

SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT: GOD'S AGENDA

Psalm 146

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Let me introduce you to Sarah James. Sarah lives 100 miles above the Arctic Circle. She's in her 70's, and she lives now where she was born. One of her first memories is running alongside a dogsled on a hunting trip with her family and eating fresh caribou meat roasted over an open fire. She is joyfully devoting her life to protecting the environment where her people have lived for generations. This is the view from her cabin. She teaches conservation: "Recycle, reuse, reduce, refuse and use less oil" is one of her mantras. She says, "We believe God put us here to take care of this part of the world."

Let me introduce you to Jean Bouchebel. He is 79 years old; he lives in Texas. He spent his life as a missionary, most of his years in the Middle East, especially his native Lebanon where he visited people in Palestinian refugee camps, trying to bring hope to a bleak place. Jean grew up poor himself, he lived a few of his childhood years in an orphanage.

During the height of the war in Syria, when more than 2 million refugees flooded across the border into Lebanon, he could not contemplate the leisure of retirement.

Refugees were living in tents in the snow. Children lacked adequate footwear. People were hungry. Drawing on skills he had learned as a missionary, Bouchebel shipped 40-foot containers to Lebanon filled with medical equipment, clothing, hygiene kits, and food. Over 1,000 meals a day were provided to needy refugees.

And amid an economic collapse exacerbated by last summer's explosion in Beirut's harbor, relief work has extended to the Lebanese. Church partners have served Muslim and Christian without discrimination, giving out nearly 3,000 food parcels to families, providing medical services for 3,600 people, and repairing 168 neighboring homes.

Why does he do it? In his words: "I started with nothing in life—not even a pair of socks—and God made me a servant...I believe in God's promises; this is what pushes me to do more and more for others."

Let me introduce you to Kate Bowler. Kate teaches at Duke Divinity School. She is 41 years old, married, the mother of an 8 year old. When she was 35 and her son was 2, she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer. Despite that devastating illness, many surgeries and hospitalizations, she has gone on to write two books, teach, and host a podcast (which I highly recommend.).

Kate Bowler said recently that she is learning to live with the things she can't change: "Hope is not just about whether I get a cure and my life works out. We are all wrapped up in a story about love that is beyond time and beyond our physical bodies. I'm learning that we belong to each other, and that what really counts is the way we live right here and right now - are we part of this wild project called life, this wild project about love?"

And finally, let me introduce you to Jason Reynolds. Jason is an author of books for children and young adults. The Library of Congress has tapped him, three times in a row, to serve as the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. He is

passionate about using literature - reading and writing - as tools to help today's children and adolescents cope and thrive in the world. In a recent interview, he said this about how he empathizes with young people today. "I always try to sprint towards compassion and crawl towards judgment." That's not a bad life philosophy, is it? Sprint towards compassion - always put compassion first.

Reynolds is a prolific author, but he also speaks to school groups every chance he gets. He especially likes to go to neighborhoods and towns other authors don't visit - to let the children in those places know that he sees them, he's interested in their stories. He has been meeting with children via zoom for the past 19 months. He has won many prestigious awards and received a lot of attention, but what he mostly wants people to know is that he loves children, and that love motivates his work. In an interview I listened to this weekend, Reynolds said, "I serve at the pleasure of this nation's children. If we do our jobs and we are in complete service to them, then they will grow to be in service of the world." Sprint towards compassion...

When I think about us building a spiritual toolkit, I want that toolkit to be equipped for this moment in time in which we live: this moment in which we are all keenly aware of the fragility of life, the fragility of our planet, the problems that can seem overwhelming. What we need in our toolkit is a way to live in this present moment with hope. So we need stories of people who are living courageously and honestly.

I spent some time this week reading about a research project called the Spiritual Exemplar Study. Funded by the Templeton foundation, this study identified 80 people working around the world, each of them engaged in one aspect of problem-solving, and

all of them motivated by their faith and their spiritual practice. It was inspiring to find so many stories - from people working on neighborhood farms, to people working in health care, to community organizers.

Here is what one of the researchers concluded: “Pessimism, cynicism, despair—these words are not in the vocabulary of spiritual exemplars. Instead, I kept hearing the words hope, compassion and love. What really struck me was their entrepreneurial spirit in the face of poverty and trauma. Perhaps visionary action is an antidote to paralyzing anxiety and fear.”

Each of these spiritually-grounded leaders is fed by the practice of their faith. In this sermon series, we are focusing on the psalms, preaching on one psalm each week. The psalms are not all easy to understand. The ones we have chosen have some difficult passages, including Psalm 146; if we were in Bible Study we would take each phrase and ask questions about it, seeking to understand more. In some religious traditions, it is recommended that people read one psalm a day. I don't recommend that for everyone - especially as a **first** spiritual practice - but you can imagine that if you did that, every year you would read through the entire book of Psalms twice. And over a lifetime, these words would become a part of you. You would easily access poetic phrases to help you express feelings of joy and feelings of pain.

I hope that you find psalms that speak to you in a meaningful way, that become part of your spiritual toolkit, words you want to go back and read when you need instruction or encouragement.

I won't take you to Bible Study class this morning, but let's do look briefly at Psalm 146.

If we were reading this Psalm in the original Hebrew, we would begin and end with the word, "Hallelujah," which means "Praise the Lord." This is one of five psalms called Hallelujah psalms - they begin and end with hallelujah.

And then we read this phrase:

"Don't trust leaders; don't trust any human beings"

The psalmist is reminding us that our **ultimate** source of trust is God. And then the Psalmist goes on to **define** this God - God is the creator, the maker of heaven and earth. And here are God's values:

God gives justice to the oppressed

God gives bread to people who are starving

God frees prisoners, protects immigrants, helps orphans and widows.

And how about this phrase: "God straightens up those who are bent low." Bent low by what, do you think? By illness, by grief, by depression...how about people just bent low in despair over the state of the world? "God straightens up those who are bent low."

Happy are those who put their trust in this God...not a God who solves all problems with the tap of a magic wand, but a God who addresses the problems of the world through **us**...we are called to enact this agenda: to give justice to the oppressed

and bread to the starving, to lift up those who are living with homelessness, to listen to the stories of people everyone else ignores. This is our agenda.

People who come to me for counseling these days seem to be swinging from one end of a pendulum to the other. Most people who come to me are deeply caring people, people who feel the weight and the pain of the world. Some are consumed by it, they can't stop reading articles, watching documentaries, and they're almost paralyzed by the magnitude of all there is to do. And then, when they feel immobilized, they swing the other direction...they deny, they stop reading. They indulge themselves in whatever numbs them. So we swing from caring too much to not caring at all, and neither seems right, neither is really solving anything.

There is wisdom in learning what things we can control, what aspects of life we can influence, and what world problems we need to just lift up to God in prayer. We can **control our thoughts, our actions, our choices, our words**. We may be able to **influence** our family and friends and other aspects of our lives like our health. But what about the big issues - climate change, poverty, inequality, prejudice?

My best advice to those coming to me is to say, "What is one area of life you feel most passionate about right now...which of the world's problems do you want to try to influence, one baby step at a time? Don't obsess about everything at once. Instead, choose one, and decide you'll find a way to make a difference."

I want to leave you with another piece of hope for your toolkit. The projects we engage in together in the church make a difference. We can do more together than we can do individually. We ARE feeding the hungry, we ARE lifting up those who are bent

low. Yesterday morning I drove to Elyria to pick up mums from the Neighborhood Alliance mum fundraiser - when I gave my name, all of the volunteers there thanked me for all that our church does to help Neighborhood Alliance (the umbrella agency for the Haven Center homeless shelter; they also provide senior meals, childhood education programs and other direct services to those most in need.). I said, "Well, of course, what else would our church be doing but helping those who are most vulnerable?" (And then we raved about Rich General, our church member, their board member!)

Everything you do to support this church helps these efforts - whether you're giving sacrificially or participating as an active volunteer. Being a part of God's agenda saves us from the feelings of despair and overwhelm. Doing God's work in the world leads us towards moments of joy. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. Thank you God, for your holy words, your words of wisdom; they are a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. They give us direct and lead us towards lives of joy, meaning and purpose. Thank you for the example of Jesus, who embodied your agenda fully. In his name we pray and live. Amen.