up to you to choose to be there for it. Put yourself in the way of beauty.” I like that, and I’ve tried to do the same. Because beauty reminds me of the goodness of God, that He is a Father of Lights who delights in His children. I’ll take myself for a walk through the woods, where the sun streams through the trees, the squirrels scamper across the path, the birds sing to me from the branches. I

let the radiance of nature remind me of God's good plan. I let creation's song lift me up. I join in the chorus of His faithfulness and love.

When life feels monotonous, when I've lost inspiration, when I struggle to pray, one of the best things for me to do is step outside. Sometimes I've become too focused inward that I've lost sight of the bigger picture — that the Kingdom of Heaven is here and it is still advancing, always inviting me into its arrival.

It is springtime now, and the buds are just starting to grow on the bare trees. Their little red faces like a promise, *good things are coming, just you wait!* I think of the Kingdom like that, slowly but surely it is coming. New things are being planted, beauty is growing, in God's good time. My prayer as I see these signs of spring bursting forth out of the ground, is that I would see the evidence of the Kingdom in my midst. And that I would be a part of it, a part of the good things that God is doing in the world. When I pray *Your Kingdom come*, I'm asking to be a participant, I'm listening for what God might show me, the ways I can bring His goodness and love and light to my little circle here on earth. I am encouraged by something I read by N.T. Wright recently — “Whatever you do in the present in Christ and by the Spirit will somehow be part of the new world that God is making and will one day complete.”

The choices I make today, in this very moment, can be a part of this new garden. I know there are times I've not taken this task seriously enough, when I've chosen hatred over love, resentment over forgiveness, anger over peace. But I want to sow light, not darkness. So I am trying to listen and pay attention to how the spirit is nudging me. Where can I be planting seeds of faith and hope and love in this world that is groaning for redemption? God is making this world a garden again, and He wants us to be a part of this beautiful task.

He is at work making all things new. And maybe, just maybe, He is doing a new thing in me too.

A moment for reflection

Where could I go to put myself in the way of beauty? Pencil it in. Stay in this place and savour all that is around you. Let it lift your spirits. Maybe you want to make these “glory soaks” a weekly or monthly occurrence.

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display his craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. Yet their message has gone throughout the earth, and their words to all the world.

Psalm 19:1-4 (NLT)

Day 20



Sowing seeds of forgiveness.

Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Where is there bitterness to let go of?

Where are there wounds to invite healing?

Where have I brought pain to another?

You don't punish me out of anger,
but discipline me in love.

*May I learn to forgive and be forgiven,
dig my hands deep in the soil of Heaven.*

soil

“Eden explodes and we enter a dangerous, terrifying world, the same place where goodness, love, and kind intelligence lift us so often. The world has an awful beauty. This is a chaotic place, humanity is a chaotic place, and I am a chaotic place.”

Anne Lamott

* * *

I'm in the basement with the boys right before lunch, in the thick of those long days of stay-at-home motherhood. And it's one of those days when they want to be the opposite of mommy's little angels. At the moment they're fighting over the piano and whose turn it is to play. My oldest, who is four at the time, keeps pushing his two year old brother's fingers away from the keys. This quickly escalates into a screaming match between them. "Share with your brother," I say, tired and impatient. He keeps yelling. "You'll have to go play upstairs by yourself if you can't be nice," I scold. He scowls at me, both arms crossed across his chest. I tell him to go to his room, he turns and starts to run and his defiance causes me to snap. I spank him as he turns away from me but as I do his socked feet slip on the laminate and he falls face first into the step. He grabs his head. *Oh God, what have I done. I'm such a bad mom!* He stands up and I catch a glimpse of the purple lump forming above his right eyebrow. His face is red and his mouth wide open, a scream erupts. I grab a bag of ice from the freezer and we sit on the couch together. "Why won't you just listen to me?" I feel so stupid for the mistake, but I'm letting out all of my frustrations now. Why can't he just make the good choice? Why can't he just be kind? Why has he been making these days so unenjoyable, always ending with arguing and yelling and screaming?

And I'm angry about so much more than the piano. I'm angry that I'm stuck here at home while my husband goes to work, and I don't want to spend another day sweeping

dust bunnies from under the couch, and dealing with toddler tantrums and preschooler crankiness. I'm yelling because I don't know how I am going to fill the day let alone the week and the entire summer. I'm struggling to know how to help my heart come alive, because this staying at home thing is really sucking the life out of me.

I look at my son's little face, eyes wet from tears. Why do we keep ending up here? In this mess of chaos and overwhelm. How can I raise these little ones when I can't even raise myself? How can I give them what they need when I can't figure out what I want?

My son starts to sing "Jesus Loves Me", forgetting the words and asking me for help. I don't want to sing that song right now but I do anyway. I know it's the message we both need to hear. Motherhood is so, so difficult. Life is so, so difficult. Anne Lamott said it perfectly — *Earth is forgiveness school*. This is how we learn about grace. In the messiness of who we are and the messiness of the people we love. We stumble, we fall, we make mistakes and hurt others. But in Christ we learn how to get back up and do better.

As Jon Foreman so beautifully sings in his song "Thanks Be to God":

I wanna do good but I can't stay right
The wrong in me came out tonight
Waging war against the law of my mind
I'm a wretched man in a losing fight

Thanks be to God who delivers me
Thanks be to God who delivers me
Christ, Christ alone come and set me free
Thanks be to God who delivers me

Every mistake I make, every time someone else hurts me, is a chance to forgive and be forgiven. And each time I do, choose forgiveness over bitterness, humility over revenge, grace over grudges, will be a sign that Christ is transforming me, delivering me. Molding me into the likeness of Him.

Search me, O God. I let Him shine light on my heart, bringing forward the names of those I have hurt and the wrong decisions I have made, the patterns of thinking I have fallen into that need to change. This is beautiful Kingdom work, how we plant seeds of heaven right here on earth — I don't need to shine without a flaw but I can be a walking, breathing expression of the boundless grace of God.

A moment for reflection

Have I been making time for God to search my heart? Use Psalm 51 or the Lord's Prayer as a springboard. Pray and then listen for what God might want to reveal to you, remembering that He does not punish out of anger but disciplines out of love.

How can I know all the sins lurking in my heart? Cleanse me from these hidden faults.

Psalm 19:12 (NLT)

Day 21



All who enter are Christ.

May my door be found open,
and my heart be full and ready to give,
to all who come into my home this season.
More important than the dust and the dishes,
is the beautiful face of the one sitting
across from me at the table.

May I see Christ in each and every heart.
May my home be a place of nourishment and peace,
a taste of Heaven right here on earth.

home

“Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adore the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”

Henri Nouwen

* * *

Years ago when my husband and I were just newlyweds, a family we had recently met invited us over for dinner. I walked into their kitchen to see pumpkin soup simmering on the stove - the shell scooped empty on the countertop. *A mom of 3 and she has time to make pumpkin soup, from scratch?!* Bruschetta was warming in the toaster oven. A bowl of nacho chips and salsa sat on the centre of their long wooden table. The kids ran in and out of rooms, stopping just long enough to say hello and remind us of their names before continuing their game of chase.

We stood around the kitchen devouring the bruschetta as they asked us about ourselves, our hobbies, our jobs.

The wife offered me a tour and so I followed her around, getting a little glimpse into the life of parenting as we explore her home. In the basement she points out the laundry room and as I peak my head in I'm taken aback — it's huge but it's not the size of the room that surprises me. It's that every inch of this space is covered in clothes. There are clothes in baskets, clothes in mounds, clothes folded in piles. We can barely step foot through the door because of the mess. “Laundry isn't my strength,” she laughs, and we make our way back upstairs for dinner.

When our bowls are scraped clean we clear the table and sit around playing cards. We stay long after the kids have fallen asleep in their rooms down the hall.

This is one of my first memories of true hospitality. The imprint this friend left on me was that she didn't wait until her kids were older, quieter, to open her home to us. She didn't wait until she had time to cook us an elaborate dinner, or until her house was tidy and the laundry was done and the floors were washed and her make-up was perfect and her hair was curled. If she had, she would never have found the time to invite us in. She knew what mattered to her, and she shrugged off what didn't.

How many times have I frantically rushed around my house before company comes, trying to wipe walls and fix my eyeliner and hide clutter, all of a sudden furious that my thighs aren't thinner and my family isn't neater and my couches aren't nicer. I do all of this in the name of hospitality, when really I am afraid. I'm tied up in knots worrying what people will think of me. What if, God forbid, someone discovers what I'm *really* like?

I am grateful for this woman who welcomed us into her life, just as it was. I was so thirsty for this kind of naked honesty. Because the truth is, I don't want you to show me you're perfect, just show me you're *real*. Show me your messy hair that you haven't had time to wash. Show me your food-splattered fridge and your dusty baseboards and your overflowing hampers. Show me the cookies that flopped and the fight you had with your husband last night. Show me your insecurities and worries and disappointments. And I will love you even more because when you show me *you*, I see myself. And I thank God I'm not alone.

I made a meal once for a grieving friend, a mango chicken curry, sprinkled with cilantro and scallions. I wanted the food to bring comfort and nourishment, but she was only able to eat a few bites in between her tears. As I scraped the leftovers into the compost, worrying about her and letting my own tears fall, it was a lesson to me that hospitality really wasn't about the meal. Inviting someone into my home is about

receiving them, holding space for them, and showing up completely. I was there not to wow her with a fabulous dinner, but to accept her as she was. To just be with her on her journey.

I've found it helpful to ask myself the question, *What if it were Christ entering my home?* Would I be too occupied and distracted to see Him? Would I be too consumed with getting everything perfect, or worrying about what He thought of me, that I would miss the gift he had to offer? The truth of who He is, and who I am, that He longs to reveal to me?

Though a delicious meal and a clean house are a gift, they are not the highest goal. More important is how open my heart is, and letting the Kingdom of Heaven be known right in our own living rooms and around our dinner tables. Whether it's a three course meal we're serving or a frozen pizza, our homes and hearts can be places where Christ's love is made known to all who enter.

A moment for reflection

Can I be honest with myself and look at my attitude towards hospitality — what thoughts spring to mind? Do I notice myself focused inward, on how I am being perceived? Or do I try and control how my time with others unfolds without taking much notice of each person? Invite Christ into this place, ask Him to help you see each guest as if it were Him walking through your door. Enjoy this time and let Him reveal His light through the unique gifts of another.

So all of us who have had the veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord — who is the Spirit — makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)

Day 22



A healthy diet for my soul.

What I let into my mind
is just as important as the food I eat.

Are my thoughts nourishing me
or depleting me?

My soul needs a diet of rich, wholesome truth,
not junk-food lies.

Lord, help me change the way I think.

I want to be rooted in your love
and strengthened by your words.

rooted

“I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Martin Luther King, Jr

* * *

One afternoon in my psychologist’s office he handed me a piece of paper that would later play a significant role in my personal growth. The page was divided into two columns, the first one labelled “Unhealthy Thinking Habits”, and underneath it were words like *overgeneralizing, catastrophizing, mind-reading, judgements, emotional reasoning*. The other column gave examples of healthier thought processes. I stared at that page wondering how someone had so concisely summed up the goings-on of my internal dialogue. There in black and white and bold print was the truth that I was more often than not thinking about things in “unhealthy” ways.

Wait, didn’t everyone think like this? Was my first reaction. And then the reality started to set in. No, in fact, they did not. I had been living in a way that if a thought crossed my mind I was likely to give it attention, give it value, see it as truth — isn’t this how we should treat our thoughts?

But in this room where I sat in the brown leather chair with my feet curled up under me, I was offered a new perspective. I began to see the ways I might be hurting myself, be too hard on myself, and I was shown a kinder, more balanced way to think and to live. My psychologist helped me understand an important lesson — *you can’t believe everything you think*.

I had to start seeing myself in a new way. Not as someone flawed and inadequate but merely human with normal struggles and questions and doubts. This meant forcing

myself to let go of thoughts that come easily to me and shifting to new thoughts that might not feel as comfortable. It's like putting away those familiar shoes that you've had for ages and trying on a brand new pair. There is usually some discomfort at first, your walk feels awkward and unnatural, there are blisters forming on the backs of your heels. But with a little bit of wear, a little bit of practice, these new shoes will start to feel pretty good. And just like that, new thoughts, better ones, can become our new habits.

At the root of my internal dialogue was the belief that *I was not okay*. That I was not as valuable as others, that I was lacking something that everyone else had. This may not have been a conscious conversation in my head, but it was pervasive. Our minds are fertile ground — whatever seeds we continue to plant there will grow. When your core belief about yourself is that you are missing something, you will start to look for external validation everywhere. And that is just what I did. My relationships became more about feeling accepted rather than giving love. And I began to hate this about myself. I didn't want to see people as objects with the sole purpose of feeding me the approval I so desperately craved. What I wanted was real connection, openness, and honesty.

As I spent time in quiet with God, learning little by little what *He* has to say about me, this need of mine slowly began to fall away. I am still a work in progress, but I am focused now on living from the beautiful truth that God is *with me*, that I am not hopelessly flawed, that I might actually have what it takes to get through life, to even find joy and purpose and connection. That I have value, not because I am perfect but because I am *human*.

This is very much against what the world wants me to believe — every store I pass, every commercial I see, tells me that I am NOT enough unless I have what they are offering me — shinier hair, bigger curves, better clothes, more confidence, more followers, longer lashes...the list is endless isn't it? All the while Christ is standing above the noise and whispering, *I have created you, let ME show you who you are*.

My goal now is to try and fully embody this truth. I want to leave my house everyday not looking to others to tell me who I am, but celebrating that Christ has called me by name, and in Him I am already enough. And not just *enough*, but a person who is full of love and light and life because that is the Creator's beautiful intent for me, for all of us. I've recently begun this small practice of looking at others and calling them beautiful (in my head of course, or that could get a little bit creepy). *You are beautiful*, I think to myself as they pass me by. Whether it's a stranger or someone I know well. Because it's the truth, we are all clothed in God's divine light, and maybe as I name this in others I will recognize it more in myself.

At this point, I'm realizing that life is just too short to waste it on thoughts that bring me down. Like my psychologist did for me in that room all those years ago, Christ offers me a better way of seeing. In every moment I have the choice — will I listen to His voice of love, or will I follow the path of insecurity and wavering worth? It's time to do the work of digging up the old and letting new roots grow.

A moment for reflection

Do I pay attention to the thoughts running through my mind during the day? Do I talk to myself with the same compassion and care I would talk to a close friend? If this is a struggle for you, place a sticky note somewhere in your house where you will see it often, with an affirmation such as "I am grateful for who God made me to be." Every time you read the words, remember that this is truth straight from heaven and nothing the world says could make it be otherwise.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

Isaiah 43:1 (NIV)

Day 23



Grant me the serenity.

My heart worries and frets,
it tries to control things it cannot change,
it fears the things it cannot predict.

But this is no way to live,
this is not the abundant life you offer me.

The heart of the problem is that
my heart is restless until it finds rest in you.
You're in control, and so I can stop trying to be.

My place is under your wings of grace.

rest

“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don’t be afraid.”

Frederick Buechner

* * *

One day in the early part of spring when the grass was still yellow and faded from winter, and the trees had not yet budded new life, I was raking in the backyard. In the pile of dried leaves and sticks I noticed a speck of purple. I picked it up and held it in my palm — a crocus petal. I got down on my hands and knees and found the spot where a tiny patch of purple and green were trying to push through the earth.

In my rushing I hadn’t even noticed the flowers blooming and almost raked the poor little buds right out of their warm beds. Almost ripped that beauty right out of my own backyard. I live my life this way much of the time, consumed with my own goals, caught in worries, a busy body with a restless heart, all the while trampling over the beautiful things God is trying to grow.

The way I live reveals my lack of trust. I worry because I think I have to, because if I don’t, who will? I rush because if I don’t push to make things happen, who will? This is about noticing the fear that drives so many of my choices and choosing instead to trust that God is at work, in my heart and in the hearts of those I love. Each of us on our own journey, and though I can’t always see every turn up ahead, or the final destination, I can slow down and release my white-knuckled grip on the wheel.

If I am restless, impatient with myself, my life, and others, I need to find my rest in Him. For God, a thousand years are like a day. I don’t need to be trapped in this sense of urgency and emergency. As I enter into God’s rest, I will catch a glimpse of His eternal

nature, His kingdom that lasts forever. And slowly I will learn to let go of my worries and fears and preoccupations. When I spend too much time in the land of worry and not enough in the beauty of the present, I remember the words Jesus spoke — “Worrying does not add a single hour to your life! Let the birds and flowers remind you that the Father loves you and knows what you need.”

It is spring again now, and just the other day my boys run in from outside breathless, “Mom! Come quick! You have to see something!” I follow them to the backyard where those same crocuses have popped their heads up, a whole row of them. I smile at the boys’ excitement, watch them carefully step around the flowers as they kick a soccer ball back and forth. They know how precious new life is, they are not moving so fast that they miss this sort of thing. They are my best teachers in how to live slower, with more attention to the present, with more peace and less worry. With more wonder.

Yes, life is full of beautiful and terrible things. But our response has been made clear — *Do not be afraid.*

A moment for reflection

What is something I can let go of today that is not mine to control? Maybe it is a worry I have been holding onto, ruminating on again and again, or something I have been trying to alter in someone else. Pray for the ability to let go of this thing you are not meant to change, and the courage to change something that you can...and, as the Serenity Prayer goes, *the wisdom to know the difference.*

If God gives such attention to the appearance of wildflowers — most of which are never seen — don't you think he'll attend to you, take pride in you, do his best for you?

Matthew 6:31-32 (MSG)

Day 24



My soul becomes a silent night.

Today I take a moment to turn my heart towards Him
who knows me better than I know myself.

I open my heart, my soul laid bare.

The hopes and let downs and fears and longings,

He can hold it all.

I pray for patience as I wait for change,

the waiting helping my soul turn quiet,

the quiet helping me take notice,

where does Christ want to enter in

and make a change?

silence

*“I want to live,
I want to give,
I’ve been a miner for a heart of gold.”*

Neil Young

* * *

I step out into the backyard with a digging fork and pail in my hands. My husband has taken the boys to the playground so I am alone, gloriously alone. I pull on my blue gardening gloves and crouch down by the blossoming magnolia and tug at the grass and weeds that are sticking their heads up from the mulch. I slowly make my way around the yard while the pail fills with unwanted things. The quiet surrounding me is lovely and I drink it in. There’s a gentle breeze blowing and I can hear the sounds of children laughing and squealing nearby. It’s one of those warm Sunday afternoons that crawls along deliciously slow like honey dripping from a spoon. A soft knocking sound catches my attention. I gaze up to the branches of the large tree beside me, and then I see it — a woodpecker, with his red hat and pointed beak chiseling away at the trunk. *Knock knock knock knock knock*. I watch him for a moment in delight, mesmerized by his little black and white body, the fast and steady rhythm of his hammering. How often has he visited this tree and I have been unaware? Some things you don’t notice unless you get low enough, quiet enough, to hear them.

Ann Voskamp wrote, “You can only hear your life sing — when you still.”

How many songs of my life have I missed because I didn’t make time to be still?

Our culture is one that puts busy on a pedestal. “Hustle” is the word we love to throw around in conversation, and those who are doing it are the ones we praise and admire. I sat writing in a coffee shop the other morning, and as customers came in to make their orders, the barista would seize the opportunity to chat about his crammed schedule. *How are things?* They would ask as he made their lattes. *Oh, busy! Things are just crazy right now.* Almost to a person, they would respond with a *Good for you!* One lady listened and probed him further, *That’s a good thing, right?* He nodded passionately. *I always think I want more down time but then when I have it I’m bored and wish I were busier.*

So many of us don’t know how to be still. We don’t like the feeling of having nothing to do. As Henri Nouwen writes, “We move through life in such a distracted way that we do not even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say, or do are worth thinking, saying or doing.” When we finally do have a moment of quiet we reach for something to occupy and entertain us. The truth that God wants to reveal to us, the hunger in our souls, gets drowned out with all of the noise. Are we being the people we want to be? If we actually took a moment to stop, to listen to ourselves, to our lives, to God, what might we hear?

Of course productivity has its place. We had beautiful weather this weekend and our whole neighbourhood takes advantage, working on gardens, setting up patio furniture, cleaning out sheds and enjoying the sunshine and the hours to finish up tasks.

The stillness we want is that of the heart, and sometimes it means we have to slow our bodies down, too. To hear the woodpecker drumming, and our own heart beating, and our very lives singing.

Eugene Peterson reminds us of the beauty of the pause: “We stop, whether by choice or through circumstance, *so that we can be alert and attentive and receptive to*

what God is doing in and for us, in and for others, on the way. We wait for our souls to catch up with our bodies.”

Our bodies are rushing ahead, but our souls are longing for stillness. Longing to open up to God, to reflect on where we are going, on who we are becoming, on the ways He is working in our lives.

The world wants me to think that I am perfect just as I am. *Just keep hustling, you're doing great!* But I've tried it, and I know that on my own I am not at my best. I will naturally look out for my own interests before others, put my needs and desires above theirs. Though I may strive to be kind, and generous, and good, selfishness will always exist within me and will be something I have to fight against.

A 17th century poem written by Polish monk Angelus Silesius has a beautiful way of saying this:

Lo, in the silent night a child to God is born,
And all is brought again that ere was lost or
lorn.
Could but thy soul, O man, become a silent
night!
God would be born in thee and set all things
aright.

Could but my soul become a silent night. To create a space of silence and stillness within me where God can be born, where His spirit can take root and grow. With more of Him, I become more myself. The true me begins to emerge, the one who wants what is best for others, who hurts when others hurt, and celebrates another's joys. This is God coming alive in me.

How do I grow that heart of gold that Neil Young sings about? I pray. Prayer pries my heart open, kneads it like dough, little by little it becomes shapeable, moldable, growable. Less of myself and more of His spirit. This is the wonderful, mysterious process of spiritual formation — the gradual development of the heart of God in me.

A moment for reflection

God invites every part of ourselves to draw near, our fears and our joys, our gladness and our sadness. Give yourself time to sit in stillness and reflect on an area that you would like to see less of yourself and more of His spirit.

Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.

Ephesians 3:17 (NLT)

Day 25



I am free.

What do I need to prove today?
What do I need to feel insecure about?
What judgements could hurt me or define me?
Christ has already named me as his own,
and given me the gift of himself.
I have everything I need,
I am free to love and be loved.

This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine.

free

*To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the
greatest accomplishment.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

* * *

Years ago, before we had kids, my husband and I were put in charge of dog-sitting for his parents. I was excited but also nervous. When I was younger my family only had one experience owning a dog, some sort of terrier that my Mom had found via an advertisement in the paper. *Free dog!* It read (which should have been our first warning sign). Her name was Honey and we enjoyed her for a little while but she was impulsive and unpredictable, and when she ended up angrily biting the hand of one of our guests we knew we would have to put her down.

Charlie was my in-laws energetic golden doodle and I took to her right away. She was a hyper, in-your-face kind of dog but soaked up any signs of affection, and I quickly sensed a kindred spirit between us. She followed me around the house and laid at my feet when I read on the couch, and I began to love having this four-footed companion always by my side.

It was one afternoon at the park that I saw a side of Charlie that I hadn't seen before — suddenly in new surroundings this sixty pound bundle of fur and excitement transformed into a ball of nerves. When another dog approached her, even if it was half her size, she would whimper and cower behind me. The other dogs were having the time of their lives, playing and chasing after each other, but she would have none of it. And honestly it made me a little bit mad. Her reaction didn't seem right or normal, *just be a dog!* But I also felt sad for her. Why was she so fearful and timid? Why did she assume

that everything was her enemy? As I watched Charlie interact with the world, and felt my irritation growing, I realized we were more alike than I thought. Her fear actually reminded me a lot of myself.

Charlie was happy indoors, away from the world she felt safe and comfortable. I, too, was living inside a cage. Not opening myself up to others, and afraid to let them in. I was suspicious and fearful of so many things. So I'd pace within those four walls that I created for myself, afraid to venture outside of them, boundaries that kept me safe and happy. But was I really?

I wanted to run free, the same way I wanted Charlie to. I hated seeing her body tremble when stepping outside, hated the way I had to tug at her leash to get her to move forward on our walks. She was not made to be afraid, I wanted her to just be herself, playful and happy and excited about the world. I suppose that is exactly what I wanted for myself, too. Charlie and I were great at protecting ourselves — we could see threats, even false ones, from a million miles away. But with this came lives of great limitation.

What would it look like if you felt free? Free of the worries of what others thought of you, free of society's demands and expectations, free of trying to fit in, or stand out. Just free to be yourself, wholly and naturally you. Do you know that person at all?

These are questions I ask myself because I have known quite the opposite. How it feels to be trapped by self-consciousness, by unrealistic expectations for myself, by forgetting who I was in order to be who I thought others wanted me to be. I have cared far too much about how others perceive me. I've hated my body when she wanted to be embraced, kept my mouth shut when I wanted to speak, and said things that I didn't believe. I've not eaten when I was hungry, and stuffed myself when I was already full. I have not listened to others because my mind was too busy thinking about myself. *What do they think of me? Will they like me? Do they notice me?*

It is a natural thing to want approval from others — we all want to be loved and appreciated. But how far am I willing to go to feel validated? How much of my time is spent occupied with these thoughts? If I were not so consumed by them, what other good things could I be working towards in this world?

I didn't yell at Charlie or scold her for being afraid. I told her how beautiful she was and how much I loved her. I gave her lots of hugs and belly rubs and soothed her when she was scared. What if we gave ourselves this same kindness and self-compassion?

God wants us to live freely, to be all that He has made us to be. When we're less afraid, when we're open to others and the world and to Him, we free ourselves to be a warm, welcoming embrace to those who are also struggling to feel accepted and loved. In waking up to the worth we have as image bearers of God, to the worth we have in Christ, when we ground ourselves in this unshakable identity, we invite others to do the same.

A moment for reflection

Take a day to practice this way of being. Every time you notice yourself looking inward, or keeping yourself closed off from others, ask God to help you focus outward — how can you be a source of His love to the person you are with?

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept...By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up to God, this generous
Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:14-16 (MSG)

Day 26



I am broken, but Christ will come.

Today I stop running from my emptiness.
I find the place where I feel most insufficient
and I wait.

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!
This is where you come and heal,
this is where you come and redeem,
this is where you lift me up from the ashes of my life
and breathe into me your new life.
You are the author of my story.

I wait in hope, for you.

ashes

*“Sometimes the best map will not guide you
You can't see what's 'round the bend.
Sometimes the road leads through dark places
Sometimes the darkness is your friend.”*

Bruce Cockburn

* * *

I stared at the laundry basket on the floor, full of my husband's neatly folded shirts and socks, as tears rolled down my face. He had been gone for a few days and I didn't know when he was going to come home. I cupped the steaming mug of tea between my hands, hoping our one-year-old who was napping in his crib down the hallway would sleep for a while longer. The afternoon sun slanted through the window making rhombus-shaped light pockets on the floor. *This is what rock bottom feels like*, I thought. We had been fighting constantly.

With the clarity of hindsight, I now understand that I was struggling with post-partum anxiety, brought on by exhaustion, by a long list of unrealistic expectations for myself, for my son, for my life. I did not have this wisdom or compassion for myself in the moment. And I took a lot of the stress out on my husband. He wasn't helping enough, he was walking too loudly down the hall during nap time, he wasn't paying enough attention to me. Finally, my husband declared we needed space, threw some things in a bag and headed to a friend's house. It is hard to support someone when neither of you understand the root of what is happening, when fear presents itself as rage and resentment.

When I was four years old our house caught fire while my family had been out buying a Christmas tree. As we pulled onto our street the smell of smoke was strong, and I naively declared “Somebody’s having a BBQ!” We were greeted by a line of firetrucks outside of our duplex. I remember getting out of our minivan and staring at the side of the house where the fire had clearly started (luckily the other half of the duplex was untouched) — the stark blackness of the once-blue vinyl siding looked like some sort of large, angry monster charging into our home. We lost nearly everything that day, save for a few of my mom’s precious photo albums, and spent Christmas at our grandparent’s house.

Now as an adult, sitting in the house with my husband absent, I thought, *My life feels like my first home. A pitiful, crumbling mess of smoke and ashes.* I blamed myself and felt awful.

A friend came over one night, with cups of coffee and warm biscotti. We sat together in the living room, and by just being there with me she helped me to feel a little bit less like a hopeless failure. By sitting with me in this place of utter brokenness she reminded me that this wasn’t the end of my story. She reminded me that things can change even if all feels lost, because God loves to redeem and rebuild and make new.

After the house fire, when the emergency crews were long gone, we had a picnic on the kitchen floor. The whole place emanated a thick smoky smell that still lingers in my nose. We ate chunks of baguette and cheese and grapes and said farewell to our first family home, and I think this was my parents beautifully stubborn way of sitting in their own literal ash heap and waiting for God to lift them up and start something new. A few months later, as we drove down the highway in our minivan, they told my brother, sister and I the plan to move to a different town where my Dad would be starting a new church.

Out of the ashes, newness can rise.

I received help for my anxiety, my husband and I worked hard at our marriage, and things are so much better now. I can't believe how lucky I am to be with this man, I love who he is and everything I continue to learn about him. I love who I am with him. I love who we are becoming, together. I am so thankful we didn't give up on ourselves, on each other, even though it felt like the easiest decision at the time.

We will all at some point walk through seasons of life where there is more despair than success. You look around and your friends seem to have some sort of unending blessing that you don't. They swing from one accomplishment to another, one great idea to the next, all the while everything you touch seems to fail — your relationships are not thriving, your work is falling flat, you don't know which way to turn and every day feels like a struggle to put one foot in front of the other. In these seasons it's hard to see any evidence of God at work in our lives. We feel forgotten and overlooked, stumbling around in the dark, wondering when we will see light again, feel the sunshine on our faces again.

In these empty places, the places I am most weary and desperate and alone, I wait for Christ to come. And I trust that He will. Sometimes in the face of a kind friend carrying warm biscotti.

This is the mysterious unraveling story of the Kingdom come and the Kingdom not yet. Jesus has come, and He will come again. He is not finished with us yet, He is not finished with the world yet.

He is making all things new. Even me, and even you.

A moment for reflection

What place in my life feels like an ash heap? Where do I feel broken and insufficient, where is my strength failing? Remember the words of Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount — “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” (Matthew 5:3 NIV) We’re blessed when we’re at the end of our rope because there’s more room for God’s rule and grace and help in our lives. How can you wait patiently for Him to come and bring new life?

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

Psalm 113:7 (NIV)

Day 27



His kingdom will never end.

God is the beginning and the end,
the Alpha and the Omega.

Christ is revealing to me the things that last,
with him I am part of something eternal.

Have I prepared a space for him to dwell?

Have I prepared to change?

He comes in peace,
but he will not leave me as I am.

Am I ready for the gift he offers me?

kingdom

“Faith looks out instead of in and the whole life falls into line.”

A.W. Tozer

* * *

A couple of years ago, when I had reached the wonderful phase where both of my boys were in school, I decided to start weight training. I got a membership at a women-only gym just down the road from me and signed up for an introductory session with a personal trainer. She used a nifty little scale that somehow figured out things like my body’s fat and water percentage. “Hmm, your muscle mass is very, very low,” she said in that tone of voice that made me feel like a first grader who had just disappointed her teacher. She scribbled down a short-term goal for me to gain five pounds, hopefully it being muscle. I spent the next hour following her around the gym, learning different types of bicep curls and lunges and trying to do push-ups but barely succeeding. I looked around at the other women in their workout flow, with their abs and shapely legs. The distance between where I was and where they were felt way too great. But I found something I liked to do, that felt rewarding, and so I stuck with it. I kept showing up, even on days I really didn’t want to.

Journalist Megyn Kelly wrote in her memoir *Settle for More* about a critical shift in her life that happened when she heard something Dr. Phil say: “The only difference between you and someone you envy is you settled for less.” This quote would inspire her to leave her decade-long job in law to pursue journalism — something she had only dreamed of doing — and give her the title of her book.

Envy. What did it have to teach me in my own life? I certainly envied fit women. I looked at the muscle in their bodies and what I saw was dedication and discipline, two

things I admire greatly, or, more specifically, two things I *envied* in others. My envy was pointing me in the direction of the squatting bar, and so I listened and followed it there.

The constancy I showed to my exercise routine had me reflecting on my faith journey. What if I were just as committed? What if I showed up in my faith life even on days I didn't want to, even when I didn't see results?

Because the truth was I also envied the believers. The pastors I learned from, the authors I read, the musicians I listened to. The ones who spoke and wrote and sang about God with such love and passion and faith — I envied that, I wanted that same kind of love relationship that seemed to pour out of them. And so I began. I started putting in the minutes with God.

I think we too often think that our spiritual lives should flow organically out of our hearts, that prayer should come naturally to us, that good choices will just stem from our good intentions. And perhaps sometimes it's like this. But more often I think faith is like a muscle that we have to build one day at a time. As C.S. Lewis reminds me, "Relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing has yet been done."

I can walk through my day without acknowledging God's presence — the world we live in is structured in such a way where it is very easy to do this. We go about our jobs and daily tasks, forgetting that, *Oh ya, by the way, God IS.*

Madeleine L'Engle wrote that "Believing takes practice" and this has given me a whole new perspective on faith, a more encouraging one. I felt like a failure because I had fallen so far from the faith of my childhood, but would I expect my body to get stronger without putting in the time? These things don't happen by chance. I had fallen from belief because I hadn't been practicing. Remember that Philip Yancey quote from the beginning of this devotional? *Doubt feels more like forgetfulness than disbelief.* We

easily slip into the habit of forgetting God as we live out our days one after another, and our lives slip by week by week, month by month, year by year.

Which is why faith is not a once-made decision, much like “being healthy” isn’t. We decide that this is the type of person we want to be and we follow through with the hard work of our daily choices. I turn to God again, and again, and again. I intentionally slow down, take a moment to pause, to open myself to the fact that God is all around, that we are all completely immersed and awashed in His presence.

Slowly, I am seeing the fruits of my labour. Prayer is becoming more ready on my lips. People are becoming more important to me. Slowly, I am growing in compassion for myself. And my soul is becoming a bigger part of who I am.

I look back at myself two years ago standing in that gym feeling out of place and intimidated, and I am glad I made the choice to begin anyway. Similarly, come three, five, ten years from now I will look back at the person I was and will be so grateful she made the choice of faith, and kept showing up, day after day after day.

How could there ever be any regrets when we say yes to God?

A moment for reflection

What is the most transformative thing I have gained from this time of prayer and reflection? How have my ideas of God changed, and my ideas about who I am? Where would I still like to grow?

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:20 (NET)

