

Back to Basics
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Have you heard the one about the church that got a new minister? It was a small town, so everyone came by to hear the new minister's first sermon. And was it ever a sermon – fiery, moving, inspirational! They were so impressed that they all came back for the evening service – yes this was a church with morning and evening services every week. They couldn't wait to hear his next sermon, and they did – except it was exactly the same as the morning, just as fiery, moving, and inspirational, except they'd heard it all before. Well, they said to each other, he just began. He just didn't have time to write two sermons on his first week – and what a sermon it was. So they all came back the next Sunday, to hear what he would say. And it was the exact same sermon again, word for word. So, after the service the Board chair said to the minister as they were shaking hands at the door. "That was quite the sermon, but we couldn't help noticing that it was the same one you preached twice last week." "Yes," replied the minister, "and when you all start acting on that one, I'll preach a new one."

I've always enjoyed that joke, although I've resisted the temptation to try putting it into action. There are some experienced ministers who go back to old sermon files, and dust off a good one from a decade or two ago... But even without that environmentally conscious approach, there is a theory that every minister has about 6 or 8 sermons – ones they go back to again and again, preaching with different Bible passages, different words, different stories and illustrations... Have you figured out what mine are yet? It's easier to notice if you're not the one in the midst of sermon writing every week, so I'd be interested to hear what you think they are for me.

Have you heard about the idea of a capsule wardrobe? The term was coined in the 70's but has become increasingly trendy since the turn of the century. The idea is that every season you have a limited number of items of clothing, which all work together so that anything can be worn with anything else. It's an idea of wardrobe basics, not letting anything else get in the way. I don't have a capsule wardrobe, but I'm drawn to the idea of the capsule wardrobe being about simplicity, harmony, and a clear sense of what fits and works for you. Proponents highlight the savings in time (choosing an outfit that "works" together) and money (don't buy as many clothes), while stressing that simplicity actually increases creativity - the small number of pieces can be combined in so many ways! It's the idea of getting back to basics.

The idea of the capsule wardrobe, and the larger minimalism trend, is that you don't have other things there just getting in the way. Every piece of clothing is something you love, something you use all the time. Here's how Caroline Joy of the blog "Unfancy" suggests going about starting a capsule wardrobe: "Step 1: Empty your closet. Seriously, take absolutely everything out of your closet and lay it out on your bed. Don't cheat—taking everything out at once is the secret to style clarity. As you put your LOVE IT pieces back into your empty closet, your style will practically scream at you. But that won't be the case if your closet is still being muddled with MAYBE pieces left hanging in there." And although some people offer checklists and strict rules, she stresses that this is about you as an individual. Your capsule wardrobe could not be anyone else's; it fits you perfectly.

So what would be the capsule wardrobe of your faith?

What are the basic pieces of your faith that you reach for again and again, that work together? And what are all the other things you should clear out because they are getting in the way?

After all, it can feel like there is so much in our lives that gets in the way of living well. There are things to do, places to go, people to see. There are illnesses to live with and people to care for. There are 24 hour news channels, social media feeds, and weekly emails from the church – and other places, about everything that is happening. There are sleepless nights, empty hours, demands on our time, absences felt too keenly. There are traffic jams and transit delays. We can feel too small to make a difference, too unimportant to take the time to care for spiritually. We need to take a moment, and get back to basics, remind ourselves of the key pieces of our faith.

And then, when we get to church, ready for worship, it doesn't necessarily get any better. We worry about rituals, get caught up in traditions, we wish we were repeating something old and familiar or that we'd just stop all of that churchy language. We get caught up in *how* we worship rather than *why* we worship. It's not a new problem. The words in Micah are in response to these very concerns: how do we worship the right way? What are the rituals? The requirements? How do we get things right!

Micah says:

*God has told us what is good.
What God needs from you:
to do justice,
love kindness
and humbly walk with your God.*

You might know this verse best from the round we sang together, but I think the reason many of us could at least vaguely repeat this (even if we don't know where in the Bible it's from) is because it takes us right back to basics, the basics of what our faith should look like lived out.

Cameron Howard writes about the poetry of the Bible (and yes, this passage from Micah is part of a poem): “Poetry is a salve for our meme-filled world. It moves us beyond our screens and our prejudices and into a world of possibility, a world of hope. No wonder the prophets uttered poems! They’re always trying to point us past ourselves, our greed, and our fears, and toward the kingdom of God. We often describe the Bible as “God’s story,” and that can be a quite useful way of conceptualizing Scripture. At the same time, if we’re always looking for the story, we might be missing the poems. We might be so busy looking for a right answer, or an overarching theme, that we do not let the Bible transport us into its radical, ridiculous visions for the future.”

And writing about the Beatitudes, Eric Barreto says: “Jesus’ sharing and interpreting of these commandments is less an imposition of strictures for an obedient life than a guide to a life of wholeness aligned with God’s creation and grace.” He talks about communal wholeness.

These verses might be ones that you add to your basics, or they might not.

What should we be looking for when we go back to basics with our faith?

From capsule wardrobes to tidying up. Marie Kondo is also a popular name right now. In her book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* she says that we should only keep things if they “spark joy.” And Sarah Cottrell, writing about Margareta Magnusson’s book *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning* says “What Swedish death cleaning gets totally right is asking its participants to create a simple life that is easily managed, thus leaving room for joy.”

The basics of our faith should be the pieces we love, the ones we reach for again and again – the ones that leave room for joy in our lives.

I’ll pretend that this was all a masterful plan, where in January I highlighted the basics of my faith and today move to what that means for us. It wasn’t. But if you happened to be here for the camping Jesus sermon on January 5 I talked about the single most important thing about God for me – God’s presence (Emmanuel, God-with-us), and those of you who were here on January 19 heard me share two things I know are true about God in the midst of everything else I don’t know: God is love. God loves you. These are the basics I reach for again and again, the ones I try to live by and that I miss if I forget about them for too long.

So, with these basics (God is with us, God is love, God loves us), the question is: What does this mean for us in the day to day?

A couple of weeks ago, I suggested that it means practicing seeing others, paying attention to others, with God’s love, which means we need to practice:

- Patience, for others and ourselves

- Forgiveness, for others and ourselves
- Recognizing and celebrating the gifts of others and ourselves

Or even more simply, Micah suggests:

*God has told us what is good.
What God needs from you:
to do justice,
love kindness
and humbly walk with your God.*

As an off-the-chart introvert, it's not easy to recognize that each of these is about relationships. After all, "Justice is what love looks like in public" (Cornel West), and kindness needs someone to receive that kindness, and humbly walking with God is about a relationship that sustains us through the whole journey of life. Justice. Kindness. Walking humbly. God with us.

So, what sparks joy for you? What do you reach for again and again? What are the basics of your faith?