

September 27th: A Season of Growth

My friends, welcome to our new fall series, and welcome to a new season.

As we shift deeper into Fall, and all that this different phase of our year entails, we know these transitions can have a powerful impact on our spiritual lives and on our souls. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are sensitive to change—and yet change is one of the only constants in our world. So this series is an attempt to offer language, support, and encouragement for those transitions that might be occurring in our lives. As we navigate these moments together, we'll be relying on passages from Old Testament wisdom literature to guide us—these texts, stories, and sayings will hopefully speak to our needs for reassurance and clarity. Wherever you are on your faith journey, we invite you to join this conversation and space for reflection.

Before we jump in, I invite you to pray with me.

God of wisdom, from the beginning, you have walked with us on our journeys. You knew even then that we would be your messy people, prone to mistakes, blunders, and missteps. You knew that we would be broken, confused, and often imperfect. Yet you made us anyway, lovingly knitting us together in our mothers' wombs. You made us fully human, you made us to be constantly evolving and growing. This morning, teach us to accept this inborn reality, so that we might cultivate a new appreciation for opportunities to challenge ourselves and gain new insight. Remove our fear of failure, so that we can embrace our birthright of love and wisdom. Amen.

One of the milestones that I use to mark the arrival of Fall is the wardrobe clear out. Pretty much every September, I take a few hours to basically empty out all of my clothes, put away my summer pieces, and organize all of my beloved sweaters and cold weather items. It's a little ritual that helps me get ready for the new season—to make sure that I have what I need, and all the stuff that I don't need is tucked away and safe for the next spring when the sun once again returns to Seattle. This week, I decided it was time. I had a spare

afternoon on my day off, and I started to pull out all of my t-shirts and shorts, placing them in neat piles on my bed.

Just kidding, I threw everything in a giant pile on my floor.

As this pile grew, it started to spill over—first it took over my bed, then my laundry basket, then my drying rack. I thought I had a system going, with smaller piles for items to donate and the socks that I just needed to get rid of, but it was a big mess. I looked around, and panicked. I was starting to lose energy, and I didn't know if I had it in me to continue sorting and folding and packing my clothes away as I had planned. I'll confess that I went to bed that evening with the process unfinished—there was still a pile of clothes on my floor that I abandoned after dinner. I did eventually get everything organized the way that I had hoped, and I was able to cross this task off my to-do list, but as I reflected on this experience, I noticed how this process of getting things cleaned up and orderly included a certain level of discomfort. Not necessarily physical pain, but emotional frustration and spiritual unsettledness.

Now, I like to consider myself someone who has what our culture calls “a growth mindset,” but in this moment, I was challenged to reexamine those beliefs and view of myself. Here's what I discovered, as I sat with those emotions:

Before everything could be clear and ready, I had to navigate that feeling of things falling apart—I had to deal with the disconcerting reality of things being unfinished. I couldn't rush past it, I couldn't go around it. In fact, the process of organizing required a period of chaos—a transitional moment that I am going to call “the messy middle.” Despite my desire to be someone who is willing to grow, I discovered that I was not fully ready for this “messy middle.” I didn't like it! I wanted to avoid it at all costs.

Have you ever been in the messy middle before? Have you ever found yourself in a season where you're trying something different, but you haven't quite made it to the finish line yet? Have you been in the uncomfortable position of

wanting to change something about your life, but stuck in what feels like chaos and confusion? Have you ever tried to grow, but gotten discouraged by what it takes?

If any of that is resonating with you this morning, then I hope we can process this together. Because you shouldn't have to navigate this alone. And I'm willing to bet that the messy middle is a lot more common of an experience than we might think.

As our minds start to wrestle with this concept, let's turn to our text for today and start with that piece of wisdom.

This morning, we're going to turn to the book of Proverbs, which is an ancient collection of wise sayings, likely spanning decades if not centuries. It took time for God's people to write all of this information down—but they clearly saw the value in passing down this insight from generation to generation. At every stage, the scholars and thinkers and theologians wanted their children and grandchildren to develop a keen awareness of God's presence, they wanted their descendants to carry on the divine knowledge that had been collected through prayer, ritual, and worship. And so a lot of this advice takes on the form of personal lectures, like a parent instructing a child, or a teacher instructing a student.

Our passage comes from chapter 3, which is part of this first section of the book. In these early chapters, see this lecture type structure play out—the character Wisdom, with a capital W, is the one speaking, and we are the audience. The subtitle that accompanies this particular lecture is “Wisdom Bestows Well Being,” which I think is a lovely way to think about receiving this divine information. If you have your Bible with you, or a Bible app on your phone, and want to follow along, now is a great time to do so.

Starting in verse 1, Wisdom begins with these statements: “My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. Let love and

faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.”

Sounds like a pretty good start right? Just a gentle reminder to keep all of this wisdom close to our hearts and not forget what Wisdom is about to teach us. Next, Wisdom offers us one of the most quoted verses in all of Proverbs: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Again, a lovely invitation for us to put our faith in God and let him guide us through life.

But here’s where it gets tricky. In verse 11, we hear this: “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline, and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in.” Huh, that’s maybe not what we expected is it? That’s not necessarily the type of advice that perhaps we want to hear, am I right?

To be clear, I don’t think the word discipline in this verse necessarily refers to harsh or strict punishment, but I think it asks us to consider that the path towards spiritual and emotional growth comes with a process of refinement and intentional development. It is a process that invites us deeper into a sense of preparation and cultivation. As we gain understanding and increase our knowledge, it takes effort and training to put all of that wisdom into practice. The discipline that God provides is geared towards building us up into the people that we are meant to be.

Of course, most of us probably are not that jazzed about the idea that our potential season of growth will include difficulty and discipline. We might cognitively understand that practice and repetition are what gives us the strength and experience that we need to grow, but it can feel emotionally daunting and spiritually discouraging to actually submit that to this process. Just like we know that going to the gym and lifting weights is what will build our muscles, it can be almost impossible to convince ourselves to actually go to the gym after a long day of parenting or a long week at work.

And this passage hints that even if we submit to the discipline that growth requires, it won't always be an easy path—we human beings are a messy creation. We are susceptible to hurt feelings, broken relationships, childhood wounds that become adult scars, disappointing and being disappointed in each other, and so many other complex life experiences. We throw our clothing on the floor and give up when things get hard, and resist being vulnerable with God and with each other because it can be deeply disruptive to acknowledge and then mend these less than perfect parts of ourselves. We might believe that a season of growth would perhaps require more energy than we currently have in the tank. We might believe that a season of shifting and transforming would ask more of us than we might be able to give.

But we have to get comfortable with the messy middle, my friends.

It is probably never going to feel great to be challenged and stretched and pushed out of our comfort zones, but those things are unavoidable if we genuinely desire to grow as humans and people of faith. To try to skip this stage would be to cheat ourselves out of the mental, emotional, and spiritual growth that is essential to our holistic transformation. The messy middle is where the magic happens. I'm not talking about Harry Potter, Sabrina the Teenage Witch type magic—I'm talking about the spiritual power that exists when we are truly vulnerable and open to the change that is happening in and around us. I'm talking about the confidence you can gain when a new skill becomes muscle memory. I'm talking about the wisdom that is earned when you navigate something hard but still make it to the other side. I'm talking about the joy of unlocking a fresh perspective or learning something about yourself that you didn't know before.

Here's the good news about our seasons of growth: our biblical author reminds us that even in the messy middle, God delights in us. In your season of growth, God delights in you! God is delighted that you are changing and developing and maturing. God is delighted that you are not the same person that you were a decade ago, or a year ago, or even a month ago. God will be

delighted if next year's version of you is different than who you are today. Growth is God's design for us from the very beginning.

And this delight directs us towards wisdom that yields better returns than gold and is more precious than rubies. This divine wisdom gives us something more profitable than silver, and a path of peace that many of us are longing for. Growth is a gift that all the money in the world cannot buy, and an experience that cannot be taken away.

So as you reflect on this passage this week, and contemplate on your own season of growth and what it might entail, here is a final piece of encouragement from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Verse 6 of chapter 1 says, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus."

I needed to hear this reminder this week, and I think you might too. Paul's gentle reassurance tells us that we don't have to be perfect in our growth process. Even if you have piles all over your floor, even if you are not quite who you want to be yet, and even if you are still making mistakes, the work that has been started in us will be completed. God will continue to be at work in and through you, day in and day out.

So write this on the tablet of your hearts today, beloveds, and carry it with you this week as a constant source of grace: God is with you in that messy middle, and he is not done with you yet.

Amen.