

Soul Reset: 1. Restless Soul
Genesis 2:4b-7; Matthew 11:28-30
January 5, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

How are we doing with our New Year's Resolutions? Surveys indicate that Americans are evenly split between those who make them and those who refuse to make them. But of those who make them, the most common resolutions are lose weight, improve finances, and exercise at least three days a week. Do any of those sound familiar? They do to me! 80% of the people make such resolutions rarely keep them past February – which is why so many of us refuse to make them in the first place. But the easiest way to fail is to never make them. So, I look forward to the beginning of each year as a kind of do-over or a try again or maybe a starting line – because if 80% fail then 20% succeed and I'm always hopeful that I can be among the 20%. So on Monday morning, I met with a trainer at my health club. It was the end of the year, and I'd looked at our finances which reminded me that we are paying a monthly fee for access to all kinds of equipment and services that are designed to keep me healthy and I wasn't taking advantage of most of it. So my trainer and I developed a plan – it's just one part of my New Year's resolution to do a reset – to focus on healthy practices – and not just physical fitness, but spiritual fitness.

To reset is to restore something. If you've ever experienced the crash of a computer or your cell phone locked up and would not function, it required a reset – to restore the original operating system. And in the process, it cleared away clutter and old files, so you could start fresh. In this series, we will consider that it means to do a soul reset – to get all the way back to the beginning settings in my heart, mind, and soul. It will require us to do three things: stop the busyness, look inward, and then move forward in a way that resembles an abundant life that Jesus offers all who will follow. In John's gospel, Jesus says, **"I came so that they** (who are the 'they'? This comes in the middle of a teaching where Jesus presents himself as the shepherd and those who follow as the sheep. The 'they' are those who would follow Jesus.) **could have life – indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest."** (John 10:10) I only get one life, and I don't want to miss out. I want to live to the fullest. I want abundant life.

To experience fullness is to stay close to God and live in such a way that we avoid over-commitment, over-scheduling, and under-praying. Have you ever been there? Too busy, too tired, too burned out to pray. Or maybe you've never really established a true connection to God – you'd like one but don't know how and are a little concerned about how it might change your life. Or maybe you are walking through a season of grief, anxiety, depression, or stuck in a season of despair. In October, I made a trip to Seattle with Amanda. She had been making a few out of town trips in 2019 and each time she asked if I'd like to go with her – and each time, I replied that the timing wasn't right – either I was too busy or there was something on my calendar that I could not miss – so each time I stayed home. But when it came to October and once again, she asked if I would travel with her – this time to Seattle. I said yes and I made a plane reservation and almost immediately I felt I had made the wrong decision. I failed to look carefully at my calendar and there were commitments I had made as part of my responsibility serving on Hamline University's board of trustees. So I weighed which was worse to back out on my commitment to Amanda or admit to Hamline that I could not fulfill my commitment to them. And wisely, I decided to keep my commitment to Amanda (but let me say, I'm a very slow learner because in most of our marriage everything else came first). We spent four days in Seattle – Amanda attending a conference during the day – and I had a backpack filled with work I was planning to do. So the first day, she left the hotel room to attend her conference. I grabbed my backpack and looked for a coffee shop to do some work. It was Seattle so there's a

Starbucks on almost every corner. I ordered my coffee, say down at a counter, took out this book, *Soul Reset* by Junius Dotson. And before opening the book, I looked out the window and watched a steady stream of people walking up and down the street – some in business attire, some with bags and shopping carts and obviously homeless, some – like me were probably tourists – all of them going somewhere. I didn't recognize any of them. I didn't know any of their stories. All I could see was their outward appearance – and I remembered a quote from Henry David Thoreau: "the mass of people live their lives in quiet desperation." On the outside they look one way but inside they are empty and are trying to fill it with all sorts of things. And I had this epiphany – not unlike Junius Dotson, in his book, that maybe work has been what I've been using to fill me.

What about you? I often say, "We clean up well." We put on our church clothes and "everything is good" smiles, pretending we're okay as we praise God and worship. Church does not feel safe enough for us to be vulnerable and authentic – or we stay at home because we hurt too much or feel too empty to come. Could we be a church where it is okay not to be okay? We need places in our lives where we can be vulnerable and authentic, to know we are not alone no matter what we are going through. All of us play a role in helping to make this place a safe place to disclose where we are on the inside.

There's a scene from the movie, *Rocketman*, which is the story of the British rock singer Elton John whose music took him to the top of the charts in the 1970s – he achieved fame and fortune as a superstar, but at the same time his life was spiraling out of control, turning to alcohol and drugs to fill his emptiness inside. He suffers a heart attack and then he attempts to take his own life. Eventually, he enters rehab and in the movie, it is in the midst of a support group when he admits to himself – "I don't know who I am?" And that's the moment when his true recovery begins. It is his reset button. Do you know who you are – really? Do you know who God says you are?

In Genesis 2, we are told that the human (Hebrew word is "adam") is made from the ground ("adamah"). We are made from the same matter as the rest of the world. But then God does a kind of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, breathing breath (Hebrew is "ruach") into "adam" and the lifeless human becomes a living being – or as the King James Version puts it – "a living soul" – a whole person. What is it that makes us fully alive? The breath of God. How do we restore – How do we reset the breath of God in us?

Parker Palmer describes how a century ago Midwestern farmers used to run a rope from their house to the barn in case of blizzard. They knew stories of people who had died in their own yards during a whiteout because they could not find their way home. Palmer says what we need is a rope from the back door to the barn so we can find our way home again. When we catch hold and attend to the soul, we can survive life's blizzard without losing our way.

Junius Dotson – by all outward appearances his life was great. He had a successful ministry leading one of the fastest growing churches in America. He was an in-demand speaker. When the news media needed someone to comment on issues in the community, he was their first choice. He loved the spotlight. He was living on the mountaintop, but inside he was suffering and he was suffering in silence not even able to admit to himself how empty he was until one day he stood to preach at a funeral – so tired and so fatigued that he collapsed and the next thing he knew, the paramedics were putting him into the ambulance. Most of us never get to that extreme – but we know an emptiness inside that comes from drifting off course, carrying burdens that are not ours to carry, working to fulfill expectations that we've placed on ourselves that we should have given to God.

Jesus offers the most welcoming and encouraging invitation ever. **Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.** He uses this image of a yoke which was something people in the first century understood. A yoke is a wooden beam normally used between a pair of oxen or other animals to enable them to pull together on a load. Pharisees taught that people were to carry the yoke of the Torah – the heavy burden of the Jewish law with all of its commandments and then the additional commands that the Pharisees had added so that people would keep the commands. It's like the example I used with the children – people were struggling to fit into shoes and those shoes did not work in their lives. But Jesus offered a different yoke (shoe) which was easy to bear because it came from his mercy and love. It's not that Jesus did not have expectations. There was the time he told his followers that they should be prepared to leave behind family, possession and even life itself – which is what Jesus ultimately did. But Jesus is offering the rest and renewal necessary to live “life to the fullest.” And he does that by coming alongside us to carry whatever physical, emotional, financial, relational burdens we carry. He's not going to stand over us watching to see if we have kept all of the religious laws that were required. Instead, he comes alongside as the encourager to say, “Let me help you carry the load.” Will you let me help you carry the load?

I sat in that coffee shop in downtown Seattle, watching the people and it seemed to me that I was watching myself- and it felt like God was saying to me, “You're an idiot! You think life is about doing as much as you can and you will never be able to do enough. And there's a word for this – Sin. Sin means to stray from the path or to miss the mark. Sin should move us to repentance – to turn around – to reset. I felt God saying, Come to me. You need a reset.”

If any of this resonates with you and where you are or if you want to taste a life of fullness or you find you are chasing something and you're not even sure what you are chasing anymore, join me this month in a reset – a soul reset. Each week through our Grow, Pray, Study – if you don't currently receive it, mark your welcome card or send an email or pick up a copy across from the library – each day, I am inviting you to take a few minutes to focus on a spiritual practice. This week, it is the practice of listening – Latin word is *examen* – from which we get the word examination. It will require that you set aside a few minutes of time – quiet time. It might mean getting up in the morning a few minutes earlier or cutting out something so you can reset your soul. A few minutes – and in the GPS, we've provided a prayer, scripture, and a series of questions meant to help you listen and examine.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 5, 2020

Weekly Prayer: God, please help me review my day. Grant me the willingness to see what you would have me see in the light you would have me see it; free from fear, obsessive guilt, and dishonesty. Let me see where I might become more Christ-like in my life and grant me strength to make the changes to align with Your will. Amen.

Monday, January 6

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: John 10:1-11

I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice." Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

We learned in the Christmas Eve sermon that shepherds were not highly thought of in Jesus' day. So Jesus chose a somewhat daring metaphor when he presented himself as "the good shepherd." His main point was simple: a good shepherd always wants what is best for his sheep. Jesus' shepherd image assumes a bond of deep trust. Sheep must trust their shepherd for wellbeing and safety. Jesus came to offer us the best possible life, life "to the full."

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

What brought you the most joy? Give thanks to God. When did you feel most connected to God? Give thanks to God. When did you feel sad today? Share your raw and unabridged feelings with God. Then sit in silence and listen for God's voice reminding you that you are loved and held in grace.

Tuesday, January 7

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: Luke 10:38-42

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

Martha was very busy—doing good, legitimate things! She wanted to be a generous host to Jesus, to offer him a good meal and, quite possibly, comfortable lodging. Especially in church settings, we often face Martha's problem. We feel hurried and stressed, not because we're doing bad things, but because we're trying to do too many good things. Jesus did not put down Martha's caring. He just said "Mary has chosen what is better." Where does "listening to Jesus" fall within your 2020 priorities?

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

If you could relive a moment from the past day, which would it be? Where was God in this wonderful moment? What did you experience or discover about the love and grace of God today?

Wednesday, January 8

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: Romans 12:1-2

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Paul called Christians to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The Greek verb for "transform" (*metamorphoo*) meant not a surface change, but the kind of total change that turns a caterpillar into a butterfly. Change like that takes time—in caterpillars or in us. And Paul said "be transformed," not "transform yourselves." This only happens if we open ourselves to God, who alone can do the deep transforming work in us.

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

Jesus invites us to live lightly and freely with him each day. Did you feel light and free in the past day? If yes, what was it like to walk unburdened through the day? If no, what is needed to accept Jesus' invitation to a light and free kind of living? Listen for God in the silence of your heart about what is keeping you from freedom.

Thursday, January 9

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: Matthew 11:28 – 12:14

"Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

At that time Jesus went through the wheat fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry so they were picking heads of wheat and eating them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are breaking the Sabbath law." But he said to them, "Haven't you read what David did when he and those with him were hungry? He went into God's house and broke the law by eating the bread of the presence, which only the priests were allowed to eat. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple treat the Sabbath as any other day and are still innocent? But I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what this means, *I want mercy and not sacrifice*, you wouldn't have condemned the innocent. The Human One is Lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus left that place and went into their synagogue. A man with a withered hand was there. Wanting to bring charges against Jesus, they asked, "Does the Law allow a person to heal on the Sabbath?" Jesus replied, "Who among you has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath and will not take hold of it and pull it out? How much more valuable is a person than a sheep! So the Law allows a person to do what is good on the Sabbath." Then Jesus said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he did and it was made healthy, just like the other one. The Pharisees went out and met in order to find a way to destroy Jesus.

For devout Hebrews in Jesus' day, keeping the Sabbath was a key way to let God govern life's pace. (In today's 24/7 world, the Bible principle of taking a day for spiritual and physical rest often feels unworkable and absurd.) But at times, the spiritual point of the Sabbath got lost in a blizzard of regulations. Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath, hated that. The point of Sabbath rest, he said, was not busily following "the rules," but resting in his grace and caring. Matthew seems to have wanted his readers to see the contrast between Jesus' "easy" yoke, and the burden of a system that censured a kind act of healing.

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

Reflect on your ability to give and receive love in the past day. Was love easy or difficult to give away? Was love easy or difficult to receive? Look for God in these moments of giving and receiving love today, and ask God to teach you more about God's generous ways of loving.

Friday, January 10

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: Hebrews 4:9-16

So you see that a sabbath rest is left open for God's people. The one who entered God's rest also rested from his works, just as God rested from his own.

Therefore, let's make every effort to enter that rest so that no one will fall by following the same example of disobedience, because God's word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions. No creature is hidden from it, but rather everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of the one to whom we have to give an answer. Also, let's hold on to the confession since we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, who is Jesus, God's Son; because we don't have a high priest who can't sympathize with our weaknesses but instead one who was tempted in every way that we are, except without sin. Finally, let's draw near to the throne of favor with confidence so that we can receive mercy and find grace when we need help.

This section starts in Hebrews 3:7. The writer drew on Genesis 2 and Psalm 95 to say that living in the physical Promised Land did not fulfill what God had promised. God's rest is inward, and transforms "the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." We find rest as we release our need to control every outcome, and trust God to rule the universe better than we could. As we trust Christ, "we...receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Can you trust, down deep, that if you live at "the will and pace of God" you'll be more truly productive?

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

Rehearse the day in your mind, pausing at each moment of gratitude to give thanks. Invite God to reset your heart, to clear away the clutter of guilt, harsh words, words left unsaid, and actions taken or left undone. Let God's grace wash over the desolation and guide you to a place of consolation where you can always begin again.

Saturday, January 11

Each week in the month of January, we will focus on a spiritual practice. This week's practice is examen, a centuries-old practice that invites us to prayerfully reflect on our days in the presence of God. Consider what God might be revealing to you. Be honest, humble, and forgiving. Open your heart to hear God speak.

Scripture: Psalm 46:1-11

God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea, when its waters roar and rage, when the mountains shake because of its surging waves. *Selah*

There is a river whose streams gladden God's city, the holiest dwelling of the Most High. God is in that city. It will never crumble. God will help it when morning dawns. Nations roar; kingdoms crumble. God utters his voice; the earth melts. The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

Come, see the LORD's deeds, what devastation he has imposed on the earth— bringing wars to an end in every corner of the world, breaking the bow and shattering the spear, burning chariots with fire. "That's enough! Now know that I am God! I am exalted among all nations; I am exalted throughout the world!" The LORD of heavenly forces is with us! The God of Jacob is our place of safety. *Selah*

In *A Testament of Devotion*, Thomas Kelly wrote, "People nowadays take time far more seriously than eternity." This psalm focuses us firmly on eternity. "Nations are in uproar," the psalmist said (a condition that has continued pretty much without interruption ever since). But running faster, trying to keep up with (or outrun) the uproar, is not the answer. Instead God, through the psalmist, invites us to "Be still, and know that I am God."

Examen: Find a quiet place, invite God to be present with you, take some deep breaths, and consider these questions as you reflect on the past day.

How is it with your soul? Listen to your body, to your feelings, and to your thoughts. Share with God how your soul is doing today. Then, listen for God's voice to speak to your heart.