

WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED:
A retreat to remind me that I am beloved by God

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The day that I began writing this retreat was Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the 40-day period in the church calendar called Lent, where followers of Jesus (and those wanting to be baptized into the faith) observe a time of fasting and penitence (sorrow for one's sins). The 40 days are symbolic of Jesus' 40 days of being in the wilderness, culminating in his temptation by the devil. So, here I was in church having just received the ashen-cross on my forehead, reminding me that I (as a human) originated from dust, and that I would be returning to dust at the end of my life. Sobering, yes. But so is 40 days of choosing some type of fast and reminding myself that I am a sinner. Because, you know, sometimes I forget I still need saving.

During the service we read David's anguished confession regarding his adultery with Bathsheba, Psalm 51. If those words did not do the trick, the litany we prayed afterwards surely did:

*We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. (Frankly, we really could have ended there. It covers a lot of ground.)
We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us.
We confess our pride, hypocrisy, and impatience.
Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people
Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work
For our waste and pollution of creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us
For our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty*

I'll spare you more. But you get the idea.

Like cold water thrown into my face, I was awakened to my own woeful, sinfulness. Once again. Oh yes, I am indeed, still, in need of saving. And by saving, I mean, forgiven, washed clean, restored, made more like Jesus. I need Thee, O, I need Thee. Every hour I need Thee.

We then had communion. Something we do every week. The prayer leading up to communion, said by the pastor, is one I have heard most of my life. But on this day, the prayer after communion, also one that I have repeated countless times, jumped off the page.

*Almighty and everliving God,
we thank you for feeding us
with the spiritual food
of the most precious Body and Blood
of your Son our Savior, Jesus Christ;
And for assuring in these holy mysteries
that **we are living members of the Body of your Son,
and heirs of your eternal Kingdom....***

It's true. I am sinful beyond my knowing. But yet, I am **also** a living member of Christ's Body and **in addition**, an heir of an eternal Kingdom! How can this be? I am filled with wonder, awe, gratitude, praise, and incredulity.

How do you respond to this?

Take a moment and check in with yourself. Do you feel loved by God? In addition to knowing you are loved by God, do also you feel it? If you are struggling with this a bit, do this one thing: take the last line of the prayer above, and change the words to, "I am held, and I am Yours" and repeat it slowly, as many times as you like. Put your hand over your heart. Smile. Lift your head up to receive.

A Prayer for Ash Wednesday

(Bill Haley, Coracle)

We forget sometimes that ashes come from fire,
That this soft black powder was once a firm green frond,
Bright and vibrant before it became dry and brittle,
Stiff and fibrous before a flame transformed it into dust.
Every living thing submits to change.
Let's not fear it.
From seed to plant, palm to ash,
This bit of the earth smudged on our foreheads today
Was carried lovingly in the hands of the Creator.
What fires will we step into this Lent?
What new forms will our souls take
When we encounter the holy blaze of the Living God?
We are—it is true—ash to ash and dust to dust,
But whether in youth or in old age, in life or in death,
Let us be assured,
We are held, and we are God's.
Amen.

"Nothing is as fundamental to the Christian journey as knowing and feeling that we are loved." ~Gordon T. Smith, *The Voice of Jesus*

Scripture Engagement

Approach: How have success and failure, love, neglect and rejection, good AFR numbers and disappointing AFR numbers or other people's opinions influenced your sense of belonging to God?

Now read Isaiah 31: 1, 3

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
And who rely on horses,
Who trust in chariots because they are many
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But do not look to the Holy One of Israel
Or consult the Lord!*

*The Egyptians are human and not God;
Their horses are flesh and not spirit.
When the Lord stretches out his hand,
The helper will stumble, and the one helped will fall,
And they will all perish together.*

Egypt* can represent financial power, the place that enslaved you, and/or the height of cultural influence. What are the things or relationships in your life that you may turn to for validation, to give you a sense of "I'm OK," or "I am allowed to take up space," etc.? Or what things might you turn to for help or to fill that sense of emptiness you may feel?

- Performance review
- Social media likes
- Standing out more than others
- Excessive alcohol consumption
- Rumination
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Do you find yourself turning back to something that enslaves you? What is alluring about those things? What is the shape and quality of your faith after turning to them? What does God want to say to you about your turning? How can you respond?

Look underneath that turning. What might you be afraid of?

Bring that fear into the open; into a conversation with Jesus. He knows you are afraid. Ask him to speak to you about that fear.



When you are ready, watch the video [No Longer Slaves](#) by Zach Williams and allow it to touch your spirit and lead you into worship.

Take some time to list the ways God has delivered you from any kind of slavery.

Further Reflection & Scripture Engagement: Looking at Jesus' Baptism

"So John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the whole Judean region and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him and were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins. Now, John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

--Mark 1: 4-11

Reflection

- Use your senses to imagine this scene. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you smell? What are you touching? What do you taste?
- Focus on John. What strikes you about him? Consider his humility. Richard Foster writes in *Leaning Humility* (IVP, 2022), that humility is “seeing yourself as you truly are.” Give that some thought next time you post on social media. But also go back to the first section of this retreat to remind yourself of what is true about you.
- What is the relationship between humility and belonging to God?
- How is God inviting you further into humility?
- Notice again the words of the voice from the heavens to Jesus. See Jesus in his humanity, here, receiving this blessing from his Father. Mark’s gospel uses the personal “you”—“with you I am well pleased.” A personal, perhaps private, message to Jesus as he begins his ministry.
- What difference could that have made in Jesus’ life?
- How did Jesus’ sense of belonging affect his life, consider the impact of serving, being misunderstood, being the target of much criticism, rejection, disrespected, betrayal, having his closest friends fall asleep when he asked them to pray with him, being unjustly accused, tortured, and then crucified?

Henri Nouwen writes in *The Life of the Beloved*, “We also need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God who will never leave us alone, but will remind us always that we are guided by love on every step of our lives...The great spiritual call of the Beloved Children of God is to pull their brokenness away from the shadow of the curse and put it under the light of the blessings. This is not as easy as it sounds. The powers of the darkness around us are strong...But when we keep listening attentively to the voice calling us the Beloved, it becomes possible to live out brokenness, not as a confirmation of our fear that we are worthless, but as an opportunity to purify and deepen the blessing that rests upon us.”

With Jesus, look back over the last weeks of your work and life.

- Where did you sense your own brokenness?
- When did you turn away from seeking horses and chariots and return to God’s embrace?
- When did you sense that still small voice saying, “In you I am well pleased”?

Now would be a good place to go take a walk. A slow walk. Let things deepen in you. Take a word or phrase with you that you can savor as you walk.

Conclusion

After you walk, what has deepened in you?

Consider writing in your journal a paragraph or two about your belonging to God, i.e. what it looks like, how you feel about it, when do you most need to be reminded about it, what are the fears that lead you to trust in horses and chariots, etc.

Consider this breath prayer as you sit in a comfortable chair.

On the inhale, we take in what is life.
On the exhale we release what is death.

Inhale—I am a child of God;
Exhale—I will not be a slave to fear.

Ask yourself: How will I cultivate a sense of belonging through these next months? (e.g. conversations in community, consistent devotional time, memorize Scripture, breath prayer...)

A Collect for Belonging

O good Father, Father of Jesus, Father of us all,
the One who spoke the first words of belonging,
who doesn't leave us orphaned: Forgive us for
trusting in temporary things we think will satisfy, but always leave us wanting.
Grant to us an unshakable sense
of our unchangeable identity as yours.
In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN.