

Isaiah 40:1-11

1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out!"
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.

11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

2 Peter 3:8-9

8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’”

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Pleasant Street and St. Luke's UMCs
Pastor Ben Daggett
"Preparing for What Has Already Come"

My grandfather always used to carry a small pocket knife with him, wherever he went. And, amazingly, there was always some little task that would arise wherever he would go, and with whatever it was he was doing, that would require its use. It never failed, when a string needed trimming, a kitchen appliance needed tweaking, or a toy truck needed readjusting, the twinkle would appear in Grandpa's eye, he would flip open his little pocket knife, and in no time flat the problem of the hour would be a thing of the past and we were back on our way, content that the crisis was averted and we could carry on in peace and trust. If ever there was a living example of the Boy Scout motto of, "Be prepared," it was embodied in the person and character of my grandfather Eugene. The Boy Scout motto, of course, applies to many things, from learning to tie the proper knot to easily string a tarp for shelter, to properly scaling a freshly caught fish, or, like Grandpa showed us, having the proper tool within reach to take care of the task at hand. To be prepared means to do your best to be ready for whatever situation might arise. The Scout motto, of course, has an eye for survival situations that might arise in the wilderness, and so the merit badges are geared to important activities like first aid, swimming, boating, and camping, among many other skills.

But what if the wilderness is not literally a sparsely populated, untamed region devoid of the comforts and trappings of a home? What if the wilderness in which we find ourselves is more like an inner place of confusion, pain, anxiety, loss, and uncertainty about what comes next? What if the wilderness is the very real sense that God is distant and/or aloof to our concerns here on earth? What if the wilderness is a loss of trust, or fear that those closest to us don't really have our best interests at heart? How do we prepare for a place like that? What happens if ours is a spiritual wilderness?

Our text from Isaiah today reads, “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

Are you in a valley today? Have you been here for awhile? Are you on uneven ground? “Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” For “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.”

But how? Advent is a season of preparation for that which has already happened. It is a time in which we recognize that we are living in the days foretold, that Christ has come and that Christ’s return is imminent, he is here, and yet we await his return. How is that?

I believe Isaiah offers insight into this paradox of life. We read in our passage for today: “All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

“All people are grass,” the prophet states. Well, we all fit into the category of “all people,” don’t we? Our constancy does fade, we all, at some point, will wither like grass. “But,” says the prophet, “the word of our God will stand forever.” Our strength does and will fail, our limited ways of knowing will cease to bring us meaning, our reaching, grasping, striving, trying to figure it out, controlling, managing, fighting, understanding, it all falls short. “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.”

The things outside us in life, the demands and struggles, the hurts and stresses, and our power to meet these challenges in our human strength, knowledge and wisdom - all of it brings us to our limits, it brings us to our breaking point. But the place we have the most influence, the greatest capacity to overcome, to carry out real change is not outside us, but always

within us, especially in how we relate to what's going on around us. In a world that seems to have gone out of control, the very most control we have is in our own response to the chaotic landscape. Maybe this idea is old hat to you, maybe it's a fresh perspective, whatever the case, let me repeat it: The place we have the most influence to carry out real change is always within ourselves, especially in how we relate to what's going on around us. In a world that seems to have gone out of control, the very most control we have is in our own responses to the chaotic landscape. The Apostle Paul declares it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." And as Jesus is quoted in the Gospels to say to his followers, "The Kingdom of God is within you." The Kingdom has come. What does it mean to prepare for its coming, if it is already here?

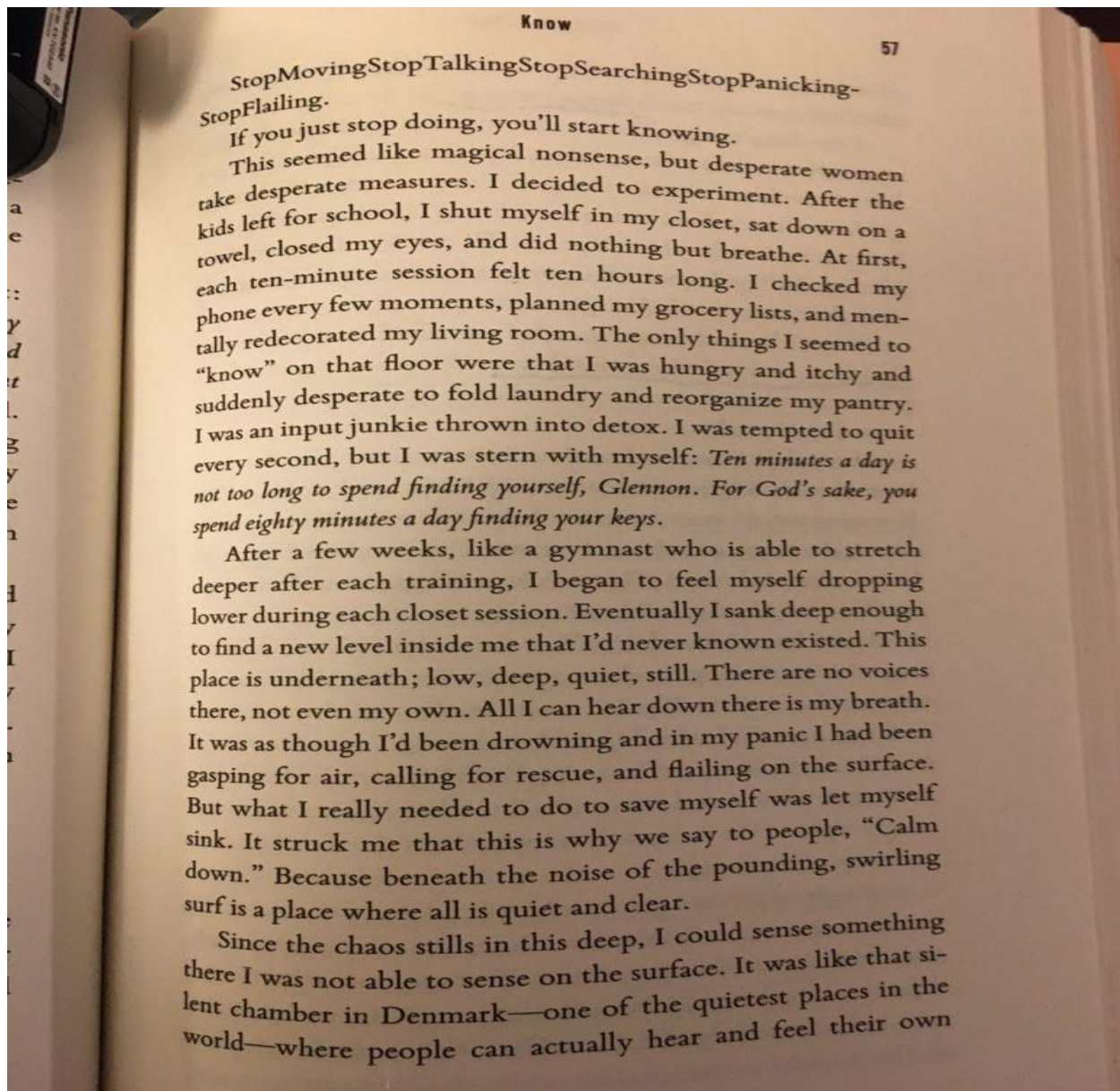
I would like to share a passage from Glennon Doyle's book *Untamed* that offers so much insight into how, in this season of Advent, we might prepare our hearts for what has already taken place. It offers a tool for your spiritual toolkit, like my Grandfather's pocket knife, that with practice you can learn to access at any time, and truly be prepared for the wildernesses that this life brings, and which crowds our lives, and seeks to occupy and lay claim to the sacred spaces and places within our being, places which, if we have opened ourselves to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ, have already known the true and lasting One, whose glory never fades, and whose word will stand forever. (go to next page)

From Glennon Doyle - *Untamed*

Doyle writes: "BE STILL AND KNOW

I'd read that verse many times before, but it struck me freshly this time. It didn't say 'Poll your friends and know' or 'read books by experts and know' or 'Scour the internet and know.' It suggested a different approach to knowing: *Just. Stop.*

StopMovingStopTalkingStopSearchingStopPanickingStopFlailing. If you just stop doing, you'll start knowing."



blood circulating. There, in the deep, I could sense something circulating inside me. It was a Knowing.

I can *know* things down at this level that I can't on the chaotic surface. Down here, when I pose a question about my life—in words or abstract images—I sense a nudge. The nudge guides me toward the next precise thing, and then, when I silently acknowledge the nudge—it fills me. The Knowing feels like warm liquid gold filling my veins and solidifying just enough to make me feel steady, certain.

What I learned (even though I am afraid to say it) is that God lives in this deepness inside me. When I recognize God's presence and guidance, God celebrates by flooding me with warm liquid gold.

Every day, I returned to the closet, sat down on the floor littered with T-shirts and jeans, and I practiced sinking. The Knowing would meet me in the deep and nudge me toward the next right thing, one thing at a time. That was how I began to know what to do next. That was how I began to walk through my life more clearly, solid and steady.

A year later, I found myself in the middle of a work meeting, sitting at a long conference table. We were discussing an important decision that had to be made, and the team was looking to me for leadership. I felt uncertain. I was about to fall back into my old way of knowing: looking outward for acceptance, permission, and consensus. But when I glanced over and caught sight of the door to the supply closet, I remembered my new way of knowing.

I wondered if the team would mind if I excused myself to spend a few minutes in that closet. Instead, I took a deep breath and, with eyes wide open, I turned inward and tried to sink right there at the table. It worked. I sensed the nudge, and as soon as I acknowledged it, I was filled with warm liquid gold. I rose back to the surface, smiled, and said, "I know what to do."

“I calmly and assuredly told the others the thing I wanted us to do. The panic in the room settled. Everyone breathed and seemed instantly relaxed and steady. We moved on. God came out of the closet, and now I can take God anywhere. I now take orders only from my own Knowing. Whether I’m presented with a work, personal, or family decision - a monumental or tiny decision - whenever uncertainty rises, I sink. I sink beneath the swirling surf of words, fear, expectations, conditioning, and advice - and feel for the Knowing. I sink a hundred times a day. I have to, because the Knowing never reveals a five-year plan. It feels to me like a loving, playful guide, like the reason it will only reveal the next right thing is that it wants me to come back again and again, because it wants to do life together. After many years, I’m developing a relationship with this Knowing: We are learning to trust each other.”

This final portion of Doyle’s story reminds me of descriptions we read in the Bible of the Holy Spirit, as Counselor, Friend, Advocate, the One who leads us into all Truth, and who reveals that which is hidden, disclosing the things concealed. I hear the kind of prayer that the Apostle Paul describes, where prayer is a delight and a relief, the key to rejoicing in all circumstances. I hear in this story a form of “Prayer without ceasing.” To move through life in this way is to move under the direction and guidance of the One who truly knows us, yes, and loves us more than life itself.

Have you cultivated a relationship with the stillness of God, with the Knowing that transcends knowledge? If you’re in a wilderness today, why not prepare your mind for the coming of Christ with 10 minutes of stillness a day, as this author did? Prepare yourself in and for what has already happened, that you might rest in it, know it, live it when the mountains of life rise up, when your ground is uneven and when the valleys take you down into dark, dark places. Though you are like grass, though the flower fades, the word of God stands forever: You are saved, you are healed, you are freed and made whole - in Christ. For Christ has come and Christ has overcome.

As we turn now to our celebration of Communion, we remember Jesus, the One who has come and will come again in glory, who on the cross displays the faithfulness of God the Father to the uttermost, God who takes upon himself every burden of shame, betrayal and loss, who knows with every fiber of his being the depths of injustice and suffering of life on this earth, who knows your suffering and devastation, the trials and traumas you have undergone, and who is with you in them, for you in them, and offers a way to lead you beyond them, out of the ruminations and calculations, the regrets and frustrations and into a new way of being so radically and indelibly transformed that it can only have come from our Almighty and Amazingly patient and loving, forgiving, restoring, reforming, revealing, resurrecting, transforming God. Will you partake of God's bounty today? If you are in the wilderness, remember that there is a voice in the wilderness, and it says, "prepare the way of the Lord." Take the time, still yourself, prepare yourself and receive that which has already come. Amen.