

*Changed from the Inside Out*

Psalm 85:1-3, 5-8 and Mark 1:1-9

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Harvard professor and author, Arthur C. Brooks, reminisced in an article that appeared in *The Atlantic* this week about coming down with strep throat while at a summer camp some 3000 miles away from home. Brooks recalls feeling miserable while one he describes as “the coolest kid at camp” suggested his sore throat was all in his head. “Just decide you don’t have a sore throat, and you won’t,” the cool kid said, coaxing Brooks to accept his advice until he had had a fever of 103 and could not swallow, at which point the Cool Kid suggested that he was mentally weak. Still, Brooks headed off to the nurse who prescribed a drug that relieved all symptoms within a day, provoking the Cool Kid to conclude, “That stuff is just a placebo...You cured yourself.”

Brooks continues to write about the power of the placebo effect, “a phenomenon in which the mere mental suggestion derived from taking a drug that is actually inert has a therapeutic result.”

Interestingly enough, the modern use of the word, “placebo,” originates from a mistake made by Saint Jerome, a fourth-century scholar who is known for translating the Bible into Latin. When Jerome was translating Psalm 116, he mistakenly translated verse 9, “I walk before the Lord in the land of the living,” to *Placebo Domino in regione vivorum* which means, “I will please the Lord in the land of the living.” “Subsequently, hired professional mourners at funerals chanted that line and became known as ‘placebos.’”

Fourteen centuries later, a German physician introduced the placebo as a concept in medicine by mesmerizing patients to relieve them of certain ailments. His method was later debunked by a commission that included Benjamin Franklin. To this day, there is no scientific data to support the belief that diseases can be completely cured through the power of positive thinking. And yet, many of us know that placebos have a powerful psychological impact on us.

My sister, for example, swears that liquid collagen has transformed her facial skin while shrinking her stomach but my \$300 investment in the same product offered no results.

Some athletes suggest that a particular protein powder or bar is what enables them to run faster or lift heavier. But I have not yet found any miracle bar that enables me to run faster or further.

And yet, the placebo effect is real. Researchers conducting a 2005 study gave participants an anti-anxiety medication designed to mute activity in parts of the brain that govern perception of unpleasantness. After taking the medication, participants were asked to look at a series of disagreeable photos. The participants did not find the images nearly as disagreeable with the medication as they did without it.

The next day, the participants were told they were taking the same medication but were given a saline solution. After drinking salt water the participants still had lower levels of perceived unpleasantness when looking at the photos, even though they had not been given a drug with such power.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, “Harness the Power of Suggestion for Your Happiness,” *The Atlantic*, December 7, 2023.

Beloveds, our minds are powerful things.

Who or what we listen to impacts what we believe and what we debunk, how we approach others and who we cast aside, what we feel in our bodies and how we feel about ourselves.

Who or what do you hear?

What voices shape your stances or views?

Who has most influenced how you see your worth, dignity, giftedness, belovedness?

Do you listen to the voices that suggest you are the sum of your mistakes and will never be found worthy of God's love and acceptance?

Or have you heard the voice of one who offers you a changed life—right here, right now, this very day?

We never get far into the season of Advent without the synoptic gospel writers taking us to the banks of the Jordan where we encounter a prophet dressed in clothing of camel's hair.

John the Baptist appears in the third chapter of Matthew—after the genealogy of Jesus, Jesus' birth, a visit from the wise men, and an escape to Egypt.

Luke begins with the foretelling of both John the Baptist and Jesus, a delightful conversation between their mothers Elizabeth and Mary, and a gloriously romantic birth story that has inspired the nativities many of us pull out of the closet this time of year. John the Baptist then appears in the wilderness in the third chapter—just like Matthew.

Mark, however, begins with baptism. The earliest gospel has no angels hovering over a borrowed barn, no giddy exchanges between two pregnant women, and no visitors from the East. The good news begins not with the commencement of Jesus' life but with a focus on the changed life available to all people through the one whose birth we celebrate this season.

Mark seems to understand how all of scripture is about setting people free—free from bondage, free from oppression, and free from sin.

The story of our faith is one of liberation!

While those for whom Mark writes around 70 CE did not weep by the waters of Babylon while enslaved by the Egyptians, they have seen their temple destroyed by the Romans. But even more, they, like us, know the power of the past to grip our today and tomorrow.

Mark knows how we cannot fully liberate others until we have been fully liberated from whatever weighs us down—just as we cannot fully love ourselves or our neighbors until we accept God's profound love for us.

Mark begins with John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins. The Greek word translated "repentance" is *metanoia*. Its literal meaning is "change of mind" Outside of the biblical sphere, the word is used only for regret for individual acts.

I suspect many of us live with the consequences, perhaps even the placebo effect, of such an understanding. We hear the word "repent," and we immediately start to feel shame for what we have done or regret for some of the choices we have made. Repentance is something that we have been led to believe makes less of us.

But the word, repentance, has been what Joel Marcus describes as "immeasurably deepened by the influence of the Jewish concept of *tesubah*" which has a literally meaning of

“turning” or “return.” The concept of *tesubah* “has its roots in the call of the Old Testament prophets for the nation to return to God and implies a total change in spiritual orientation.”<sup>2</sup>

Beloveds, repentance involves a turning away from our sin and the ways of this world **and** a glorious returning to God who always stands ready with arms open wide to receive us, welcome us, and love us—no matter what we have done or failed to do, said or failed to say, loved or failed to love—and despite what we have been told about ourselves or our worth.

John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. The original Greek reads *eis aphasis*, and “*Aphasis* literally means a sending away or release.”<sup>3</sup> Repentance can lead to the complete sending away or release of our sin and shame!

How many of us are longing to experience a more meaningful relationship with God?

And how many of us want to be released from sins we have grown to love, shame that holds us back, and guilt gripping us?

I returned last Sunday after being with my family in Missouri for a rather extended stay. I discovered while packing my bags last Saturday night how much I had accumulated on the trip—Kansas City Chiefs sportswear from my mother’s neighbor, several articles of clothing that belonged to my stepmother, and a Black Friday purchase or two. I labored to fit it all into my carry-on suitcase and large shoulder bag, determined to not check a bag. My mother was quick to tell me that she would be angry if she was a fellow passenger sharing the overhead bin with me as she watched us load the car.

But her words were embraced as a challenge instead of a deterrence.

I did, in fact, make it home without checking any luggage.

But I did not make it home without admiring the people who carried only a small backpack or purse on board.

I could literally see how freely their bodies moved without being held down by so much baggage.

Beloveds, our future with God—the glorious reign of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven—is one that is more fully enjoyed and experienced when we leave our backage behind, literally checking it with God as we confess our sin and shortcomings while asking God to free us to fully live the life God is calling us to live.

What is God be calling you to relinquish?

What do we need to let go of that is not of God?

A sin we have grown to love?

Shame that prevents us from seeing the image of God whenever we look in the mirror?

Regret that keeps us focused on the past instead of the fresh start that awaits us today?

We do not have to take it all with us—despite what we may have heard others say.

Listen for the voice of the one in the wilderness.

Repent, and believe the good news.

Turn around and allow yourself to fully experience God’s steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace—the gifts of salvation that have the power to transform us from the inside out.

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Bible, Mark 1-8* (New York: Random House, 1999), 150.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus, 150.