



What are
you looking
for?

A devotional for the PLU community.



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*A devotional for the PLU community
Fall 2026*

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What are you looking for? *An introduction*

In the gospel of John Jesus begins his ministry by asking his soon-to-be followers this question: ***What are you looking for?*** That's a good question, isn't it?

"Looking" in this question is not just about seeing, but about seeking, searching, longing for, desiring. This is a big question, with layers of answers. And your response may shift and change over time and in response to experiences or circumstances.

It's important to note that the "you" in Jesus' question is plural. As in, *What are "you all" looking for?* This is the case with most of the "you's" in the Bible! Faith is not a solo quest. So each reflection in this booklet includes a question or two for you to reflect on, and an invitation to talk with someone else about that question - your roommate, classmate, colleague, teammate, family member. It's not just individuals who seek to answer this question – *What are you looking for?* – but also communities.

The disciples answer Jesus' question with a question of their own, "*Rabbi, where are you staying?*" The word for "staying" in Greek, the original language of John's gospel, is *meno*, meaning to "abide" or "dwell." The disciples want to dwell with Jesus in order to begin to answer his thought-provoking and soul-searching question. Jesus responds by saying "Come and see." And so they follow him, abide with him, dwell with him.

This devotional is an invitation to dwell with God - to *come and see* through scripture, through prayer, through other people, and through God's creation. God abides with us, dwells among us, helping us live our response to the question, *What are you looking for?*

Joining you in the question-asking journey.

~ Pastor Jen Rude

What are you looking for? *A new beginning*

Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-19

¹⁸ *Don't remember the prior things;
don't ponder ancient history.*

¹⁹ *Look! I'm doing a new thing;
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?*

*I'm making a way in the desert,
paths in the wilderness.* (Common English Bible translation)

Reflection: I love beginning a new book when the first sentence just pulls me in. I can't wait to experience the story unfold. But I don't like beginning a difficult conversation, evidenced by my unsettled stomach, tense shoulders, and pounding heart. Beginning a new friendship can be mixed. There is excitement coupled with uncertainty.

Whether you're new to PLU as a first year or transfer student (welcome!), or a faculty or staff member who's been here 20 years (welcome back!), September always marks a new beginning. And if you're like most of us, beginnings are often mixed. As you begin this semester, I hope there is excitement, hopes, expectations for learning and growth. And I imagine there is also anxiety, nervousness, and anticipated disappointment for when things inevitably don't begin as planned.

Beginning is not a one time thing, either. We begin over and over again. Sometimes we choose a new thing and sometimes it just happens to us.

Isaiah wrote these words to a community living in challenging (unchosen!) circumstances. They were in exile, away from their home. But even here God promises them a new beginning.

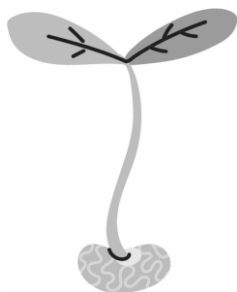
God's new thing might be exciting and joyful like a new relationship or a creative idea to pursue. God's new thing might also be a challenge that requires courage, risk, or vulnerability. God's new thing is an invitation.

God says, "Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?" Of course it's easy to miss God's new beginnings sprouting up around us. With our heads buried in our phones, our hearts heavy with the news, our minds spinning worst case scenarios, it can be easy to miss new things sprouting. But in the midst of it all, God will keep doing new things, whether we notice them or not. And I'm grateful for that. Still, I long to recognize the new things. Where are you noticing new things sprouting up today? This week? Where might God be present in this sprout?

Prayer: God of new beginnings, sometimes it seems like I'm *always* beginning again. And, even when I'm excited about it, it can still feel like a lot. Please be with me. And, help me to notice that you already are. Help me to trust in your new thing sprouting up in my life and in our world and to follow your invitation. And when I don't notice you doing a new thing, please make it a bit more obvious. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else:

What's a new beginning you are excited about right now and Why? Where are you looking for a new beginning?



What are you looking for? *A plan.*



Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11-12

¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Reflection: I love a good plan. With goals. And checkboxes. And opportunities for gold stars. But I resist theological claims of “God’s plan for my life” or “everything happens for a reason.” When I’m feeling lost, it can be comforting to trust in the idea of God’s plan for my life, but I don’t think God is a micromanager, influencing whether or not I make the green light or if they have my favorite meal in the Commons. And “everything happens for a reason” feels at odds with tragedies like an untimely death or war or racism. I don’t think those things have a reason. But I also don’t think God is absent in these times and places. Oh, theological conundrums!

Perhaps the prophet Jeremiah can help. Jeremiah is writing to a community that is living in exile, away from their home, beaten down and defeated, feeling abandoned by God. I wonder how Jeremiah’s words of hope landed? Did they laugh? Throw rocks? Cry?

It took me years to realize what Jeremiah is *not* saying. He’s not saying God has a 10-step individualized daily plan for you. And if you just follow this plan things will be okay. Which conversely suggests that if things are not okay then it’s your fault because you’re just not following the plan correctly. Maybe you have been harmed by this type of theology. If so, I am sorry. And, maybe there’s another way to hear these words.

What plan God is promising through the prophet Jeremiah is “a future with hope.” Seems kind of vague. Which is maybe the point. God’s plan is the overarching plan not for harm, but for a future with hope. Hope is something to navigate toward, a way of being, not a checklist to be conquered. God’s plan, that we are invited to participate in, is a future with hope. How are we doing at enacting God’s plan?

I say *we* because (as usual) the “you’s” in this passage are plural. These words are not for an individual, but for a community. The plans are for you all and the gift of a future with hope is for you all. And we’re not left to figure it out alone, or even just in community, but God proclaims, “when you call upon me and come to me, I will hear you.” God is in this with us, nudging us toward a future with hope, inviting us to co-create this reality together. Maybe this is the plan.

Prayer: God of Hope, I often want a plan and clear steps. Sometimes it feels like there are too many paths to choose from, and other times, it feels like no paths exist. Often I’m not sure which path is the “right” one and I don’t want to choose wrong. And sometimes I just want confirmation that my plan is aligned with your plan and that we’re going the same direction. Breathe your Spirit into me, that I may feel your presence and trust that I’m not alone in this. Awaken me to notice the “you all’s” that are already on the way with me, those I can work with to help shape a new future, one with hope. Please keep nudging us toward your plan. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else: What do you think “a future with hope” includes or looks like”? What are one or two ways that you feel called by God to help create this future with hope?

What are you looking for? *Belonging*

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. ¹³ We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Certainly the body isn't one part but many. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁶ If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. ¹⁹ If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? ²⁰ But as it is, there are many parts but one body. ²¹ So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. ²⁷ You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

(Common English Bible)

Reflection: When I attended a community organizing training for faith leaders we were each asked, *What part of the body are you? And, Why?* The responses rolled in: "I'm the eyes because I see and notice everything." "I'm the feet because I'm good at running around to get things done." "I'm the arms because I'm a hugger, bringing comfort when people are feeling defeated." "I'm the right hand because I'm always stirring a pot of soup to keep people nourished." "I'm the stomach because I feel things in my gut and I trust my intuition." "I'm the mouth because I love to speak truth loudly and boldly." "I'm the lungs because I remind everyone to take slow, steady breaths."

The Bible tells us that we are the body of Christ. And that it takes all of us to make up Christ's body. But just like in our own bodies, within the collective body there are surely parts we don't like, or are embarrassed by, or that are a bit painful. And yet, the Bible tells us that all the parts belong. And all are needed.

I read a book this summer called *Mattering: The Secret to a Life of Deep Connection and Purpose*. Author Jennifer Wallace talks about mattering as including belonging, but more than that. She writes, "You can belong to a group - a classroom, a workplace, even a family - and still not feel like you matter to the people in it." Maybe you have had that experience. I know I have. This kind of belonging can feel shallow and precarious. Instead, Wallace writes, "Mattering says you belong at the table, but it goes even further, and it says you would be missed if you weren't here. You are adding value, and we would notice if you weren't here."

I think the body of Christ is about *mattering*. In the reading above from 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul describes all the parts of Christ's body as not only belonging, but essential, mattering for the health of the whole. Each part adds value.

I think Paul's message is a reminder that we each matter, are valued by God, part of Christ's body, belonging to the whole. If today (or on any day) you are feeling isolated or separate, not quite sure if you belong or matter, I hope you hear these words as grace, rooted in deep love. You add value. You belong. You matter.

And, I think Paul's words are also a reminder that *all* the parts matter, which is sometimes the harder good news. There are times I'd certainly like to cut off part of the collective body. And there are times when you might need to distance yourself from another person or situation for your safety or wellbeing. But when I have run out of grace for someone, I can trust that they still matter to God and God has grace enough for all the parts of the body.

This passage also reminds us that we are interconnected. Paul says the parts of the body are so interconnected that when one part suffers, the whole suffers. We know this with things like racism, climate change, or violence in our community. Whether we are directly impacted or not, we feel the ripple effects of such suffering.

What do we do with *this* kind of belonging to each other? Maybe we feel a greater sense of responsibility, care, or even valuing of one another. Christ's body is suffering. How might we restore mattering to each part in order to heal the whole?

Prayer: God of love, you put on skin and came to live among us in a human body. You understand the strength and fragility of our individual bodies and of our collective body. Today, remind me to be grateful for both. And when I wonder about my place in the midst of things or feel tempted to disparage or cut someone else down, bring me back to your body, where all the parts matter. May your body be whole, O God. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else:

Where do you most feel like you matter? Who is someone in your life that might need a reminder that they matter?



What are you looking for? *Growth*

Scripture: Mark 4:26-29

[Jesus] also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Reflection: The PLU garden moved over the summer. It's now on lower campus, past Morken, by the Customer Service Center. Definitely go check it out. It's lovely! It seems like every time I walked by it over the summer it expanded. There were new structural things like the gazebo, fence and raised beds. And then as the summer went on, the seeds sprouted and grew, plants and flowers and vegetables showed up in stunning abundance.

PLU staff, students, and community members plant the garden beds. (And much of the produce is shared with Trinity Lutheran's Food Pantry). These are the "someones" Jesus mentions in the passage above. They plant the seed (or starter plants) and then go on about the rhythms of their life, sleeping and rising. Then they notice the seed sprout and grow. And here's what seems key - this someone *does not know how*. Some of you are biologists and could probably explain the science behind the growth. Yet still, some parts of how a seed becomes a dahlia, snap peas, or a raspberry bush remain a bit mysterious.

So it seems according to this story, growth is *not* about having knowledge and know-how to carefully bring about such growth. The text says, "The earth produces of itself." The word here (in Greek, the original language of this text) is *automatos*, connected to the English word, automatic - self-prompted, self-sufficient, requiring no external effort, spontaneous and self-propelled. It

seems like Jesus is saying that growth is like this - it just happens, automatically, it rises up on its own.

Sounds beautiful, like the PLU garden. But gardens also have things like pests and people who steal the watering hose. In our world we experience things like human-driven climate change, the violence of multiple wars, entrenched polarization in our government. Where is the *automatos* of such fruitful growth when so many things feel instead like they're decomposing and falling apart?

Maybe you've heard someone around PLU say this quote attributed to Martin Luther - "If the world were going to end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." I heard a Muslim woman recount a similar saying from the Prophet Muhammad. When asked, "What do we do if it's the end of time?" the Prophet basically says, "Even if it's the end of the world, and you have a seedling in your hand, you still plant it."

The woman continued, saying, "Even when there is an apocalypse around you, you still plant the seedling, because *you don't know* what that little inkling of hope could do. *You don't know* what that little good deed could actually manifest into, even in the last hours of our time together." Her repetition of "you don't know" echoes this parable from Mark today.

Where are you longing for growth? Maybe you are longing for healing in a strained relationship and growth for a path forward together. Maybe you long for growth that gives you the courage to speak out against an injustice. Maybe you are looking for signs of growth confirming that you can flourish here.

Out of these longings, Where do you feel called to plant seeds? Even when, maybe especially when, you *don't know how* they could ever sprout?

You plant seeds by listening deeply to someone you disagree with rather than canceling them. You plant seeds by noticing someone who could use a friend and reaching out. You plant seeds by teaching students who think they only took your class to fulfill a Gen Ed requirement. You plant seeds by putting away your phone and taking out your ear buds and marveling at God's creation as you walk across campus. You plant seeds by pausing to consider your educational path and how it will benefit your community, even if you don't know how, yet. You plant seeds through prayer and listening for God.

How might anything grow from these seeds? *We don't know how.* This is where trust comes in. The person in the story faithfully plants seeds, and then just as faithfully trusts God and the earth to do their part. They don't stay up all night watching the seeds and willing them to grow. They don't obsess over the speed of growth. They follow the natural rhythms of work and rest. They pay attention. They notice. They trust that something will grow. Jesus calls this the Kingdom of God. And it's sprouting up now.

Prayer: Gardening God, today I marvel at your diverse and beautiful creation. Throughout the day, help me to pause and notice all that is sprouting up and growing around me - flowers, trees, relationships, imagination, courage, peace. I too want to grow. And even when I don't know how anything could grow, help me to keep planting seeds. Help me to grow in trust, knowing that it doesn't all depend on me. Help me to grow in awareness, noticing glimpses of new sprouts in me, in others, and in your world. God, help me to grow in faith as we garden together. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else: What growth are you longing for today - in your own life? For our world? What growth are you noticing today - in your own life? In our world?



What are you looking for? **Strength**

Scripture: Ephesians 3:16-21

¹⁶ My prayer for you is that from the great treasures of his beauty, Creator will gift you with the Spirit's mighty power and strengthen you in your inner being. ¹⁷ In this way, the Chosen One [Jesus] will make his home in your heart. I pray that as you trust in him, your roots will go deep into the soil of his great love, ¹⁸ and that from these roots you will draw the strength and courage needed to walk this sacred path together with all his holy people. This path of love is higher than the stars, deeper than the great waters, wider than the sky. Yes, this love comes from and reaches to all directions. I pray that you would feel how deep the Chosen One's great love is.

¹⁹ It is a love that goes beyond our small and weak ways of thinking. This love fills us with the Great Spirit, the one who fills all things.

²⁰ I am praying to the Maker of Life, who, by his great power working in us, can do far more than what we ask for, more than our small minds can imagine. ²¹ May his sacred family and the Chosen One bring honor to him across all generations, to the time beyond the end of all days. Aho! May it be so! (First Nations Version)

Reflection: I love the feeling of being physically depleted after a long hike or a good run. I feel accomplished, spent in a good way. And I trust that my body will recover after a nourishing meal and some rest. I actually even feel kind of strong.

But when I'm feeling depleted because I'm overwhelmed by the gravity of the world's problems, unsure about a big decision I need to make that affects my future, or witnessing the suffering of others, this kind of being worn out does not make me feel strong. I feel weak, incompetent, inadequate and wonder if I'm doing it all wrong. When I've run out of inner strength, I'm not sure when or if I'll feel strong again. I feel depleted and stuck.

Paul, the writer of this passage above, can relate. He writes this letter to the community in Ephesus from a jail cell. He certainly understands these feelings of weakness, overwhelm, feeling stripped of power, all the ways we run out of strength. And yet, his words proclaim strength. In fact, he starts with a prayer, that “Creator [God] will gift you with the Spirit’s mighty power and strengthen you in your inner being.” Yes! I want that.

We’re used to things running out of juice. We (constantly, it seems!) have to re-charge our phones, earbuds, watches, and even toothbrushes. But we know what to do. We plug it in, wait until the device indicates 100% strength and then go on our way. Like our gadgets, many of us could use a re-charge on strength. But renewing inner strength doesn’t work that way. We can’t just plug into God, charge and go. God’s power is at work *within* us. God’s strength is in relationship.

We don’t have to (and can’t!) manufacture strength and courage on our own. But rather, as the passage above describes, strength and courage are drawn from roots nourished in the soil of God’s deep love. We draw from the rich soil of community, the wisdom of ancestors, the soil of learning, faith community, and spiritual practices.

But different from our phone or toothbrush, we’re not just re-charged or re-strengthened enough to get by. But through this relationship, through God at work in us, we “can do far more than what we ask for, more than our small minds can imagine.” Now, this doesn’t mean you can “do more” as in adding another major, submitting one more article for publication, or adding another meeting to your overbooked Gcal! I think Paul would say this is an example of our imagination being too small.

But what does God’s strength at work within us make possible?

I wonder if it's the sacred path, the path of love, as Paul describes. He says strength and courage are what's needed "to walk this sacred path together with all of [God's] holy people."

And if we think the *path of love* sounds just a little too cutesy or simple, we are quickly reminded that we are thinking too small. This path of love is higher than the stars, deeper than the great waters, wider than the sky, coming from and reaching to all directions.

God gives us strength to be in relationship with all God's holy people, with the cosmos, the waters, the sky. Strength to do this life together. Part of this strength is that we are freed from the limited imaginations of our small minds and self-centered spirits. We are strengthened to join others and creation in the project of expanding love in all directions. Could that be what God's strength, at work within us, is for?

Prayer: God of Strength, I don't want to feel weak, and I'd like a quick re-charge when I run out of strength. But I trust that you have more in mind for me, probably beyond what I can imagine. Stir your Spirit of imagination in me that I might expand my ideas of strength and be open to your power within me. Help me to listen for your nudges, guiding me on your path of love. Strengthen me toward expanding love, in all directions. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else: What makes you feel weak? What does that feel like in your body? In your spirit? What might God's strength working within you make possible?



What are you looking for? Rest

Scripture: Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸ [Jesus said]: “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Reflection: Sleep optimization is very popular these days. And I am a fan of a regular sleep schedule. I think good sleep benefits our bodies, minds, and spirits. It’s important to turn off, lay flat, and let go for 7-8 hours every day. Sleep allows for our brains to get cleaned out, bones to be built, and our circadian rhythms to be re-set. Sleep also allows us to quiet our busy minds and put things in perspective (like waiting to send that email until after you’ve “slept on it”).

Students today seem more conscientious about sleep than I was in college, and that seems wise. While this may be true for some, others on our campus can be seen getting a 2pm latte at OMM most days, or doing some head nodding in 8am classes (or meetings). Maybe it’s that we *know* that sleep is important, but we still have a hard time making it happen.

Maybe you are having a hard time sleeping because, like those whom Jesus was speaking to in this passage from Matthew, you are “weary and carrying heavy burdens.” Weary from microaggressions, burdened by financial worries, weary from conflict in your family, burdened by the stress of climate change, weary from loneliness, burdened by addiction. Jesus could certainly have been speaking to any one of us. Weariness and burdens are part of the human experience.

But Jesus is not just advocating for good sleep hygiene as he offers this gift of rest in the face of such weariness and the ache of

carrying heavy burdens. He starts by saying, “Come to me.” The rest starts in relationship. But then the next sentence is about taking on a yoke? A yoke is a wooden beam used to connect two animals, like oxen, who are pulling a heavy load together. That kind of seems like the opposite of rest.

While sleep is one form of rest, rest is more than just sleep. Here rest is about sharing the load, easing the burdens. Rest cannot take away all that we are carrying in this life, all that burdens us. But Jesus reminds us that we are not carrying it alone. In sharing the load by being yoked to Jesus, we can rest in the midst of burdens. Jesus doesn’t magically take away all that wearies us or burdens our spirits, but he joins us, picks up part of the load so that we might carry it together.

This also means that rest doesn’t have to wait until after the paper is finished, after the assignments are graded, after the to-do list is all checked off. If we wait to rest until all the things are done (thinking then we have “earned” the rest), we will never rest. Rather rest can happen right in the midst of it all.

What might you let God help you carry today? May you find rest for your soul.

Prayer: God, you call me to come to you. But sometimes I resist, thinking I can carry it all on my own. Often that works. Until it doesn’t. To be honest, I am weary and carrying heavy burdens. You know all that is weighing me down. I long for rest and relief. Help me to trust your promise to carry it with me so that I might find some rest. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else: What heavy burdens are on your mind and heart today? What kind of rest does your soul long for?



What are you looking for? Joy

Scripture: Isaiah 55:12

For you shall go out in joy

and be led back in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you

shall burst into song,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

(New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Reflection: The bookends to PLU's academic year involve a lot of clapping. In September faculty line up outside on either side of the entrance to Olson gym in their academic robes and funny hats. And then as students round the corner from in front of Rieke, faculty begin to clap and clap and clap (and clap!). For Convocation, the marking of a new academic year, those moving through the "gauntlet" are new students, first years and transfers, those beginning their academic journey at PLU. Students look a little bewildered, wondering who all these people are, and why they are clapping so enthusiastically. This is part of the welcome, the joy of another fresh start, a new community of students, and officially kicking off the academic year.

In May the faculty line up outside on either side of the entrance to Olson gym in their academic robes and funny hats. And then as students round the corner from in front of Rieke, faculty begin to clap and clap and clap (and clap!). This time, it's Commencement. And those moving through the "gauntlet" are graduating students, undergraduates and graduate students, those concluding a chapter of their academic journey at PLU. Students are thrilled, beaming with a sense of accomplishment. They high five professors, hug mentors, breathe a sigh of relief, and relish in the joy of all they accomplished as they prepare to receive their degree.

There is something so beautiful about these moments of clapping, joyful welcome, celebration, and sending. And I like to think on these days especially, Mount Rainier is bursting into song and campus Spanish firs and Cedar trees, Giant Sequoia and Oak trees are clapping their hands in joy, too.

These sturdy tree elders and ancient mountains have witnessed the rhythm of going out in joy and being led back in peace for generations.

God has baked joy into the design of creation. Why else make such a variety of beautiful trees and flowers, hilariously rascally squirrels, and the possibility of laughter?

In between the joy-filled clapping bookends of welcoming and sending is a lot of hard work, frustration, productive struggle, overwhelm, new insights, changing course, and transformation. And the mountains and the trees witness all of that, too.

When I've spent too much time in front of my computer screen, am feeling stuck on a project, or running low on energy, I like to take a walk on campus. Specifically I like to head out to the old "golf course" where the trees tower and you can catch glimpses of the mountain. Among God's creation I experience a wider perspective, connect with nature's sturdy endurance, and, if I'm really paying attention, might even hear a quiet song and a little tree clapping as the wind blows among the leaves and branches.

We're so distanced from the natural world that we have to be reminded: "touch grass!" So, go touch grass today. Look and listen to nature and its songs and clapping. Be filled with God's joy. And then share some with others.

Prayer: God of all creation, you wove joy into the very fabric of creation. But too often I forget to notice this joy and for that I am sorry. Today I give thanks for these particular natural places: *[name some of your favorite nature spots of joy]*. Remind me that I am also part of this creation and that the capacity (and necessity) for joy is interwoven within my cells, too. Fill me up with your joy today, God, and I'll do my best to share it with others who could use a little too. I'm going to go touch grass now. Joy! Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else: Is there a spot in nature that brings you particular joy? What does joy feel like in your body? Why do you think God created joy?



What are you looking for? *Peace*

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-8

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

Reflection: “I just need some peace”... says the scattered parent answering work emails and making dinner...says the student living in a crowded house and unable to find study space to prepare for an exam... says the friend who is tired of all the stress and tension of this relationship.

But often what passes for peace is more like checking out - bingeing Netflix or scrolling TikTok, pretending the conflict doesn't exist, or even addictions that numb us to our restlessness. I don't think this is the peace we long for.

And there are good reasons we don't feel very peaceful. The reality is that at any given moment there are multiple wars wreaking havoc on people, communities, and the earth, people living with chronic anxiety, and communities navigating massive stressors like (un)affordable health care and AI. In the midst of all this, we feel a longing for peace in our bones.

And yet nothing seems particularly radical about the words from the apostle Paul (the writer of the passage above). Pretty basic. Rejoice. Be gentle. Don't be anxious. Pray and be in relationship with God. God will give you peace. It's a little simplistic, honestly. And, it doesn't seem like enough to meet the moment we are living in.

Do you hear these words differently if you know that Paul is writing from prison? Maybe he does have some insight into stress. I imagine prison would create some anxiety, and not much occasion for rejoicing. And it's definitely not a place that cultivates peace.

While being guarded by prison guards, Paul declares that it is actually God who will guard your heart and mind with a peace "which surpasses all understanding." It doesn't make logical, understandable sense that we might experience peace in the midst of a prison cell, in fractured relationships, during an anxiety attack, in the midst of global crises. And yet, this is the promise of God. Not necessarily to give us peace by removing all the stress and anxiety, but rather God promises to be Peace, by being with us, right in the midst of all the mess.

We do not need to settle for a false peace. The God who is Peace is near.

Prayer: God of Peace, there is so much that feels un-peaceful in our world and in my life. Too many things to name, but here are a few that are particularly on my heart right now..... Help me not to settle for false promises of peace that create harm or simply fall short. Help me to trust that you are near and that you are Peace. Cultivate in me your peace and I will do my best to share your peace with others in my life who could really use it. And because I'll probably forget, remind me again that you are near. Amen.

Question for self-reflection and for asking someone else:

Where are you settling for false peace? When have you experienced true peace?

