

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 12, 2025

At this time, as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to get comfy. Maybe close your eyes and take a deep breath in with me. Breathe it out slowly.

Take another deep breath in.

Breathe it out slowly. Breathe in God's mercies and breathe out God's mercies to others.

Let us pray. Gracious spirit, you're as close to us as our very next breath. And so we pray that you would dwell within us in this time, quieting us that we might hear your voice and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

We're going to have two scripture lessons this morning. The first will come from Lamentations chapter 3. The second from Philippians chapter 4. We're going to invite you to turn to the Bible in just a bit. But we have some stories to share before that. As I mentioned to you, this is our Growing in Gratitude generosity season. So, this morning is the first in a three-part series when we imagine together the ways in which we are growing in gratitude. We believe here at Idlewild that gratitude is something that quite literally lives within us and that as we nurture it and the grace of God nurtures it, it grows within us. Okay. So, I've been thinking a lot about growing and what that looks like. You all know cuz I've talked about it a handful of times from the pulpit, from here, about some issues that I've had in my yard. Okay. When I bought the house that I live in three years ago, we had to take out four oak trees out of the front front yard. I talk about my house and my yard here often because every time I do y'all have wonderful recommendations for me. You help me troubleshoot being a homeowner. Okay, so that's one of the reasons I'm telling this story. But another one is a really important, I think, spiritual point. So, we took out four oak trees out of the front yard. That left what we believed to be still the largest and the oldest of the oak trees there. We had to take them out, unfortunately, because of a sewage thing, and the roots were...had been compromised by having to run a new sewer line. So, every day I wake up and I look out at my yard that I've spent, uh, too much time and too much money, for it to look the way it looks right now. Okay. I look out at it and there's patches of, like, just sandy dirt, right? I've taken a tiller to it. I've thrown a ton of seed and fertilizer and all this sort of stuff on it. About 3 months ago when I was in the midst of my sabbatical, imagining that I would just really want to devote a bunch of that time to yard work, I went out early in the morning and I opened up my chat GPT app and I took like eight pictures of the front of my house. Okay. And I told Chat GPT, I said, "Here's the deal. I moved in a couple years ago. When I did, we had to take out four really old big oak trees. I've had issues with growing grass since then. Help me design a plan for my yard that will work, okay, and be beautiful." And it took, you know, all of 15 seconds to spit out

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the five or six steps I needed to take to ensure that my yard was healthy and good. And then it actually drew a picture for me of what my yard would look like. It took the pictures that I put in there, and it showed me this is what your yard could look like. It kind of felt like it was talking some junk to me. I've got to be honest with you because the plan that it developed was pretty involved. But there was one key part. Step one had...before you even got to step one, there was a little bit of an introduction there. It said because, Chat GPT said, because you had to cut down four oak trees that were really old, your soil has pH issues. Okay, some of you are nodding your heads. You know this to be true, right? Yeah, your soil has pH issues. And so in order to deal with and make sure that your soil is fertile enough to receive new grass and plants, you have some work to do. And so I went, as Chad GPT told me to, and I bought a big old bag of lime. It said you had to, you have to first of all till up the ground. Then you have to throw lime in there. So it changes the acidity, balances out the pH. Because your yard has something called an oak legacy. Are y'all familiar with this? Okay. So, you cut down an oak tree, you grind up the stump, you think it's gone. Of course, you know it's not gone, right? There's all the roots and all the structure underneath the ground. Well, while the tree ceases to live in its former form, right? the roots in the stump that you can't see any longer are still doing things. They are breaking down. They are decomposing. As they do that, they are releasing nutrients into the soil. Lots of acidity actually into the soil, which makes it in the short term darn near impossible to grow something.

So, I have this five-step plan, and it said you need to implement this plan in October while it's still a little bit warm and you can plant the grass. Then you need to get the pH perfectly balanced, and then you can move forward. I thought about that this week as I was imagining how we were going to begin this season of growing in gratitude together. And I wondered if our souls...our souls are something akin to my front yard, 3427 Central. Right. I've wondered a bit about what sort of tending our souls need in order for us to grow in gratitude. Right? We could throw a bunch of scripture at you. We might just call that seed or fertilizer. Right? We can tell you all the ways in which your generosity in this place will benefit people. Just put that in your face. But if we don't tend to the soil of our souls, then we're actually not going to receive the lesson. We're actually not going to grow in the ways that we would hope to be able to grow. If we actually want to grow into more gracious, generous people, we have some steps to take, some tending to the soul, the soil of our souls in order to do that to prepare ourselves. Okay? So, I wonder if over these next three weeks there might be a question that you can sit with. How are you tending and allowing God to tend to the soil of your soul?

The world around us is difficult to navigate right now. It feels scary. It feels imposing. Right? That's to say nothing of the lives that you are navigating right now as parents, as partners, as those single, as those in retirement, those who are working. There's a lot going on in the world

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and in our worlds. So, it seems like a great opportunity, a great time for us to ask, how are we tending to the soil of our souls? Because it turns out that the tending needs to happen now, even while things feel heavy and difficult. It's actually in those moments when some of the best preparation and tending can happen. We see that first in Lamentations chapter 3. We're going to read verses 22 to 26 together. Okay? But a bit of context. If you turn to Lamentations chapter 3 and you begin to read, what you're going to read is a writer who is in the midst of incredible difficulty. I mean, the title of the book kind of gives it away. It's a book of lament, right? But verses 1-19 of chapter 3 is some of the most intense lament of the entire book. And the writer, the author who is lamenting, is not simply lamenting the absence of God. That's often a lament in our Old Testament. God seems absent. That's not what this person is lamenting. This person is lamenting God's presence and specifically believes that God is intentionally inflicting upon this person difficulty.

The image that the author uses is that of God with a bow and an arrow and an arrow drawn back pointed directly at them. Right? God is not absent. God is actually here and present to inflict pain and difficulty. Which then makes the verses that we're going to read together all the more interesting. In the midst of the difficulty, we read this.

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul. Therefore, I will hope in him. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

So these verses, then, these verses interrupt lament with something that doesn't sound anything like lament, right? They interrupt the difficulty that this person is navigating with something all together new and different. And it's worth our paying attention to it. It's worth us understanding the difference in the verses that have come before and then these verses that we read. These verses show the one lamenting, willing themselves by God's grace into hopefulness in the Lord. Let me say that again. These verses show the one lamenting, the author, willing themselves by God's grace into hopefulness in the Lord, claiming even that God's faithfulness is great, even as all the evidence around them seems to be to the contrary. These verses show a person bent...bent on caring for, nurturing the soil of their soul, cultivating, nurturing hope, cultivating peace.

Even in the midst of their difficulty, they say, "The Lord is my portion. Therefore, I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him. So I'm going to be patient. They are cultivating within themselves, within the soil of their soul, hope and peace which they will need

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for the journey. They are claiming the faithfulness of God amidst the difficulty of the world. And we have to believe that even though it sounds foolish, it is not foolish to them. It is faithful. It is even fruitful for them to do it because it sets the stage for them to grow as followers of God. This first lesson comes to us from one who is lamenting deeply. So here's the thing. If you came to this place this day with a heavy burden on your shoulders, maybe it's the burden of the world outside this place or the burden of things you're navigating in your own life right now, I want to give you permission, maybe even an invitation, like the one who laments in chapter 3:verses 1-19 to begin to see the lesson of cultivating within the soil of one's soul, hopefulness and patience even in the midst of that difficulty.

So there's a lesson for us if we're going to grow in preparing our soil. There's a lesson from the one who laments. There's also a lesson from Paul. We're going to read from Philippians 4:verses 10 through 13 and then 19-20. But I wonder, and we've got some biblical scholars out here, before I read from it. Does anybody know where Paul was when he wrote Philippians? You can just say it out loud. Louder. It's so quiet, Bruce. You're so quiet back there. Nobody can see you. They wouldn't even know it was you. Prison. Prison. Yeah. Paul's in prison. He's not writing this from a place of comfort, right? He's not on a beach off the coast of the Mediterranean somewhere, right? He's writing them this letter from prison to the Philippians. Okay, if you follow along in your Bible, he says this.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly. I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me." The Philippians, they've revived their concern for him. "Indeed, you were concerned for me but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need, for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, and my God will fully satisfy every need of yours too according to his riches. In the glory of Christ Jesus, to our God and father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

So Paul is in prison and yet he is doing some cultivating of the soil of his soul as well. As the one who laments was cultivating it with hope and peace, the one who is imprisoned is cultivating it with a type of patience and even more so contentment. He is content to be in the place where he is for now, trusting and believing that the one who dwells within him, Christ Jesus, the Lord, is going to accomplish everything that Christ desires to. In fact, "I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me." Paul is cultivating in his own imprisonment even contentment in that place for a season...for a season. And he is calling the people of Philippi to do the same—in the midst of their difficulty and distress to be about cultivating the soil of their soul with a contentment that

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is hopeful and leaning forward and trusting that indeed Christ is working in and through them beautiful and powerful things.

Okay. Three months ago when I put Chat GPT...told it to do my yard design and all that and it told me about Oak Legacy, um I have decided for the last three months Oak Legacy is my enemy. Okay. I have decided it is the thing that is stopping my yard from being what I want it to be. And I sat with that belief for like three months. And then I was getting ready for this morning's sermon. I just did a little bit of research. Turns out oak legacy isn't the enemy. Here's the interesting thing. In the short term, the remnants of oak trees as they decompose under the ground change the pH of that soil. In the short term, you've got to do some cultivating, right? You've got to nourish the soil with some different ingredients to make it yield a good crop. But in the long term, in the long term, those oaks that stood proudly for about a hundred years, as they break down, they are going to nourish and feed the soil with so much nutrition, you can't even imagine it, right? There are nutrients that will be released from the roots of those oaks that I couldn't buy at Home Depot. Right. There is a fertility that will come from breaking down the legacy that those oaks leave behind that we couldn't manufacture on our own.

Here's what I want to invite you to do. I want you to think about your soul as soil. I want you to think about it as something that needs attention and cultivation. I want you to think about it as something that needs the tender hand of a gardener to turn it over and over and over again. And I wonder if over the next three weeks you might mark in your Bible Lamentations chapter 3:verses 22- 26, Philippians chapter 4:verses 10-13 and then 19- 20. And I wonder if together we might tend to the soil of our souls with a hopefulness and a patience. We might tend to the soil of our soul with a contentment for the place where we find ourselves right now, but a deep and abiding hope that God is drawing us into something brand new. I don't know what it is that's making your soil difficult to grow in right now. But I do trust and believe the legacy that we have in Christ Jesus is a legacy of one who tends to us gently and thoughtfully. And I believe and trust that even as the one who lamented told us, great is the faithfulness of our God. So my hope for you this morning is that you might know it to be true in a fresh and new way for you over these next couple weeks as we grow in gratitude, as we grow in hopefulness, as we grow in patience, as we grow in contentment with all that God has done and all that God will do.

Let's pray together. Gracious and loving one, you interrupt our lament with hope. You tend to us with your faithfulness and we are so grateful. We pray for your attention to the soil of our souls this day. You know better than we what it needs to bear fruit over time, to be healthy and good soil for you. And so we pray that you would grant us in every way that which we need. We pray that the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ might tend to us with gentleness but also with courage.

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We pray, Lord, that over these next few weeks you might help us to grow not only in our gratitude but also in our discipleship of you. Draw us ever closer to the faithful image of Christ Jesus. For we ask it in his name. Amen.