

Exploring the Wilderness

by

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with

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All scriptures paraphrased by authors.

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Introduction

If you're like most, this past year's chaotic tension has unearthed issues, attitudes, and addictions you didn't realize you had. Who imagined anything could so quickly render our normal coping skills ineffective? This pandemic has shaken the ground like nothing we've faced before.

There's a lot said these days about new ways to create a sense of well-being and security. Almost like, how can we distract ourselves to keep from going crazy as we hunker in our "storm shelters?" But, secretly, don't we hunger for more? Once these dark days pass, are we good with picking up and driving on as if untouched by what we've observed in ourselves?

What if we dig into the emotions and attitudes that have surfaced? I've experienced feelings toward God I didn't know I had. I've treated my people in ways I swore I never would. I've gone back to old attitudes and addictions. Words have been said. Where did all this come from?

We have an opportunity these next six weeks to explore. And our time together will be based on a recovery versus a classroom model. Our objective is NOT to memorize six principles for better living. This is an invitation to collectively step onto a wide playing field with broad boundaries where we can safely discover and share the truth about what is going on inside us.

This isn't about solving problems. It's about exploring and admitting them. Don't shut down if you find yourself puzzled. Get curious about your feelings. Can you remember these feelings from the past? Is there a connection between the two?

Our groups will follow time-tested guidelines that provide a safe place for folks to honestly unpack and explore their emotional journey over this past year. Our approach will be far more diverse, guided by the reality that we're all wounded. No one makes it through life trauma-free. Our hearts long for hope and healing.

Over the years our Pathway ministry here at BUMC has discovered and cultivated its own unique approach. We courageously own our "stuff" by thinking it through, writing it down, and then speaking it out either in a group or to a trusted individual. This process is built on the premise that individuals, in partnership with the Spirit, can discover hope and healing. And this works minus any feedback, assistance, advice or attempts to fix from other group members.

Our weekly discussions will run parallel with the wilderness travels of the Children of Israel as they moved from slavery toward the land of promise. We

will find our own hope and healing in their story.

Helpful Guidelines

As you work your way through this book with a group, we will follow these proven guidelines that will help ensure safety:

- go around the room answering each question, starting with the facilitator
- pass if you have nothing to share
- share your own thoughts and feelings
- keep your sharing at 3 to 5 minutes
- allow the person talking to have the floor (no cross-talk, comments, or contact)
- maintain confidentiality: what's said in the room, stays in the room—except if someone threatens to harm themselves or others
- remember: this is about listening and supporting, not fixing, advising, correcting, or consoling (this includes encounters that might happen outside the group setting)

At first these guidelines feel awkward. Given time, they will become normal. You will even begin to see the wisdom in doing things this way.

There will be ah-ha moments. Being guaranteed your own uninterrupted 3 to 5 minutes will create the safety you need to discover and share. And as you wait your turn, you will learn to listen; the kind of listening that bears witness to someone's story without inserting yourself in any way.

There will be tears, awkward silence, anger, laughter, panic, fear etc. None of this should be avoided, discouraged, or even managed. Whatever a person is feeling is legit and worthy of their expression and exploration. Press into emotions. Get curious. You think and feel what you think and feel for a reason. Search out those reasons. There are no wrong answers, only honest ones.

This six-week exercise will likely spark further introspection. Many who dip their toe in groups like this realize they have deeper issues than they first imagined. Find people close by who can walk with you in the upcoming weeks and months. Community is your friend. Isolation is not healthy. There are ongoing ministries here at church that can help as you move forward.

Serenity Prayer

*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that you will make all things right
if I surrender to your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with you
forever in the next.*

Amen.

One
--Looking Inward--
Discovering Me

You and I have an unhealthy attraction to the leaves of the fig tree. We hold out the hope they will effectively hide our imperfections and issues. According to scripture's big story, this started with our distant ancestors in a garden called Eden. Fig-leaving has been humanity's default ever since.

This practice manifests itself in the various personas we present to others. We maintain closets full of them. Only a select few get to see the private version of who we truly are. In time, changing personas becomes so seamless we hardly notice the Jekyll and Hydeness of it all. We come to buy our own artificiality.

Imagine life in Egypt: in-laws to navigate, kids to raise, mouths to feed. Now weigh this down with slavery. What's the safest version to pull out of the closet on your way out the door? Which persona will keep your master from beating you? How do you get on their good side? You try to control outcomes. You can't.

Life weighs heavy these days, pressing down with mandates, conflicting information, and an impossible future. It's like you're a sponge being squeezed. This pandemic is mashing your true persona out in the open for all to see.

In this uncharted emotional and relational territory, typical coping mechanisms no longer work: shopping, social gatherings, movies, sporting events. This creates toxic strains of fear, anger, and grief, triggered by (you name it) and obsessed with (you name it). Pile on distancing, and you're all alone.

Keeping your fig leaves arranged is impossible. Words blurt out. Tears flow. Stoicism loses its grip. Tone slips from bravado to quivering. I'm not the steadfast, even-tempered, generous person I've always portrayed. I'm miles from who I thought I was or want to be. It's not COVID's fault. The pandemic is simply revealing what has long been hiding right below my surface.

There is an essential you God originally had in mind. It's not so much about a job or calling. He just wanted to explore a relationship with you, the likes of which he'd never had. But trauma in your formative years triggered survival instincts that went into hyper drive; self-protect, self-provide, self-prove, self-promote. With all diligence, you created a galvanized, presentable version of yourself. You didn't set out to be a hypocrite. You were just in search of safety and comfort.

So here we are worn out from the ruse. Time to get real with the hard questions. Why am I so fearful, angry, depressed, and confused? Why do I do what I do? How come I feel so strongly about (fill in blank)? When did I get so (fill in blank)?

I can't relate in a healthy way to God or others until I know who I am. So we start these sessions by exploring the difference between the real me and the fake me.

Things to consider:

1. What personal tendencies have surprised or puzzled you during this crisis?

2. Dig into the difference between the private and public versions of you.

Two
--Looking Upward--
Discovering God

What we tend to overlook: There is a God who hears the cries of his people. Behind the scenes he's been carefully preparing a qualified rescuer; 40 years in the palace, 40 years tending goats in the desert. This real God is about to expose the humanity of the Pharaoh who runs the slavery machine that grinds you down. God will reside with you in a large pillar of smoke and fire as you make your way across the wasteland toward the land of promise.

What we tend to focus on: God doesn't seem to care, given years of slavery, beatings, and a dictator who thinks he's a god. "Granted, you parted the Red Sea, but it feels like you brought us out here to die of thirst, boredom, and bland food. You've kept Moses too long up on the mountain. So we're going to make a golden calf we can touch and carry around with us."

Thousands of years later, we still tend to gravitate toward the second paragraph. We grumble and pout like the children of Israel when what we get from God fails to match what we expect.

We want a cosmic-genie God. Give us what we want when we want it, with sprinkles. We revert to this childish notion that we can control God by reciting contrived prayers with abracadabra precision. But, think about it. What if faith worked like this? We'd become entitled with God as our enabler.

Think about God's great visitations on our planet. Old Testament—any given morning, throw back the tent flap and there was God in the middle of the camp in a towering pillar. New Testament—reach out and touch God in the flesh. He's the one hanging out with lepers, tax collectors, and sinners. Both places, the grand prize was having God with us.

Sure, let's be grateful for the "stuff" we do have. But it's God's "withness" that brings us internal peace and joy. I'm sick. God is still here. I did something really bad. God is still here. My world is falling apart. God is still here. My best friend thinks I'm garbage. God is still here. I'm in the middle of a global plague. God is still here with me.

This distinction may or may not be a paradigm shift for you. If it is, it changes everything. We stop trying to control God and start enjoying life with him in the moment. Our focus turns from presents to presence. Prayer doesn't beg God to

come close. It acknowledges he is already here. God is not our Santa Claus. He's our traveling partner. God is no longer a fixture in our religion. He is the divine half of an actual, vibrant relationship.

Things to consider:

1. What *presents* have you expected from God during this plague?

2. Describe times you've recently known God's *presence*.

Three
--Looking Outward--
Discovering "Us"

You grew up in the land of Goshen on the outskirts of Egypt, far enough away so Pharaoh couldn't smell your disgusting goats. It's been a hardscrabble existence: mouths to feed, flocks to tend, water to haul, food to grow, etc. And this is all in addition to being owned by a king who tells you you're nothing but a brick producer—a mindless cog in his machine.

Then God swoops in with his guy Moses; river turned red, lights out, hail storms, legions of bugs and frogs. Under cover of night, you make your escape. You wake up out in the desert faced with an unexpected reality. Look around. No more machine. Who are you now?

As dreadful as it was, it's hard to know who you are—minus that machine. You hated it, but at least it gave you some semblance of purpose. Who knew you could feel so free and so lost at the same time?

Our word here is codependency. On my own, I don't know who I am. I rely on someone or something else to define me. Who am I without my job, my kids, my volunteer work? I find my identity so many ways: addictions, hobbies, wealth, popularity, performance, academic achievement, political/religious affiliation. Whatever the option or combination of options, it always involves an unhealthy version of “us” because codependency always comes down to some form of me using you and/or you using me. It may be our normal. But it is not healthy.

Of late, this unhealthy “us” has fallen on hard times. At first it was a virtual “us,” at times, almost no “us” at all. Working at home, how can I prove I'm irreplaceable? If I'm not helping people, I'm worth nothing. I've made a name for myself with my productivity, humor, and likableness. Now what? How do I get credit for cooking more often than normal, homeschooling, and thankless hours in front of a computer? “Out of sight, means out of mind” is no longer a cliché.

Life will never be a healthy “us” as long as I'm using people or trying to tweak their impression of me to meet my needs. All this is so insidious it even drives the good stuff—like me trying to be helpful, generous, steady, and smart.

Codependency is one of the hardest issues to discover and unravel in yourself. It disguises itself as goodwill and selfless intentions. Asking questions is a healthy place to start. Do I know who I am, if nobody tells me? Do I tend to use people as stepping stones, or do I invest in their walk? Am I kind to you in order

to brighten your day or so I'll feel like I'm a good person? Am I curating my image in an attempt to control the response of others?

In a session about “us” we start with “me” questions because you and I will never find a healthy “us” until each of us finds our healthy “me.” Just knowing I am codependent is a significant step here.

The first step in cultivating a healthy “us” is recognizing my codependency. The second step starts with me hearing your story minus any personal agenda.

Things to consider:

1. Think of ways you've used/utilized others to feel better about yourself.

2. How have you found your worth during our current crisis.

Four
--Looking Backward--
Traumatized Emotions

A few years back, a documentary exploring the historical validity of Israel's Egyptian enslavement uncovered interesting archaeological evidence. One piece was found deep in a mine that had likely been worked by a Hebrew slave. While lying on his back, he had etched on the ceiling, "Lord hear our cries."

The slave figured no Egyptian would find it. God did. Out of a burning bush he responded, "I've heard the *cries* of my people." God gave us emotions. He cares about our feelings, even if we struggle to explain or express them.

Emotions are like the temperature gauge in a car, letting us know how we're responding to life. They're neither good nor bad, just indicators. But, sometimes normal emotions that have been traumatized tend to red-line on the gauge. It is best to pull over and investigate instead of ignoring them and driving on.

One can imagine, faced with the rigors of Egyptian slavery, every day concerns red-lined into panic and chronic worry. Disappointment sunk to despair. Loss slipped into crippling grief. Frustration overheated to anger. And all of this became a generational cycle of trauma begetting trauma begetting trauma ...

This is where we are right now. Feelings we've managed to subdue over the years are oozing out the sides of our sandwich with each bite. Words we would never say start popping out. Arbitrary tears. Fits of anxiety or anger. This plague is triggering us in ways we wouldn't have dreamed of a year ago.

Ever pick blackberries? Yummy fruit, but they come with stickers. You know that going in and simply remove the ones that break off on your person. You rarely get them all. Little bits remain just below the surface. A week later an innocent tap on the shoulder brings you to your knees. A hidden sticker was triggered.

This is life. Our formative years frequent the blackberry patch. People hurt us. They may not mean to, but they deceive, manipulate, enable, dominate, use, abuse, and sometimes seduce us. There are no perfect parents. There is no perfect upbringing. Sadly, neither time nor determination heal these wounds.

This pandemic triggers emotions that have festered below the surface for years. We've managed them with an array of coping strategies that no longer work. When the pressure of right-now feels like the trauma of back-then, I need to ask: "Among my friends, why does this particular issue trigger only me? What does

this remind me of from my past? What is it about me that won't let this go?"

This plague has become like an involuntary stress test, revealing preexisting damaged emotions. It would do us well to explore the test results.

Things to consider:

1. Explore your feelings toward the most influential person in your childhood.

2. Talk about your prevailing emotions during your early years.

(Homework)

Think - Write - Share

1. Take time to mentally review and ponder your current emotional flairs ups. (don't rush)
2. In private, write about times you felt like this during childhood. (details)
3. Find a trusted friend (not a family member) and share your story. (be brave & honest)

Five
--Looking Around--
Community

How do you move a nation? Just uproot out of Goshen and start walking? You're a bird perched on a boulder watching this unfold: blinding travel dust, hordes of smelly livestock, the chaos of children, clatter and clang, withered guy out front waving a stick. No armed guard. From where you sit, this is NOT cohesive.

Down in the middle of the mayhem, as part of the throng, what do you see? Is this about my immediate family and handful of livestock or is it about my tribe? There are people here I don't know? Is this "we" or "us and them?"

Right now, we have an opportunity to choose the vantage point we take of ourselves. There's the ground-level-pandemic-chaos-all-around-us view. Or, we can rise up and peer down at our culture more objectively.

Culture is systems. Our culture presents us with systems in tension with each other. We have systems that circle the wagons scoffing at systems that want to explore. There are systems that demand conformity lined up against systems that celebrate diversity. We've got systems capitalizing on hoarding and stockpiling that push against systems that want to help and share. There are systems focused on mass production belittling systems that artfully create.

How do we shape systems? We vote. We determine how and where we use our resources. We pursue certain vocations. We relocate. We study the rationale of alternate systems to which we're not normally exposed.

But, culture is also people. If people are nothing else, they are diverse: gender, age, race, etiquette and protocol, lineage, back-story, social/financial status, personality, outlook, attitude, IQ, ability, level of health, habits, hobbies, etc. There are three common responses to diversity: Cluster in our private bubble (isolation). Circulate with those who stand with us against "the other" (tribalism). Celebrate and explore the possibilities of diversity (inclusion).

Suppose we choose the last option? How might we celebrate and explore diversity?

Imagine someone very different from you sharing their back-story. What do you do with their alternative ideas or ethics? How do you handle what feels like push-back? Do you recoil as if attacked? Or do you see it as an on-ramp to further conversation? Do you treat your differences as cause for competition and

correction, or catalysts for cooperation and celebration?

We've intentionally placed this session after ones dealing with personal "stuff."
I'll never do culture in a healthy way until I do me in a healthy way. And the healthy version of me will always invest in culture.

Years struggling against diminished opportunities, the children of Israel finally realized their collective identity, embracing the African concept of Ubuntu, "I am because we are." On the banks of the Jordan, after a long desert ordeal, they were a united "we" instead of a scattered collection of "me's."

Things to consider:

1. Without naming names, describe a person who is your polar opposite.

2. With candor, talk about a conversation with this person.

Six
--Looking Forward--
A Vision for Tomorrow

The children of Israel were at a national crossroads. Moses sent twelve spies into the land of promise to explore the possibilities. By all appearances, it was to survey the acreage that was to be their future home. Ten spies came back tails tucked. "Giants live there. We were grasshoppers next to them. And we're pretty sure they saw us the same way." Only two were eager to take action.

Because of the fear-driven majority, Israel was faced with forty years wandering the desert trying to find themselves. They proved unready to pursue their future because they hadn't yet processed their past. How do you move from centuries of oppressive slavery to becoming responsible landowners? This calls for honest introspection, mental reprogramming, and an inversion of expectations.

Here we are as a people "spying out" our uncertain future. As the pandemic slowly subsides, we face fresh possibilities. Do we know who we want to be? What is our vision? With whom will we link arms? Like Israel, we'll not move forward in a healthy way until we first come to grips with our collective past.

Like cream, truth rises to the top. The realities that failed to make our early history books have risen to the top in recent decades. Facts like, our founding fathers were more deists than followers of Jesus; slave owners who kept enslaved mistresses. Their constitution conveniently excluded, and therefore degraded, women and those with darker skin tones, as well as the poor. Land was routinely ripped from indigenous people by deceit and slaughter. And all of this was built on the backs of enslaved Africans.

History's ripple effect has not died down. It's more like a tidal wave that is reaching landfall. For certain, we've passed laws and made amendments, but you can't counter-legislate centuries of longstanding bias. So, how do we move forward?

In our last session we talked about impacting systems and treating the person in front of us with respect. This is a great start. But, can we do more?

What if we start with the most vulnerable? Do you understand what it means to be poor? What's it feel like to be racially profiled? Try to understand what it feels like to be born gay or lesbian into a straight family/church. What does a foster child deal with? What's it like growing up across the tracks? Long term hunger or

homelessness ... what's that do to a person's psyche?

Included in these sessions are helpful links/resources that can get us started. Research is only the beginning. Real life conversations are a must. Friendships will develop. Groups will form. Arms will be linked. This is not a concept to be grasped. It is a lifestyle to live in to.

We're creating our world every day.

Things to consider:

1. Do you have a story to tell about racism, homophobia, poverty, etc.?

2. What is your first step toward a better collective future?

*** Resources ***

For families and LGBTQ persons looking for support and information

<https://www.gchristian.org>

<https://www.freedhearts.org>

<https://www.canyonwalkerconnections.com>

<https://www.reformationproject.com>

Torn, by Justin Lee. New York: Jericho Books, 2012.

Community Development

<https://www.luptoncenter.org/>

<https://hotelincbg.com/>

<https://www.bracac.org/>

General politics

<https://www.pantsuitpoliticsshow.com/>

<https://astartingpoint.com/>

Race/Racism

Jemar Tisby, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Reflective, 2021.

<https://thewitnessbcc.com/>

Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020.

Latasha Morrison, *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2019. <https://bethebridge.com/>

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Daily Reading Journal

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“Hello” to here
—Week 1, Day 1—

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.
Psalm 139:1

“If you find the courage to name ‘here’ – especially in the place where you do not wish to be – it can help you be there...The pain is only deepened when the location is resented or, even worse, unnamed. Hello to here.” Pádraig Ó Tuama, In the Shelter

When life as we knew it shut down in March 2020, I first dreamed of foreign language acquisition, ukulele sing-alongs, and idyllic homeschooling. Not surprisingly, these scenarios didn’t materialize. I struggled to name the place I found myself—to accept it, take it as my starting point, and try (really really) hard not to resent it.

The world offers us many escape routes to avoid the place we call “here.” We would so much rather go exercise, watch a show, or read a book than face the clutter we accumulate, the hard tasks of parenting, our regrets and loneliness, or the reality that we tend to numb our pain.

But here, in this moment, the challenge is to do that hard work of naming our “here”—with all its messiness, challenges, and confusion, and to know that in telling the truth about our “here,” we move ourselves toward freedom.

“To begin where you are may take courage, or compromise, or painful truth-telling. Whatever it takes, it’s wise to begin there. The only place to begin is where I am, and, whether by desire or disaster, I am here. My being here is not dependent on my recognition of the fact. I am here anyway. But it might help if I could learn to look around.” Pádraig Ó Tuama, In the Shelter

Telling the truth can bring freedom.

Something to consider:

Make a list of all that characterizes and troubles your “here.”

(kab)

Who Am I?

—Week 1, Day 2—

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Psalm 139:2-6

Do you want to X-ray your psyche? How about the Myers-Briggs personality test? Then, there's those inkblots. Lately the Enneagram has become the rage.

You can find these on the internet and take them on your own time in the privacy of your home. If you don't like the results, try an alternate test or maybe retake the same one, only tweak your answers so as to profile a more palatable version of yourself.

We generally don't balk at standardized testing that reveals “blood type.” Yet when asked to share secret thoughts and feelings, we either run or throw up a smoke screen.

Authentic introspection scares us with levels of honesty that can feel like a lethal dosage. That's why we painstakingly fabricate a presentable version of ourselves that hangs on a peg by our front door. We put it on whenever we're entering a scrutiny zone.

It's okay for them to know my favorite color, the college team I pull for, maybe even my political persuasion. But nothing deeper. In fact, I've kept that area restricted so long, I'm no longer sure I know what or who I'm hiding there.

This pandemic is forcing us to look inside. So I have to ask myself: am I so fragile that knowing my truth will destroy me?

You'll never be able to live life to its fullest until you truthfully know who you are.

Something to consider:

Write about who you are when no one is looking—your most real self...your secret desires, fears, and dreams...and what you wish others knew.

(wcvv)

The Sum of the Moments

—Week 1, Day 3—

Teach me to number my days aright, that I may gain a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90:12

When I was 21, I was sure that my hard work would pay off and that I would accomplish big things for God. By the time I was 38, I was so exhausted by two small children, five moves in five years, medical issues, and job uncertainty that I wasn't sure what to think—except to suspect that my 21-year-old self would have been so disappointed with what I had become.

I mark my self-reinventions based on where I lived and what I was doing. Since I've lived in seven different cities, it's a helpful tagging system. Through the past two decades, my family, theology, and professional life have evolved such that I have often wondered if these versions of me could be integrated. Would my college friends still recognize me? Would I want them to? What do my parents think of who I've become? Are they disappointed?

Sometimes I feel tempted to make myself larger or smaller in some misguided attempt to feel like I belong. But as I become more at home with naming and being who I am, I return again to Brené Brown's words:

“True belonging is the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. *True belonging doesn't require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.*”

—Brené Brown (emphasis added)

My authentic self is some combination and integration of the good and the bad moments. Thomas Wolfe says, “But we are the sum of all the moments of our lives,” and I think he's right.

Somehow it all holds together. I am neither my greatest success nor my worst failure. Moreover, my most authentic self remains consistent—no matter who I am with, or even if I am alone.

Something to consider:

Write about the parts of your story that seem like they don't belong.

How have they become part of who you are?

(kab)

The Struggle is Real
—Week 1, Day 4—
Read Romans 7:14-25

Have you ever walked away from a conversation beating yourself up about that stupid thing you shouldn't have said? *Sometimes I say what I don't want to say.* Have you ever tried to stop yourself from making what you know is not a good decision—and yet you just couldn't get yourself choose otherwise? *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing* (Romans 7:19).

I know these tendencies about myself, *and* I still like to imagine that my life is in my control: that I am one sticker chart away from getting my kids to be compliant; that practice makes perfect; that if I study I'll get an A; and that my actions can guarantee the outcome.

Years ago, I came across a Peanuts cartoon in which Lucy is asked what she wants to be when she grew up. "Perfect," she responds. Something in me resonates with her desire, for I am embarrassed by my inadequacies and weaknesses. *I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out* (Romans 7:20).

In recovery movements, our recognition of our own powerlessness—that our lives are out of our own control—is the first step. This must be why even when I want so badly to maintain the illusion of my own capacity, I find freedom in telling the truth: *control is beyond my reach.*

Because maybe no one has it all together. Maybe we live in a broken world among broken people, which means none of us have can transcend fully this state of affairs. Maybe we find healing in our relationships with God and with others. Maybe through self-

reflection, therapy, and other group experiences we can learn some skills to mitigate the effects of our brokenness, and, as Maya Angelou says, when we know better, we can do better.

And maybe *these* are truths that set us free.

And so we say, *Thanks be to God, who delivers us through Jesus Christ our Lord!* Romans 7:25

Something to consider:

Write about your flaws and how you see them.

(kab)

God Calling Us in Our Losses

—Week 1, Day 5—

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14

Instead of a reading, today's "text" is a video, an excerpt from a sermon Pastor Adam Shourds preached on April 28, 2018 entitled, "God Calling us in our Losses" [\[Link\]](#)

Something to consider:

Write about people, relationships, or dreams that you have grieved or need to grieve.

Here is an excerpt:

"If we really grieved, we would change our orientation in life.

When we stop running from pain and loss, we get to stand on the truth in a way that allows us to rebuild and reorient our lives.

When we give up our running and our avoiding, and we give up control and surrender to God...

When we look our losses in the eye and see them for what they are, peeling away guilt and shame... it changes things.

Something starts welling up in us that's truer and more real than what was there before. And we would call that word hope, but we need to be very clear...it's resurrection hope.

It's hope in the midst of loss, it's hope through real honest grief, it's hope that's been through the fire—and might still be in the fire. *If we learned to grieve, I think we would ultimately learn to hope."*

The God Who Came Near

—Week 2, Day 1—

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

John 1:14

This is the story of how my son, now eight, tried to make peace with my in-laws' grumpy cat, who had bitten him. One day during a later visit, my son disappeared into his room and came out wearing a cat costume. He proceeded to lie down on the floor and started meowing (i.e., speaking cat). He did this several times in our visit, always intending to communicate good will.

His attempted reconciliation reminded me of the incarnation. My son became *like* a cat in order to communicate his desire to make peace with the furry friend who had wronged him. In the Advent season, we celebrate a God who *actually* became human to communicate God's love to a sinful people. The Christ hymn of Philippians 2 celebrates Jesus "who... gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born a human being."

The Gospels show Jesus as fully human *and* fully God. Jesus weeps over the death of his friend Lazarus *and* he raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11). Jesus takes a nap in the boat (with a pillow) *and* Jesus calms the raging storm with the command "Peace, Be still" (Mark 4). Jesus was tempted in every way, *and* yet he did not sin (Hebrews 4).

Just past the limits of reason we encounter mystery; therein lie the mechanics of the incarnation. And I am okay with those unknowns, for I can still take great comfort in this truth: our Savior understands our human impulses, and he promises his ongoing presence in our lives through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Hebrews 4:15

Something to consider:

Write about what it means to you that Jesus understands what it is to be human.

(kab)

The Girl with the Curl

—Week 2, Day 2—

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:38-39

When my daughter was born nine days early in small-town Iowa, we couldn't reach our babysitter. Our baby was born around 8 pm, and then my husband went home to be with our two-year-old son while I introduced her to my parents over Skype. I was so smitten with her scrunchy baby beauty; I showed my parents her dimple, and I pointed out a swirly spiral curl pattern where her hairline met her forehead.

In a surreal series of events, the next day we smiled through hot tears for a family picture right before we handed our baby girl to the helicopter paramedics who would see her safely to the Mayo clinic; there they would diagnose her heart murmur. I kissed her swirly curl pattern as they strapped her in, and I promised we would find her again soon. We followed her helicopter's path by car, with our son in the back seat. Just hours before she had been nestled securely in my womb.

We found our baby soon after our arrival at the clinic. Her wristband identified her as ours, and I kissed her swirly curl as we listened to the doctors explain that out of all the heart murmurs, she had the one that would be easiest to address. Six years and one surgery later, she lives a healthy life with regular check-ups, and we continue to wait and see, and to hope and pray for her ongoing good health.

I used to think that faith in God meant that if I played my cards right, I wouldn't have to deal with bad things. I used to think that God's work would always be obvious. But I am learning instead to rest in a different promise: that I am not alone. God is present—even if I don't see it and even when my "faith" looks more like a thread of hope than a confident belief.

Even there Your hand will hold me, Your right hand will hold me fast.

Psalms 139:10

Something to consider:

Write about the times when it is hardest to see God's presence.

(kab)

God in Camouflage

—Week 2, Day 3—

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Psalm 139:7-10

God is invested in our day to day, but he does most of his work from behind the scenes; rarely tips his hand. Just because we ask specifically doesn't mean his response will be obvious.

Scattered through Scripture we find folks who couldn't visibly see God but did life as if they could. They stand out as our heroes. We secretly wish we were like them.

We create clichés to help us out. Just because it's cloudy, doesn't mean there's no sun. You don't understand electricity, but you can still rely on it. Just because you didn't see them in action, doesn't mean the restaurant chef didn't do a great job with your meal.

We trust the unseen all the time, only with God, the stakes are higher. Whereas we don't need to know the chef to enjoy his cuisine, we kinda do need to know God if we want to enjoy life with him. So, how do we come to know God without him physically standing in front of us?

How about starting in your mental “playground.” In your free time, are you a poet, musician, builder, explorer, grandparent, etc.? On a good day, look for him in your favorite place like a poem, or a project, or a child.

And on a bad day, welcome to Job's world. Watch Job as his story unfolds. You'll see how his bad days made him doubly rely on what he'd discovered about God on his good days.

God is everywhere. Watch for him

Something to consider:

Write about times you've been keenly aware of God's presence.

(wcvv)

“A Prayer Everyone Can Pray”
By Thomas Merton
—Week 2, Day 4—
The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
Psalm 23:1

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist Monk whose writings ranged in topic from spirituality to civil rights. He spent 27 years at the Abbey of Gethsemani (Trappist, KY).

Something to consider:
Trust does not require certainty. Write about the areas of your life of which you are most uncertain.

Let's pray together:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Prayer, and Being Part of God's Story

—Week 2, Day 5—

Pastor Wayne Hunter

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.

Hebrews 12:1

Today's selection is a video featuring the words of Wayne Hunter, pastor of the BUMC Greenwood campus, who passed away from cancer in November 2019. His thoughts on prayer were recorded a month earlier. [[Link](#)]

Pastor Wayne talks about how through prayer he gains an awareness of God's presence and grace. Prayer is not just about answers—we all know that we don't always get what we want from God. Instead, we are invited into a relationship with God and to become part of the bigger story of God's work in history.

Pastor Wayne also talks about the reality of his experience of prayer:

We can demand the miracle we want or we can accept and celebrate the miracle he gives us. I know in my case with the cancer, I have not gotten the miracle I wanted, which was healing yet ... But I've received a tremendous miracle in how I've been loved and supported and experienced God's presence through the people and prayers....

It would be easy to miss that if all I was looking at was a specific answer to the prayer that God would heal me.

Something to consider:

Write about how you've been changed by prayer.

The Rabbit and The Mountain

—Week 3, Day 1—

I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalms 139:14

Back in the day, my 7th grade English teacher taught a lesson on prepositions by drawing a rabbit and a mountain on the blackboard. Turning toward the class, she asked, “Now, tell me, how can this rabbit relate to the mountain?” Boy howdy! We had some answers. “He can go around it, over it, through it, be beside it, with it, for it, against it, etc. etc.”

That English lesson—and all of the bunny’s ways of relating to the mountain—paints a good picture of codependency. What if someone removed the mountain? Our poor little bunny is lost. Without the mountain, he doesn't know who he is or what to do with himself. In his mind, life without the mountain is inconceivable.

This week we're digging into the unhealthy reliance we have on each other. I need you to tell me who I am, by what you say and do or don't say and don't do. And it goes both ways.

Tell me I'm good/bad, needed/needy, helpful/ helpless, wanted/unwanted, brilliant/mediocre. Without your input, I'm not sure who I am or how I'm supposed to feel about myself. It goes without saying, this is not a healthy arrangement. If everybody is as codependent as I am, we're a collection of parasites leeching the life out of each other. Common sense...a bucket full of parasites will ultimately self-destruct.

This is why we dig into codependency. Mr. Rabbit can't have a healthy relationship with the mountain until he *first* knows and accepts who he is *without* the mountain.

Something to consider:

Name the one person or thing you can't imagine your life without, and then explain why.

(wcvv)

Aside from Achievements...

—Week 3, Day 2—

But the LORD said to Samuel, "...For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

I am that special combination of over-achiever, people-pleaser, and female. I grew up in a branch of conservative Christianity that explicitly taught traditional gender roles and the importance of self-sacrifice while implicitly telling me that my emotions were untrustworthy, and my anger was unacceptable.

As Wendell and I began to collaborate on these materials, I kept pushing for a more robust definition of codependency. I wanted to know: Is it about control, or about wanting to please people? Could it be about *thinking* it's within my control to please people? I'm not sure if I wanted to find myself in Wendell's definition or if I wanted to be able to say "nope, not me."

When I read about the bunny and the mountain, I see myself and the many ways I construct my identity based on who I am to others and what I do for them. I am codependent, and I would venture to say that—without an intentional movement away from it—most of us have the same tendency. It's so easy to define ourselves in relationship to the constellation of important things and people.

For years my sense of self came from being a good student and eventually a professor. To my students, I was Dr. Attanasi. I was respectfully and gainfully employed. Then one day that job went away, and I found myself staying home with a toddler and a newborn. I went from feeling proud of myself to insisting to a telemarketer that my status as "homemaker" *not* be listed in my college alumni directory.

Who was I without a career, students, or colleagues? How could I feel affirmed or validated without the regular feedback loops of course evaluations, compliments, and publications? What would it take for me to feel good about myself again?

Something to consider:

Write about how you typically measure your success.

What would happen if that measurement of success was no longer relevant or available to you?

(kab)

The Pecking Order
—Week 3, Day 3—

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

James 2:1-4

Sometimes how I feel about myself depends on who I'm around and where I fit into their social hierarchy. I feel good when I compare myself to people whose accomplishments or wealth I think I have surpassed. I feel insecure when I measure myself against people whose accomplishments or wealth I envy.

Chickens create hierarchies so they can allocate the best resources to the most powerful. Humans create pecking orders, too.

There are many problems with human attempts to create social hierarchies—starting with their artificial and hurtful nature. Who of us is equipped to judge better/worse, worthy/unworthy? This isn't to say that there shouldn't be leaders or that someone's accomplishments shouldn't be honored or appreciated, but it does mean that *our human efforts to assign people worth—and to derive our own worth from how we rank—are seriously harmful.*

Any ordering system that we construct based on externalities denies the basic human dignity and worth that God assigns us. Such earthly hierarchies render God's love and grace unintelligible. In truth, we are loved and beloved of God, and we are called to share that reality with others. But we can't communicate others' worth to them at the same time we deploy these human-made hierarchies that sort

people based on skin color, socio-economic status, educational level, or sexual orientation.

Our call is to understand our infinite worth to God as individuals and to see others as beloved of God, too, and not to create our own hierarchies.

Something to think about:

Write about how you see yourself in relationship to other groups of people. Who do you tend to think you're "better" or "worse" than, and why?

(kab)

Intrusions

—Week 3, Day 4—

Beloved, let us love one another. 1 John 4:7

If life was pie-charted, the slice marked “work” would likely dominate the graph. For most of us, to live is to be busy.

You have lawns to mow, meals to prepare, kids to raise, paychecks to earn, careers to pursue, taxes to pay, etc. Not a lot of wiggle room.

Motivational phrases keep us hopping. – “Make hay while the sun shines.” – “Git 'er done.” – “Got a bad job, don't nurse it.” – “That job's not gonna' complete itself.”

In the midst of all this, what do we do with folks who mean well, but stay too long? Those who call obsessively? Offer to help after the job is done? Are a “tad” needy? Ones who dominate every conversation or ask inappropriate questions?

Intrusions. Let's just say it. That's what they feel like. How am I supposed to get on with my life and all its weightiness with them eating away at my time?

There are no easy solutions here. Just know, these “intrusions” are God's beloved children. He adores them. This is the best place to start.

Jesus encountered many people in his ministry who misunderstood his purpose. Jesus stimulated healthy conversation by asking questions.

Let's go there:

“(Fill in blank) is really important to you, isn't it?” – “Why are you so interested in (fill in blank)?” ... “I'm curious, what made you come to me with this?”

Something to consider:

Describe your most frequent “intruder.”

What questions might you ask of them?

(wcvv)

The Space Between

—Week 3, Day 5—

Each one should test their own actions. Galatians 6:4

If life is a highway, as the song goes, then what are the rumble strips? How do we know when we hit those grooves that alert inattentive drivers to danger and startle them (or perhaps us) awake?

The following questions are designed to help us think through how we can steer that middle pathway of interdependence that tries to avoid *both* codependence and a radical individualism.

*How do we find a balance between doing a good job and being a perfectionist? What are the warning signs that we have gotten out of balance?

*How do you know you've gone too far into either independence (I do it myself!) or (co-)dependence (there's no "me" without "you")?

*In what ways are you preparing for the eventual reality of changes to your family (kids growing up, leaving home) and career (retirement) and other "mountains" to which you relate?

*Where is the healthy balance between exploring someone's strengths and weaknesses so you can work well with them and judging them so you can feel superior?

*What about God? Can we be codependent with him? Does God's posture toward us change based on our behavior?

*When does simply wanting to be helpful cross the line and turn into a rabid need to be needed?

Something to consider:

What are the signs that your life is out of balance, and your identity is coming from externalities?

(kab & wcvv)

The roots of the problems

—Week 4, Day 1—

Whatever you sow, that you will reap. Galatians 6:7

I do **not** like trimming bushes and pulling weeds. Instead of enjoying the great outdoors or my “alone” time, I sift through feelings of inadequacy followed closely by self-condemnation for so intensely disliking the tasks with which I struggle. In the past four years, I’ve killed a hydrangea bush, thrown away gardening tools, impaled my fingers with thorns, and—perhaps most dramatically—slashed an extension cord with the hedge trimmers and blown a fuse.

Yard work does give me some quiet time to think.

When I regularly uproot the tiny shoots growing in the front yard, I think about how futile my efforts are since I am not getting at their roots. The sprigs are growing off a tree root with a devilish (albeit natural) reproductive urge so strong it extends from our flower beds under our walkway to our front yard. This tree root grows so far underground it has persisted through last fall’s chemical and aeration treatment. As I gather these little sprigs, I think about the ways that I might be treating the *symptoms* of my own problems rather than getting at their *roots*. Sometimes the bad habits, attitudes, and beliefs I see in myself really point to deeper wounds that beg to be addressed.

It’s easy to look at my neighbors’ lush grass, manicured bushes, and weed-free beds and think their task must be easier than mine. But an adequately-maintained yard—and a well-lived life—both take hard and ongoing work. Everyone’s task might be a bit different, and we might be more or less prepared to take it on. But as with most things, the burden can be lightened through conversation and collaboration with others.

Something to consider:

*Write about the weeds and the roots in your life;
the symptoms and the underlying problems.
Is a life well-lived necessarily free of weeds (problems)?*

(kab)

“A Liturgy for a Fleeting Irritation”

—Week 4, Day 2—

from *Every Moment Holy*

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22-23

I bring to you Lord, my momentary irritation,
that you might reveal the buried seed of it—not
in the words or actions of another person, but
in the withered and hypocritical expectations
of my own small heart. Uproot from this
impoverished soil all arrogance and insecurity that
would prompt me to dismiss or disdain others,
judging them with a less generous measure than
I reckon when judging myself.
Prune away the tangled growth
of my own unjustified irritations, Jesus,
and graft to my heart instead your humility,
 your compassion,
 your patience,
 your kindness,
that I might bear good fruit in keeping
with your grace.

Amen

*Humility, compassion, patience, and kindness are
antidotes to what irritates us.*

Something to consider:

Write about how you cope with your irritations and anxieties.

Hidden Helpers
—Week 4, Day 3—

For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Luke 6:45

What is your default emotion in a crisis? We're talking knee-jerk, instant, gut-level reaction, prior to your first rational thought. Anger? Fear? Guilt? Are you prone to blame? Do your control issues jump into over-drive?

Chances are this default emotion has been around for a long time, maybe since your childhood. It's programmed into your hard drive. You rarely give it a second thought. How about we give it a second thought today?

We all have a little girl or boy inside us that has been our protector since we were small. She or he works overtime to help us feel safe and comfortable. We can even have more than one.

They tell us to run and hide. Or they tell us to fight back, or curl up in a shame ball, or take the bull by the horns, or deflect blame on someone else.

These hidden helpers can get a bad name. Granted, they go to extremes: temper tantrums, pouting sessions, isolation, self-harm, shame, passive aggression. But their intentions are to protect you.

Have you noticed how hard times can prompt more frequent and pronounced emotional outbursts? It might help to tell yourself, "This is my hidden helper trying to do their job." This doesn't mean they're doing it well, but they're trying.

As you notice your helper's efforts to protect you, try to pause and become more aware of how it might be hurting others.

The fact you can objectively observe this is a significant step toward hope and healing.

Something to consider:

Talk about a prevailing emotion you've experienced for as long as you can remember.

(wcvv)

X Marks the Spot

—Week 4, Day 4—

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. Psalms 139:11-12

Someday, I will get my son a metal detector for his birthday. I know he will be so excited and begin imagining all the treasures he will uncover (as well as how much they will be worth). This new tool (not a toy, of course) will accompany us on all future trips to the beach. He will excitedly scan the shore line, and when the alarm goes off, he will dig at that location and find buried treasure.

But today, a different set of alarms went off when I gave him an instruction, and he told me, “no.” Initially, I made his behavior about me. And so arose all of the parenting lessons and insecurities such as, “You know you need to be consistent!”; “You know you can’t allow disrespect!” “He’s testing the limits—be stern!” And last of all, “What am I doing wrong?” and “I am failing!”

When this particular set of alarm bells go off, I really want to silence them by either ignoring the situation or shutting it down. I want to give in (“okay, you don’t have to!”) or just to escape (“go to your room!”). I definitely don’t want to dig deep to find out the root cause of the crisis.

The messy work of excavating a repeated site of conflict or figuring out why I respond so predictably poorly requires me to stop, reflect, and linger in the discomfort of conflict.

But we need to do that hard work to uncover the real cause of our problems so that we can treat the root issue. Think of it this way: in some cases, it might be enough to treat the symptoms—maybe my

muscles hurt because they need to be stronger. But other times we have to deal with the root cause in order to heal: the pain of a broken leg will need more than heat, ice, and anti-inflammatories.

Something to consider:

Write about the situations that predictably coincide with your anxiety, stress, or other elevated emotions.

(kab)

“The Journey,” by Mary Oliver

—Week 4, Day 5—

So he called out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.” Luke 18:38

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice --
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voice behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,

that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do --
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

Deciding to dig deep is just the beginning of the journey.

Something to consider:

This poem focuses on the ways that we choose this journey as individuals. Write about the ways in which God is part of your journey.

Story Listening
—Week 5, Day 1—

Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.
James 1:19

Everybody's got a story. Given a safe place and devoted listener, most people want to share theirs.

If you're on the listening end, you're sending a clear message. The teller matters. They are worth your time. Their story is dear and precious. Listening offers them respect, honor, and celebration.

In his book *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard*, David W. Augsburger says "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable."

Good listening is not about fixing, correcting, or converting. Its only agenda is to invite someone to share part of their life with you.

What about you? Are you ready to listen to someone who doesn't believe like you do, vote like you do, value what you value?

Effective listening is as ego-free as possible. You have nothing to prove. You are not better or worse than them. And you don't have to listen professionally, just authentically.

Few activities in life will get us out of our selfish head-space like listening to someone's story. This is not the reason we listen, just a healthy side effect.

Listening also helps us to settle into our place in the grand scheme of things. It breaks down walls and levels the playing field. It

strengthens the empathy muscles in our heart as it loves the person in front of us.

To listen is to love.

Something to consider:

Talk about a time when someone truly heard you.

(wcvv)

Don't Be Afraid of Difference

—Week 5, Day 2—

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. 1 John 4:18

I have been wrong SO MANY TIMES in my initial perceptions of people. I remember swearing off my judgmental habits in high school when I discovered the back story of my government teacher (whom I didn't particularly care for) whose daughter was a victim of a violent crime.

Everyone has a story.

Despite my desire to have a generous heart, I sometimes become confident again that I can discern who deserves my judgment (hint: no one) and which people deserve the benefit of the doubt (spoiler alert: everyone). When I fall back into my old judge-y habits, I hear again the call to be humble and open and remember that I am not God and do not have a God's-eye view.

In 2007 I spent several months living in South Africa and interviewing people whose life experiences were profoundly different than my own. Being in a different culture and learning to listen to its people was uncomfortable at times. I did not always like what they said, and I certainly could not agree with all of their theological, cultural, or ethical claims. My assumptions and perceptions were regularly shown to be incorrect, but I faithfully listened to what was said with words and left unsaid.

I knew the people I met were beloved of God and that I was called to listen and to bear witness to their struggles, their triumphs, and their pain. I was changed and made better by these relationships. At the height of my discomfort with being such an obvious outsider

and having so much to learn, I would whisper to myself "Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid."

When we judge people as different or scary or make assumptions about them, we feed our fear, and we rely on our own finite human abilities. Dr. Loretta Dye talks in our Day 5 video about how we are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action. When we get curious and give people the benefit of the doubt, we find the ways our humanity can connect us and the love of God can bind us together.

Something to think about:

What kind of person do you find most "foreign"? Write about what you might have in common with this person who differs from you.

(kab)

“It’s Complicated”

—Week 5, Day 3—

Let us not love in words or speech, but in action and truth.

1 John 3:18

Nothing happens in a vacuum. To understand any situation we have to understand the events and circumstances that made it possible. It's a helpful reminder for interpersonal relationships, and it sheds incredible light on societal problems. Take, for example, homelessness. One narrative about homelessness says that “homeless people are lazy; they should get a job and pay their rent.”

But homelessness is much more complicated. People find themselves homeless for a variety of reasons. In Bowling Green, the primary causes of homelessness are relationship changes (divorce/breakup), job loss, chronic illness, untreated illness (behavioral or physical), addiction, and domestic violence. According to Rhondell Miller of HOTEL INC, the latest Housing Analysis of the City of Bowling Green showed an immediate need for more than 15,000 housing units with a rental cost under \$700 a month, and a growing need for units for seniors 65 years old and older. The waiting list varies from 3-6 months to 3-5 years.

At a basic level, we have a nation-wide shortage of affordable housing occurring simultaneously with a rise in poverty. A full-time employee would have to earn \$15.02 an hour to afford a 2-bedroom rental in Bowling Green/Warren County, KY and meet their basic needs, but the average renter makes under \$13 per hour.

These few paragraphs barely scratch the surface of our most vulnerable citizens’ great need not just for affordable housing but also for health care, higher wages, mental health care, substance abuse treatment programs, and domestic violence intervention.

If we look at societal problems and see easy solutions, we should probably look more closely so that we can better see the conditions that create these situations. Only when we recognize the complexity and intentionally listen to the people who are most affected by the problem can various collaborators begin to work toward long-term societal change.

Societal problems are complicated—and so are people. We rarely get to see more than what social media and brief encounters allow. But individuals are—in Wolfe’s words—the sum of the moments of their lives, which invariably includes heartache, trauma, and pain. In yesterday’s reading, I confessed my struggle to stay generous and to avoid judging others. Today’s reflection reminds me of the same—that there’s more than meets the eye to both people and to societal problems.

Something to think about:

What is a situation that you once thought was clear cut but then—as you learned more—became more complicated?

(kab)

The Life You Heal May Be Your Own

—Week 5, Day 4—

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

1 John 4:7

We started our homeschooling year in July, mainly because it was so hot out and there was nothing else to do. An epic struggle for control soon emerged on the battleground of 3rd Grade Math. I faced a real problem: every lesson dissolved into conflict, and my strategies (the video series, scaled back expectations, and fun math games) were failing me.

Then a friend offered her high school daughter's tutoring services. My boy began to glow during math time. I could hear her telling him what a good job he was doing, and I could see that he was believing it. I could also see his tutor's confidence grow. I suspected that she could see in him the same kind of analytical mind that both empowered and isolated her. The very same logical reasoning that would connect them to each other could alienate them from some peers, especially in a pandemic. I quickly realized the value was not just in the math but in the connection they were forging and the healing that could come through their realization that they were not alone in their isolation.

Not to be left out, my daughter declared her desire for tutoring, and so weekly art classes commenced. To say my daughter was excited is an understatement. She squeaks with anticipation as she waits for the call to go through each week. She and her new bestie read a story and create beautiful art projects, and their connection provides a respite from this world of COVID, virtual academies, and social distancing. They are a bright spot in each other's week, and

the encouragement, affirmation, and creativity that bubble out of this first grader and her sixth-grade friend feeds their souls.

In relationships where there is wholehearted love and vulnerability, we find safety and a place to heal and flourish.

Something to think about:

Write about relationships that have helped to heal you.

(kab)

A Journey from Head to Heart

Dr. Loretia Dye

—Week 5, Day 5—

People will know you are disciples of Jesus by your love for one another.

John 13:35

This workshop [[Link](#)] by Dr. Dye took place in August 2020 as part of a longer webinar (also available on our website). Dr. Dye is an Associate Professor in the Department of School Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University. She is a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor (LPCC), National Board Certified Counselor (NBCC), and Licensed School Counselor (SCL).

Dr. Dye's presentation explains how our brains try to keep us safe by scanning for threats and making meaning of information using processes of sorting, creating associations, and filling in the gaps. The positive associations or stereotypes we call "preferences" and our negative stereotypes are "prejudices." When we discover that stereotypes and prejudices are affecting how we view people, we need to intentionally retrain our brains. Dr. Dye emphasizes that we "are not responsible for [our] first thought, but [we] are responsible for [our] second thought and [our] first action."

To watch the full webinar—including an introduction and devotional by Pastor Adam Shourds and a presentation by Dr. Terry Daniels, please click [here](#).

After you've watched the 15-minute video, take some time to reflect on the following prompts:

- Did you have any expectations of this video given the topic?
- How did you feel when you saw the images that reversed the biases we hold?
- What was your experience of the presentation, and where is God nudging you to examine those first thoughts before your second thoughts and first actions?

(kab)

Holy Imagination

—Week 6, Day 1—

I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalm 139:14

Imagination gets buried beneath the rubble during a crisis. Creativity only comes into play when it's fashioning some sort of weapon or survival tool. Dark days are good for the candle-making industry. But they don't inspire much candle-light dancing.

It's beneficial to revisit the dawn of imagination where God spoke light into existence out of something he saw in his mind. He carved out canyons with the tip of his fingernail, brush-stroked the bird's plumage with vivid form and color, designed the workings of an atom without a calculator.

He “dared” to imagine. He spoke. Life exploded out of dark nothingness. Was this a one-time deal, or might God be setting a precedent?

God is up to something in this world ... still. This gives us hope. But what if this is about more than hope? What would happen if we jumped in with what he's doing? Imagine that!

But do we really have to imagine what God would do if he were here in person? No, he's already been here. So let's start there.

He stood against hatred and injustice. He held babies. He touched the unclean. He listened. He gave. He was present. He included the excluded. He washed feet. He laid down his life.

Something to consider:

*Zero constraints, what would you like to do
with your life?*

(wcvv)

Loving Means Learning

—Week 6, Day 2—

When I was a child I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an [adult] I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now, we see only a dim reflection in a mirror. 1 Corinthians 13:11-12

In fourth grade, my best friend and I decided to make up our own sign language so that we could communicate without words. I was signing “pass the pencil sharpener” as we were lining up to leave the classroom one day, when all of a sudden, our teacher pulled us out of line with a very stern look on her face. She asked what we had been doing—and we learned that she had understood our sign for “pass me the pencil sharpener” as a rude or crude gesture.

I was ashamed and embarrassed. I hadn’t meant any harm. But I was a child—and I was thinking like a child. My knowledge was growing—and I learned that since adults interpreted our gesture as rude, my friend and I would need to change our behavior so we weren’t offensive.

We know in part. Whatever we believe has been shaped by so many things that we can’t control—skin color, biology, childhood experiences, geographical location, socioeconomic status. No one has a God’s eye-view. Our response to that truth should be a humble acknowledgment of our limits, a curiosity about what there is to learn, and an openness to correction.

Sometimes we don’t want to know more because we fear what we will discover, and we definitely do not want to change. We don’t want to dispense with the certainty that gives us such great comfort. It’s not always an enjoyable process to discover our old beliefs are inadequate and to engage in the hard work of learning to

see things from others’ perspectives. It’s not easy to listen to the people whose lives are affected by societal problems.

As humans we don’t see the whole picture. But even though we will only see through the glass darkly, our knowledge can grow. My 9-year-old self had no idea what she was doing—but I learned. And such growth is normal and desirable when we are willing to acknowledge the reality that we can only ever see in part.

Something to consider:

Write about an area where your thinking has developed or matured.

(kab)

Remember...

—Week 6, Day 3—

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, *for you were foreigners in Egypt*. Leviticus 19:33-34

Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice...Remember that *you were slaves in Egypt* and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the *foreigner, the fatherless and the widow*. Remember that *you were slaves in Egypt*.

That is why I command you to do this.

Deuteronomy 24:17-18, 21-22 (emphasis added)

By the time the Israelites settled in the Promised Land, the first generation of Hebrew slaves had passed on. Nevertheless, the memory of their ancestors' experience was to motivate them to care for the foreigners, the fatherless, and the widows. As the texts above say, they were (1) to treat foreigners as native-born; (2) to treat them justly; and (3) to leave the extra grapes for foreigners to glean—all because the Israelites had been *slaves or foreigners in Egypt*. How did their past affect their present? The memory of their ancestors' experience as slaves and foreigners radically shaped their laws and ethical practices and obligated them to protect the most vulnerable among them.

How does our past affect the present? What virtues ought we to embody in grateful recognition of God's provision for us? I think about what it means for me to live into this grace—not just to *do* generous things but to *be* generous—in grateful response to God's work in my life. I know what it's like to be overwhelmed and exhausted by a baby, and so I will always try to make a meal for new parents. I know what it's like to be new to town and trying to make friends, and so I try to be hospitable and to connect people. I know

what it's like to be excluded, demeaned, and bullied, and I try not to do that to others.

How does collective memory shape our communities? How do we live corporately in response to God's generous work in our lives? As humans, we are loved and beloved of God, and the evidence of the Spirit's work should be in our fruits. Whatever the particular implications of our community's experiences, may we—as Christians, Kentuckians, and Americans—live with intentionality and with generosity because it is *who* we are *and* what we do.

Something to consider:

How have your experiences affected the way you show Christ's love incarnate to others? What evidence of your community's history can be seen in its identity and ethical commitments?

(kab)

Creating the World

—Week 6, Day 4—

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart—
As for God and not just for humans. Colossians 3:23

When the pandemic started, our artists and musicians unleashed their creative power to bring comfort and healing to a weary world. YoYo Ma recorded #SongsOfComfort, and other soloists and bands went live on Facebook and YouTube. Even Disney Plus made available Frozen 2 and Hamilton, to our everlasting delight.

Thousands of people tuned in for talks by the Cincinnati Zookeepers. Local non-profits, school staffs, and congregations responded creatively to their communities' needs by distributing lunches, holding wave parades, and hosting morning prayers online.

Such actions create and re-create our world, and they foster virtues like connection, imagination, conservation, literacy, and love of neighbor.

We are all artists who work with different media. As a wife, mother, Christian, minister, and ethicist, I aim to foster virtues in my children's moral formation. I teach them that we follow public health recommendations as a way of loving our neighbors, especially those most vulnerable.

We cultivate gratitude by writing thank you notes to the teachers who prepared their lessons and the bus drivers who deliver free school lunches. Such actions contribute to the creation of a world I very much want to inhabit.

As we rebuild our lives and our communities, these words about grief by Laura Kelly Fanucci really speak to our experience: "When something is shattered—a bone, a bowl, a dream—it can never be put back together in exactly the same way again. Cracks, jagged edges, trauma's hard memory persists. But an artist catches the glint of hope under the rubble and refuses to let destruction have the final word. Every creation is a mosaic, built from brokenness."

We are all artists, and we encounter a broken world. We don't aim for perfection, but we do join in this effort to create a better world.

Something to consider:

What is your sphere of influence, and what kind of creative work is yours to do?

(kab)

From Where I Am to Where God is Leading

—Week 5, Day 5—

The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.
Numbers 6:24-26

Questions to consider:

- *What were your expectations as you began this Lenten journey?
- *Which days or weeks have you found most challenging?
- *What have you learned about yourself?
- *Where on this map do you most frequently find yourself?
- *Where do you go from here?
- *Where do *WE* go from here?

