FLYAWAY

Embracing God’s Plans For Your Everyday Life

By

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DEDICATION

To my Grandparents, E.R. and Stella Carver

And

Weston and Helen Sherwood

They were my first fans.

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**Flyaway**

 Exodus 15:2 The LORD [is] my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; He [is] my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him.

 The Olympics were a thrill to watch. People enjoyed the Fab Five and the way they bounced and twisted their way to gold medals.  I also love to watch my teenager compete in gymnastics. He has come a long way in a short time.  It takes three things to excel in gymnastics – strength, balance and courage. It requires tremendous upper body strength to support your weight, and even more to support your weight while twisting and turning. Balance is a key part in all the events. As exciting as the flips and handsprings are to watch, the slow, deliberate moves are just as impressive. Balance beam comes to mind, of course, with girls executing intricate moves on a surface less than 4 inches wide.  When it comes down to it, all the strength and balance in the world are useless without the courage to put them to work.  My son says that he is completely capable of doing a handstand on the parallel bars but that it is terrifying to look down and see the floor six feet away.  There is one particular move on the high bar called a flyaway. This move involves working up momentum by swinging and then letting go of a perfectly good bar to go hurtling through the air backwards. I confess that I watch through parted fingers while holding my breath. Fortunately for the athletes, and the parents, there are coaches, spotters and mats to increase safety.

 In life we also need strength, balance and courage to be successful. In West Texas we are notorious for “pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps”. We are self-reliant which makes it hard to rely on God.  God understood this and addressed it. The word strength is mentioned 230 times in the Bible. God does not endorse bootstrap pulling. Many of the verses follow this theme;

  Psalms18:2 The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; My God, my strength, in whom I will trust; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Exodus 15:2 The LORD [is] my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; He [is] my God, and I will praise Him; my father's God, and I will exalt Him.

2Cr 12:10 that is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

It is actually a little scary to get our strength from God either because we feel unworthy or because we have to let go of control. It is much more effective than relying on ourselves, though.

             Jesus is our example when it comes to balance. In Luke 2:52 we are told he grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and Man.  When things got chaotic in his ministry, He was able to go and be alone with God. I am not sure if it is a function of our society or just our human nature, but balance is so difficult to find. We have to make the effort, though.

             Courage is where I often fall short.  Peter gets a bad rap, but he is the only disciple who got out of the boat and walked on the water. Many times when God asks me to do something, I am afraid to start. I may be afraid that I will fail and I may be afraid that I will succeed.  A good example is when I started writing in earnest.  I have mentioned before that I had seven really good reasons that I should not or could not write a book and almost as many why I couldn’t write a blog.  Yet here we are, 3 years and two books later. Honestly much harder than letting God take care of my stuff is letting God take care of my loved ones’ stuff. Just like I watch the flyaway stunt with parted fingers and held breath, I watch my sons take flight in their lives the same way. What if they fall? What if they can’t get up? What if they don’t need me anymore? Well, they have fallen some. I watched my older son fall hard into addiction and rage, but God was faithful and caught him in the safety mat of grace and the Holy Spirit. My younger son has had different and less visible struggles, but God has been faithful to him too.

                Let God and His joy be your strength. Keep your life balanced as much as you can and have the courage to let go of your perfectly good bar. You can trust God to keep you and your loved ones safe in His grace and love. Apparently it is a process.

Monkey See Monkey Do

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. 1 Corinthians 11:1

 We had a parakeet named Iggy when we were growing up, and my brother tried to teach it to

talk. Unfortunately, Iggy was not interested. To start with, his cage was in the kitchen and when

someone pushed the buttons on the microwave he would start chirping along in perfect pitch and

rhythm. Mother got tired of his comments and moved his cage to the front door. When the

doorbell rang, the dogs would run to the door and bark. One night, we were settling in and heard

soft barking. Dad decided that the dogs had gotten out and declared DEFCON 1. We set out on a

search party for the dogs, only to find them all accounted. Going past the front door we realized

it was Iggy, who had learned to bark. From that day on he was referred to as either the “watch

bird” or the “bird dog”.

 Who do you imitate and why? Children imitate their parents, usually by doing things they

shouldn’t and often without realizing it. I started wondering at some point why I chew on my

pens and pencils until I saw my dad doing it. Much more destructively, I also imitated his habit

of refusing to use three little words, “I NEED HELP.” My younger son has it right, I think. He is

the only person I know who learns from other’s mistakes, and he often said, “I want to be just

like brother, except I’m not going to do this and I’m definitely not going to do that cuz that was

stupid.”

Ephesians 5:1 says that we should “Be imitators of God as beloved children”. That is a great

idea, but I can’t get my head around it. Even commands like “be holy even as your father in

heaven is holy” are not that helpful because they are not specific enough for me to follow.

(Matthew 5:48) Fortunately God understands and it is one reason that He sent Jesus. This is how

Paul explains it to Timothy.

“But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ

Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in

Him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:16)

 Imitating Jesus is easier because he was flesh and blood, but it is easy to say “Yes, but I

am not like Jesus.” Paul has an answer to that, too. He tells the Corinthians, “Be imitators of me

as I am an imitator of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1). He goes on to list specific ways we can do that. We need to try to be imitators of God, but if we can find a human example to follow, that is even better. Look for someone a little ahead of you in their faith walk and learn from them.  At the same time keep an eye out for people following you.

Emmanuel

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers,

 they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned.” Psalms 43:1-3

 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were in trouble. They weren't in trouble for doing what was wrong but for doing what was right. King Nebuchadnezzar had built a huge golden statue in the plain near Babylon and commanded that when people heard the music play they were to bow down to the statue. When the music played, three men did not bow down. Enter the tattletales, who ran to the king and informed on the three Israelites. He called them in to talk to them and told them that if they bowed down, everything would be forgiven, but if not, he would throw them in a blazing furnace. They bravely told him that they would not bow to anyone except God. He wants to know how "any god" can deliver them out of the furnace. Their answer is, “We believe that our God can deliver us, but even if he does not we will not bow down.” Not only does he throw them in the furnace, but he also has it heated up to seven times the regular temperature. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were tied up and thrown in the furnace and the fire was so hot that the men throwing them in were burned up. When the king looked into the furnace he was shocked and amazed. He asked the soldiers, "Didn't we throw three men bound into the fire?" When they answered that they had, he said "I see four men walking around unbound and the fourth is like a son of the Gods!" When the three men were brought out they did not even smell like smoke and their clothes were not singed. King Nebuchadnezzar changed the law he had made. No one was to worship any god except the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

 Most of you grew up hearing this story, but can you imagine what it was like to witness this sight? God did not keep them from being thrown into the fire but he was with them in the fire. Maybe this will help us when we feel like we are in a fiery trial. We may be angry at God because he could have stopped it. This is true. He could have, but He didn't. I can't pretend I know why. Many of us have had a lot of difficult things happen this year, but we can take comfort in the fact that God has been with us in the fire.

 Some of the last words Jesus spoke to his disciples were, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Psalms 46, in verse 7 and 11 says, "The Lord Almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.” Look at this beautiful description of what God says he will do for us in Isaiah 43:

1) “But now, this is what the Lord says—

he who created you, Jacob,

He who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

2) When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

 they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

3) For I am the Lord your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

I give Egypt for your ransom,

Cush[a] and Seba in your stead.

4) Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you,

I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.

5) Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east

and gather you from the west.”Do you still need something for which to be grateful? I don’t know about you, but I can and do feel eternally grateful.

**Come On In**

“In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” John 14:2

 My family has a favorite story on me. I was about 3 or 4 years old, and we had gone to my Aunt Lita's house. Aunt Lita's house always had a unique smell. It was one-part Bengay, one-part musty, one-part whole wheat bread made inside coffee cans, and one-part re-hydrated pimento cheese that everyone tried to convince me that I loved. I had gone outside and couldn't get back in. I could look through the screen door and see my mom, my aunts, and my grandma. They were visiting and drinking coffee. I tried the door and couldn't get it to open. I knocked but they didn't hear me and kept talking. I knocked louder and they still didn't hear me. Finally, I had enough. I put my hands on my hips and said as loudly as I could "Somebody let this poor baby in!" They heard me then and opened the door for me. They hugged me and gave me some toast made with the round bread out of the coffee can.

 My mom's family lived a good ways off. Visiting with them always meant a long drive. I would usually be asleep when we arrived. I would stumble out of the car and we would walk up to the porch where the light was always on for us. We would ring the doorbell and someone would open the door. Again, they would hug us and say, "COME IN THIS HOUSE!" No matter how sleepy I was, it always made me smile.

 You may have noticed that life is hard; sometimes I have the feeling that I have been left out in the cold and can't get any help. I hate to try to get help with anything. In part, I don't want to bother anyone and also don't want anyone to say, “No”. As a consequence, I end up being self-reliant, which is good, but also being resentful, which is bad. Self-reliance has a down side, too. It can keep me from asking for help from God. I don't want to bother Him and I don't want Him to say, “No”.

 God has invited us to “come boldly before the throne of God that we may find mercy and grace to help in our time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16.) That means we don't have to stand and knock quietly to be sure we don't disturb him.

There is a children's song that we sang in Sunday school. Below are the lyrics from that song.:

 Tiptoe tiptoe in God's house

 Tiptoe tiptoe in God's house

 Tiptoe tiptoe in God's house

 Tiptoe very softly.

 I know that this song was intended to keep children from making too much noise during service, but being over the top as I am, I decided that this was how I was to approach God. According to 1 John 1, we have become children of God because of his great love. How many children would creep quietly into their parents’ room to ask for what they needed? Not mine.

 We are not home yet. Like the journey to my family's house for holidays, some day we will get where we are going. Jesus tells his disciples, “In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” John 14:2.

 I have a friend who was recently killed in an accident. I can almost see him leaving his broken body behind to be greeted in heaven by a smiling Savior who exclaimed, “COME IN THIS HOUSE!” Some day He will do the same for me and for you. Whether we meet him there or he comes back for us, I long to see him. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

**Baby Steps**

“Do not rejoice over me, my enemy, for though I fall I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness the Lord will be my light.” Micah 7:8

 I was watching a little girl try to learn to walk the other day. She pulled up on the coffee table and let go. She stood for a minute, wobbling. She took one shaky step, then another, and then a third. Mom was cheering her on and beaming. As she looked up to get a better glimpse of mom, the baby lost her footing. Boom. Down she went. She sat for a minute and then pulled up again. This time she made a few more shaky steps before falling. The third time, she reached mom, who scooped her up, laughing and kissing her. Before long she will be walking everywhere, and Mom will wonder why she was so anxious for this day. Babies are much easier to catch on all fours.

 What if the scene were a little different? What if the baby fell down and instead of getting up she sat and looked at mom. What if she thought, “Well, if I can’t do it right, I’m not going to do it at all.” What if she thought, “I guess it’s just not meant for me to walk.” Maybe she thought, “I wish I could walk as well as Billy, but I can’t so I’ll just sit here and resent him for it.” Worse yet, what if mom looked at the baby when she fell and said, “What’s wrong with you? You’re supposed to be a walker. I got you a new pair of shoes and everything.”

 We would never dream of doing that to a baby, would we? Unfortunately we do it to new Christians all the time. Change the words to this: “What’s wrong with you? You’re supposed to be a Christian. You got baptized and everything.” We also are prone to react the same way the baby did when we are learning to walk with God. Have you heard these words or said them?

“I should help teach a class or tell someone about Jesus, but I don’t know enough. If I can’t do it right (or perfect) I’m not going to do it at all.”

“I guess it’s just not meant for me to pray for people’s healing.”

“I know God wants me to write, but since I can’t write like Rick Warren, I’ll just sit here and resent him.”

 Your objections are different than mine, I’m sure, but no less destructive. Falling down is a part of learning to walk physically and of learning to walk with God. Fortunately God is a patient and helpful father. When we fall, the enemy swoops in to make the very most of it. He will whisper, "See you did it again. Your out of luck this time. You might as well not even try.” One of my life verses is Micah 7:8 which says “Do not rejoice over me, my enemy, for though I fall I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness the Lord will be my light.” We need to "gird our loins with truth" (Ephesians 6:12) to stand up to that kind of talk. Romans 8:1 and 2 are beautiful verses that we too often forget. It tells us, “there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ has

set me free from the law of sin and death.” Not only do we have God's assurance, but also the help of

the Savior. 1 John 2:1 says

 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have

 an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for

 our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

 Can you think of a better reason to get back up after falling?

 One place we as Christians often fall short is in dealing with others who fall. We can act like the mother in the story, and not like the Heavenly Father. Romans 14 talks about dealing with weaker brothers. He says that we must accept them and try not to put a stumbling block in their way. Galatians 6:1-2 gives us this advice. "Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

 We will fall. We are learning to walk with God for the first time or learning to walk with him into a new place in life or ministry. Put on your belt of truth and let’s walk together.

**Goin' Fishin'**

 “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19

 One summer our family escaped the hot West Texas summer. My uncle and aunt from the big city of Groom, Texas had a cabin in Del Norte, Colorado. I remember a rustic barn, which in retrospect was probably just old and decrepit. Whichever description is correct, it was great fun to climb the ladder to the loft and jump or look out the high windows. There was a trailer on the property, and I remember coming into the bedroom and realizing that the bed took up almost the entire room. One of my older cousins was there that summer and he knew all kinds of interesting facts about animals. He showed me burrows for foxes and chipmunks and nests for different kind of birds. (My sister reminded me of an interesting wild life fact. One had to kill rattlesnakes on the porch before going outside.) I followed my cousin around like a puppy that week. He was one of the ones who took me fishing. Most of the grownups had brought fishing gear, but we didn't have any. No problem, though. They hooked me up with a bamboo pole with fishing line and a hook. The pond had been stocked with trout. The grownups showed me how to bait the hook, of which I never got the hang. Then they helped me throw the line into the water. Then was my least favorite part. I had to wait. After waiting, though, was the fun of pulling the bamboo pole up and seeing the thrashing fish on the other end. The grownups would cheer and laugh, and then take the fish off the line for me. Later that evening it would "magically" appear on the table.

 If you will indulge my imagination, I see God as a cosmic fisherman. (Depending on how old you are, you either just pictured George Burns in hip-waders or Morgan Freeman casting a line off a boat.) God, in trying to lure us in to his love, takes care in what bait he uses. I am constantly amazed at how God uses different tactics to get our attention. As I have said before, he talks to me in a completely different way than he talks to my family or my friends. He uses the things that matter to each of us and chooses the methods to which we are able to listen. (Hebrews 1) He is willing to wait for people to respond to him. We read that "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9)"

 If it were up to me, I would have given up on some of the people he is trying to woo. He is infinitely patient, though, and I admit that some of the people he has waited on are mighty workers once they are "caught". God doesn't wait for us to show up like fully cooked fish on his table. Instead he pursues us and draws us to him. One of the most beautiful and amazing verses in Romans is this. “God demonstrated his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8.

So what is our response to all of this? Jesus tells the fishermen that he called as disciples, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19. He will do the same for us today. Go where the fish are. Meet them where they are. Use the bait that matters to them. Love them before they look lovable,and be patient. Happy Fishing.

**Fruit**

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Galatians 5:22-23

 Walking into the room, I felt awed. Everything was shiny and well put together. I was actually a little intimidated. I could work for hours and still not achieve this kind of perfection. In the center of the room was the table which looked as perfect as the rest of the room. No spots on the dishes marred the scene. Colored napkins fanned out elegantly and treats were spread on sparkling silver. Looking at the other people in the room I noticed that most of them were daintily nibbling crackers, without spilling any crumbs on their dresses. I really wanted one of the decadent looking chocolate bites, but didn’t want to be judged by people I didn’t know. Instead I reached for the bowl of fruit, convincing myself that what I really wanted was a nice juicy orange. I just hoped the juice didn’t squirt on my blouse. I chose an orange that was perfect in color and texture and picked it up. Then I realized with a surprise that it was plastic. In aggravation, I picked up the chocolate after all.

 Plastic fruit may look pretty but it doesn’t satisfy. There is no good juicy flavor and no refreshment. It can’t provide any nutrients or any benefits that real fruit provides. It doesn’t have any of the flaws that real fruit can, but except for looks, no one would choose it over a good tasting nutritious piece of the real thing.

 The Bible uses things that are familiar to teach us things that are unfamiliar. Paul was trying to teach the believers about the Holy Spirit. He had told them that we were born of the Spirit. Then he explained that there are fruits of the spirit. These fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) I want all of these things. Some of them are fairly easy for me. It is not too hard for me to be gentle, because that is my personality. Some of them are harder. Peace is not in my list of things that is easy. I find it much easier to be anxious, and while I strive for peace, my toes are curled up inside my shoes and my teeth are clenched. I don’t feel loving a lot of days, especially when things are not going my way. Here is my problem. I can decide that I am going to be joyful and smile till my teeth hurt, praise Jesus. I am very likely to decide I am going to have self-control. For a while I can do it, but then something trips my trigger and I want to run for coffee, chocolate or a tantrum. Maybe a good cry. My results look good but they are plastic fruit.

 So what do we know about fruit? It grows on a plant, not out by itself. In John 15:5, Jesus told his disciples, “I am the vine and you are the branches. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing.”

Plants need water to bloom and produce fruit. Psalms 1 says this.

1. Blessed is the one

 who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take

 or sit in the company of mockers,

1. but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,

 and who meditates on his law day and night.

3) That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,

 which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither—

 whatever they do prospers.

 Our nourishment is the word of God. Finally, the soil must be good. In the parable of the sower (Matthew 13), Jesus described a farmer sowing seed in different types of soil, including shallow, rocky, thorny and good soil. The rocky soil did not provide depth for the roots, and the plants withered quickly. The thorny soil choked the plants, and the seed in the good soil grew and produced fruit. I had always thought of this parable as talking about salvation, which is a logical thing. It also applies to believers who are bearing fruit. No matter what the conditions, the fruit of the Spirit is from the Spirit. It is a natural outpouring of his power and his work, not ours. This week let's try to abide in Jesus. It is not easy, but it is worth it.

**Beyond Our Control**

Consider the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Matthew 6

 This has been a difficult couple of weeks with many ups and downs. There have been many things that are out of my control, and it seems like the harder I try to get them in control the worse they get. I have been so frustrated and overwhelmed which has made me irritable and unreasonable. I finally sat down and cried, telling God I had just had it. I looked over and through the mist of my tears I saw something unexpected. It was a robin. That in itself is not so unusual, but the fact that it was November made me take notice. The robin was happily hopping from one seed to the next, chirping a cheerful tune. It was not worried about where the next bite was going to come from, but enjoying each one as it came along. As I watched its’ carefree trek through the parking lot, I thought of the old TV announcement. “Ladies and Gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control…” followed by whatever the problem was. I realized that although my situation was out of my control, it was not out of God’s.

I am not the first or the last to try to control my own circumstances. One of the earliest examples is the tower of Babel. They decided to make their own way to heaven. Remember how well that worked out? All their languages were confused, frustrating High School students in foreign language courses ever since. Then there was Abraham, who knew God had promised him a son, but couldn’t see the result. He got impatient and he and Sarah took matters into their own hands. Ishmael, Hagar’s son, was the result of their efforts to control things. While God did bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation in his own right, that nation has been at war with the children of Israel ever since. Many more instances occur in the Bible and in our lives. Fortunately, God has provided for all our needs, including our need for security. He tells us in Psalms 46:1 that he is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble. In verse 10 he urges us to: “Be still and know that I am God.” He reminds us that we are in a battle, and that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against powers and authorities and rulers in high places. (Ephesians 6)He says that he is the Lord our God who upholds us with his righteous right hand.(Isaiah 40:31) TAKE HEART!

**Family Ties**

Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor."1 Pet 2:17

 One summer my husband was working at a sales job where he went into various offices in the area. One day, he made his sales pitch to a woman, and she asked his name. When he told her, she said, "That’s my name, too! Who's your dad?" They talked for a while trying to place each other on the correct branch of the family tree. Then she told him that there was a family reunion in New Mexico a couple of weeks out.

 We were engaged at the time, and we talked it over with family. The two of us, my in-laws, and my brother-in-law drove to New Mexico together. We did not know what to expect because this was a branch of the family we had never met. We were told, though that only a couple of McCabes had come over from Ireland, so if you were here, you belonged. We were immediately made welcome, and quickly discovered similarities. There is "the nose", which appeared on most faces. (When I was telling this story to my children, they pointed to their faces and asked, "This one right here?”) Most of the men had jobs that fell into one of three categories. The women were all crafty and had organized a craft sale over the weekend. There was also a cut-throat horseshoe tournament, which our family held their own. Most everyone had sunflower seeds in their pocket, not just our men. The family church service on Sunday morning made it clear that beliefs were similar as well. We all enjoyed finding new family members and promised to keep in touch.

 There is a tendency in the church today to be "clannish". It is easy to stick to the Sunday school, the church, or the denomination that we come from and to exclude others. We may do this from convenience and we may do it because of disagreements in doctrine or tradition such as sprinkling vs. immersion, instruments or no instruments, or blue song books vs. overheads. If we do separate ourselves we are depriving both ourselves and our extended Christian family. We truthfully have more similarities than differences. We all come together because of our love for God and our gratitude for what he has done for us. There is something that we can learn from every group of believers and there is something they can learn from us. In our part of the country we are seeing a greater unity in the body.

 In the past few months there have been gatherings of believers from every denomination, called One Kingdom, coming together to pray for the city and the nation. There have been Racial Unity Summits to help different cultures learn to understand each other and worship together. There was a wonderful rally, called Abilene for Israel, where Jewish and Gentile believers met to pray and worship together. This really opened my eyes to our extended family in other countries. Aside from the fact that we are commanded to pray for Israel and to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem" we can learn so much from their reverence for God and their care for each other. Also, it helps us to understand the roots of our Christian faith.

 John Chapter 1 tells us that to everyone who believed in Jesus God gave the right to become children of God.(John 1:12-13) Much of Romans 8 deals with the beautiful picture of God's adoption of us and the way we can call him Abba Father and have become joint heirs with Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:17, we read, "Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor," and 1 Thessalonians commended the believers there for their love of the family of God everywhere.

God has given us a gift in our human families, our church families and the extended family of

believers. Have the courage to accept that gift and receive the blessings it can give us.

**Through It**

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Is 43:2

 Well, people's prayers in this part of West Texas have been answered. God sent rain. Then he sent some more, and then more still. When it stopped early this morning, the dog decided it was a great time to go out. I groggily put on my shoes and got the leash. We made it Ok for a few minutes and then began to have trouble picking out a route that did not include puddles. Not able to find a path I gritted my teeth and stepped into the puddle, completely soaking my Keds. I told Benji, "Well I guess we got to go through it." Immediately I was reminded of the old children's game, "Goin' on a Bear Hunt." I spent countless hours on my Grandpa's lap playing, with the cave being the fireplace with glass coals lit from below. I spent countless more hours with my children on my lap, playing the same game. After announcing that they are going on a bear hunt, the leader and children proudly announce that they are not afraid. They get to one obstacle after another such as a tree, a big rock or a river depending on which version you play. They have to get past all the obstacles to get to the cave where the bear is hiding. No matter which version you play, there is at least one obstacle where this is the conclusion. "Can't go over it. Can't go under it. Can't go around it. Got to go through It.!"

This feels like my life right now. There are several places in my life where I am sure God is working but me Have to wait and walk through it. I confess today that I am not very happy with God. A friend of ours passed away this week. I know all the Sunday school answers and the right things to say. I know she is With Jesus and I know she is not in pain and I know we will see her again, but I am still angry. I think God missed it on this one. Why would he take someone who was totally committed to Him, who was generous and helpful and compassionate and leave some of the turkeys who are actively spreading chaos and destruction? Do you know what I did? I told God that I was upset with him. I did hear the words I heard in church a couple of weeks ago about how "It came to pass, it didn't come to stay." That helped some but what helped more was just a reassuring sense of His presence, and a conviction that He was there with me, even in my anger. No lightning, no condemnation, but just a reminder of his faithful love.

Apparently I am not the only one to struggle with these things. Look at Isaiah 43:2.When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over You. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Joshua 1:9 says be strong and courageous. Do not tremble or be dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you may go. God reassured Hagar that he is the God who see (El Roi) in Genesis 16:13. So many other verses in the psalms and the gospels in particular tell us that God is with us in our struggles. We have to walk through some things but we do not have to walk through them alone. We have our God and we have each other. Hold on to both.

**All Choked Up**

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, 2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither; whatever they do prospers. Psalm 1:1-3

 We went visiting this weekend and in the Panhandle, it is a little cooler than it is here. We sat out on the back patio with the dog for a while and talked. My mother-in-law is having some health problems and I asked if there was anything I could do for her outside while it was cool. After some cleaning chores, she said that she really needed the grass out of the flower beds. With the dog supervising, I got down in the soft grass to work on the flower beds. It felt so good, with the cool, damp dirt on my hands. She showed me what she needed. There were long tendrils of grass filling most of the flower bed. It was using up the nutrients and the space that the flowers needed. In some places it was so thick that the sun couldn’t get to the flowers the way they needed. She reminded me to get the roots and identified which plants were desirable and which were weeds. After a while she asked if I was tired and wanted to stop, but by that time this story was churning in my head so I finished the task. The result was a cleaner, healthier flower bed and a story about what God can teach us through the natural world.

 First and most obvious is the fact that just as the weeds were using up the energy and resources needed by the plants, there are things that choke out the word and the spirit in our lives. The ones that bother me most frequently are the evil threesome of resentment, guilt and worry. Like the grass, they are all three intertwined and mixed together, feeding off each other in a destructive cycle. Your weeds may be different, such as addictive behaviors and people, or toxic anger. Whatever they are, like my mother-in-law said, you need to get the roots. Positive thinking, will power and punishment/reward programs won’t work. It is a spiritual issue and one that needs to be dealt with. Finally not all the things that end up choking us are bad things. Guilt can be a motivator for change and anxiety a prompt for better planning. It is good to help other people and righteous anger has its place. The problem comes when things get out of balance and when we are not connected to the source of our life.

Passages about plants and nature are all through the scripture. The challenge this week is to narrow them down. The first that comes to mind is Psalms 1.

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked

or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,

2 but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.

3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season

and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers

. Jesus teaches us about spiritual growth in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, and specifically talks about the idea of things choking out the word. In John 15:1-9 he encourages us to abide in him, the vine, so we as branches can bear much fruit. This is such a beautiful picture.

**Storm**

 The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run into it and they are saved. Proverbs

18:10.

 It was the day before Thanksgiving in 1992. I woke up to a winter wonderland, which quickly became less wonderful as I got out in it. The roads were an icy nightmare and ice driving has never been one of my best skills. I was driving a Mitsubishi and managed to slide it off the road and get it stuck really well. That was OK because I was prepared. I had just signed up for AAA.

and called them for a tow. The very friendly operator informed me that there was a 33 car pile-up

 on I-40 and it would be several hours before they could get to me.  Then I called my mom who

was working at another school in town. I was going to ride with her and Dad to Austin for

Thanksgiving.  Mom agreed to pick me up and take me the 30 miles from Amarillo to

Panhandle. The snow and ice continued through the afternoon and the 30 mile trip took over an

hour. We were sure that Dad would decide that it would be best to wait out the worst of the

storm and leave in the morning. We were wrong, though. Dad wanted turkey and dressing,

pumpkin pie and UT football. In a statement that will live in infamy in our family, he said, “If we

make it past Claude (20) miles away, we’ll be fine.

 We took off, with Mom driving slowly and carefully. About 10 miles into the trip there was an overpass which Mom successfully navigated. Dad said, “That was good driving, Stella.” Then we crested the top of the hill and saw a semi stalled in the middle of the intersection and several cars sliding. Mom reacted and slid the car into a snow bank past the bumper. Dad tried unsuccessfully to flag down a tow truck and just as unsuccessfully to free the car. After a while

he decided that we would walk the ¼ mile to the little 10 room motel and get a room. After the

longest ¼ mile I have ever traveled, we walked into the lobby and told the clerk that we needed a

room. She laughed and told us they had been full since noon, but we were welcome to wait in the

restaurant with the 30 other people who were stranded. We agreed that that would be good

because we were hungry. She apologized and said that the cook wouldn’t be in for an hour and a

half.

 So, tired hungry and cold we made our way into the restaurant. Dad immediately found two of

his football cronies so he was happy. Mom was immediately drawn to one woman, who it turned

out, was the only other person in the restaurant who was filled with the Holy Spirit. {I was not

well acquainted with the Holy Spirit at the time, having grown up learning about the Father, Son,

and Hmm Hmm Hmm Hmm.) After supper, finally, and more visiting, we heard the snow plows

and waited for them. We waited and waited and waited. About 9 o’clock, the owner said they

were going to have to close. Someone called 9-1-1 and the judge called back and told him that

they couldn’t close because there was no place for us to go. He explained that he and his family

had been there since 4 o’clock a.m. and they needed some sleep. The judge, whose name really is

 Jay Bob, asked who was in the restaurant. The owner named my dad and his football

cronies.  Jay Bob said, “Leave them in charge and go get some sleep.” They left the coffee pot

and hot chocolate. We served drinks and honey buns, visited, and tried to get some sleep in a

variety of contortions.  About 4:30, Dad’s buddies came in looking bright eyed and bushy tailed.

Mom asked what was their secret. They said that they had been sleeping in their car and if we

wanted, we could take a turn. We gratefully took our bags, turned on the engine and the heater

and caught a comfortable forty winks.

 We woke up and leaving our bags in the car, Mom locked the car and took the ignition key in to

Jimmy Don. When we didn’t see him, Mom asked around and found out that he had left an hour

earlier on the snowplow with Judge Jay Bob. Snow plows came with the sun and one after

another our new friends dug out and went on their way. The owner paid for our lunch, for our

help, and finally the last snow plow came over the hill. In the passenger’s seat was Judge Jay

Bob with the key to the car. We got our bags while they freed the car, and we were on our way.

As we left, I looked back at the sign that said, Panhandle – 11 miles. Then I looked at the clock.

It was almost exactly 22 hours since we left. The irony of our adventure was that once we got to

Claude, the roads were almost completely clear.

Our lives can look a lot like that trip. The wind howls and the snow blows, and one thing

after another hits us. What looks like a safe place to wait out the storm is not available. This may

be friends who have been “temporarily disconnected or are no longer in service. It can

be strategies that no longer work, such as addictions that have lost the ability to numb the pain. It

can be a challenge to be crammed together with others who are storm bound. There are people in

my life right now for whom I would love to flag down a tow truck.  There are also times when it

is hard to rest and we are weary, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually drained. It can

be hard to wait while other people get their answers while you sit and wait for yours. Rejoice

with those who rejoice sounds good in a song, but it can be tough to pull off.

 God is with us in all of these situations. He is our one true refuge. (Psalms 46:1.) He is

the God who holds us in his right hand.( Psalms 43:1) He urges us to put on our spiritual clothes

of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,(Colossians 3:12) and our spiritual

armor ( Ephesians 6) in dealing with our fellow travelers.

Finally there is Romans 12:12, where we are urged to be rejoicing in hope, persevering in

tribulation, devoted to prayer. Jesus promised us in John 16:33 that in the world we would have

tribulation, but be of good cheer for he has overcome the world. Let’s be willing to lean on God

and his peace and provision in the storm and to be compassionate with our fellow travelers.

**Home Where I Belong**

But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. (Isaiah 43:1)

If you haven’t read the little book Corduroy, by Don Freeman, go out and buy it, find a

child, any child, to share it with and read it to them. It is the story of a little bear that lived in

 a department store. He dreamed of finding a home. A little girl came into the toy store and asked

her mom to buy him. Mom said no because they had spent too much already, and pointed out

that he didn’t look new since he had lost the button on his overalls. Realizing that she was right,

he decides to go looking for his button. When he cannot find it in the toy department, he sets off

on an adventure.

The little bear climbs a mountain; (escalator) gets off in a palace (furniture department)

and crawls up onto a bed. He sees buttons sewn onto the mattress and pulls one off. The night

watchman finds him and carries him back to the shelf, clutching the button. The next morning he

woke to see the little girl reaching up to pick him off the shelf. She takes him up to her

apartment and into her room where she has a bear – sized bed just for him. The room is not as

fancy as the “palace,” but he looks at her in amazement and says, “This must be home. I think

I’ve always wanted a home.” Then she sets him on her lap and sews on his button, telling him

that even though she likes him the way he is, he’ll be more comfortable with his strap fastened.

He says, “You must be a friend.” I know I have always wanted a friend. She hugs him and says

that she too has always wanted a friend.

Many times in my life I have felt like Corduroy. I want so badly to feel that I belong. The

enemy is crafty and is always pointing out the ways that I am different and don’t belong instead

of how I am the same and do belong. Recently, I have begun trying to reconnect with my

siblings. It is tempting to focus on the ways that I am not like them, such as being less athletic

and less outgoing. Instead I am trying to see ways that we are all the same, such as having

creative minds and compassionate hearts.

Other danger zones are talking with other mothers and church. Focusing on my

differences from people at church keeps me feeling excluded. This suits the enemy’s purpose

well, because it will keep me from letting down my walls and fellowshipping with the rest of the

body. (1 Corinthians 12) This deprives both me and the other people of the strength we could

draw from each other. Instead we try to fill the void with substances, money, work, or

destructive habits or people.

Here, though is what God says. He says I am accepted in the beloved. (Ephesians 1:6).

He says I have received the spirit of adoption as his child. (Romans 8:15) He says that Jesus has

gone to prepare a place for me where I can go and be with Him. (John 14:2-3). He says that he

has redeemed me and called me by name and I am His. (Isaiah 43:1, Revelation 5:9) He says that

he will be our God and we will be his people. (2 Corinthians 6:16, Hebrews 8:10) He says, too,

that by one spirit we were baptized into one body, whether Jew or Greek, whether slave or

free.(1 Corinthians 12:13) His love and our acceptance of His gift are what gives us our sense of

belonging and of home, and is much more important than our differences.

Don’t listen to the lies that tell you that you will never belong or find your place, because

you are missing the button on your overalls. We have not just a family, but the family of God.

We have not just a home, but an eternal home with him. We have not just a friend, but a

precious friend who bought us with his sacrifice. Take your place in the family and reach out to

draw others in, too.

**Sheltered life**

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. and strength, a very present help in trouble. Psalms 46 :1

 I admit it. I lived a sheltered life. When I was 17 I was in Austin for Thanksgiving with my family. For some reason I was there without my parents.  I, of course, had a wonderful time. Being with my mom’s family was always a treat for me. The problem came when it was time to go home. My Grandpa was chosen to take me to the airport. I had to fly through DFW to get to Amarillo. Even though I had done this many times he was worried about me. I assured him I would be fine but he decided to take matters into his own hands. As I was checking in he told the stewardess that I needed to pre-board, with the 5 year olds and the elderly people in wheelchairs. I protested but it was all vain. When you are 17 life is a crisis anyway. I was so embarrassed! I lined up with the other pre-boarding passengers sure that everyone was looking at me. I found my seat and sat down, covering my face with my hands. The stewardess came up and asked me if I was going to need help finding my gate in Dallas or if I was going to be OK. I told her that since I was going to be 18 in 3 months I was probably going to be fine. She smiled and said, “That’s what I figured, but we have to keep Grandpa happy, don’t we?” Once I got over my embarrassment, I realized that regardless of how it looked to me, my Grandpa had done it out of love and was only trying to protect me. I did, however do my best to finagle for someone else to take me to the airport after that.

 Life is hard. Our family is going through a tragedy right now, and I am feeling sad and sort of lost. I have been talking to God about it and I let him know that I didn't think it was fair. I told him that I felt like he was wrong and I was angry. The good news is that I did not get struck by lightning. The bad news is that I did not get an answer. What I did get was a clear sense of His presence. I felt an assurance that he will hold me and shelter me in the middle of this storm. I still wish he would take this storm away for all or our sakes, but I know that he loves us and is in the storm with us. He is our shelter.

 The verse that come to mind are Psalms 46:1   God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.  Psalms 62:8 Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. There are many, many more verses that tell us that God is a shelter, a refuge and a shield. I need that right now. Storms will come, but we have a shelter and a hiding place. If you are in a similar place today, take your questions and your hurts to God and let him love you and hold you.

**Eyes Wide Shut**

"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind". 1 Timothy 1:7

 Amarillo is not a great cultural center but there are a lot of things to do for kids. There is a symphony, a really great science museum, and then there is Thompson Park. It has picnic tables, playgrounds and a zoo. The zoo now has a lion and a tiger, but the last time I was there, other exhibits include two goats, a horse, a donkey and a skunk. Across the parking lot is an amusement park, called Wonderland Park. One summer when I was about 10 our cousins came to town and we took them to Wonderland. They talked me into going on a haunted house ride called Fantastic Journey. We climbed into the car and it started rolling toward a door which opened as we got to it. We found ourselves in a tunnel with swirling black lights. We went through a second door and something jumped at the car as strobe lights flashed. That was enough. I covered my eyes and held onto my cousin's hand. I could hear the creepy noises and the screams from the people around me. My heart was beating fast and my mouth was dry. After a very long few minutes, I felt water running down my neck and the car burst through on more door into the summer sunshine. My dad asked me if it was scary. In my pre-teen wisdom, I said "How should I know? I kept my eyes closed the whole time!" Thus began my tendency to avoid things that I am afraid of.

 I am not the only one who has this tendency. In Judges 6, we find Gideon hiding in a wine press threshing wheat. He was hiding from the Midianites who would swoop in at harvest time and steal the wheat. An angel came to him and said, "Hail, mighty man of valor. The Lord is with you!"  Gideon answered "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" The angel informed him that he had been chosen to deliver his people from the Midianites. Gideon asked not once, but 3 times for a sign that the Lord had really chosen him, including a sacrifice that was immediately consumed by fire and a bowl of fleece that was wet when the ground was dry and dry when the ground was wet. He gathered 32,000 fighting men. God told him that he had too many men and to send home anyone who was afraid. 22,000 people took him up on the offer, and I'm sure Gideon wanted to be included in that group. God said that was still too many men and told him to take the men to the river and send home anyone who cupped water in their hands for a drink. 300 men were left and divided into 3 companies. 1 on each hill around the opposing army. In one of the strangest battle strategies known, he issued each man a torch, a pitcher and a trumpet. God told Gideon that if he was still afraid to go to the enemy camp and listen. One of the soldiers was telling another about a dream of a barley loaf rolling down the hill and destroying a tent.  The soldier listening said, “This has to be Gideon son of Joash." Encouraged by this report Gideon went back to his own camp. When he gave the signal, the 300 men broke the pitchers covering the torches and blew the trumpets. The Midianites were terrified and actually killed each other in their frantic race to get away.

 One encouraging thing about this story is that I am not the only one who has dealt with fear. I love the fact that God is clear about this and does not put the Bible character on a pedestal and not let us know their weaknesses. He was patient with Gideon and worked with him through his fear. He allowed him to ask for signs to reassure him. I also love the fact that once Gideon received his reassurance, he went ahead and acted.

Psalms 56:3 tells us this.

"When I am afraid I will trust in you. “Then we read this in 2 Timothy 1:7.

"God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and a sound mind".

Solomon tells us in Proverbs 18:10, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run into it and they are saved." Finally in Isaiah 43:1 is one of my life verses.

But now thus says the Lord,

He who created you, O Jacob,

    He who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

    I have called you by name, you are mine.

Over 300 times in the Bible we are told not to fear. God knows our weakness but he also knows the solution. Keep your eyes open to God's mercy and goodness this week.

Power Failure

Proclaim the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel, whose power is in the heavens.
You, God, are awesome in your sanctuary; the God of Israel gives power and strength to his people Psalms 68:34-35

 Hurricanes. Floods. Earthquakes. Volcanos. Besides the fact that they are all natural disasters and that we have seen them all in the last few weeks, what do they have in common? They all cause power failures. Power failures make everything much worse. There are the obvious problems, such as no power to prepare or store food or to get relief from the heat. There is the problem of not being able to work and the problem of not being able to communicate.  No jumping on Facebook to reassure family and friends or using your cell phone to console a hurting friend. There are also difficulties that I had not considered. For example, I learned that without power there is no way to pump water for drinking. Transportation systems rely on electricity and are in chaos. People are having to use physical labor to do work that they could do easily with power tools. These things are all bearable for a while, but then people start to get irritable and resentful, than anxious and depressed and finally despair can set in if the problems are not dealt with.

 The disasters have taken over the news, but there is an unreported problem that is just as serious. This is the problems Christians face when they try to live without the power God has made available. We can do the work he asks us to on our own power but it is much more difficult. Have you tried to love your spouse, your toddler, your teenager or your aging parent on love that you produce yourself? It works for a while but quickly leads to exhaustion and resentment. How about communication with God and our faith family? Are you feeling disconnected?

What are the power tools we have at our disposal?

These are the ones that come to mind.

Miracles

 Miracles are God's way of showing us both his power and his nature. Not done just to "show off", they are either done to show dominion over a false God (such as the gods of the Egyptian in Exodus), to show power over a need such as the feeding of the 5000 (Matthew 14) or over nature, such as walking on the water (Matthew 14) or raising the dead (Mark 5:22) They were not an end in themselves, but called people to God.

Salvation

 Sin separated us from God and we were hopeless. We could not reconcile to him, but He sacrificed Jesus and paid the price for our sins. Every other religion leaves the burden on the believer, but God came "demonstrated His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for the ungodly. (Romans 5:8) This is so amazing that it leaves us in awe, saying as Paul did, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power of God for salvation, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile." (Romans 1:16)

Holy Spirit

 Many believers have not been taught about the Holy Spirit. We are not able to use the many things he offers us because we don't know that they are available.  This includes sealing us at our baptism (Ephesians 4:30), comforting us (Romans 15:13) teaching us (Luke 12:12), interceding for us (or being our go-between with God), gifting us (1 Corinthians 12) and many more. Take time to learn more about this third member of the Godhead and the power he provides.

Scripture

  We are told in Hebrews 4:12. That "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword and able to separate bone and marrow and soul and spirit." Never underestimate the power we have in the "Sword of the Spirit which is the word of God." (Ephesians 6)

Prayer

 We are told to pray without ceasing (Romans 1:10), "to come boldly before the throne of God" (Hebrews 4:16), and that the effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:12)

God is willing to give you his power. Are you willing to receive it and use it?

**We’re Not From Around Here**

In my father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place I will surely come again and receive you unto myself. John 14:2

 The summer after my freshman year in College, I worked for a week as a teacher at church camp in Oklahoma. It was a different kind of place than I was used to and even boasted a ghost town close by with a population of seventeen people. One afternoon, I went on a store run with another woman from our group. The first sign of trouble came when we could not find road signs. We drove for miles, hoping we were on the right road. Before we found road signs, though, we found something else. Cows! About twenty or twenty five cows were relaxing in the roadway we were trying to cross.  They ignored our shouts and horn honks. Finally they decided on their own to move along. We drove on down the road for a minute, laughing at our adventure. Then the other lady suggested that we find a farmhouse and let someone know that the cows were out. Since we couldn't find any road sings I wasn't hopeful, but we did find a farmhouse. We knocked on the door and when the farmer answered, she explained to him that a quarter mile back we were trying to cross the road and the cows must have gotten out, and we felt that someone should know. He listened to the explanation and then asked, "Where're y'all from?" We told him we were both from West Texas. He smiled and told us they had open range. I asked the other lady as we drove off what open range meant. She said that the cows wandered and ate wherever they wanted and then were sorted out by the brands when it was time for market. We were glad to finally reach the town we were looking for and get back from our trek.Sometimes things are hard to understand if you don't know the language or the customs. It can leave you feeling homesick. Sometimes we feel ill at ease in the world here. It is partly because we are not from around here. This is not our home. Advent reminds us that our hope is a home in heaven because of what Jesus did. Many of my family and friends have gone ahead of me the last couple of years. I am reminded of the old song that says,

This world is not my home. I'm just a-passing through.

My treasure are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.

The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door

And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

 The Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 tells us that Abraham looked for a city whose builder and maker was God. (11:10) Others in John 14, Jesus is telling his disciples about his going to the father and preparing a place for them. He says, "In my father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you and if I go to prepare a place I will surely come again and receive you unto myself. (John 14:2)

There is a beautiful description in John's vision in Revelation.

**13**And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, what are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came they?

**14**And I said unto him, Sir, thou knows. And he said to me, these are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

**15**Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.

**16**They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.

**17**For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.

 I admit that I long for that. Life is so hard here sometimes. I want to be where there is no night and the Lamb is the light. I want God to welcome me and wipe the tears from my eyes. Until that time, let us encourage our fellow travelers who are not from around here.

**Restless Heart Syndrome**

Be still and know that I am God. Psalms 46:10

 Bedtime is always welcome, but not always easy. The first issue is that my little fur ball of a dog is not always interested in letting me go to sleep. This is especially true if I have worked a long day. He will either crawl up beside me and "oof" for attention, curl up on the opposite corner and "oof" so I have to sit up and pet him, or get just out of reach on the floor and bark. Resistance is futile, so finally I get out of bed and follow him into the living room. A lot of the time he goes to the door, wagging his tail, and then cuts between my legs and jumps up in my spot in the bed. Once he has settled in, the next issue comes along. My leg muscles tense as I am trying to relax. My feet twitch and I feel an irresistible urge to move my legs. Sometimes just as I am falling over the edge into sleep, they will jerk and startle me awake. The diagnosis is restless leg syndrome, and medication has helped a lot, for which my husband is grateful. What has not responded to medication is my restless heart syndrome.

 Symptoms of this disorder include dissatisfaction with life as it is, disappointment with God, and a sense of disquiet in the spirit. This syndrome was first seen in the Garden of Eden when Eve was tricked by the serpent into believing that God was not being fair to them and they could have more wisdom and be like God. (Genesis 3) Another recorded case was seen in the people building the Tower of Babel, believing they could "ascend to the heavens," (Genesis 11) In exodus we see the telltale symptoms in the Israelites who grew frustrated with Moses, asking in [Exodus 14:11](http://www.biblica.com/en-us/bible/online-bible/niv/exodus/14/) 11They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? One of their most dramatic episodes came when they had Aaron make the golden calf for them to worship, assuring Moses that they had just thrown the gold into the fire and that was what came out! (Exodus 32).

  Cases of restless heart syndrome occur throughout the Bible and into our own lives. Risk factors include spiritual malnutrition (1 Peter 2:2) and lack of contact with the Great Physician. Recommended treatment is the following.

Be still and know that I am God. Psalms 46:10

For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, “In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.” Isaiah 30:15

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. Proverbs 3:5

 Life is hard and most times there are no easy answers for things we face. Saying that we should depend on God my sound like a pat answer, but that is not my intention. What I do know is that in my life when I have been upset with God and feeling adrift, I have come back to the point that Peter did, saying "Where else can we go? You have the words of life. (John 6:68) If you are hurt and your heart is restless, I am sorry.  It is a real problem and not something to be made light of. God, the one Hagar called THE GOD WHO SEES, has not forgotten you.

**Are You Ready For Some Football?**

Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will

not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. (1 Cor. 9:25)

 In West Texas, football is not a game; it is a way of life.  My family lived it too. My dad seldom missed a high school game in our town, unless it was to go to see my uncle coach a high school game in another town. Greg was a phenomenal coach, and his 23-year coaching record was 174-64-2. Coaching was not a job to him. It was a ministry. He used the time on the field to teach much more about life than he did about football. Nothing could get in the way of Dad getting to football games. One night he had left with my grandmother to go to a game, and my brother and I were home with Mom. The phone rang after they had been gone about 15 minutes, and this is the conversation that took place.

     DAD: “Stella, you need to bring me the other car. I am out by the pizza place.”

     MOM: “Why? What’s wrong?”

     DAD: “Well, I am sitting here watching this one burn, and I have to get to the ballgame.”

      MOM: “OK, I’ll be there in 5 minutes.”

 There are many things that compete for our attention, and we can easily focus on things that are good, and not things that are best. As important as work, family and friends are, nothing is more important than our relationship with God.

 There are spiritual lessons to be learned from football that will help us understand how and why we need to keep God at the center of our lives. In football, there are two teams; each team has an opponent, a coach, a goal and a group of cheerleaders. There are rules and there are rewards. The same things are true in our Christian lives.

 We, as believers are a team.  We must work together to win.  Many verses speak to this idea, but one that comes immediately to mind is Galatians 6:2. “Bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” We definitely have an opponent, and he is not just playing. According to John 10:10, he comes to steal, kill and destroy.  In 1 Pet 5:8, he is described as a lion seeking whom he may devour.  We have a coach or a leader in God.  Our goal is to bring salvation, restoration and healing to others (2 Cor. 5:18, Mark 16:15, James 5).

 In Hebrews 11, the writer describes the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on.  Yes, there are rules to be followed. Some people get focused on the rules and forget the goal, and some people forget the rules and focus on the goal of eternal life. Think how this would work in football. Suppose one team decided they were going to get a touchdown regardless of how many people got hurt or run over. Another team might get so interested in following each rule to the letter that they never got around to scoring or found any joy in the game.  It takes a balance of both in football and in life.  As a reward in football, a team will receive a trophy, a write up in the newspaper, and fame.

 As Christians, we are promised a crown of life. This is what we read in

1 Cor. 9:24-25. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?” Run in such a way as to get the prize.  Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

God meets us where we are and teaches us from the things we understand.  Like Uncle Greg did with his players and coaches; take the lessons from the gridiron and use them every day.

Cree’s Tree

“He will bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of **ashes,** the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” Is 61:3

 The Texas Panhandle is a desolate place in many ways. The first settlers said that there was no way that trees could grow there.  Houses were usually dugouts or sod houses called “soddies.” The stereotype that Texans are bullheaded has its roots in reality. In 1888, a settler named Thomas Cree and his wife came to West Texas after working on the railroad. Since there were no trees for wood, they built a dugout. His wife wanted a tree, so he drove 35 miles in a wagon to get a sapling. He decided that for her sake he would get a tree to survive, by George. He watered it from a lake he dug from a buffalo wallow and it lived for many years, through blizzards and droughts. Although it has since died, in 1963 the governor dedicated a historical marker there, celebrating the first tree in the Panhandle. What was the secret of Cree’s Tree, as it is known? In a word, roots. What the early settlers did not know is that deep under the prairie grasses and dust ran an underground river. It is known as the Ogallala Aquifer, which I still find fun to say out loud.

 The Bible has a lot to say about trees. In Psalm 1, we read this about the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord;

“He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither” (Psalm 1:3).

 Isaiah says that we are the trees of righteousness planted by the Lord for the display of His splendor. (61:3) The parable of the sower compares different types of soil that seeds grow in. The seed that fell in the shallow soil grew up quickly but because it did not have deep roots, it died quickly too. The seed that fell on the good soil took root, grew strong and multiplied thirty, sixty, or even a hundredfold.

 I have mentioned before that I grew up in a family “well-versed” in the word of God. (Pun intended.) From my earliest days I was taught stories and memory verses. They took root and my faith has held through the wind storms and drought in my life. This is what I hope for you. Water your seeds of faith with prayer, study and fellowship. Take heart when God prunes off dead leaves in your life. Take joy in being a tree of righteousness created to display God’s splendor.

The Bigness of Small

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 1 Cor. 1:27

 Every year when I was growing up we had the Peewee Track Meet. As I remember, it consisted of 2 races - the 50 and 100 yard dash.  Each class ran a heat and the four winners from each class ran a final. The parent cheered and tried to keep order among twenty five kids waiting in the March wind for their turn to run.  I ran my hardest every year, only to watch the rest of the class pull ahead of me one by one. After snacks on the football field we would go back to our classroom where the teacher would hand out the ribbons.  The six place ribbons were blue, red, white, yellow, orange and green. (Ugly green, by the way). Then she would pass out maroon ribbons with cartoon kittens trying to look ferocious. They were printed with the words, “I’m a Little Panther”. I have six “I’m a Little Panther” ribbons, each with a slightly different ferocious kitten but no other ribbons. By 5th grade I tossed them all in the closet.

 I have encountered obstacles to goals in my life and sometimes feel that no matter how hard I try still end up with an “I’m a Little Christian” ribbon and no successes. I haven’t achieved some of the big things my family has and often feel that my life and service to God is inferior. Recently a preacher prayed for me that God would continue to anoint me in my work with disabled people. It stopped me in my tracks.  Wasn’t anointing for the big things like preaching or singing? I know He has anointed my writing and my music, but what about my work? Does God care when I try to soothe tears of frustration or chase flailing limbs with socks?  Is he present when I coax a smile out of someone who is locked inside a broken, twisted body? Does it bring Him Glory when I show up with a smile when I would rather be home in bed? How about when I love a family member who is acting unlovable? Could it be that these things bring him as much honor as the “big things”?

 Recently at our church we had a series on “Extras”, the minor characters in the Bible. Take the Christmas story. The major characters are Mary, Joseph and Jesus, but God chose to include a host of extras, to make the story richer. He included the innkeeper who gave them a place, although not the best place. He included the shepherds who the equivalent of today’s rednecks, the wise men who were foreigners with vastly different customs and beliefs and two elderly people in the temple who were waiting for Messiah.  The next time the enemy tries to tell you that your life or service is inferior, take the advice of Joyce Meyer. “Just stomp your little holy foot and tell him that he is a liar.

Ghost Dog

Do not rejoice over me, oh my enemy, for though I fall I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness the Lord will be my light. Micah 7:8

 My friend had a grandfather who was a genuine mountain man, complete with moonshine and shotguns. He also had a hound dog named Gus. Gus was a good dog but he had two faults. He was an “egg-sucker” and he would fall down and play dead when he heard a shot gun. He decided that these traits wouldn’t do in a mountain dog and was going to put the dog down. The children liked Gus and the set out to be his angels of mercy. While Grandpa was refiling his moonshine, the kids snuck in and replaced the shells in the shotgun with blanks. Grandpa went out and dug a shallow grave, and then took the shotgun and the dog out to the clearing. He fired the blanks and down went Gus. Grandpa buried him in the shallow grave and then came back to the kitchen and sat down with his jug. In a few minutes he heard a scratch at the door, and looked up to see Gus standing at the door with his tongue hanging out! He let loose with a string of colorful mountain words and said to the dog, “I could have sworn I just shot you.” Again he took the dog and the shot gun. Again he shot the dog with the blanks and buried him. Then he stomped back to the house and sat down in the living room. He stole looks at the door and sure enough, in a few minutes Gus was back. Now his language was not only colorful but downright psychedelic! The children were hiding behind the door laughing hysterically. He took the dog to the clearing a third time and fired the gun. Gus went down and back into the grave. When Grandpa got back to the house, Grandma decided he had had enough moonshine and gave him a beer and a bowl of peas to shell. He sat on the back porch with his peas, his beer, and his gun. Looking out toward the grave, he told the dog, “If you come back this time, I ain’t gonna shoot you now or never. You deserve to live.” Lo and behold, he saw Gus’s front feet and then his snout poke out of the grave. As the dog came toward him with his tail wagging happily, Grandpa picked up the gun and slammed it on the porch breaking it. Gus lived a long and happy life and was buried 15 years later in the same shallow grave.

 Sometimes we feel like life has got us down. It may be a prayer that has not been answered even though you have prayed it as long as you can remember. It could be a habit or stronghold that you can’t seem to overcome. Today I realized that I had a resentment that was clouding my judgment and nurturing a root of bitterness ( Ephesian 4:31), even though I thought I had conquered it. Sometimes when we have fallen either because of sin or just because of circumstances, we just want to lay there and not try again. We may feel like poor old Gus, tossed in the grave over and over. God has a lot to say about this. In Romans 8:37 he declares that we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. One of my favorite verses is Isaiah 41:10.

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

 Another is Micah 7:8, Do not rejoice over me, oh my enemy, for though I fall I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness the Lord will be my light. One thing we must be careful of is to realize why we are more than conquerors and why we can rise again. In each of these verses and many, many more, It is because of God and his grace and his power. I can “suck it up” and power through in my own strength. The result is fleeting and flawed, like the difference between real and plastic fruit.

This week let’s make a commitment to persevere in God and his strength. We can overcome and try again and we can give others the encouragement they need to do the same.

Out of Reach

God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble. There for we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. The Lord almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Psalms 46:1-3

 It is finally fall here in West Texas and it has come in with a vengeance. Lots of churches and organizations have had fall festivals or Trunk or Treats.  One that I saw recently had inflatable games and I did a double take going past one of them. Two people were inside of an inflatable boxing ring. They were wearing huge blow-up sumo wrestling costumes. It was hard enough to stand, much less fight. They would take a “running” start and crash into each other.  Usually one or both would fall after a rebounding bounce from the hit. The people watching were laughing and clapping. It was also quite a sight to watch them get up after they had fallen. The good thing is that it is almost impossible to get hurt in a game like this. It is also almost impossible to help someone up.  Basically, it is good for a laugh but not much else.

 In life we have ways of keeping from getting hurt too, but they are not nearly as funny. My fall back (no pun intended) is that I will reject someone before they have a chance to reject me. I don’t get hurt much but I end up feeling lonely and not getting the help or encouragement that I need, or that I could give. I strenuously avoided forming new friendships after someone I love died. I also tend to bury any negative feelings or hurts, though I do this less often than I used to. When it comes to relating to God I think I am more comfortable following the rules that I am risking real relationship because it is somehow less scary than accepting love from a holy God that I might let down. No matter how far I get away from these two ways to insulate myself, in times of stress I find myself drawn back to them. I personally do not turn to drugs or alcohol to numb the edges of pain, but I know that many people do.  Ways that we isolate/ insulate are as numerous as the people who use them.

 What can we do instead? First, let’s let God do the protecting. HE has said, that He is our shield and our very great reward.(Genesis 15:1) He also said in Psalms 46:1 “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in times of trouble. There for we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea. The Lord almighty is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress.” Second when it comes to one another, Paul urges us to clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. (Colossians 3:12)

 Be brave with me this week and engage with your brothers and sisters. We might be bruised or even scarred, but we will come out stronger for God’s glory.

You light up my life!

 You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before men that it may be seen. Matthew 5:25

 One of my favorite things about the holidays is candlelight services. This year I was struggling some because I did not get to be with my family. I was feeling sad and lonely when I got to service. I tried to focus on Jesus but the enemy was working overtime. The preacher said that Jesus understands when our holidays don't go like we planned, because the first Christmas didn't go so smoothly either. At the end of the sermon all the lights were out except the Christmas lights on the tree and the wreaths. One light was lit and shone brightly in the dark room. Then two more candles were lit from that one and the light quickly spread from one to another. Soon the candles all around the room were shining. As the light spread so did the hope and faith in my heart. I noticed two things. The first light was the key. Nothing could happen without it. Second the light had to be spread. What if one person, maybe  halfway through the room got so caught up in how beautiful his candle was that he refused to share it for fear something might happen to it. What if someone looked at the person next to him and  decided that he was not going to light that person's candle because that person had not spoken to him or stepped on his toe on the way into the pew. The light would stop its spread at that point.

  Jesus is the light of the world. John 1 says that they light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not understand it. Like the first candle had to be lit by a match or lighter, we have to depend on Jesus to supply the light for us. One of the lessons that I am learning this week (again) is how important it is to receive from Jesus.  We accepted his gift of salvation but we need ot daily accept  his provision, his grace, his strength. We are broken and trying to fill our own cups. This is like trying to bail water out of a boat with a colander.

 Once we have let Jesus light our candle, we can share this light with others. We are encouraged to do this in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.  Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they set it on a lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.  In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:14-16. It is often hard to do this. We want so badly to protect our hearts. What can we do about this? Mother Teresa had an answer. This is called her Anyway Poem

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;

Build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;

Do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;

Give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;

It was never between you and them anyway.

 This world is a dark place and people need the light of Jesus that we can give them. Pass

 it on to your neighbors, to strangers, to friends, and remember to pass it on to your family.

FREEDOM!

Where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. 2 Corinthians 3:17

 I saw them again this week - “free” tickets to the circus. We fell for it once. I took my children to the circus with their free tickets. My ticket was fifteen dollars.  We went in and sat in an empty section near the center ring. We were excited to find a seat so close to the action. After a few minutes a woman with a money belt come and told us that it would be four dollars apiece more to sit there. Rolling our eyes, we moved to another seat.  The circus started and there were other money making opportunities, such as elephant rides that cost twelve dollars and lasted about two minutes, and pictures with a sci-fi looking version of a cartoon character that gave me the willies.  I enjoyed the trapeze and high wire acts but the animal acts were my favorites. I was especially impressed with the elephants that were so easily controlled by a whistle and baton.

 How do these great beasts learn so much control? I found out that when an elephant is very young it is tied to a post with a heavy rope that it is not able to break. As it grows it quickly becomes strong enough to break the rope or rip the post from the ground, but it is so used to being bound that it does not try to break free. By the time the elephant is full grown, it can be tied with only a thin cord.

 This is a sad commentary on mankind and the way we treat animals but there is a deeper lesson to be learned. We are often held back in life by things that we can actually overcome. We may be held back by fear or by guilt or by self-defeating attitudes. We are vulnerable to these anyway and the Enemy of our souls is more than willing to supply them. One of his names in First Peter is the “Accuser of the Brethren.” For example I am filling out applications for jobs and every time I write down a job, he is in my ear saying, “Remember the things you did wrong at that job.” I am trying to counter with the things that I did well or things that I learned.

 This is not something that we can overcome on our own, but it is something we can overcome. Guilt is a common trap that the enemy sets for us, but in Romans 8:1 Paul tells us that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ has set me free from the law of sin and death.” Isaiah 54:17 tells us this good news. "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their vindication is from me," declares the LORD.  We also need to remember that “greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world.” He has promised to complete the work that he started in us. (Philippians 1:6)

 Don’t fall for the lies you are told. “Gird you loins with truth” (Ephesians 6) and let God help you to break free from the things that bind you.

Testing, Testing

Count it all joy my brothers when you encounter trials of various kinds, knowing that the testing of your faith works patience and let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:3

 I bought a new car recently, praise the Lord. Cars make our lives so much easier, especially in a town like this which is too big to bike across and has a bus system designed by a sadist. While I was looking for a car, I did a lot of research and talked to my husband and my pre-engineering student child. (Yes, that was a shameless plug, taking nothing away from my social work student child.) The previous car was in a crash, and I wanted to know about safety tests that are done. I found out that there are wind tunnel tests, extreme conditions tests, engine safety,  roof strength tests and crash tests for front, side and rear. If a car is not tested thoroughly, drivers and passengers can be in real danger.  Threats can come from any direction depending on where a car is driven, the skill of the driver and any extreme conditions. While tests are not a guarantee of safety in an accident they are very necessary.

 No one likes to talk about it, but faith is tested too. Like a vehicle, threats to our faith can come from any direction. They can come from within our own hearts and minds, (engine safety) or from assaults from the outside. (crashes) They can be brought on by extreme conditions such as death of a loved one or financial hardship, or they can be brought on by wear and tear on our souls. James 1 talks about the wind tunnel test of living in doubt, tossed about by every wave of doctrine. (1:6) College students often have their faith tested by being exposed to other views. A catastrophic event in our lives will shake our faith down to its core, but through God’s grace it can come out stronger and even be a source of comfort and ministry to others.

 I tried to find people in the Bible who had had their faith tested, and then realized that it was difficult to find anyone who had not. In Hebrews 11, sometimes called the Hall of Faith, he lists many of the faithful, and then ends with this in verses 38-40.

 The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, 40 since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

 There is so much to be said about faith, but let me leave you with this. In John 6, Jesus was teaching and many people left because what he said was hard. He looked at the disciples and asked, “Do you want to leave too?” Peter said, “Lord, where would we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

I can remember personally where I was when I said something very similar to God. A friend had drowned trying to save some girls who had gotten caught in and undertow and I was very angry with God. It was the first time someone I loved had died. I said to God, “I don’t think I want to play if that the way you’re going to be. He was a missionary trying to do your work. “ I cried for a while, and then came to the same realization that Peter did. There was nowhere else to go. No one else has redeemed me and called me by name. (Isaiah 43:1) Many, many other tests have followed, but He has shown Himself to be faithful and worthy of my trust. Faith that is tested is faith that is strengthened. Ride the wave and hold on. He is with you in the storm.

Disturbing the Peace

These things I have spoken unto you that in me you might have peace. In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world. John 16:33

 There are a few pockets of beauty in the dry, flat West Texas landscape. One of them is McBride Canyon. There are trees big enough to climb, and I remember a time when one of our church friends climbed one and stayed there all day. He even had his food tossed up to him and ate in the tree. A few years later we made a trip there for a campout with my brother's Cub Scout troop. It was special for me because my friend who had moved away came back and camped with us. We talked non-stop for hours. We slept in a pop up camper on one of the bunk beds and our friend and her daughter slept on the other bunk bed. We finally wore ourselves out and fell asleep listening to the crickets and frogs and night sounds that were different from what we heard in town. About 5 in the morning our friend got up to take her little girl to the bathroom. We woke up as they were leaving the camper. We lay there in the dark and listened again to the quiet sounds, then of course started talking. We talked about being away from civilization which we knew so much about at 12 years old. After a few minutes, one of us wondered if there were bears in these "woods". Our imaginations ran with that for a few minutes, even though the nearest bear was probably 700 miles away. We had started to quiet down when we heard a sound that struck terror in our hearts - the zipper on the camper. We jumped sky high, sure that a bear had not only found its way to the Texas panhandle, but learned how to unzip a camper. I said the only thing I could think of. "Who Goes There?" This was met by hysterical laughter, not from a bear, but our friend and her daughter.

 God has offered us peace as one of the fruits of the spirit. He has promised to fight our battles and carry our burdens and bind up the brokenhearted. He has promised that he will never leave us or forsake us. Unfortunately we also have an enemy who wants nothing more than to disturb our peace. He will work in our minds and speak through other people. He will bring difficult situations He will tempt us to worry or resent and then hit us with guilt when we succumb to these temptations. Talk about playing both ends against the middle. How do we combat this when it comes?

 The first thing is to put on our armor. Ephesians 6:10-17 reads

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. 13 Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. 14 Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, 15 and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. 16 In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

 I don't know about you but I need to read and remember this every day, especially in hard times. Us the shield of faith and the sword of the spirit.

Second remember the promises of God, including these words of Jesus.

These things I have spoken unto you that in me you might have peace. In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer. for I have overcome the world. John 16:33

 Jeremiah 29:11 says  For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Micah 7:8 us one that I go to in hard times. Do not rejoice over me my enemy for though I fall I will rise again, and though I sit in darkness the Lord will be my light.

Finally I have a challenge for you. Try to come up with a part of your identity in Christ fro each letter of the alphabet. For example, Accepted, Beloved, Cherished, Delivered, Forgiven,

These things can help us through weeks like this and any time the enemy tries to come against us. Also lets commit to holding each other up in prayer. Ask God who needs you to fight for them and swing those swords.

Why Did the Chicken Cross the Yard?

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:12

 I had what should be a once in a lifetime experience this week. I was driving close to downtown Abilene and saw a chicken ambling across the road. It was strutting across my lane. I honked to encourage it to hurry. It declined to hurry, looking at me and the car behind me as if he were wondering what we were doing on his street. I guess he figured he had the right of way.

 As I drove off I thought of one of my favorite chicken stories. A woman (I believe it was my great grandmother) took advantage of a warm spring afternoon to do some deep cleaning. She brought chairs bedding and outside so she could air them out. Deciding to give the mirror a good cleaning as well, she brought it outside and propped it against the wall of the house. She went back inside for a minute. but was startled by a horrible racket. She went back out and saw her rooster standing at the mirror, screeching at his reflection. She tried to shoo him away but he was lost in the moment. With his talons and beak flashing, he flew at his adversary. The good news is he was victorious and the interloper lay in pieces at his feet. The bad news is that the woman was not understanding about his smashing the mirror to get to the "other rooster" and he ended up in the soup pot.

 How many times have you spent time and energy fighting the wrong thing? We do have things that we need to fight, but we often have our focus in the wrong place. For example, the other night I was having a stupid argument with my husband. We were arguing because instead of the super ultra-extra large pack of paper towels, I had only bought the ultra-extra large pack. He was determined to show me the error of my ways and I was determined to defend my decision. All of a sudden I stopped and thought, "I bet we are not arguing about paper towels." Then we were able to figure out the real issue and settle it, especially once I promised to buy super ultra-extra large packs from now on.

 This is true in our spiritual lives as well. We argue with our brothers and sisters about stupid things. There have been church splits that have happened because of the color of the carpet chosen or which song book was the right one. This suits the enemy's purposes just fine. As long as we are sniping with each other we won't be fighting the more important battle of helping to win people to the Lord. Another trap we often fall for is "taking up an offense". Because of my personality, I don't like to see people mistreated. If I hear about it, I will get upset with the "mistreat-er" on behalf of the victim. The truth is that this is a bad idea. I had recently forgiven someone after a very long period of resentment. Then I heard about him mistreating someone else. Immediately I started to get angry with him on her behalf. That resentment started flooding back. God showed me that I had to let their issues be theirs. As long as I had "cleaned my side of the street" with him, that was all I was responsible for.

So what does the Bible say about all of this?   Ephesians 6:12 is the verse I immediately think of.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." 2 Corinthians 4:8 reminds us, "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal." So much of what we are fighting about is trivial and takes our energy and focus away from the things that are much more valuable and lasting. Finally we need to remember that no matter what we temptations we face from the enemy, his ultimate goal is only to "Steal, kill and destroy." (John 10:10). Keep your eyes on the goal and don't be tricked into fighting an illusion.

The Price is Paid

You are not your own. You were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your bodies. 1 Cor. 12:3

 I have a guilty pleasure. I love to watch The Price is Right. I like the excitement of people coming up to contestants’ row or up on stage. I like the silly T-shirts people come with, and I like the games. I was talking about this to a friend and these are our favorites.

 Cliff Hanger - You can make a certain number of mistakes but if you make too many, your little man falls off the edge of the mountain.

 Plinko - You win Plinko chips and release them from the top of a slanted board.  They bounce off of pegs and end up in slots at the bottom. The slots have different dollar amounts from 0 to 10,000

 The Check Game - You fill in the amount on the blank check that you think the prize is worth.

 Has your spiritual life ever felt like a game show?  Do you feel like you have a certain number of mistakes allowed before God gives up on you and lets you fall off the cliff? Maybe you try to keep all the rules or do good deeds to scramble back down the mountain a few steps. How about Plinko? Even though you know God loves you, do you feel like life tosses you around like a Plinko chip? Maybe you feel secure in your salvation, but when it comes to abundant life you are unsure whether you will end up with lots of blessing or a bit fat nothing.  Maybe you feel more like the check game.  What value do you place on yourself? Who gets to decide how worthy you feel? Is it your job, your spouse, or is it a parent’s voice that said, “You’ll never amount to anything. “

 There is good news. The game we are playing is The Price is Paid. Jesus paid for our mistakes with his death.  He didn’t fall off the cliff. He willingly went over the edge so we wouldn’t have to. John 10:28 says, “For this reason the father loves me because I lay down my life. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."   He also gives us abundant life (John 10:10). Psalms 23 says that He anoints our head with oil and our cup runs over. When it comes to value, he says that he bought us with a price.  The price was his own blood.  Matt 20:28 says the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

 Yes, life can seem like a game, but we can win here and we can reap the rewards for eternity. Take heart.