

January, 7, 2024

Year Ending; Year Beginning

Isaiah 42:9-12, 16

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise from the end of the earth!
Let the sea roar and all that fills it, the coastlands and their inhabitants.
Let the desert and its towns lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar inhabits.
Let the inhabitants of Sela sing for joy.
Let them shout from the tops of the mountains.
Let them give glory to the LORD, and declare his praise in the coastlands.

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by paths they have not known.
I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them.

The Revelation of John 1:4-6, 8

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and
from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful
witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to
be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion
for ever and ever. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’, says the Lord God, who is and who was
and who is to come, the Almighty.

Over two decades ago I had the privilege of bicycling in the Colorado Rockies with my uncle and a few of his friends. My bike, which I still own and use, and I were both in better shape back then. Day two of our expedition took us up Independence Pass to the Continental Divide at an elevation of 12,095ft. It is one of those roads which is full of hair pin turns as one nears the top. It is one of those roads campers and semis are simply not allowed to take. When a person finally reaches the summit and a takes an hour to recover, there is this unique perspective of looking back into the valley from whence one has come with its sprawling land descending towards the Colorado river. To the west lay the quaint village of Aspen nestled into the forest land which extend to an elevated plateau named the Grand Mesa. That was to be another stop on the trek; and much was between us and it. There on the Continental Divide one had the vantage point of looking back and looking ahead. A sense of having survived the past; uncertainty how legs, lungs, and bearings would hold out in the journey upcoming.

I feel as if those Sundays near the turning of a calendar year are quite similar. It is a seasonal space to look back and look forward. It is a time to give thanks for the good which has been and to acknowledge the losses and pain of life. It is a time to reaffirm our trust in the God who is Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the end—who prepared the way before we set out, has journeyed with us, and goes before us into an unknown future. God has promised to not leave us orphaned or abandoned.

This looking back and looking forward is an exercise we might benefit from practicing daily. It is, in fact, one of the spiritual exercises of 16th century Christian reformer and pioneer Ignatius of Loyola. I will say more about this spiritual exercise in a bit, but I first want to place this kind of reflection in a biblical context.

Isaiah 42 falls in a section of Isaiah called “2nd Isaiah”. The tone and message of Isaiah 40-55 is significantly different that chapters 1-39 which has led most scholars to conclude that it was written at a later time.¹ Here is the theory in a nut shell. The widely accepted notion is that chapters 1-39 were written prior to Israel’s being defeated in conflict and a portion of the people deported to Babylon—those chapters are full of God’s harsh critique of the behaviour of God’s people; particularly the leadership. They were not treating the vulnerable of the land very well. They were worshipping other gods, like mammon and power and

¹ R.N. Whybray, *The Second Isaiah* in the “Old Testament Guides” series (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield England, 1995), pp 1-7.

prestige. God sent a warning through the prophets. It got no traction. The people end up defeated in battle and deported.

The setting of Isaiah 40-55, so the theory goes, is a message for emotionally and theologically battered Israelites in need of encouragement. They had trusted in God, or at least their image of God, and it didn't work out. They thought God would defend the Temple at all costs. Their precious temple, centre of religious life and God's dwelling place on earth, had been demolished. This kind of thing can lead to a spiritual crisis. No longer pushing quills on parchment, they are shoveling sewage down the street. In the midst of this time of theological upheaval the prophet is given words like, "Comfort, comfort, ye my people." And things like, "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall walk and not be faith; they shall run and not be weary". And things like today's passage-- "See, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?" This would not have likely come from Isaiah himself, but from the "school" of Isaiah—probably his students and scribes carrying on the prophetic tradition who went into exile as well for the sake of succeeding generations.

All this raises very important points of discernment. Whether one is living through the raucous times of 1st Isaiah or is in the recovery mode of 2nd Isaiah, how do we hear the nudgings of God? And this cuts both ways. We benefit from spaces of honest evaluation on the manner in which we have conducted ourselves as individuals, as a congregation, as a country, as a human race. The prophets sought to create space for reflection on how we treat our house mates, our neighbours, our brothers and sisters in Ottawa, and those across the pond. And when defeat, deportation, and dislocation descend upon us, we need space to hear that God is doing a "new thing". This, then, comes to the crux. How exactly do we listen well, reflect well, pray well, and rest well in God's presence?

I will offer two models of reflection; one now and one in the hard copy of my sermon and on the web posting of it. Ignatius of Loyola, spiritual reformer and pioneer of the 16th century, set down a practice known as the "Examen" in his manual called the *Spiritual Exercises*. Think of examination, it has the same Latin roots. I quote modestly from a web site devoted to Ignatian spirituality.

"The Daily Examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern God's direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church that can help us see God's hand at work in our whole experience... One of the few rules of prayer that Ignatius made for the Jesuit order was the requirement that Jesuits practice the Examen twice daily—at noon and at the end of the day. It's a habit that Jesuits, and many other Christians, practice to this day."

On this point I pause to note that the current pope, Pope Francis, is part of the Jesuit order. So we have a bit of the history, but how does one do this? Here is a version of the five-step Daily Examen that St. Ignatius practiced.

1. Become aware of God's presence.

On this point. Simply recognizing your breathing is one way to become aware of God's presence. Every breath we take links us to the source of our lives. Feel your feet on the ground is another way to become aware of the ground of our spiritual being. We are rooted in the Divine.

2. Review the day with gratitude.

A review of the day is not neat and tidy. It will contain the good, the bad, and the ugly. Each are opportunities for learning. Each day offers us lessons. The kindness offered or received; the harsh word given or received; the gracious act done or left undone-- we review them all.

3. Pay attention to your emotions.

Emotions are a place which trigger thanks and lament. Sometimes there are gifts we have imparted or received which bring joy. Sometimes there are words or actions which bring sadness. The emotions will guide us in how to pray.

4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.

One is good, and sometimes that may flow into several features of the day. We celebrate the good, and grieve the ugly. We honour the best of the past to empower us; we honour the worst to instruct us.

5. Look toward tomorrow.²

We ask God for wisdom, compassion, and the fruits of the Spirit in the living of the next day. We ask for strength to continue on the good path and, sometimes, return to the good path.

Now, Ignatius shaped this routine for a daily or twice daily routine. We can, in fact, apply this to a whole year in review and year up-coming. That is where my secular source expands the points of reflection and consideration.

For now, however, on this first Sunday of 2024 it would be good to hear from our Board Chair and our deacons on how they have sensed this New Year taking shape in response to the year 2023. On this point I will emphasize my sense that the Deacons in particular, and Board as a whole, have been reflecting back and discerning forward. In their own muddled way, they have been practicing the Examen. Let us hear from them.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

[Bob Neufeldt, as Board Chair, speaks on behalf of the Board]

² [The Daily Examen - IgnatianSpirituality.com](http://TheDailyExamen-IgnatianSpirituality.com)

Reflect, Restore, Replenish³

Reflect

To reflect is to cultivate time, space, and energy to look at yourself and your life with fresh eyes, with intention, with the purpose of finding deeper connection and knowing. It gets to ebb and flow as the seasons do, as we do. It gets to feel easy sometimes and harder others. It gets to shift and change shape over time.

What did you learn about yourself this past season that surprised you?

What did you discover that made you reevaluate your beliefs?

What did you experience that shook up how you feel about yourself?

What did you remember that reminded you of who you truly are?

What are transitions and changes in season usually like for you?

How are you impacted by the changing of seasons, of light, of time?

What comes up for you newness of a season or a year?

Are there any rituals or routines you hold to mark the change of seasons?

How do you honour what leaves in order to welcome what's coming?

In what ways do you tend to yourself during seasonal transitions?

What season do you most feel yourself in?

What about that season feels like home to you?

What season do you feel the least yourself in?

What about that season feels distant to you?

Reflection practices through movement:

- Use a movement practice as a source of noticing what arises within you

Reflections practices through writing:

- Using writing as a method of sourcing what is inside

Reflection practices through nature:

- Being in nature as a way of finding deeper connection to yourself

Restoration

³ Based upon an online workshop resource from Lisa Olivera, 2023.

Restoration is the action of returning something to a former owner, place, or condition. To restore ourselves is to return to ourselves; to restore ourselves is to come back to who we truly are after straying or departing for a while.

What in your life or yourself is asking to be made anew?

What needs restoration?

What needs reviving?

What is asking to come alive again?

And what might it look like to slowly move toward that act of restoring?

Where do you find restoration?

What spaces, places, bodies, groups, communities, locations do you find restoration in? What spaces support you in the practice of restoration? How do we get there more often?

Who supports You?

Who supports you in a season of restoration and renewal?

Who do you turn to for nurturance and sustenance?

What is in need of repair, rebuilding, restoration? Where do you find restoration?

Who supports you?

Replenish

“To replenish is to fill up again. The word itself implies one cannot and will not always be full; instead, we must empty and replenish, over and over again, as a way of coming closer to ourselves, to each other, to the world around us, to aliveness.”

What practices nourish and ground you?

How do people nourish and ground you?

Take stock of what would replenish you in this season:

- Time to write; time to just be; time to be with people
- Rest
- A practice which nurtures

Replenishment has a different look and texture based on what the circumstances of our life currently look like. Replenishment is very specific to the individual. It is deeply personal and unique for each of us, which is why turning inward and exploring is so necessary.

It helps if we can let go of the “should”, of comparison, of expectations, or what others are doing or needing...and re-centering your own experience and needs in your life. I believe this is what allows us to show up for the versions of ourselves that exist right now, rather than what we assume we’re supposed to want or need. And in this way, replenishment becomes true, aligned, actually supportive, deeply meaningful. As with everything, replenishment is an ongoing practice that we can iterate, shift and change as we do.

Ask yourself: What would it look like to fill myself up in this season? What would it look like to fuel myself? What would it look like to pour back into my own being? What would it look like to nurture and nourish myself? What would it look like to take in my own care?

- Adding in practices that nourish you
- Adding in layers of support and care
- Adding in ways to nurture basic needs
- Staying hydrated
- Staying well-fed
- Asking for help
- Doing less
- Buying flowers
- Simple meals
- Beloved music
- Rest, Rest, Rest
- Books
- Time outside
- Time to write / journal
- Time with trees
- Time to just be
- Time for real connection
- Time for solitude

What would go on your list? What would you add?