

## WHY WE GATHER Finding Purpose

“Prayer of Examen”  
(Lamentations 3:19-26)

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### Introduction

1. There was a study recently published in the *Psychology and Aging Journal* that claims to be “the longest personality study of all time.”<sup>1</sup> The study began in 1950 with 1,208 fourteen year olds providing information on six personality traits: self-confidence, perseverance, stability of moods, conscientiousness, originality, and desire to learn. More than six decades later they tracked down 635 of the participants and 174 agreed to repeat testing. This time, at 77 years old, they rated themselves again, and also nominated a close friend or relative to do the same. The results surprised researchers because previous personality studies over short periods of time, like childhood to middle age, or middle age to older age, seemed to show that people changed little over time.

The popular personality stereotype is that we do not change throughout our lifetime. This 63-year study, while not addressing or diminishing such matters as the powerful forces of cultural worldview and established brain patterns that hold tight grips on our biases, suggests that, in regards to self-confidence, perseverance, stability of moods, conscientiousness, originality, and desire to learn--there is hardly *any* relationship between a 77-year-old and their 14-year-old self.

2. Today we return to our teaching series called “Why We Gather” and the eight-week segment called “Finding Purpose: Clarifying, articulating, and action on one’s personal mission in life.” The helpful wisdom of developmental psychology<sup>2</sup> and studies such as the 63-year study give us many reasons to look at purpose finding not as something exclusive to young people sorting out their vocational path as they enter the adult world. Purpose finding and personality transformation are lifelong pursuits. And today’s topic, “Prayer of Examen” encourages us to see a specific and ancient Christian prayer practice as an essential reflective discipline for Christ followers in our lifelong journey of purpose finding.

### A. An Overview of the Prayer Practice of “Examen”

1. The prayer of “examen” (ig- 'zā-mən) is a practice first developed by Christian leader Ignatius of Loyola in the 1500’s AD. The practice is a specific pattern of prayer that invites Christians to prayerfully review the events of the previous twenty-four hours of our day. I taught on this topic some years back and I remember one of First Covenant’s venerable seniors, Margaret Nelson, coming into the office and asking me if I was using the Latin or French version of the word “examen.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://qz.com/914002/youre-a-completely-different-person-at-14-and-77-the-longest-running-personality-study-ever-has-found/> (Accessed 4-15-17)

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developmental\\_psychology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developmental_psychology) (Accessed 4-22-17)

For those of you who are new to First Covenant—Margaret Nelson was a life long English teacher and edited my sermons for several years before going into “sermon editing retirement” and, so I call her my “grammar” because she is really smart and taught me a grammar lesson or two almost every sermon! “Latin or French?” Margaret asked, “because if you are using the French version, it would be pronounced “eg-zah-‘mə” (drop the “n”).

I thought about Margaret’s question for a moment and said, “Well, I was planning on using the Midwestern version of the word: “eggzaaaaaaman!” We joked for a while, and I concluded that (ig-‘zā-mən) or the Latin version would be best for the pronunciation. But, what about the spelling? You may have read the title of my sermon on the cover of the worship guide and thought, “That word isn’t spelled correctly! ‘Examine’ (ig-‘za-mən\ ) is spelled “e.x.a.m.i.n.e.” Which is true, but “examine” is not the same word as “examen.” Really! I am not just being a smarty-pants!

2. “Examine” (ig-‘za-mən\ ) is a *verb* that means ‘to inspect someone or something in order to determine their nature’<sup>3</sup> whereas “examen” (ig-‘zā-mən) is a *noun* and comes from Latin that means ‘the accurate measure of a thing’...as in what a scale tells you when you put something on the tongue of the scale:



I know. This all feels a little like “vocabulary gymnastics.” Let me simplify the conversation by pointing out that the *prayer* practice of examen is the act of prayerfully remembering the events of the previous day by placing them in God’s hands as if on the tongue of a scale and getting an accurate reading as to what those events mean. Christ followers are invited to practice the prayer of examen because, if practiced well, it is a method of prayer that helps us discern how God was present in the events or our lives and what the key things of our days, good and bad, tell us about God and ourselves. And, that is essential to understanding both our personal development and our life long path of purpose finding.

3. In order to do “examen” well one needs to learn the art of healthful reflection. This is not as easy as one thinks because most of us are super busy and distracted, and our mental life tends to draw us to the extremes of either beating ourselves up or puffing ourselves up. Think about it. It is easy to reflect back on a day that didn’t go well and think, “Everything was my fault; I’m a loser.” Or conversely, “Nothing was my fault; everyone *else* is a loser.” Or when reflecting on a *good* day, “I don’t know why yesterday went so well. I certainly didn’t deserve it.” Or conversely, “It’s nice to know that people can recognize talent!”
4. “Examen” resists such extreme opposites and takes us deeper. This prayer practice helps us recall the events of our days such that we transform our worldview and receive fresh, healthy perspectives on God, ourselves and life as a whole—even if our starting point is at the extremes

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/examine> (accessed 6-20-13)

of overinflated self-ego or, more often what I hear from people--struggle and lament, which is what we find in today's Scripture from the Hebrew book of Lamentations.

The book of Lamentations is one of the saddest books of the Bible. It is five chapters of Hebrew poetry joined together by the common themes of sorrow over the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the humiliation of the Hebrew people because their leaders were either killed or forced into servitude, and the average citizens were enslaved by the Babylonian Empire.<sup>4</sup>

5. Hold that framework in your mind as I read from Lamentations chapter three where the poetic writer was obviously being overtaken by a *false* understanding of God and the Hebrew people. The opening stanzas speak of:

- God making their skin and flesh grow old and breaking their bones...
- God besieging them with bitterness and hardship, forcing them to live in darkness...
- God shutting out their prayer, even though they cried out for help...
- God acting like a bear or lion that dragged them from their path to mangle their bodies and leave them for dead.

Seriously, this is all in the six opening stanzas of Lamentations chapter 3. It gets worse! The poet envisions

- God making them target practice with a bow and arrow piercing their hearts, and making them a laughing stock.
- God breaking their teeth with gravel—and on and on and on the poet wrote, writhing in pain.

6. However, something startling begins to shift as we reach verse 19:

<sup>19</sup> I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
<sup>20</sup> I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
<sup>21</sup> Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
<sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
<sup>23</sup> They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
<sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;  
therefore I will wait for him."  
<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,  
to the one who seeks him;  
<sup>26</sup> it is good to wait quietly  
for the salvation of the LORD.

Lamentations 3:19-26. NIV

"My soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope." There it is...in that line. *That* is the power of examen. Recollection—prayerful review helps us literally re-orient

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<sup>4</sup> J. Andrew Dearman. *The NIV Application Commentary*, "Jeremiah, Lamentations." Page 425.

and teachers of prayer tell us examen points us toward two primary ways our outlook is changed for the better:<sup>5</sup>

- The *first* is a greater *consciousness* (or being awake and aware) of how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we responded to God's loving presence.
  - The *second* is a greater embrace of thoughtful *conscience* (or sense of right and wrong) as we uncover those areas in our lives that need refinement and healing.
7. Consciousness and conscience. Those are the two primary takeaways from the Prayer of Examen. And consciousness and conscience also factor into our lifelong journey of purpose finding in significant ways in that, just as ships in open sea need constant accurate navigational input in order for the captain and crew to make smart directional decisions, so do we need accurate feedback from the Spirit of God on the day to day activities of our lives, in order to keep ourselves on course to a meaningful and joyful life.

We take a look at the examen of *consciousness* first.

## B. Examen, Consciousness, and Purpose

1. The Lamentations poet thought back in time and "remembered" their affliction, wandering, and bitterness, but after re-filtering those events with a clear understanding of God, the poet's perspective changed. Consider the poet's words:

<sup>22</sup> Because of the LORD's *great love* we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.

<sup>23</sup> They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23. NIV

This practice of reminding ourselves of who God is, is essential. If we have an inaccurate understanding of ourselves and God and how our Creator has created us in a benevolent universe, reflection will only make us feel worse about things. This is true because it is scientifically proven, and the business model for most media outlets counts on the fact, that our thinking and memories attach themselves with ease to fearful and negative thoughts. So, it is really easy to make false assumptions that God is against us because of this or that unfortunate series of events. That just isn't true. God is *always* for us and our discipline is to re-filter everything in terms of God's love *for* us and presence *with* us in whatever it is that we are going through.

The Hebrew poet pointed this out specifically when they wrote, "Because of the Lord's *great love* we are not consumed." The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Common Greek. The translations that we have available to us today are outstanding, but occasionally meaning and nuance get lost in translation. For instance, the Hebrew word that the Poet used for "great love" was "hesed."

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Foster in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* discusses several facets of the Prayer of Examen on pages 27-36.

חֶסֶד

“hesed”

“Great love” is not an inaccurate translation, but it does not capture the full meaning of “hesed,” which means “loving-kindness and loyalty in a covenant way.”<sup>6</sup> We must never forget this! God has a relentless and all-consuming “hesed” for us. That is why Jesus and New Testament writers taught again and again that God is *always* “for us.”<sup>7</sup> Even when we make mistakes or intentionally sin, God is for us and pulling us “in” and “back” to God. Jesus embodied and taught us that God is “Emmanuel, God with us.” So, in good or bad experiences, moments of brilliance or moments of boredom, moments of failure and tears or moments of triumph and laughter— in everything, God is *for* us and God is *with* us.

2. Examen of consciousness helps wake us up to this reality and places “hesed” in the details of everyday life. Richard Foster, a Christian author and prolific writer on prayer, describes it in this way:

“In the examen of consciousness we prayerfully reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of our days to see how God has been at work among us and how we responded. We consider, for example, whether the boisterous neighbor of last night was more than just a rude interruption of a quiet evening. Maybe, just maybe, the neighbor was the voice of God urging us to be attentive to the pain and loneliness of those around us.

Perhaps in the glorious sunrise of this morning God was shouting out to us his love of beauty and inviting us to share in it, but we were too sleepy or distracted to participate. Maybe we responded to the Divine Whisper to write a letter or call a friend on the telephone, and the results of our simple obedience were nothing short of startling.

The examen of consciousness is the means God uses to make us more aware of our surroundings.”<sup>8</sup>

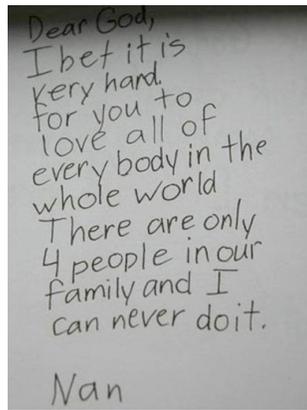
3. Children can teach us a few things here. I find that the complexities of our world tend to numb us as we become adults. But young children seem very aware of their surroundings. Consider these written prayers of children, reflecting on past experiences while trying to make sense of “the now.”

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<sup>6</sup> <http://biblesuite.com/hebrew/2617.htm> (accessed 6-22-13)

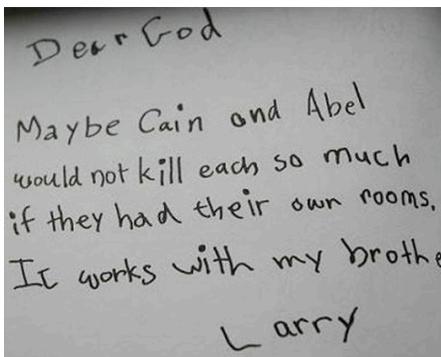
<sup>7</sup> In example: Luke 12:6-7; Romans 8:31-39.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Foster. *Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home*. Page 28.



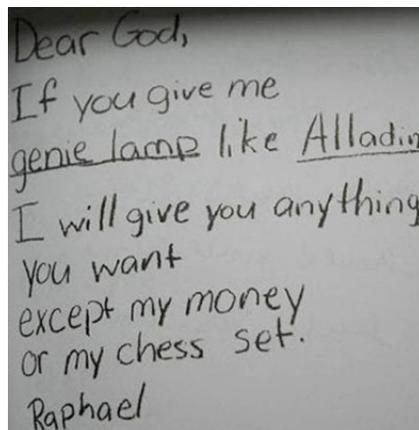
Dear God,  
I bet it is  
very hard  
for you to  
love all of  
every body in the  
whole world  
There are only  
4 people in our  
family and I  
can never do it.  
  
Nan

Nan was most certainly awake to the challenges of loving people closest to you. Along the lines of family and learning Bible stories at Church, Larry prayed:



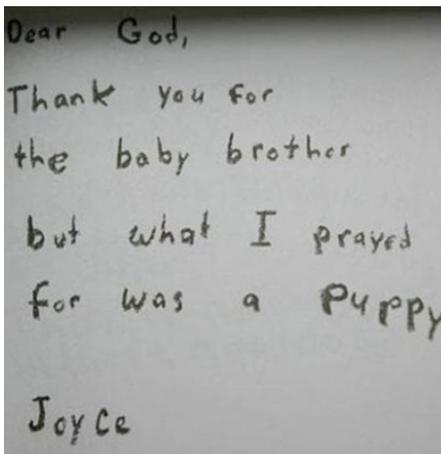
Dear God  
Maybe Cain and Abel  
would not kill each so much  
if they had their own rooms.  
It works with my brother  
  
Larry

Good work, Larry! He was doing examen and didn't even know it! Check out this prayer of reflection by Raphael, who watched the Disney movie "Aladdin" and began to experiment with the concept of generosity:



Dear God,  
If you give me  
genie lamp like Alladin  
I will give you anything  
you want  
except my money  
or my chess set.  
  
Raphael

Raphael, if only you knew how much like all of us you really are! The final prayer of examen is from Joyce:



Ooooooh, how honest! These simple prayers point us to honesty and the importance of the small experiences of life being the places where we learn about God and ourselves. Joyce was learning that God is not a cosmic Santa Claus. The other children were learning how the world worked and the challenges of relationships. We can do the same as we recall:

- Chance conversations with strangers that tell us something we were unaware of about ourselves.
- A scene in a movie or a play that grips us in such a way we are motivated to have courage. And, to have courage for such things as that which we believe is our unique God-given life vocation--that beautiful life theme that hovers about our work, careers, and life stages calling us to animate our best and most intentional selves in the world.
- Or, maybe we recall a passage of Scripture that we have read dozens of times, but for some reason it jumps off the page and points us in a new direction or understanding of God.
- Something we learned in a class that makes us think about the world in a whole new way.
- Gazing at an item in nature—or a painting—or a piece of architecture and having a moment of wonder—or frustration—or anger—or deep questioning.

All such moments, if we pause (and it doesn't have to be more than a few moments) and enter into the Prayer of Examen, will help us be more alive and conscious of God and ourselves.

4. Beyond these specific examples that help us be awake, there are specific questions we can ask to help us as well. And, as I always do, I encourage you to study the Prayer of Examen for yourselves because there are dozens of methods available, ranging from "The Spiritual Exercises" of Ignatius of Loyola that catalyzed the prayer movement of examen back in the 1500's AD<sup>9</sup> to how a few modern authors framed it very simply here:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual\\_Exercises\\_of\\_Ignatius\\_of\\_Loyola](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spiritual_Exercises_of_Ignatius_of_Loyola) (accessed 6-21-13)

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn. *Sleeping with Bread: Holding what gives you life*. Pages 5-6.

For many years, we have ended each day the same way. We light a candle, become aware of God's loving presence, and take about five minutes of quiet while we ask ourselves two questions:

“For what moment was I most grateful?”

“For what moment was I least grateful?”

These simple questions are very helpful because they are straightforward, and there are many other ways to ask the same questions:

“When did I give and receive the most love today?”

“When did I give and receive the least love today?”

“When did I feel most alive?”

“When did I most drained?”

“What was today's high point?”

“What was today's low point?”

And so on, and so forth. We can ask these simple questions prayerfully at the end of our day right before bed, or first thing in the morning, or during the noon hour, or any time once a day where we have a moment to pause for quiet reflection to look back over the past twenty-four hours.

Our consciousness of God, ourselves, and our tracking life purpose will be more awakened in such a practice. And, as mentioned, there is also a second outcome of examen will come to the forefront: *conscience*.

### C. Examen, Conscience, and Purpose

1. Seth Godin is a very popular American blogger known for his entrepreneurial and futurist thinking, and innovative ways we can converge clear minded ethics and successful business strategies in the marketplace.<sup>11</sup> He recently wrote a blogpost titled “But where did the algorithm come from in the first place?”<sup>12</sup> An “algorithm” is a process or set of rules to be followed in calculations and problem solving *by a computer*.<sup>13</sup> Godin points out that important emails landing in our spam folders, automatic Facebook programs that awkwardly combine automatically created cheery memory videos with our truly sad moments that we happened to post to our page, and one woman who kept getting repeatedly stopped by TSA at the airport—have all been explained by Google, Facebook, and the TSA as “its just the algorithm,” nothing personal!

Godin insightfully writes:

“We need to speak up. You have policies and algorithms in place where you work, passed down from person to person. Decision making approaches that help you find good customers, or lead to negative redlining...What they have in common is that they are largely unexamined.

<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seth\\_Godin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seth_Godin) (accessed 4-23-17)

<sup>12</sup> [http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths\\_blog/2017/01/but-where-did-the-algorithm-come-from.html](http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2017/01/but-where-did-the-algorithm-come-from.html) (accessed 4-23-17)

<sup>13</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Algorithm> (Accessed 4-23-17)

Google's search results and news are the work of human beings. Businesses thrive or suffer because of active choices made by programmers and the people they work for. They have conflicting goals, but the lack of transparency leads to hiding behind the algorithm.

The priority of which Facebook news come up is the work of a team of people. The defense of, "the results just follow the algorithm," is a weak one, because there's more than one valid algorithm, more than one set of choices that can be made, more than one set of priorities.

The culture (our politics, our standards, our awareness of what's happening around us) is being aggressively rewired by what we see, and what we see comes via an algorithm, one that was written by people."

2. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the examined life, and for Christ followers, a life helped by the practice of examen, will not only help us be awake, it will help us be awake to that which is good and right. This is true now, and was true thousands of years ago when the poet in Lamentations wrote a human algorithm of sorts in verses 24-25:

<sup>24</sup> I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;  
therefore I will wait for him."

<sup>25</sup> The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him,  
to the one who seeks him;

Lamentations 3:24-25  
NIV

The Lamentations poet urges us to *seek* God. The expression "to seek God" is discussed dozens of times in Scripture and can be a bit confusing because God is Spirit and everywhere at all times and knowable on some levels, and at the same time God is the mysterious and unknowable Spirit and Algorithm Creator of the universe. It is not as if God is always hard to find. That is not what the poet is saying. Rather, "to seek God" means to posture ourselves in such a way that we intentionally seek God's will and purposes. That process of "seeking" requires many adjustments on our part.

Jesus taught that, "the pure in heart shall see (or find) God."<sup>14</sup> The process of seeking and finding God, therefore, is a process of refinement that takes place as we have courage to let the Spirit of God bring to our conscience those things in our lives that keep us from God, keep us from others, and keep us from our best selves as God has designed us to be.

3. This is the work of examen of conscience, and Christian author Richard Foster spoke to this as well:

"In the examen of conscience we are inviting the Lord to search our hearts to the depths. Far from being dreadful, this is a scrutiny of love. We boldly speak the words of the Psalmist, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 5:8.

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 139:23-24.

Without apology and without defense we ask to see what is truly in us. It is for our own sake that we ask these things. It is for our good, for our healing, for our happiness.”<sup>16</sup>

Applying this to the two examen questions (“For what moment was I most grateful?” “For what moment was I least grateful?”), we then review the previous day and invite God to help us deal with the things that need correction and refinement:

- Those words that we said that brought someone life—and the other words that brought someone death.
  - The moments of testing when someone in the room spewed an evil comment at someone else in the room, and we either spoke up or we shrank back.
  - The moments where we struggled with temptations of many kinds as we wrestled with such things as power, weakness, temptation, honesty and integrity.
4. Examen of conscience gives us the gift of remembering that every day there are moments we must accept the fact that we did wrong and need to seek forgiveness from God and others. And, every day there are moments to celebrate the fact that we did the right thing, and it is appropriate to bask in the personal growth. This is what the New Testament writers call the journey of sanctification and holiness for the Christ followers. It is growing in intimacy with God and others as we are refined. And, it helps us make the needed course corrections in our pursuit of purpose as well.

## Conclusion

1. The Lamentations passage ends with verse twenty-six saying: “It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.” We are going to take a few minutes to experience the prayer of examen. Allow me to provide direction as we move through our brief time of prayer, and everything will be very straightforward. My hope, as a pastor, is that you can take this and do this at home on your own. Or, on a coffee or lunch break at work. Or whenever you have a few moments to reflect.

If you are comfortable, you can close your eyes to help create mental space to remember the last twenty-four hours. First, let’s take a moment to calm and settle with silence.

(PAUSE)

God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, we invite you to help us prayerfully remember and reflect on the events of the past day. Guide our time of prayer.

Reflect back over the past twenty-four hours, remembering the events of yesterday morning—what you ate—who you were with. Reflect back to the events of the afternoon and evening. What was on the schedule and who did you speak with? What happened?

Now, we ask the first question: “In the last twenty-four hours—for what moment were you most grateful?” Why were you grateful? Where was God in that moment? What was most life-giving and needs to be looked for again in the next twenty-four hours ahead of you? Take a moment to thank God for that life-giving moment and all that it means to you.

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<sup>16</sup> *Prayer: Finding the Hearts True Home*. Page 29.

(PAUSE)

Now, let's ask the second question: "For what moment were you *least* grateful?" What went wrong in that moment? What was going on in you when that moment occurred? What is it that you need to confess to God and to yourself about that moment? What is it that you need to remember to be cautious of for the next twenty-four hours ahead of you? Take a moment and bring these things to God in prayer.

(PAUSE)

Now reflect on what it is that you have learned in the last twenty-four hours that you need to take into the next twenty-four hours. What follow-up needs to be done with other people or yourself? What new thoughts do you need to carry with you? What action needs to be done? Pray about the next twenty-four hours for a few moments.

(PAUSE)

2. (Prayer) God of every breath we take, we thank you for helping us call to mind the way you were and are in our lives. Thank you for your "hesed" covenant with us, your loving-kindness and loyalty to us. Even when we choose to create distance between us, you never stop reaching for us. In light of the last twenty-four hours, we call this to mind and have hope now and for the next twenty-four hours. Because of your great love we are not consumed, for your compassion never fails. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. I now invite the musicians to return for the closing song, and I have one final item for us this morning. I invite forward Maddie Bartsch, an artist in our community who will be leading an important conversation about Earth Day at 11am in the Lounge. The ushers are handing out a small packet to everyone here today that represent a simple and creative way that you can use your personal prayer and times of reflection for personal focus and collective community imagination.

Maddy: Please explain these packets and what you call "Mindful Stitching" and how it relates to today's topic.

[MANUSCRIPT OF MADDY'S THOUGHTS FOR ONLINE READING ONLY]

Mindful stitching is an emphasis on setting aside time to slowly stitching lines, rows, shapes etc. (using a simple running stitch) onto a piece of fabric by hand. The lines are usually one color, simple in nature, and emphasize creating a rhythm by which you can allow your mind to be free for reflection and healing. With a focus on reusing materials, slowing down your practice, and limiting the resources and methods for making, all are encouraged to engage in a slow creative practice that can transcend the physical object created. Slow stitching is deeply connected to sustainability and well-being/mindfulness, as it shares many common ideas with the slow food movement and environmental sustainability, a less is more emphasis you could say. The simplicity of method and freedom of what you are making is meant to relieve stress, free our mind for reflection time and as a Christ-follower, I believe is a perfect opportunity to communicate with God in a creative way where there is no right, or wrong way of doing.

## Benediction

As our week now begins, may we remember to pause, if only for a few moments, to practice a prayerful review of the day. In doing so, we will be more alive and aware of ourselves and of all that God is doing to guide, shape, and give purpose to our lives.

Go in peace.

Amen.