

Welcome to Rhythms of Return.

We are returning—back to Jesus, back to what’s true, back to a life with God at the center. Over these 30 days, we’ll slow down, listen, and re-center through daily Scripture and simple practices you can actually keep.

This guide also invites you into fasting—not as a diet, but as a spiritual discipline. Fasting helps us make space: we empty ourselves to come closer to God, not to “get more of God,” but for God get more of us. You can fast from food (selective, partial, or complete) or choose a soul fast—stepping away from something like social media or entertainment to refocus what’s out of balance.

Each day includes Scripture, a brief reflection, and a RHYTHM practice—one small step to help the Word move from information to formation.

Come as you are. Start where you are. Return, one day at a time.

How to use this guide

Read the Scripture slowly (even twice).

Sit with one line that stands out.

Pray honestly—no performance.

Practice the day's **RHYTHM** (small + doable).

Commit to fasting (small steps).

End with gratitude: "God, thank You for being here."

Common(s) church prayer for 2026

Jesus, for 2026 we come to You as one church—not a crowd of individuals, but a people You are forming together.

Father, build this house. Not with hype, not with striving, not with human strength—but by Your Spirit. Make Common(s) Church a home where You are honored, where people belong, where the hurting find healing, where faith becomes practiced, and where our city catches glimpses of Your kingdom.

Holy Spirit, knit our hearts into unity. Teach us to carry one another, forgive quickly, listen deeply, serve joyfully, and move at the pace of love. Make our “together” more than a word—make it a way of life.

Give us willing hearts and open hands. Show each of us our part—our yes, our gift, our responsibility, our courage. Help us build with faithfulness in the ordinary: in our gatherings, in our Circles, at our tables, in our crews, in our friendships, and in our neighborhoods.

And as You build, send us. Make us a people of reconciliation in downtown San Diego—present with those who feel unseen, compassionate toward the wounded, bold with hope, steady in prayer, and generous with what we have.

We surrender our plans and we receive Your purpose. We don’t want to build alone, and we don’t want to build for ourselves. Build Your house, Lord—through us, with us, and among us—together.

In the name of Jesus,
Amen.

Day 1

Mark 1:1

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Who doesn't want *good news*? We need it...so much so that we have gone to great lengths to assure and quicken its arrival. The irony is that in trying to make *good news*, we have inadvertently made *bad news* or just *fake news*. Just try to think of one presidential candidate in the history of the USA who has not promised *good news* and spent most of their time in office managing *bad news*. Communism is a good example of something, which in its simplest form seemed like *good news* – equality for all. Yet, this *good news* so quickly became *bad news*. In his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn describes the evil done for Communism in the name of “good news.” In the blink of an eye, Marx's intention to bring history into a utopian balance of resources quickly became another twentieth century picture of humanity's ability to unleash their own hell on earth. The first-century situation in which Jesus was born was no different. Caesar Augustus promised that his coming was *good news* and that proved to be very *fake news* because what he actually brought was *bad news* – a “peace” (*Pax Romana*) enforced by a severe and cruel regime.

So why is *good news* so hard to come by? Could it be possible that *good news* escapes us because it is not something one can fabricate, but is rather something one receives? For instance, the title given to Jesus is “Messiah” which means “anointed one.” A clear image of anointing is found in Psalm 133:2, “like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down on the collar of his robe.” Notice that the oil is a foreign substance, interrupting Aaron's head and then beard. Perhaps a strange picture to us in the twenty-first century, but in Aaron's day it was a vision of well-being – a well-being, a blessing, a good news from God. But why oil? In Israelite worship, oil was used to symbolize God's presence. So the Messiah Jesus, the Anointed One, is saturated in Godness (*aka* goodness) and has come to saturate us and our world in the same reality. And that's good news.

RHYTHM: Today your rhythm is to make space to receive from God. This can look like meditating in the morning or prayer-walking in the afternoon. You can even go to a coffee shop and journal; either way, make space to be with God. As you do, consider Jesus as a mediator of God's goodness to you. Ask Jesus, the Anointed One, to share that anointing with you. Again, all we mean by anointing is what was described above as *Godness*. Hopefully, the effect will be a sense of oneness between you and God, and even a sense of peace about today and hope for tomorrow.

Day 2

Mark 1:8

I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

There is a lot that water doesn't seem to wash away, a residue to life that is water resistant; those things that happen to us, the ideas that lodge themselves in our heads and hearts – even the stuff we witness that no amount of showers can seem to take away. Which makes the nature of what John the Baptist (Jesus' Second Cousin) is saying in this simple phrase insanely profound. Water flushes away: it shows up, picks up the dirt and then runs away down the drain. That's the nature of what water does. In contrast, what Jesus brings doesn't run away down the drain. What he baptizes with is meant to stay. He's bringing God, God who will remain on us and in us, God to stay and not wash away, God to be a new permeating reality in and around our being. When we think of “getting well,” we typically think of it in terms of getting rid of something – whether it be a habit or a bad relationship. In contrast, a recent body of research has shown that what we actually need is to usurp the ideas, habits, and dysfunctional patterns with stuff that is better, bigger, and more true to our longings. That is to

say, we don't need to get rid of something, we need to add something. Which brings us to the word *usurp* – a simple but helpful word that means to take over a position of power. The reality is that we all have a metaphorical *throne* in our lives which is the control center of our behavior. You can tell what is on the throne of your life through a survey of three areas: time spent, money spent, and energy spent. Just track the last week and the time you spent on worrying about something, or the money you spent feeding a certain addiction. If you have struggled at all with these *powers* in your life, you know that they don't tend to just go away. In other words, rarely do they just “wash away” with a shower. Instead, they only tend to give way once something bigger and better shows up. Take for example Portugal's war on drugs which is being fought through funding community and connectivity efforts for someone struggling with addiction rather than guns and ammo. The point is this, the addiction to heroin can only be dethroned in the presence of something bigger and better – community and friendship. This research bares out even in the lab with rats. What if getting healthy isn't about getting rid of something but adding something? This is what happened when Jesus finally “baptized his people” in the Holy Spirit. They were stressed, scared and bewildered. After all, the last three years had been a whirlwind and now they were on their own, hanging out together and hoping for God to move. Interestingly, upon Jesus's departure, he didn't tell them to take a retreat and cleanse away the stress of the previous three years in the waters of the Mediterranean. Instead, he told them to stay in Jerusalem, the location of all the drama, and wait to have something interrupt, overcome, *usurp* their current reality. That is what happens. Their reality remained the same, people were still mad at them and Jesus had been taken to Heaven. They were alone. But the Spirit falls on them and in an instant they are given a new way to relate to the stuff that held sway over them just a moment ago.

RHYTHM: Today as you go through your day, consider taking a toll of the ideas, emotions and habits that rule your life. Make a list and perhaps even journal the origins of these rulers of your day to day. When did they start? Where have they caused damage? Do you really like them? Maybe you do not want to let them go. Fair enough, but take sincere toll of where they seem to be taking you. Now consider what it would look like to ask God to baptize your reality with the Holy Spirit.

Day 3

Mark 1:35-38

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: “Everyone is looking for you!” Jesus replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.”

If we're honest, this would read differently for the average person in our day and age. It's something like, “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, (YOUR NAME HERE) laid in bed while scrolling through (FAV SOCIAL MEDIA).” Jesus prayed. In fact, you see Jesus doing this – escaping to a solitary place and praying – often before very important decisions. For instance, in Luke 6:12 it says that Jesus went to the mountainside and prayed all night. Right after this, he comes back and chooses twelve disciples. This is Jesus being truly human.

Have you ever wondered where that longing for more comes from? The author of *Ecclesiastes* writes, “He has set eternity in our hearts.” We long for the eternal – we want God. Have you ever had one of those people in your life who shows you how to be truly human? Perhaps it's that barista from Rome who showed you how critical espresso was to human existence, or a friend who gets you up early in the morning for a workout. You may not like the early start, but when the workout is over you feel alive. It's in these moments that we feel truly human probably because we are living as we were created to live. In this passage, Jesus models for us a central component of what it means to be human: time quietly and intentionally spent talking to our Creator.

Why does this matter? It makes you into a human not a sheep. Sheep are dumb, they do whatever the other sheep are doing. They are reactionary and blank in stare – a seriously diminished existence compared to you and I. And yet, if we are honest, how often do we go along with the crowd? We spout the stuff we hear in sound-bites without thinking about them, or we succumb to the inertia of *more* that our materialistic tendencies have instilled in us. We are magnets of distraction because, perhaps, we have not spent time with our Source – the One in whom exists a rhythm and way unlike the rhythm and way we live in from day to day. This is why Jesus could respond to his new found popularity by saying, “Let’s go somewhere else”. He was becoming low-key famous and his response was, “I’m good, we have stuff to do.” Jesus was clear on his purpose and direction because he created space to be intentionally connected to his Source.

RHYTHM: We know a couple days ago we asked you to find space and we are going to ask you to do it again. There are few things as important to your connection with God and your own personal health as time spent in quiet and prayer. These times of intentional mindfulness will actually change your life, but they are a discipline. You have to create the time because it won’t just happen to you. Today is an important day. It signifies the beginning of your week and is of significant organizational importance to the rest of your week. The rhythm we would like to invite you into today is a weekly rhythm – a weekly rhythm of scheduling your time to meet with God on the daily. Use your phone or use pen and paper. Do what you know will create a daily rhythm of tapping into the power, love, and presence of Jesus.

Day 4

Mark 2:3-5

Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

The news about Jesus being a powerful teacher and healer began to spread. People were really buying the possibility that this man could possibly be the Messiah (the Anointed One). So many others had already come claiming to be the Messiah and had died at the hands of Rome. Yet, all this did not seem to thwart Israel’s hope in God’s promise to make things right through Messiah. It’s this kind of desperation for God’s intervention that motivated this paralyzed man’s friends to go to such great lengths to assure he would get his time with Jesus. They had no other options. That’s what causes one to make “an opening in the roof above” – a roof that does not belong to you. I’m sure onlookers ranged in their responses from “*Dang – bold!*” to “*What the hell guys? The roof? Really?*” But the paralyzed man’s friend did not reference public opinion, they wanted to see if this Messiah could help their friend. They wanted to know if there was a new, different option in managing the chaos of life. Perhaps they even wanted to see what the Messiah, God’s anointed, God’s PR person (at least in their minds), the spokesperson on behalf of God, would say to this living and breathing indictment on life’s senseless and seemingly meaningless suffering.

So, Jesus forgave him. The guy laying on a mat due to his paralysis had his sins forgiven.

How you imagine sin means everything at this point. If you think of it as a puritanical religious construct you will miss the gravity of this situation. Sin is everything that has ever made you feel alone – it is everything that has ever led to you feeling despair. It is everything that led you to destroy yourself and others. It is everything you have ever done to manage a life, a world, and a cosmos that seems out of control. And so, when Jesus forgave his sins, it was both because the man had – in his own way – participated in bringing hell on earth, but also to tell him that God was not mad about it. In popular thinking today, the idea of sin is reprehensible because it implies some power structure is out there creating arbitrary rules that we all have to come in line with. But what if there is an elephant in the room? What if underlying all that depression and anxiety we see out there is this sense in our hearts that we need to have

someone tell us – God tell us, “Our relationship is good. I love you, and we are all good.” That in some way, the forgiveness of sins is what we all long for and in Jesus it can be so easily found.

RHYTHM: Today try journaling but address Jesus specifically. Write to him about all the stuff that feels like it is between you and him, that stuff which contributes to the world of alienation we so often live in. When you are done, pray to Jesus about what he would like to say to you.

Day 5

Mark 2:21-22

“No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. Otherwise, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins.”

Jesus was a Jewish Rabbi and with that came a considerable amount of history, tradition and social expectation – particularly on the front of how to relate to God. In Jesus’s day, and in his mix of family and friends, the majority of people would have desired to be a *tzadik* – a righteous one. This usually meant abiding by religious tradition and laws like staying ceremonially clean, keeping the Sabbath day holy, and other rules and regulations relating to life with God. Many of these rules and traditions were meant to facilitate connection with God but over time they became the point rather than pointers to God. Our day is no different.

If you grew up going to church, you may have trafficked in the “God is a kill joy” narrative. Even if you never went to church early on in your life, you probably caught wind that God is not about your joy and fulfillment; He’s more interested in choirs that sing in tune for Him on Sundays and righteous people who don’t laugh at dirty jokes. This is what Jesus means by old wineskins. They don’t *get it*. They can’t *hold* what God is up to because they miss the point. For Jesus, righteousness was about something way better than being *good*. It was about being available and aware of certain realities that have entered the room. It was about being in tune with the cosmos and what God is up to. And just what was God up to? Moments before Jesus speaks these words, he says, *“How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.”* This was mind blowing then and it is still mind blowing today. Jesus is likening his coming to a Jewish wedding celebration. Celebrations that often lasted for seven days, and were so entirely devoted to mirth and feasting that the companions of the bridegroom were by the Talmudic ritual absolved even from prayer and from worship.

RHYTHM: Has your life with God trended towards heavy, obsessive, and guilt ridden? That’s old wine skins. Get out into nature and breath

Day 6

Mark 3:4

Then Jesus asked them, “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” But they remained silent.

Silence in the face of questions concerning good and evil is not a first-century problem. Our silence on matters of right and wrong are diverse and complex.

A study was done in the 90’s with seminary students. They had a person fake a heart attack to see how many pastoral trainees would stop and help. Very few did. You would think it is simple, and yet we remain silent.

We remain silent because it could make us uncomfortable to acknowledge the good.

We remain silent because we are post-moderns who have deconstructed good and evil in exchange for an infinite variety of interpretations – we no longer believe such a thing as good or evil exists.

We remain silent because it's easier to remain silent when certain evils pay the bills.

We remain silent because sometimes we have to let go of a lesser good in order to take hold of a greater good, and we hate change.

We remain silent because sometimes we just don't like the person who is sided with the good – we are inherently political.

This is perhaps the biggest reason why Jesus's question fell on deaf ears. It is why he had to just go ahead and do the good because when people are frozen in the face of such a good thing, it is a time to ACT.

RHYTHM: What areas in your life have you remained silent in the face of a clear choice between good and bad? Perhaps it's a friend who needs your help, and you have sensed all along that you are there to help them. Perhaps it is a wrong that was done to you and you know that to move on means forgiving. Perhaps it is as simple as waking up early and praying, working out, or getting some creative endeavors moving. ACT on the good that is clear to you today and see what happens.

Day 7

Mark 3:34

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

At the beginning of this passage Jesus and his disciples were not even able to eat because they were so busy caring for the multitudes who had come seeking help and comfort. He and his disciples were doing good work, but it was a heavy and exhausting kind of work. No doubt, on more than a few occasions in following Jesus, his protégés asked themselves whether it was worth it. On those days of breakdown and stress when they were tempted to throw in the towel, I imagine they reflected on this occasion where Jesus painted a picture of a new family, a family linked together by the crazy idea that God is talking and moving His creation in a beautiful way for all who will listen and role with him.

One of the foremost questions in any church is, How do we help people become mature and strong in their relationship with God? I've heard everything from classes to mission trips to various spiritual disciplines. At the end of the day Jesus defines and gives the primary directive of spiritual growth in this passage.

First, spiritual growth is a relationship to a family that has the primary quality of self-giving love. At the center of this family is that idea that God is real and showed up, and left his Spirit to guide us. Which leads us to the second concept of spiritual maturity we find in Mark 3:35.

Second, spiritual maturity is the simple discerning and carrying out of the Spirit's leading. It happens through prayer, the reading of Scripture, and in all kinds of other ways – all that seems required is a heart that is *seeking*.

RHYTHM: Today, make a rhythm of the simple prayer of Samuel,

"Speak Lord, for your servant is listening."

Then listen. God is always speaking and leading us towards connectivity and generativity. That is to say, He will not lead you to hurt yourself or others; that's another voice. Learning to discern between the various inclinations of the heart is something that the Bible can help us with. For now, know this: God will lead you to, in some way, carry out one of two things – love of Him and love of others. That, you can be sure of.

Day 8

Mark 4:1-20

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that,

*'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"*

Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan [The Accuser] comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

RHYTHM: Today, buy a small pot with potting soil and seed. Plant the seed and nurture it. When you notice this pot in the days to come, be reminded of this simple prayer and recite it as often as you are reminded – *"Lord Jesus, let the soil of my heart be rich, bearing more fruit than I could ever ask or imagine."*

Day 9

Mark 4:30-32 – How to Have Eyes

"How may we depict the Kingdom of God, or by what parable may we present it? As a grain of mustard that, when sown upon the soil, is smaller than all the seeds on earth, and when it is sown it rises up and becomes larger than all the garden-herbs, and produces great branches, so that the birds of the sky are able to shelter under its shade."

The parable of the mustard seed is notoriously difficult to interpret, with its indecipherable allusions and mysteries. But its inexorable draw remains and one must inevitably reconcile themselves to the fact that every good parable or story has a plethora of meanings; “A tiny stream from your teaching, Lord,” sings Ephrem of Edessa, “for us below makes a flood of interpretations.” What we can know is that this parable contains within it an obvious sense of irony, since a mustard seed does not produce great branches like a sturdy tree, nor does it possess the natural security that would allow birds to rest in it. The *brassica nigra*, or “black mustard,” seed sprouts can grow eight to ten feet at most, and the *salvadora persica*, another indigenous Israelic plant, produces a tiny bush no more than a foot high, but nothing like an oak or a cedar.

Rather, a mustard seed is a weed. So, Jesus says the Kingdom is like a weed. The first-century Roman author, Pliny the Elder, writes, “It grows entirely wild, though it is improved by being transplanted; but on the other hand when it has once been sown it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once.” We may understand from this that the Kingdom upsets expectations. It’s an ugly sprawling thing that lurches sloppily, but somehow simultaneously contains within it the power to upset empires. In Ezekiel 31, the prophet describes one of the greatest empires in history as “once a cedar in Lebanon, with beautiful branches overshadowing the forest...All the birds of the sky nested in its boughs” (vv. 3, 6). If he is indeed alluding to Ezekiel, then, according to Jesus, the reality of God’s rule coming to earth has the power of empires and the power to subvert and conquer them, but looks like an ungainly unseemly little thing.

Moreover, perhaps Jesus is encouraging us to not ask “when” the Kingdom comes or “where” the Kingdom is, but that it will come in its own time, as long as a seed takes to sprout. And rather than being in an identifiable location like a “now here,” instead it is more like a “nowhere,” – already inchoate and present when humanity and the earth work together – the gardener and the seed – when we do what we are here to do and love everything, every leaf, every ray of light, when we forgive and when we help each other.

RHYTHM: Contemplate one particular area of your life that appears unorganized or lackluster. Perhaps you’re part of a small church plant and it looks indeed more like a *plant* than a glorious ancient oak. The challenge is as we pray over this area of life, to consider the power nestled within it, to find that hidden potential and actualize it, and to be cradled in the comfort that if the Kingdom is like a weed, then these unseemly, spasmodic realities in our lives are not lost or beyond hope, but have an uncontrollable power inside. They may be buried under the dirt, but we know that they will sprout and have the birds of the air find safety in their shadows.

Day 10

Mark 5:1-20 – Clothed & in His Right Mind

When they got out of the boat, they were suddenly confronted by a man with an unclean spirit... “What’s your name?” Jesus asked him. “Legion,” he replied. “That’s my name—there are lots of us!” And he implored Jesus not to send them out of the country. It so happened that right there, near the hillside, was a sizable herd of pigs. They were grazing. “Send us to the pigs,” begged the spirits, “so that we can enter them.” So Jesus gave them permission. The unclean spirits came out and went into the pigs...[The townspeople] came to Jesus; and there they saw the man who had been demon-possessed, who had the “legion,” seated, clothed, and in his right mind. They were afraid.

Among the tombs, lives one who is said to carry an impure spirit or demon. The residents of the nearby town know not what to do with him, so they consign him to the graveyard and have – as much as they can – shackled and imprisoned him there. Abandoned to himself with only the dead to keep company, he continues to imitate, it seems, what they have done to him: he punishes and bruises himself (the whole passage is of such a length that it would be inappropriate to quote presently, but nonetheless it is worth the read). For our present text, the

demon, Legion, can only act so long as it preys upon the malformed interrelationship between the townspeople and the demoniac, thus why he begs Jesus to not to send him afar. The demoniac is the scapegoat of the townspeople: he is excluded, and for the townspeople, represents all that is dangerous and evil. He is blamed for the sin of the community, and by his exclusion, the town's identity is established; in other words, the group's peace is predicated upon his expulsion. The *Us* is established only in contrast to an expelled *Them*.

So what made the crowds afraid? That the demon had been cast into the swine? No, surprisingly, the irascible shock came from witnessing the demoniac *sitting* peacefully, *clothed* when his behavior had previously been bizarre and harmful, and *in his right mind* which is the most significant transformation for the townspeople. Jesus's restoration of the man to his humanity has made them *angry* precisely because it utterly disrupts the formation of their group identity. A modern example could be a political opponent who one sees as immutably depraved, then upon meeting him or her, one finds out they are, in fact, sane and kind, rather than the terrible evil which we had suspected.

Later in the passage, the healed man requests to follow Jesus and abscond from his home to become a disciple. But interestingly, Jesus refuses his request, instead commanding him to return home and share what the Lord has done for him. For Jesus, the man's encounter with the living God will be most powerfully demonstrated by sitting, clothed, and in his right mind among the community from which he was cast out. The colorful vivacity of God will be exhibited most beautifully by living as a former scapegoat within the society which must now learn to live without its previous economy of exclusion in order to establish peace. The challenge for him will be to live without resentment, sane, and fully alive among a group now disrupted by his very presence.

The possessed man remains possessed, but now rapturously possessed by the Spirit of God that was enfleshed in the rabbi's gentle words moments before. What had been external in the voice and actions of Jesus now resides – holy – in the interior of his soul, within him, as the heartbeat of the Creator who dreams for us to be free, and will fervently rejoice in nothing less than our passionate love for one another, becoming the awaited intimations of a right mind.

RHYTHM: The story is a challenge to us in all of the ways we construct our identity in contrast to another. It is seen in the way we trash-talk friends behind their backs because it binds together those who are there. Groups that are founded like the Gerasene town only know how to be defensive, how to exclude, how to dismiss. But to be in a right mind means moving to a place that is beyond resentment, confident that a new sort of gathering can exist where there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female, republican nor democrat, plumber nor lawyer. This sort of community (what we hope to call The Church) is confident that the truth can be spoken peacefully and is immune to the sort of exclusionary tactics of typical group identities. In our lives, perhaps the greatest call is to live sitting, clothed, and in our right mind amidst a chaotic, violent, destructive world. So today, we pray for all the places where we scapegoat to be revealed, and for a Spirit of comfort to wash over those of us who have been scapegoated, knowing that God is with the outcast, the misfit, and the excluded.

Day 11

Mark 5:35-40

While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. "Your daughter is dead," they said. "Why bother the teacher anymore?" Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, "Don't be afraid; just believe." He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. He went in and said to them, "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep." But they laughed at him.

Christians are laughed at for all the wrong reasons. I grew up around them; I know this. People like Ned Flanders frequented my universe saying stuff like “okey dokey artichokey.” We get laughed at for our canned acceptance speeches at award shows, and for the way our voices change to soft and introspective when we pray. Our subcultural quips like “Fear Not” and “Jesus is my homeboy” are just the tip of iceberg for us because we also do amazing things with chart topping songs – have you heard *God Night*, a remake of *Good Night* by the Blackeyed Peas? It’s not good. We’re funny because trends travel fast in our insular communities; big rim hats went viral a year ago when a minor Christian celebrity dawned one in a worship video. That’s funny.

But have you met the kind of person who is laughed at, not for being a caricature of Ned Flanders, but because they see life through a certain kind of lens – a lens of possibilities maybe you don’t feel comfortable considering? Clearly the laughter Jesus stirred in this situation was the kind that emerges in the face of the absurd. He was calling what the people knew to be the very definition of *dead* something else: *sleep*. He was seeing the situation with different eyes and with different possibilities.

When you live in tandem with God, subtle, more absurd realities, seem worth considering as you discover a God of infinite energy and love, available and deeply interested in your daily life.

RHYTHM: Today, as you go through your day, make it your rhythm to notice where there is pain and suffering in the world. It can be something that you personally are facing, or something a friend or stranger is facing. Ask God to turn those situations from dead ends (death) to hopeful (sleep). Ask God to intervene and to bring the unbelievable to bear on the lives, experiences, and emotions of the people you are praying for (i.e. If your friend is depressed, pray that joy would interrupt their sadness in a significant way).

Day 12

Mark 6:7-11 – On the Risk of Faith

Jesus called the Twelve, and began to send them out in pairs, giving them authority over unclean spirits. These were his instructions: they were not to take anything for the road, just one staff; no bread, no bag, no cash in the belt; to wear sandals, and not to wear a second tunic. “Whenever you go into a house,” he told them, “stay there until you leave the town. If any place doesn’t welcome you, or won’t listen to you, go away and wipe the dust from your feet as evidence against them.”

Elsewhere, Jesus tells a parable about a merchant who sells everything he owns to buy a priceless pearl. The wisdom of Jesus’s story lies in the paradox: while the merchant is the richest person on earth (for this pearl is of incomparable value), he is simultaneously the poorest because unless he sells the pearl (which he won’t because he loves it), he has no possessions at all. Jesus wants us to see the world anew where, if we have nothing but the Kingdom, we still possess everything.

In this passage, Jesus advises his disciples to take no food, no change of clothes, no extra lunch money, and gives them only one thing in return: Authority over the powers that work against them. According to his instruction, there are three ingredients for the movement of God’s dream to be implanted on earth: A friend (pairs), authority, and the courage to take risks; or in other words, one needs nothing – or properly – should have next to nothing in order to follow Jesus, and nonetheless should take no thought for tomorrow, for they are to be as careless and insouciant as the flowers that color the fields.

But perhaps most of all, this passage is a comfort to us, for Jesus does not equip his disciples with prodigious funding, remarkable talents with which to astound, or unrivaled intelligence, he instead asks of them to take the risk of faith knowing that when we are grounded in the knowledge that God is for us, with us, and ahead of us – and when we are confident that He is giving us ourselves from a beautiful future we do not yet possess – risking hunger, poverty, and

death are really no more than trivialities. Jesus simply wants us to be loving sojourners here on earth, “as sorrowful, yet always celebrating; as poor yet bringing riches to many; as *having nothing, yet possessing everything*” (2 Cor. 6:10), because “whether it’s the world or life or death, whether it’s the present or the future—all things are yours” (1 Cor. 3:22).

All things are yours.

RHYTHM: Think of an area of your life where you can take a risk. Maybe it’s calling someone you haven’t talked to in a while, starting a conversation with a stranger, stretching yourself through tithing and giving, or something else entirely. Today, take a risk which makes you profoundly uncomfortable, knowing that all things are yours.

Day 13

Mark 6:26-28

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John’s head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother.

How powerful is the desire to save face? We are often paralyzed to do the *good* – the *obvious good* – because the powers-that-be would rather us not. King Herod feared John the Baptist but he feared his court’s opinion more. After all, he had promised his new wife’s daughter anything she wanted – up to half of his kingdom. Clearly, he was drunk. Instead of owning up and saying “just kidding,” when his new daughter in law asked for the head of a revered and godly prophet (John the Baptist), Herod chose to save face, and that is how evil – entrenched systemic evil – is born. This was a simple, seemingly insignificant moment, in which a person with power does not use their power to protect the *good* but to promote the *bad*.

This narrative is brilliant in representing how easy this can happen:

- She asks for the prophet’s head.
- The King did not want to refuse her.
- He gave the order to an executioner.
- The executioner went to John’s cell, beheaded him, and brought his head back to Herod on a platter.

Pretty easy right? You might say, “for people in power but not me.” And that statement will play out over and over in your life in all kinds and forms of injustice. It is likely that Herod had an inferiority complex and that his own lack of self-confidence, made his command to kill a revered prophet seem somehow worthwhile. We exploit and kill not because we believe we are powerful and full of potential, but because we think we are weak and insignificant. We power up because we have the sinking feeling we have nothing to offer and are forgotten.

It seems a lot of people these days are okay with the idea of God, but when you start talking about Jesus they wonder why. It is only in the knowledge of our own power that we can surrender it to serve the *other*.

RHYTHM: Today, let Jesus rid you of your inferiority complex. It is doing you and the world no good. Commit the following passage to memory and use it as a mantra through the day, constantly recalling the idea that what God sees in you is anything but weak and pathetic – God sees pure potential.

Day 14

Psalm 139:13-14

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

*Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*

Mark 6:53-55

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him and ran about the whole region and began to bring the sick people on their beds to wherever they heard he was.

Where we take our weak and our sick is where God resides.

Are people afraid of you? Are they intimidated by your talent or your appearance? Maybe not yet, but are you secretly waiting for that day that you walk in the room and people look enviously upon your grand entrance? It is interesting that in the human heart dwells two seemingly contradictory propensities – self-loathing and self-worship. They are one in the same. The weak-hearted Herod was at the same time a man who thought the world revolved around him and a man who did not think his decisions mattered very much. One thing we know for certain, there is no historical account of people bringing their sick and afflicted to the steps of Herod's palace. We take our sick daughter where someone will hear her and understand her pain. We take our sick heart to those places where it will not be exploited but held with care and understanding.

Afflicted people found Jesus because Jesus met them, saw them, and cared for them where they were. In Jesus, we see the fullness of his deity played out, not just in the resurrection, or the miracles he performed, but in the gathering of invalids and outcasts that followed him wherever he went. Jesus's unique nature of God and man in one was perhaps most beautifully demonstrated in the picture of the weak and disillusioned finding, in Christ, both a mirror of their suffering as well as a power to leave that suffering and brokenness behind. It is in the realization of our brokenness and even smallness that we discover space for God.

"It is only when you realize your bareness, your emptiness, that God can fill you with Himself."
– Mother Theresa

Question: Is God in our church? Are people bringing to us their broken hearts and broken friends? The answer is simply and profoundly answered, "TO THE DEGREE THAT CHRIST IS PRESENT IN YOU."

RHYTHM: Today, make a rhythm of checking in with God through pen and paper. Journal about the areas where you feel emptiest and barren. As part of your writing prompt, explore the qualities of the substance with which God desires to fill you (the Holy Spirit), and then explore the effects of that filling. Take thirty minutes during the morning, or lunch to do this.

Day 15

Mark 7:15

Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of person that defiles them.

The religious teachers of Jesus's day had a whole list of things that they would do to be righteous (i.e. cool with God). A large part of the list was made up of eating regulations. For instance, they were not allowed to eat certain kinds of meat (i.e. shell fish or pork) and there could be no blood in their meat. Today, we understand these religious regulations as Kosher law.

Into this cultural situation Jesus raises an important hand, and in no uncertain terms he states what you and I know to be true. To be a good person has less to do with what you eat and more to do with what comes out of your mouth. Just think of the people in your life that stand out as incredible people. You probably have no idea what they ate yesterday, but you certainly know how they spoke to you. You know how their words lifted or deflated you. That is because we know each other through the meaning symbols between us we call words.

RHYTHM: Today, make it a habit to observe one thing and do another. First, observe what tends to come out of your mouth. Not just the words, but the quality of your words. Are they typically joyful and hopeful or do they tend to be full of sadness and regret? Are they mad or are they glad? No right answers here, this is a simple exercise in recognizing what is in your heart. The bottom line to what Jesus is getting at is that God wants to meet you in those deep place today – regardless of whether they are dark and ugly. Second, try to intentionally speak well to the people you encounter. If you think someone's hat is nice, tell them. Don't be creepy. If you think a friend needs a word of encouragement, don't text them, call them or get coffee with them. Try to intentionally use your words to build up the people in your life.

Day 16

Mark 8:1-4

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance." His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

What a problem to have. Usually, it's just your own problems to which you wake, but what if the healthiest thing for you and me isn't to wake up and figure out new ways of managing our own stuff? Self-leadership and care is important, but something immeasurable happens when you find yourself in a remote place, where there is no food, and thousands of hungry people – including kids, the elderly and the destitute – are looking to *you*. This is the context of their (the disciples') question in verse four, *"where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"* It is in these situations that we learn two things.

1. We learn that God's heart is compassionate.

In verse two, Jesus says, *"I have compassion for these people."* Through Jesus, we see the heart of God. When offering first fruits and tithes on the altar, a sign of God's rich provision in their lives, Israel would say, *"My Father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt few in number and lived there and became a great nation"* (Deuteronomy 26:5). God has a heart for the wanderer. He loves to see them find - find their potential, find fruitfulness, find Him. The people depicted in the feeding of the four thousand were wanderers and seekers – people looking for nourishment in the wilderness of life. Into this rough situation, Jesus puts his students. He wants them to feel the need of a hungry world acutely. He wants them to feel the

desperation of a people long held under the grip of disease, lies, and geo-political injustices. He wanted them to come to the place where they were not just asking, *“how am I going to make it through the day?”* but, *“how are we going to feed all these people?”* Which brings us to the second lesson.

2. Your healing awaits you amongst the broken.

The idea that you need to get yourself right before you help others misses a very huge point of *becoming*. Vision precedes becoming. The disciples were about to make a profound memory that would forever be a defining moment in their own process of becoming and it all happened because they followed Jesus in to an impossible situation filled with broken people. How often do we avoid the impossible situation, (*“How are we going to feed all these people in the middle of nowhere?”*) and miss the vision of what the YOU + GOD life has the potential to be, both to the suffering world around us, as well as to our own becoming. God is making you someone who is free, loving, and glorious, but that person is only discovered in the impossible situations to which the YOU+GOD life will lead you.

RHYTHM: Common(s) has all kinds of ways you can step into impossible situations. Maybe it's investing in the next generation—encouraging a student, mentoring someone younger, or helping a family in a practical way. Making time for *wanderers* in your life by committing to a regular rhythm of caring for those in need.

Day 17

Mark 8:15-17

“Be careful,” Jesus warned them. “Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod.” They discussed this with one another and said, “It is because we have no bread.” Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: “Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?”

By this point in his earthly ministry, Jesus had already performed two miracles by multiplying bread. So, how funny is it that his students are worried about not having bread? They have a bread machine with them. Clearly this is one concern they can put aside. But they are like you and I – probably hungry, or just seeking some comfort. Maybe talking about bread is way easier than going with Jesus down the rabbit hole of whatever he meant, so they just kept it simple. Jesus was referring to the teaching of the Pharisees, in particular that it was missing the mark – it was not a teaching that gets to the point of life, and now Jesus's own disciples are also missing the point.

Daniel Goleman, in his book *Focus*, observes, *“Martin Luther King Jr. observed that those who failed to offer their aid asked themselves the question: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ But the Good Samaritan reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man what will happen to him?’”*

The only difference was where the observer was directing his/her attention. Goleman goes on to affirm exactly Jesus's point, *“Directing attention toward where it needs to go is a primal task of leadership.”*

Simply put, the disciples were focused on the physical instead of the foundational/spiritual. They were thinking about lunch and Jesus was focused on a subtle but sinister idea/philosophy that he had observed in the ranks of the Pharisees. Neil Postman, in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, notes that we are not much different than Jesus's students. We spend most of our time A-MUSING – which literally means, “not thinking”. We are so overwhelmed with life that we have given our focus over to the despot of techno-musement – aka your phone.

RHYTHM: Today, as your rhythm, spend time without your phone. If you can, leave it at home. If you can't, then try not to reference it, even for text messaging, except at noon, and when you go to sleep at night. At those times, after you check your messages for anything important, use your Notes App to journal where your focus has been since you woke up till present. Do this both at noon and then again when you go to bed at night.

Day 18

Mark 9:17-18

A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

The disciples "could not." What if I said the most powerful realization we can ever have is that we "cannot"? I know this is not the pep talk you wanted this morning, right? But just think about the beauty that occurs from that simple yet profound moment of realization and the resulting surrender. Countless people who have struggled with addiction have learned the power in the statement "I cannot." Except they say it something like, *"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."* Ironically, this statement of release and surrender is often the starting point of a new energy, a new source, a new depth of resource that can make amazing things happen in our lives and the lives around us. Why? Because, as Jesus points out later on in the unfolding of this story, *"This kind can come out only by prayer. [some manuscripts add fasting]."* What is prayer? It's a conversation. So why does it have anything to do with healing this little boy? Prayer is the tapping of a new reality. It creates pathways and tributaries to the heart, mind, and even realities of God which can change reality as we know it. It is no surprise then that some of the most beautiful outbreaks of unity across racial and socioeconomic lines has occurred in the midst of a prayer movement. The Azusa Street Revivals stand as a powerful and recent reminder of how the coming to the end of ourselves and the resulting turning to God through prayer is often the invocation of new realities.

RHYTHM: What are the areas of your life where you feel you "cannot"? It could be something as personal as forgiving a friend who has hurt you deeply, or the carrying out and finishing of a task that currently seems impossible. Meet God today in the morning, afternoon, and evening. Meet God in your "I cannot." Meet Him in your need. At best, you will see breakthrough, at worst you will have gained a deeper understanding and connection with your Creator and Friend.

Day 19

Mark 10:14-16 – Have You Found Him?

"Let the little children come to me, do not prevent them; for such is the Kingdom of God. Amen, I tell you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child certainly may not enter into it." And, enfolding them in his arms and laying hands upon them, he blesses them.

On a day not too long ago, I was walking from a shop carrying a couple books, when from behind me I heard a mother and daughter joking about the mother's imaginary daughters, "Slibble," "Bibble," and "Syble." Hearing the joyous wonder of the child's laugh, it was as if, in that precious, fleeting moment, her happy giggle cast the shadows from the sable in my clothes. For a second, I thought I should turn around and concretize the memory; the young laughing child with her hair laying awkwardly across her face in the blustery day; maybe she would pull one strand out of her eyes only to close them again in laughter as her funny mother created her funny fictions. But I thought it better to allow the memory to remain as that of

imaginary recollection, where that delighted voice will call to me always, the childish tone of joy constantly trying to reach me over the howl of the restless wind. And that, I believe, was worth my refrain.

Although that experience is my own and cannot be yours, I am confident that for everyone there is a child-like whisper desiring to reach you over the cacophony of our boorish and boring lives, a child-like voice that is at the heart of creation. We have so very misrepresented God as a grand tyrant on a grand throne thinking how grand he is, but have we found our King? He eats with us, kissing fisherman's daughters saying they are like God.

The Kingdom of God is like a child blowing a dandelion full of wishes.

The Kingdom of God is like a child who pees his pants and quietly mumbles, "sorry," thinking the event much more cause for laughter than cause for embarrassment.

The Kingdom of God is innocence reclaimed.

The Kingdom of God is like the love of a mother as she holds her child covered in a bath towel, singing softly for only them to hear.

The Kingdom of God is like two kids laughing as they knock over their colored-block castle together.

The Kingdom of God is like yelling at the monsters under the bed and making friends with them afterwards.

The Kingdom of God is found with picnic children, holding hands as they dance together, saying Hello to the sun.

The Kingdom of God is like a child, because God is like a child.

Are you one?

RHYTHM: As we go throughout the routine of our days filled with petty disagreements, gossip, cynicism, despair, and heavy sighs, every time one of these thoughts comes into our mind, may we take a deep breath and look to the children in our lives, how they are absent of these qualities, instead filled with light, wonder, excitement, and a delight at the very act of being. Our vision of God shapes who we are, so let us think of our general mood and challenge ourselves today to ask God to change our disposition to that of a child, for the pulse of God is the first smile of an infant at her new family and the adventure she is about to begin.

Day 20

Mark 10:17-22 – For When You Can't Find Your Heart

And, as Jesus went forth into the roadway, someone came running to him and knelt and asked, "Good teacher, what may I do in order that I may inherit the life of the Age?" ... "You know the commandments," Jesus said... The young ruler replied, "Teacher all of these I have kept since my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You lack a single thing: Go, sell whatever you possess and give to the destitute, and you shall have a treasury in the heavens, and come follow me." But the young man, saddened by the counsel, went away in sorrow, for he was someone who had many possessions.

To follow Jesus means many things: to become a partaker of the Divine nature, to dream the dreams of God, to love another as one loves themselves, to confess the death and resurrection of Christ, to take care of the poor, the widow, the orphan, to live a life grounded in grace and peace; nor does that exhaust description or imagination. Every act one does in the name of Jesus flows out of a deep confidence that you are held like a mother holds her child, that you

are loved to the point of death and beyond (Piglet once asks Pooh if they shall be friends forever, to which Pooh cleverly replies, “even longer”), and that God cares for you with such passion that He has given you a new you, a new future; and along with this, a new creation where tears no longer have a place, where we are all joined to the joyful bliss of being united to God and God to us.

And yet Jesus challenges this young ruler with a demand that comes easy only for the desolate. He asks him to give away everything he has. What will following Jesus cost us? Is it worth it?

The early Christians were radicals. They disavowed any phantom sense of private property, wealth, and personal possessions. According to that early Christian manual, the *Didache*, a follower of Jesus is never to claim anything as his or her own, but must hold everything as common property among the community (4:9-12). However untenable this early Christian model might be for today, we must recognize how economically prodigal and politically provocative their lifestyle was. Indeed, they truly believed they were part of a kingdom not from this world (though very much intended for it).

But why? Because, as this passage says, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” And if this is true of us – that the God of the universe wrote Himself into human history and loves each of his creations with an invincible and deathless love – how should we then live? What would our answer be to Christ as he looks on us full of compassion?

Although we may not sell him for thirty pieces of silver, would we buy him with everything we have?

RHYTHM: Today we take count of our possessions, what we own and what owns us. How are we using what God has given us? Will we find that we have misplaced our hearts? For Jesus says that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. Will this counsel sadden us? Or will it set us free?

Day 21

Mark 10: 35-40 – Thunder Recapitulated

And James and John, the Sons of Thunder, approach him, saying to him, “Teacher, we wish that you would do for us whatever we might request of you.” And he said to them, “What do you wish that I might do for you?” And they said to him, “Grant to us that, in your glory, we may sit one on your right and one on your left.” But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you ask...to sit on my right and on my left is not mine to give, but is theirs for whom it has been prepared.”

James and John, reckless and impolite as they are, rudely demand of Jesus positions of power: two thrones – the most valuable and coveted chairs of authority – from which they will rule the nations. As it happens, they contort beyond recognition nearly every precept Jesus has taught them. Another story regales to us these two thunderous disciples uproariously asking permission from Jesus to call fire down from heaven upon a village that refuses to show them hospitality. Jesus, laden with frustration and anger at their obduracy, sorrowfully rebukes them saying, “You do not know what spirit you are of,” for Jesus came “to save the world, not to condemn it.” But nonetheless, the seemingly deaf pair ask Jesus for glory; little do they know, they are not aware of what they ask.

Later in Mark, the author records that when Jesus is executed upon the tree, “they crucify two bandits with him, *one at his right and one at his left*” (15:27). Do you see it? “Theirs for whom it has been prepared” are two thieves, brigands, political revolutionaries, who are crucified for similar crimes as Jesus (though the latter was, of course, innocent of violent revolt). The writer wants us to reverse, reject, and reconfigure our entire acceptance of what it means to be “in your glory.” When Jesus comes into his glory and establishes his kingdom, it is catalyzed by

his bloody, muddy, torturous death, and not a violent assault upon Rome. “The epigraph of the charge against him was: ‘THE KING OF THE JUDAEANS’” (15:26). And this pronouncement was *right*.

Jesus was a king and he did have glory, but in such a subversive way as to reduce to nothing our entire conceptions of their meaning. He had a crown (of thorns), a throne (of wood), a coronal procession (to his death), and a right and left hand man (criminals). If God’s truth is in fact to be found where Christ is, the mockery visited on him is reversed to be upon the empire and its rulers, all of whose luxurious finery, when set beside the majesty of the humble shape in which God reveals Himself, shows itself to be powerless. This crucified rabbi is the eternal Logos, whom God has demonstrated to be in the right, and thus so many of our perennial truths are exposed to be false: As Jesus says, “it is not so among you; rather whoever among you wishes to be great will be your servant” (10:43), the powerful are removed from their places of power, and the poor lifted up, the hungry are filled with food while the rich are sent away empty. In this otherworldly kingdom, everything is reversed and nothing is as it seems. Perhaps Jesus would rather have had a couple disciples who were Sons of a Gentle Rain.

RHYTHM: Meister Eckhart, a German mystic, was known to pray, “God rid me of God.” And in so doing, he asked God to remove all of his conceptions of the Divine which were not fitting. I wonder too how comfortable we would be if God answered our prayer “Thy Kingdom come,” considering it is so unexpected and upsetting to our preconceptions, especially the expectations of the twenty-first century American middle-class. Today, we pray for God to rid us of all of our misconceptions of who He is – everything that falls short of true Love – and invite the Kingdom into our lives, knowing that it will not be as we suspect. *God rid us of God.*

Day 22

Mark 11:23 – Geography & the Meaning of Everything

“Have faith in God. Amen, I tell you that whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be caught up and flung into the sea,’ and is not divided in his heart, but rather has faith that what he says is happening it will be his.”

I doubt I am the only one who, after reading the above passage, has foolishly travelled to the nearest mountain, and silently prayed for it to cast itself into the Pacific or any ocean really. Occasionally, I have been humbler in my request, sometimes asking the mountain to waltz momentarily, or wave for a second; it didn’t have to walk all the way to the sea; that is a lot to ask after all. However, I am not sure Jesus desired our perennial frustration at the obstinacy of mountains. When Jesus passes this admonition to his disciples he is “at the Mount of Olives” (11:1), and if he was atop this mountain in the first century (33ish CE), he would have looked upon a palace in the distance built not too long before (23-15 BCE), called the Herodium (a modest title given by its conceiver, Herod the *Great* – another modest title after a modest man, of course). Now, Herod wanted a palace in this particular spot where he won a crucial victory against his antagonists in 40 BCE, and since his name was The *Great*, he didn’t intend this to be a small cottage home to take the wife every Christmas.

Herod decided that he would like a mountain for his palace to be built on top of, so he *built a mountain* on which he could crown his palace. It had a pool nine feet deep with a gazebo in the middle that could only be reached by boat. This is to say: Herod *moved a mountain* to have his glorious palatial castle reside. And Jesus looks out and says that with just a little faith, one can tell this mountain to be cast up into the sea. It is as if Jesus is saying any act, no matter how little, forgettable, or seemingly insignificant, done with faith in God is more substantial than even the greatest human achievements of magnificent craftsmanship and exquisite architecture. Compared with any small act of faith, the majestic productions of human expertise are dust and ashes.

RHYTHM: How many ordinary moments do we have in each day? The smiles we could gift passersby, the times we set the table for those we love, conversations we could have with strangers. Each mundane moment is an opportunity to fill that moment with acts of faith: smiles for the strangers, the listening to stories from those we don't know, the cooking of a meal for our friends and family, believing that these seeming trivialities *matter*; that everything, indeed, matters. Today, may we go for a walk, either near a mountain, or perhaps, if able, in sight of one, and do one small act of trust, of faithfulness, of commitment, and take a breath knowing that this act is of greater value than the castles of old. If we think about it, these palaces will one day collapse into ruins, while these ordinary and holy acts shall last forever.

Day 23

Mark 12:13-17

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." And they were amazed at him.

As they should be. In one move, Jesus avoided a political ruse while at the same time managed to encompass, in his simple response, the most profound idea relating to God and people. For any Jewish teacher, to talk of images would conjure up the first passages of the Bible where it says, "*in the image of God he created him*" (Genesis 1:27). Jesus's question, Whose image was on the coin? was a *remez*, a rabbinical hermeneutical device that operates as a hint; an unfinished idea begging to be finished, a familiar tone of human existence that Jesus sought, in this moment, to superimpose on the situation. Jesus was turning their petty efforts to trap and murder into a moment of reflection on who they truly are and for what they exist. In short, the question of Whose image was on the coin? could only naturally be followed by the complementary and profound follow up question of, Whose image is on you?

RHYTHM: As you reflect on what it means to be made in the *Imago Dei* (Image of God), consider what it means to give yourself to God. Find time today to talk with a friend or a loved one about what it means to give yourself to God. Reflect on personal experience, Scripture, or other resources that help percolate the conversation.

Day 24

Mark 12:24

Jesus replied, "Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?"

We seem to be moving forward as fast as we can, never really looking for the power that lurks in the dark corners of our experience. We mapped the human genome discovering 3.2 billion bits of information and we failed to see the power. We stood on the moon and stared back at that hazy blue dot called earth and failed to see the power. We have stared into the abyss of the night sky and contemplated its vast and harsh reality in juxtaposition to our cozy corner, and have missed the power. We have seen a child take their first breath, take their first steps, and say their first words – all the while missing the juice behind life.

In this passage, Jesus is addressing a sect within the Jewish religious order known as the Sadducees. What you need to know about the Sadducees is that they did not believe in a

resurrection of the dead. And so, their question about the resurrection is a loaded one, and per usual, Jesus's response is brilliant. We often forget that Jesus was really intelligent. He is often categorized as the Christ, the God-man, and in these titles we lose a bit of the *fly on the wall* experience of what it was like to be around Jesus. It was like being with a really smart dude, whose answers were unlike anything people had ever heard. His words had authority to them. He did not speak hypothetically, he spoke with a convinced tone, as if he was aware of things maybe we are not aware of.

This moment is no different. The Sadducees want him to riff on their story, but Jesus goes to the heart of the matter as he often did. The intent of their hearts is soon to be uncovered and foiled by Jesus adding something to their method. See, their method was simply materialistic. The Sadducees were only around during the Second Temple period and Josephus notes that they were, for the most part, an upper-class sect. They were wealthy scholars who did not have time for *goblins and elves*. That is to say, they were intellectuals who studied the Scriptures with great skill, but without the power of God.

Jesus is saying something critical to you and I – the sons and daughters of the enlightenment – about the way we read the Bible or even experience life. In short, “Don’t forget the power of God.” That thing, that strong force, that indescribable sense, that profound necessity required to access the deepest and truest parts of Scripture, is waiting for you and I to seek it, interact with it, and yes, even depend on it.

RHYTHM: Today, make it your rhythm to look for the power of God. It could be to simply notice the transcendence in a sunset, or it could be a very real prayer to see God move powerfully in your life. Sometimes a breath prayer, a prayer easily spoken through a simple in hale and exhale would, can invoke new realities into our lives. Try this one,

(INHALE) *Lord Jesus Son of God,*
(EXHALE) *show me your power.*

Day 25

Mark 14:3-9 – The Story of Stories

While he [Jesus] was at the table, a woman came up with an alabaster pot containing extremely valuable ointment made of pure spikenard. She broke the pot and poured the ointment on Jesus's head. Some of the people there grumbled to one another. "What's the point of wasting the ointment?" they asked. "That ointment could have been sold for three-hundred dinars, and given to the poor." And they were angry with her. "Leave her alone," said Jesus... "She has played her part. She has anointed my body for its burial ahead of time. I'm telling you the truth: wherever the good tidings are announced in all the world, the story of what she has just done will be told. That will be her memorial."

We are human because we tell stories. Without the stories of winners and of fighters, of love and of fragility, of structureless stories, we would not be who we are. We cannot live and not have stories to tell.

It's absurd, really, Jesus's claim that that her story will be told wherever the good tidings are shared. I have not – to my knowledge and regret – ever shared the Good News of Jesus with someone and then considered it apposite to subsequently inform them that there was once a woman who poured essential oils on Jesus and that they should know this because it's (apparently) important. But Jesus was right, we are still sharing her story today.

In the above passage, we encounter two stories told: one story about this woman's recklessness is told by Jesus's friends, the other is told by Jesus. And they happen to differ radically. On the one hand, the disciples tell a story that refuses to fight for this woman, exchanging praise for ridicule. Their story is one flowered with criticism. On the other hand,

Jesus tells a story about her riddled instead with exuberance and glory: her act – whether she knew it or not – is conceptualized by Jesus to be an effulgent act of preparation for his soon-coming execution. Two stories are told about the same act; one beautiful, the other crude.

Peculiar as this story is, it is also precious: we are challenged to allow Jesus to retell *our* story; we are not allowed to determine the worth of our story, nor are we permitted to (foolishly) let others tell our story for us. Jesus is the *only* one who tells our story, and how would he retell it? He would retell our lives with joy, with love, with hope, with laughter, with goodness, precisely like he retells this woman's act. He would tell our story and pull the good out of it, giving it new and beautiful meaning where we thought there was none. *We can trust him to tell our story.*

So what questions would we have for him? Why is there so much pain? Will I ever find meaning? Why did they have to die? Why does it hurt so bad? Perhaps he would smile off into the distance as the sun walks into the sea, and gently reply, "The answer is in the story, and the story is not yet finished."

RHYTHM: For this rhythm, I can think of no better than to fragmentarily quote this poetic practice by the brilliant Irish poet, Padraig O'Tuama:

*There is a you
telling you a story of you.
Listen to her.*

*Where do you feel anxiety in your body?
The chest? The fist? The dream before waking?
The head that feels like it's at the top of the swing
or the clutch of gut like falling.*

*For now,
take your hand
and place your hand
some place
upon your body.
And listen
to the community of madness
that
you are.*

*You are
such an
interesting conversation.*

*You belong
here.*

May you know that your story is retold by the unparalleled Storyteller who is with you, for you, and ahead of you, all in Love. And may you know, deep in your bones, that wherever the good tidings are shared the story of what you do will also be told.

Day 26

Mark 14:32-42 – Gethsemane

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay

here and keep watch.” Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Three times Jesus found his protégés fast asleep when he needed them the most. They were asleep to the gravity and depth of suffering Jesus was now facing, slumbering while Jesus faced the cup that was now set before him. It’s easy for this moment in time to be lost to the thin renditions we go to in our minds, versions based on flannel graphs in Sunday School and the various other cultural interpretations in our popular consciousness like *Jesus Christ Superstar*. But for this moment, try to resist all such ruts and suspend any modern inclinations to de-mythologize. Try to imagine this moment was unlike any moment before or after it. To do that, you have to imagine that all human rebellion and its resulting pain and suffering is in some way tied to creation gone rogue. All rogue aspects of creation, according to scripture, coalesce into a heap we might describe as more of an absence than a presence. It comes in the form of discouraging thoughts as well destructive thoughts. It works its way out in the imaginations of the Hitlers and Stalins, just like it lives in the self-deprecating ideas of our minds.

The anguish Jesus suffered in Gethsemane is often thought to be the dread of death, but theologically this was only a small part of it. The pain of Gethsemane and the suffering of the cross was more to do with what it attracted. In that moment, the Church has understood for two-thousand years that what was happening was a gathering. Jesus was luring darkness to him so that in him, it would die. By his drinking of this cup, death, violence, dread, and fear would all, somehow, lose their power once and for all. Imagine a gathering like the ones orchestrated at the end of *Lord of the Rings* trilogy or the gathering of goblins, witches, and all sorts of devils at the great stone table of *The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe*. It is easy to dismiss as pure make believe until you realize the nature of our struggle. We are all, on any given day, looking for something to die. It is either the person who has wronged us, or it is us. We feel the sting of this primordial need in our conversations and our thoughts – it is the human condition.

So if Jesus delivered these forces something of a death blow, why is it not yet our lived experience? What if we need to wake up to the cup? What if being awake to the cup and the willingness required to drink along with Jesus, is the sort of thing that realizes and activates the systemic reset Jesus made possible?

RHYTHM: Today, make as your rhythm three sets of silence. They can be however long you want them to be. Just make time for three set in stone times for silence. You may need to on a walk away from work or even hide in a closet at home – do what you have to do. In that space, repeat in your heart the simple phrase, “Break my heart with what breaks Yours.” Let that simple phrase bring people to mind or situations in the world to your heart. As situations or people come up in your mind, hold them up in your imagination to God and imagine that God’s light is healing them.

Day 27

Mark 14:72 – The Mutinous Beauty of Ancient Tears

And immediately a cock crowed for the second time, and Peter remembered the phrase as Jesus had spoken it to him: “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times;” and, covering himself in his cloak, he wept.

This particular story has a sort of relic popularity where – whether one is an adherent or detester of the Christian tradition – the narrative contents remain familiar. Peter, the boldest and most reckless of Jesus’ rabbinic apprentices, publicly disavows any relationship with Christ three times, while the blood of the one whom he rejects pours unheard on the stone of the floor. His betrayal was inevitable, really, as Jesus had predicted earlier, but Peter remembers his master’s sorrowful declaration only following the rooster’s introduction to the sunrise. And it is here we may pass over something revolutionary. A Galilean peasant weeps; and to Mark, this affair is worthy of record.

We expect this.

But this is certainly not so for the literary world of the first-century, where any notice of this poor fisherman’s sorrow would have been an authorial error, and one that should, if any proper taste stands, be eliminated before the narrative’s circulation. Peter was not deserving of any sympathetic attention from the literate elite, nor could his sadness possibly arouse the type of pity it conjures within us. When one compares this story to the entirety of its counterparts, the scene is distinctly unique in the ancient world. In fact, it is the single narrative of its kind. Only in Peter can a reader in the first-century world witness the pure, raw dignity of humanity in its full lamentable weakness. But Peter was a rural peasant in an occupied territory, so to record his uncontrollable sobs was not merely an exception to accepted literary palettes, it was a rebellion for human worth where every person, no matter how ordinary or pitiable, is of inestimable value. Something here suggests that the God of Jesus is invested in every single part of our lives, even if it’s hidden tears of betrayal.

Yet the story, for one of Mark’s colleagues, does not end in the immutable sadness of betrayal. For the fourth gospel, Peter finds harbor by a courtyard fireplace as Jesus is arraigned. As he warms himself in its coals, he denies Jesus three times. The latter is executed, extinguishing any chance Peter would have to undo his betrayal, to reconcile to the one he loves most, or to beg forgiveness for his wrongdoing. Or that is how it would have been in the ordinary realm of human possibility. John tells us later that Christ rises from the dead and appears to his disciples to cook them breakfast (typical Jesus), preparing the meal over coal fire, strikingly reminiscent, if not just like the previous courtyard fire. The deathless Christ proceeds to ask Peter three times if Peter loves him, and Peter replies that he does indeed love Jesus, to which the master entrusts Peter with leadership of his community. With each reply, Peter’s seemingly undoable sin was reversed. So the Gospel leaves us with this: In the light of the resurrection, a new creation has begun, where the future of the universe comes with it impossible reconciliation, the healing of wounds we believed eternally irreparable, and the beginning of newness precisely when all of our hope was empty.

RHYTHM: Today, we consider the places we do not think matter, the things we neglect because we believe they should go unnoticed, and how we often believe the details of our life are meaningless to God. As we contemplate this may we know that the God of Love believes that even the most intricate and hidden details of our lives matter, that our sadness matters, that the sadness of others matters. And may we know that all of our unreconciled relationships, all of the unreconciled parts of ourselves that, and every deed we think unforgivable, looked upon with the gaze of the resurrection of Jesus, is filled with a rebellious potential and revolutionary hope.

Day 28

Mark 15:25-32

It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two rebels with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked

him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.” Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

RHYTHM: Today, knowing what you know about the level of suffering Jesus underwent, sit in the knowledge that it all started at 9AM. What are you usually doing at 9AM? Are you going to work? Are you on your second cup of coffee? Are you taking your kids to school? We all have a “9am”. We all know what that hour holds for us and even means for us. Today, live into the time references of the story of Christ’s death. It says at noon “darkness came over the whole land”. Imagine what that must have been like. At 3 in the afternoon, before the typical work day is over, it says Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). How often have you uttered something like that in the midst of your day? Through these simple time references we find something interestingly common about Christ’s experience to our own. As you go through your day host these simple thoughts at their corresponding times.

9AM: Imagine the pain involved in the process of crucifixion. It was the pinnacle of Roman barbarity. Cicero called it “the cruelest and most disgusting penalty.” (*crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium*, 2.5.165.). Today, in your 9AM hour, host the idea that this is God in some profound way, communicating to you the lengths to which He is willing to go for love.

12PM: Mark notes that “a darkness came over the whole land.” Imagine what this darkness was like. Was it cloudy, or was there a quality to the atmosphere that felt dark – a cosmic weight? Have you felt darkness come over you before? What did it feel like? What sorts of thoughts did it trigger in your mind? What kinds of feelings did it trigger in your emotions? What does it mean for you/us that God’s ultimate work on earth in some way involved darkness?

3PM: Contemplate the words of Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” If there is a feeling common to people, it is this – that God has left the building and left us to our own devices, that in some way we have been abandoned to this present darkness. As you contemplate these words of Christ, imagine that Jesus, in some mysterious way, is saying this as God. What does it mean for your 3PM and all of your time here on earth, that God experienced alienation to the point of declaring the same hopeless sentiment we often feel?

Day 29

Mark 16:1

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’s body.

How often do we bring burial spices to the site of a resurrection? How often do we wake up, go to church, go to work, show up to our families and relationships expecting a death rather than life? It makes sense, the second law of thermodynamics says that stuff dies, so why would we expect anything else? It’s here that we have to acknowledge that our worlds live wedged between two fields that were never meant to be in opposition – that of faith and reason. It has always been considered reasonable that dead people stay dead, but with faith, well, maybe they don’t. Faith and reason do not seem compatible, until we realize that all scientific exploration and discovery is based in a sort of faith energy that undergirds the development of a hypothesis. You might say, Faith is the moment of looking up and wondering,

and reason is when we reach out, to hold, study and discover all that creation is communicating to us. Supernatural events may be inexplicable, but given our limited knowledge, that does not mean they are not reasonable. Dallas Willard makes the apt point that if the Titanic had pulled up on the shores of Caesarea located on the coast of the Mediterranean Ocean, they would have thought it to be a miracle. What they would call a miracle, we call the law of displacement.

Today, as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, give yourself to the possibilities of life in the face of death. May faith cause you to reach out to this person Jesus. Let reason generate in you a holding, questioning, and rational pursuit of who he is and what happened that fateful day. May faith and reason both create in you a crazy inclination to leave your burial spices at home and expect life capital L through Jesus, in every area of your life.

RHYTHM: Today CELEBRATE!

Celebrate life!

Celebrate hope!

Celebrate that death has no sting!

Celebrate that you are loved!

Celebrate that your neighbor who is kind of a jerk, is loved!

Celebrate that you do not need to fear about anything!

Celebrate that the God of the universe not only sees you but digs you!

Day 30

Mark 16:8 – An Invitation

They went out, and fled from the tomb. Trembling and panic had seized them. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Formally, Mark's gospel ends here. The following section was a later addition, possibly constructed to substitute for a lost ending or to compensate for the suddenness of his closure. The ending is strange to say the least.

One would assume that if a beloved should rise from the dead, bereaved friends of the deceased would have their mourning conquered in ecstatic joy, but here the disciples are seized by panic and they hide. Although this resurrection event is the crescendo of human history, Mark admits to us that he is not yet sure what it means or that he does not yet know how to express it even if he did.

However, the suddenness can be our teacher. Mark's conclusion signifies a profoundly human reaction, because the disciples, rather than comprehending and rejoicing that their Beloved has not been conquered by death but defeated the foe, cower and tremble as if it would be better for them to go into the tombs themselves than to explore an entirely new world where emptied graves are commonplace. Here, Mark extends an invitation for us to be human in all of our doubting frailty and fragile contradictions, where we exchange having something to say, for a fearful, silent, tumbling into the future.

"He is not here," says the angel, he is "going out before you."

And Jesus is always going out before us into the future, waiting for us to step into it, however confused and muddled we may be. It does not matter if we have nothing to say or are full of fear, only that we seize the future all the same precisely because he is already there, has already trampled death, and has implanted within humanity the indestructible possibility of a new future and a totally new reality.

Like so many things in the world, however, this gospel leaves us with no warni—

RHYTHM: Today, we contemplate our futures, the unknowability of them and the uncertainty within them. Contemplate what you want your future to be, and surrender the possibilities to Jesus who is already there waiting for each of us. God's new realities are there for us to take as we create the future with Him, and enter into the new creation He has inaugurated in the resurrection.

May you know take a deep breath and know that the future is yours for the taking, because the future belongs to the God who has conquered the grave.