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How Does a Weary World Rejoice?

We Live Sacred

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Jesus' arrival, as interpreted by the people that experienced it, marked a turning point in the story of God's activity in the world. For the Jews, and this would take some time to tease out, it marked the end of the temple and sacrificial system as they knew it. Their very way of life was getting turned upside down. Jesus would famously say so, declaring that he was the fulfillment of the law. To borrow another phrase from Jesus, this was a new wineskins moment.

In Simeon and Anna's cases, they had eyes to see that what they had been doing, their strategy for discipleship they had been following their entire lives—was in need of change and review. For them to follow God in a new way, they needed to allow God to change their strategy. They needed to put new wine into a new wineskin, cause, as pastor Paul told us a while ago, their faith needed to be stretchy.

Something I've learned in my life, across a lot of areas, is that nothing changes if nothing changes. Simeon and Anna, Elizabeth and Zecharia, Mary and Joseph and on down the line in scripture, all of them had a chance to change the way they followed God after having an encounter with God. The same is true for all of us, in the midst of worshipping encounter with God. We have an opportunity to update our discipleship.

The question is: are the rituals, rhythms, and routines that we're employing getting us closer to where we want to go or are they clear paths in the wrong direction? As we are on the doorstep of a new year, I think that this is an especially important conversation to start today so that you have the week to process it before we roll into 2024.

Here's where I want to go today. I want to look at three questions:

How do you know?

Back at the beginning of June last summer, I sent a letter to the board telling them that I was burned out. I was taking time off and not feeling refreshed. I was practicing self-care and not feeling whole. And I knew that I couldn't press through at the

same rate I had been going and stay here for the long haul. So naturally, I ended that letter by asking for a break one year from now. In other words, I said, "I'm on fire, everything's on fire, I'm not going to make it, so please don't do anything for 12 months."

Wisely, the board and the executive team around here sat me down and said, Hey. We care about your work, but we care about you more. That break you were asking for next summer is a no because we're going to give you one right now. Now, rewind: I knew I needed a break. I requested a break. So of course, I didn't want the one they were giving me.

About three weeks later, after I got over my outrage over being granted a gift of rest, I could finally see more clearly. Looking back now some six months later, I am shocked that I didn't skip out of the building when I was granted the time. Seem ridiculous. But, I can see now that there was no reason I could have seen my own problem because I was too close to it, too immersed in it, too enveloped by it.

That's the way it is sometimes. We're too close to know if or how or that we need to change how we follow God. Keep in mind, I was burned out *pastoring*.

I think that Simeon and Anna give us a clue for how we can know if our patterns of following God are good for us: The first step is to look at where we meet the two of them. The steps of the temple. For as much as I would love to use that fact to tell you to go to church more often, what I want you to pay attention to is that if they are there, then where are they not? well, any number of places. Working, staying busy in ways that make them too busy to pay attention.

The older I get, the more I believe that God isn't really hiding from us. The longer I follow Jesus the less I think it is about how much I know about things. The major barrier to why we can't figure out how to follow God is that we don't have the mental, emotional, spiritual, tangible space to listen. To be still and know. Back to my story, the real magic step in our lives isn't more, it is less. It is sabbath. It is to take God seriously in the creation stories and have a day. It is to follow Jesus'

example and to step away for a little while to reset. It is in those spaces that we can begin to focus and pay attention to the still small voice of God in our lives that might be telling us that a change to our faith is in order.

How do you change?

Ok, so let's say that you feel like Simeon and Anna and me and you sense God is telling you it is time for you to make a change in the way you follow him. How do you change?

Change is hard. There's a great skit featuring Bob Newhart where he plays a therapist who has a female client enter his practice. He starts by explaining their billing process which is five dollars for the first five minutes and then nothing after that. The lady is stunned, thinks, "oh wow, how can it be?"

So, Bob asks her what brought her in and she says, she has a constant fear of being buried alive in a box. So, she can't go into elevators, cars, houses, anything box-y.

Bob replies by saying, "well, that sounds terrible. Now, I'm going to tell you two words and I want you to take them to heart. If you do, then you will no longer have this problem of claustrophobia." So, she gets out a pen and paper to write them down and that is when Bob yells from across the table, "stop it!"

You can imagine the hilarity that ensued.

I think we often use equally unhelpful ways to change how we follow God. We start from John's words, "repent" and we take from that statement that we need to shout it at people or guilt them or shame them into being better Christians.

Friends, "repent" isn't a word rooted in guilt or shame or accusation or more effort. It is a word, for Jesus and John, that is rooted in grace. So often when we think about 'being a better Christian' we beat ourselves up with ideas like, "just pray more" or "if I was a better Christian then I would X or I wouldn't do Y." That isn't how to change how to follow Jesus. The way to change how you follow Jesus is to receive grace: the unmerited, unconditional, unstoppable love and presence of God into your life.

Grace shines a light that helps you to see clearly what is broken. Grace is a balm that satisfies what

hurts. Grace is a presence that never leaves you. Accepting grace is how we change.

How do you stick to it?

OK, so we're making space for God to speak into our lives. We're letting God's grace rush over us so we can start fresh in our faith, how do we stick to it? Spoiler alert. You probably won't.

When I was a high schooler and college student, there were at least three times I prayed a prayer, raised my hand, and went up to the cross where I promised to be a better follower of Jesus. There have been dozens of times I've kicked off a new habit, a new routine, a new practice, or discipline that is now defunct.

The way I think about all of those times I've responded to some kind of altar call, I laugh because it's like I've unplugged and plugged myself in again hoping that the glitch gets fixed.

There's an interesting line in what Simeon has to say to Jesus' family. He says that, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose him. ³⁵ As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." If you think that our community of faith or any community of faith that you have ever been a part of tried harder and more often to follow God than the Pharisees, then you are wrong. The Pharisees, which was the largest group of Jews in Jerusalem at the time believed that it was through ritual purity and religious observance that they would remain God's chosen people. This prophecy from Simeon turns that impulse on its head. It turns it on its head for the Pharisees and I think for us, too.

What makes Jesus so hard for us to deal with sometimes is that he shows us, reveals to us that it isn't about us. It isn't about what you do or don't do. It is about how good or not good. spiritual or not spiritual you are. It is about him. It is about what he has done and will do.

When you don't stick to God, God sticks to you. And it doesn't really matter if you don't meditate on that every day, remember it all the time, or even practice it in some kind of discipline—it is still true.

BUT, and this is beautiful, we are invited to try and fail, rinse and repeat, pent and repent—that's not a

word—with God throughout our lives. To dig into our relationship with this God that shows up again and again in unexpected ways, showing us grace so that we can have life and life to the full.

I don't know what your rituals, rhythms, or routines have been in your faith journey. Maybe you don't have any. In either case, we have this opportunity as we gather ourselves for a new year to be mindful of them. And I hope that you do. Over the last weeks we've encountered Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, shepherds, wisemen, and some farm animals and they all seem to be having a life-changing encounter because of their relationship with Jesus. I want that for me and for you, too. So, take some time in the days ahead to create some space. Let grace rush in to create a foundation for your faith. And finally rest in the fact that it is God that will complete the good work that GOD started in you in the first place.