

“The five daily questions”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 6, 2020

Isaiah 40:1-11 and 2 Peter 3:8-15

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

For a week now, Facebook has regaled me with magazine-like photos of friends’ homes, Christmas decorations, and beautiful families. Photos of spotless kitchen counters, and hand-sewn stockings, and garland-strewn fireplaces. I’ve seen a photo of a toddler about Emerson’s age, smiling sweetly, a bow in her hair, standing next to her very own miniature Christmas tree in her very own bedroom, decked with glass ornaments and wrapped presents, and somehow not an ornament is shattered or a present opened—the mother explaining that a single instruction to her daughter is all it takes to keep the house calm and pristine.

My first thought, of course, is: O, how beautiful. My second thought is: Wow, I’m failing at life.

We’ve already had several Christmas decorations destroyed by our rampaging toddler, who far from taking our instructions seriously, flashes us a naughty smile right before wreaking havoc. Most of those decorations of course are still in a box in the basement, which by the way is moldy and falling apart. We have a giant hole in our kitchen ceiling—literally, half of the ceiling has been missing since February. There’s a strange smell in the house that we can’t quite identify. And as I write this, my son is attempting to eat, not read, eat his Christmas storybook. We’re usually proud if we finish the day with all limbs and body parts in their proper places.

Our lives are peppered with expectations—some of them from without, some of them from within—to succeed. At being a parent, in our jobs, in our faith, just in being a person. We want our lives to matter. We want God to say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

The problem is that most of us hit a point in life—sometimes it’s every day—when we think we’ve failed. Those expectations, which began as dreams, twist into impossible pressures.

What does God want from us? What *does* a purposeful, good life look like?

The good news is that we are not the first to wrestle with these questions. In our Scripture reading today, the prophet Isaiah speaks to a people in exile, ripped away from their land, their livelihoods, their temple, everything that once defined them and gave them a sense of dignity and purpose. What do we do now, they ask? Do our lives really matter, here in this strange land, where we’re barely surviving?

In 2 Peter, the early Christians are grappling with the same kind of question. Jesus is gone. He’s risen to heaven. The earth remains much like it was before: a greedy, hurtful place. They’re waiting for God’s promises, much like we are in this time of Advent. And in their waiting, they’re asking: What are we to do?

Two years ago, I found myself hiking alone in the woods, one snowy morning, and I asked this question, this same question that haunted the Israelites and the early Christians: How do I know that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing?

As I walked and prayed, among the snow, I felt an answer. Well, more like a question. Five questions, to be exact. Five questions to know if I was making a difference. Ever since that day, I have prayed these five questions. In the morning, they help me create a plan for the day. In the evening, they help me look back on my day and be grateful. There's nothing particularly wise or novel about these questions. In fact, it's in their simplicity that they prove so helpful.

Both the prophet Isaiah and the author of 2 Peter tell us that, if we want to unlock our purpose, we have to stop thinking like people and start thinking like God. We are like grass, Isaiah reminds us. We are fleeting. And it's precisely because we occupy such tiny, temporary space on this earth, that we long for what's big and historic. We think that to be important we have to be great—at our jobs, in our families, in our faith, in all the people we help. But time and meaning are different for God, Peter says: “With the Lord, one day is like a thousand years.” It's not how much we do, or how greatly. It's this one little moment, this one little day, which feels so inconsequential to us, but which is everything to God. For God, a single act of kindness, a single word of truth, a single jubilation, can contain a lifetime, a universe. It's helpful, in other words, to narrow our gaze, and ask, What can I do, and who can I be, with this moment and this day?

Thus, these questions focus our attention on this day, and this day alone: Did I love today? Did I create today? Did I wonder today? Was I brave today? Did I rest today?

If you can answer most of these questions in the affirmative, then you know that today—the only day that mattered—you lived your purpose. You were faithful. And if you can't answer in the affirmative, know that God forgives you. And God invites you to try again, another day, which soon will be today—the only day that ever mattered. Use the questions in the morning to create a plan: five things that you will do that day to love, to create, to wonder, to be brave, and to rest. One each. That's all. It's not about all the things you could have done but didn't, for there will always be more you could've done. It's just about what you did with the time you had.

Did I love today? Did I help someone? Did I give time and affection? Did someone feel genuinely seen or heard by me today? Did I advocate on someone's behalf? God is Love, we read in 1 John. And so to love is to participate in God. There we read, “If we love one another, God lives in us” (4:12).

Did I create today? Did I imagine or bring something new into existence? Did I write a letter, paint a picture, knit a scarf, reflect upon an idea, start a conversation, fix something with my hands? God is the Creator. They're the very first words of the Bible: “In the beginning, God created” (Gen. 1:1). God created us in God's image, and called us to participate in God's creative act: to contribute something, no matter how small, to the fabric of existence.

Did I wonder today? Did I stop for a moment to feel awe, to appreciate the beauty and amazingness of life, to connect with something larger than myself? Did I read a book, watch a sunset, look at a painting, pray and worship, hike in the woods, linger in a hug? To wonder is

like Moses meeting God, when Moses hears a voice say: “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex. 3:5).

Was I brave today? Did I do something that was difficult or scary? Did I try a new food, join a new group, speak up for truth, call out a bully, do something important I’ve been putting off, face conflict rather than avoid it, grieve, or hope? It doesn’t have to be anything grand or heroic; it just has to be something that stretches us. 2 Timothy says, “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline” (1:7).

And finally: Did I rest today? Did I sleep, take a break, watch TV, play a game, listen to music, sit on my porch? In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says to his disciples after a long day, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest” (6:31).

Some of these you are already doing. By taking notice and reflecting upon them each evening, you will come to realize just how present God was with you. There will be others of these you aren’t doing, and these questions will reorient you to what’s most important.

Remember, though, this isn’t about becoming worthy. It’s not about... Oh, if I do these things, God will finally love me. That’s just more burden, more striving. Rather, this is about opening yourself to receive and funnel what God is already doing. It’s like there are five pipes running through you and through all of creation, and in each of us there are valves that open and close the pipes; sometimes they get clogged or rusted shut from lack of use. It’s not our job to create the pipes or what flows through them; they are already there. That’s grace. Our job is to open the valves. Love is flowing into you always; all you have to do is open the valve and let it flow through you to another person. When you do so, you will be warmed by that love as much as the other. The same goes for creativity, wonder, courage, and rest.

Maybe that’s the real secret. The question isn’t: How do I create the good life? The question is: How do I open myself to the good life that is already here, just waiting for me to notice. **Amen.**