

## What Holy Longings Will You Pursue?

People of God, on this second Sunday in Lent, we enjoy the freedom to gather in peace to worship the God of Jesus. We offer each other the gift of presence as we individually and collectively seek to sense the Spirit calling us toward our next faithful steps. As we move further along our Lenten journey today, I invite you to wonder with me, **what holy longings will you pursue?** Please pray with me:

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God; with the Psalmist, we seek your face. We long to sense your presence with us in our everyday experiences. Hide not your face from us. Open us further to your loving presence. Open us from the inside out. Touch us where we most deeply ache and long for our best instinct to be empowered by your love and peace. Guide us in our quest to follow the way of Jesus. As you work within us, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

At the heart of today's question is another question: what truly compels you? What endeavor, relationship, social or environmental circumstance so captivates your mind and heart that you feel compelled – obligated—to act? To what next step is God calling you?

American theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner once wrote these words about vocation: **“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”** Buechner suggests that your most authentic call from God is found at the nexus between your deep gladness (your passion, strength, giftedness) and the world's deep hunger (the ways in which God cries out to you through others). In short, both internal and external motivators are essential to God's calling in our lives.

If we only follow our own intuition while keeping our senses closed to the cries of others, or, if we are only open to the cries of others while silencing the voice within us, then we run the risk of heeding callings that do not fully align

with God’s hope for us. What truly compels you?—from both the realm of the internal and the realm of the external? If “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,” then where is your place?

As we turn to the Psalmist and to Jesus, let’s first seek to learn something new about obedience by attending to today’s snapshots from their faith journeys.

The Psalmist holds no feelings back, modeling how to seek God in honesty and vulnerability. In The *Inclusive Bible* translation, we would read this in the opening verses: *“God, you are my light, my salvation—whom shall I fear? Though an army mounts a siege against me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, I’ll still be confident.”* The Psalmist trusts in God as a source of strength and confidence while acknowledging the spiritual toll of frightening circumstances and suffering.

God calls on the Psalmist to seek God. And we hear the Psalmist reflect on that call with a sense of longing: *“You say to my heart, ‘Seek my face,’ and so it is your face I seek!... I have confidence that I’ll see the goodness of God in the land of the living! Wait for God—stand tall and let your heart take courage!”* The Psalmist was compelled to obey the call to seek God’s face in all circumstances.

Throughout the gospels, we read examples of Jesus engaging in debate with the Pharisees who, like Jesus, were teachers of Torah. In Judaism, Torah means the Way—the way that is passed on from generation to generation, whether in oral or written form. Torah guides the people to follow God’s will that we love neighbor, self, and God. Jesus was a prophetic teacher in that he had a new vision of God’s realm and a new interpretation of Torah. Therefore, Jesus and the Pharisaic teachers frequently bumped heads as they rigorously and respectfully debated their interpretations of scripture.

In today’s gospel reading, the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod plans to kill him. This was not news to Jesus or to his disciples. Herod was a puppet king.

The Roman emperor appointed Herod, a Jew, to control Jews in accordance with the oppressive Roman regime. Crowd control was one of Herod's main tasks. Because the people saw in Jesus real wisdom, charisma, and power; they could not help but hope that he would become for them a political Messiah, liberator, savior.

How did Jesus respond to their warning? *"Today and tomorrow, I'll be casting out devils and healing people, and on the third day I'll reach my goal. Even with all that, I'll need to continue on my journey today, tomorrow, and the day after that, since no prophet can be allowed to die anywhere except in Jerusalem."* Jesus was not naïve. He knew that his presence in Jerusalem during the annual Passover pilgrimage would attract crowds and that his execution by the hands of Rome or one of its puppets was all but inevitable. But Jesus was compelled to obey God's call to speak and act in truth and love. Nothing would stop him from living out his call. His deep gladness would continue to meet the world's deep hunger—for three more days and for millennia beyond his lifetime.

I invite us to continue wondering, what compels me in this life? How do I know what calling is mine to obey? Where does my deep gladness meet the world's deep hunger?

Today, we witness the spirit of Jesus in the people of Ukraine and in the people who are receiving refugees across borders and into their homes. That spirit is one of courage made out of strength and tenderness.

Jesus approached people and circumstances with strength and tenderness. He demonstrated power – power to love, to heal and to teach, power that was fueled by tenderness – emotional receptivity and responsiveness. I like to use the word fierce to describe Jesus. To be fierce means to be boldly confident, heartfelt and powerful in intensity. **What did fierceness (strength tied to tenderness) facilitate in Jesus' life? And what could fierceness look like in your life?**

Growth toward Jesus, becoming fiercer (more boldly confident, heartfelt and powerful in our intensity) will equip us for risk taking. As fierce followers of Jesus, we will risk vulnerability; we will expose ourselves to the possibilities of losses and wounds. Our losses and wounds are not products of God's will for us. They are not deserved or undeserved. They are just part of being human. Our losses and wounds can form us into stronger, more tender people – people who embrace our power to love, to heal, and to teach one another. Our losses and wounds can only be that powerful to love, heal and teach if we commit ourselves to a way of strong vulnerability – a tender form of power.

Let's hear again from today's gospel reading how Jesus responded from his grounding in strength and tenderness, vulnerability and fierceness.

*“Just then, some Pharisees came to Jesus and said, ‘You need to get out of town, and fast. Herod is trying to kill you.’ Jesus replied, ‘Go tell that fox, ‘Today and tomorrow, I’ll be casting out devils and healing people, and on the third day I’ll reach my goal.’ Even with all that, I’ll need to continue on my journey today, tomorrow and the day after that, since no prophet can be allowed to die anywhere except in Jerusalem.”*

We still use the metaphor of a fox to note a person's cleverness or craftiness. Jesus recognized that Herod, the puppet king of the Roman Empire, was sending a warning message through the gossip chain. Herod was attempting to lure Jesus with the ease and comfort of escape from very real danger. Herod wanted to maintain his role in the power structure by silencing Jesus – an activist in Herod's own Jewish faith community. Herod feared radical truths about enacting love and justice for the most oppressed and marginalized among them. But Jesus was way too fierce to be lured into the ease of fearful silence.

I love the words of First John, chapter four, verse eighteen, inspired by Jesus of Nazareth: *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”*

Jesus continued, *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I wanted to gather your children together as a mother bird collects her babies under her wings—yet you refuse me! So take note: your house will be left to you desolate.”* Desolate – so alone, so empty. Jesus’ entire purpose was to be among people – encouraging them to not be alone, to not be empty, to not be desolate. Instead, Jesus encourages us to see one another, connect with each other, to not be alone.

Jesus did not dwell in zones of ease and certainty. Jesus embraced uncertainty. In his book, *Gifts of the Dark Wood: Seven Blessings for Soulful Skeptics (and Other Wanderers)*, author Eric Elnes encourages readers to embrace uncertainty as a fundamental step on the journey toward wholehearted living.

I’d like to close by sharing with you a few passages from *Gifts of the Dark Wood*. Elnes writes, *“My frequent experiences of uncertainty [have] developed a deeper sense of trust that emboldens me to follow a call into uncharted territory... My struggles... show that living a vital, even heroic life is not about moving from temporary failure to lasting success, but allowing your next struggle to become your next source of revelation, thereby your next opportunity.”* This Christian pastor and author does not attempt to glorify struggle or jump to its potentially happy end result but rather honors struggle and encourages us to honor each other’s and our own struggles.

Elnes goes on to write, *“Incidentally, even the great saints of old experienced significant doubts and struggled with imperfections. They did not become saints by moving from uncertainty to clarity. They moved, rather, from uncertainty to trust, which requires the ongoing presence of uncertainty... they moved not from failure to success, but from failure to faithfulness, which requires the ongoing possibility of failure.”* What gift we can unwrap in community when we honor our struggles and to risk sharing them with one another!

Finally, here is one more passage from Elnes: *“When the Spirit stirs the deepest waters within me, I discover—and begin to claim—my true self as well as the connection I share with others. I move another step toward becoming the person I was created to be... These experiences or “touches” of the Holy Spirit have a way of exciting and perhaps terrifying you at the same time. The excitement comes from the sense that they are inviting you to a place, or a life, that is far more wonderful than you have imagined. The terror comes from this very realization... Uncertainty teaches us to let go of all concerns but the ones we truly face, giving us the courage and power to face them. In so doing, uncertainty provides the unexpected invitation to live our lives wholeheartedly.”*

Let us, in this season of Lent, follow the ways of the Psalmist and of our brother and savior Jesus. Let us be open to being strong and tender, vulnerable and fierce.

With the Psalmist, may we seek God’s face. With Jesus, may we surrender to the Spirit’s longing that we obey and pursue the call to love.

Love is counting on us. Amen.

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