



A BUNDLE OF
THYME
For Every Season

Online Women's Magazine | thymemag.com

January 2021



TIPS

The Dressing – Your Bed – by Marcy Lytle

Now's the time for dressing up your bed! It's the time of year when all the bedroom "stuff" is on sale, and a great way to boost your mood going forward. It doesn't have to mean an entire bed makeover (although it could), but there are cute accents and ways to dress up the bed with just one change or two! We've narrowed it down to seven ideas!

New throw pillows – This might be the easiest up-do. Toss out all of your old throw pillows, or purchase new covers, and update your bed this way. If the current throw pillows are too small, too many, too few, or the wrong colors, then stand back and look. Decide on a few new ones, vary up the shapes and sizes, and go shopping! [Amazon.com : throw pillow covers](#)

A throw at the foot – Maybe your bed looks fine, but you feel it just needs one extra thing. What about adding a throw at the foot in a bold geometric print or color, to add a pop to your bedding! And you'll also have a cozy pullup on those cold January nights. How about a fun plaid? [Blankets | Throw Blankets | Kirklands](#)

Mix up prints – One idea is to keep your basic comforter and ditch all the matching shams and pillows, and mix it up. Keep that one neutral hue and then add some prints and textures in your pillows. Seriously, this can give you an entire new look that's fresh and up to date! Here's an example of mixing up prints!

Arrange another way – If you normally fold back your comforter and stand up your pillows, try it a different way. Stack your pillows instead! If your throw pillows line up like soldiers, consider turning them sideways or at an angle! Get a friend to help you with vision!

Move it – Consider rearranging your bedroom and moving the bed to another wall. Get rid of clutter or extra furniture that's just collecting dust. Minimalize so that your bedroom is inviting and cozy, not overstuffed and busy.

The headboard – If you don't have one, create one. If your headboard is outdated, change it up. There are SO MANY options for headboards – ones from old gates hung on the wall – to a huge tapestry instead of a connecting wood piece. Or a beautiful art piece. Look on the internet and be inspired!

A whole new setup – Maybe it IS time for a new comforter – the whole set. Instead of getting a bed in a bag that coordinates perfectly - try mixing up the pieces. Purchase just the comforter you love, and then shop for all the extra pieces and put together your new look. How fun would that be?

Start with a vision, collect photos of ideas you love, and then make a list of what you'd like to do. Not good with vision? Ask a friend to come along and help. Then start moving, rearranging, adding new and tossing old. Pretty soon, you'll have a whole new look that invites you in once again...

SEVEN FOR YOU – Bath Time

It's January, and warm hot baths or showers might be calling us to linger, soak or stand in the flow for a while. Our panel of women were asked to share their picks for products, experiences, etc. that make their bath time personal and relaxing. It's fun to hear what other women do, and then try one of these ideas ourselves! After all, you've been working hard this past season, and you deserve a long, pleasant cleanse...underneath warm hot water...don't you?

I am not a bath person. I like my shower, though, but I want it quick and done. I have used the same Dial Basics HypoAllergenic soap along with Tresemme shampoo and conditioner for years because they work with my allergies. Too much fragrance can start a headache or start me sneezing. I have found one other shampoo I really like. It's Avalon Organics Volumizing Rosemary Shampoo. I found this at Central Market in Fort Worth, Texas years ago and I was hooked on its soothing rosemary smell. It can be found at other Natural Grocers too. And every time I use it I can't help but sing the song, "Rosemary and Thyme." Remember that song? I don't think that's the title but that's the part I know and like to sing. Do you sing in the shower?

[Amazon.com: Avalon Organics Shampoo, Volumizing Rosemary, 11 Fluid Ounce: Beauty](#)

I'm not a bath lingering person, at all. Once the water cools off, I'm out. However, my husband and I both LOVE special soaps. We buy them all year long – natural fragrances – handmade – whenever we get a chance. For winter, I love the eucalyptus and peppermint scents, or grapefruit. We buy them at farmers markets or other places where vendors sell their creations! Gruene Witch Apothecary is a favorite place to order from! Their facial coffee bar is the best!

[Organic Handcrafted Soap ~ Gruene Witch Apothecary](#)

No baths for me unless it's for therapeutic reasons under doctor's orders! I take hot showers at night. I don't have a particular routine, unless I need to wash my hair, in which case if it's early enough I will wash it at night. I hate going to bed with wet hair and then I really have a bad hair day the next day, so I prefer to wash my hair in the morning. Immediately out of the shower I will put Lubriderm lotion or coconut oil all over my skin. (The best thing about winter bathing is no regular shaving of your legs! That's always tricky when you're a woman of a certain age who wears glasses to read. Seems that I'm always missing spots when I shave!)

[Amazon.com : Lubriderm Daily Moisture Hydrating Unscented Body Lotion with Vitamin B5 for Normal to Dry Skin, Non-Greasy and Fragrance-Free Lotion. 24 fl. oz : Beauty](#)

During the long cold evenings this time of year, a slow hot bath can be a mood changer. I use a cup of Epson salts with a few drops of my favorite essential oil whenever I have the time to indulge. I received a bathtub tray last year for Christmas and it has made bath time so much better. I read or listen to music on my iPad and the tray keeps everything safe and secure. I do keep adding hot water as necessary because the Epson salt works better the hotter the water is. I'll sit there from 20 minutes to an hour if I'm lucky.

[Amazon.com: ROYAL CRAFT WOOD Luxury Bathtub Caddy Tray, One or Two Person Bath and Bed Tray, Bonus Free Soap Holder \(Natural\): Home & Kitchen](#)

I just bought this for my shower...Eucalyptus branch that I found on Etsy. It was \$8.00 for a bunch. Shipping was \$7.00. I'm sure you can buy it cheaper, locally. It's supposed to release the aroma with the hot water...so you feel you're in a spa.

[Amazon.com: Fresh Eucalyptus Branches \(Baby Blue\), Fresh Eucalyptus Shower, Bouquet, Aromatherapy, Spiral, Shower Bath Plant, Weddings \(1 Big Bunch\): Garden & Outdoor](#)

I love to take a hot soaking bath in the evening after I've had a brisk walk around the neighborhood. Usually, I put some Epsom Salts and lavender essential oil for these *no longer spring chicken* bones. I love listening to Spanish guitar music on Pandora while I soak with low lamp light. My favorite one is Armik Radio Station. I can set back and think about the day, what I want to accomplish tomorrow, and then rest. So lovely!

[- Now Playing on Pandora](#)

I love a HOT bath with lavender drops and Johnson's baby shea and coconut oil gel added to the water. Turn on the sauna jets, lay back, with my soft instrumental worship music playing. There is a sky light above my tub, so best time is in the evening watching the moon and stars. Especially if there is a full moon. It is so relaxing, I stay until I feel like jelly when I get out. My husband often says I look like a lobster. My favorite products are pictured below.

[Amazon.com: Johnson's Baby Oil Gel 6.5oz \(Pack of 2\): Health & Personal Care](#)

In the Kitchen – Keep on Hand – by Marcy Lytle

This month I thought it would be fun to share items/products I always “keep on hand” and use repeatedly for meals throughout the week. Some gadgets or tastes we buy end up never getting used, or just taking up too much space. Then there are others we use ALL the time and wish we’d known about them sooner! They help make cooking so much more fun and easy and better!

Here are my top seven, along with a few recipes to go with:

Mason jars – for keeping herbs in water and sitting on your counter to snip and use! I wash my herbs, place water in the jars, and set by the sink to use in the next few days. Otherwise, they go in the door of the fridge!

Cilantro is a favorite herb to keep, and it’s part of this dish:

Chicken Brussels Sprouts Tacos

- Cooked, shredded chicken
- Corn tortillas
- ½ c mayonnaise
- 2 t chili seasoning
- Lime juice
- Brussels sprouts
- Pepper jack cheese
- Limes, onion, avocado and cilantro for garnish

Toss sprouts with oil and broil in the oven (shaking pan often) til they are browned and tender. Mix mayo with 1 T lime juice and 1 ts chili seasoning and stir. Toss shredded chicken with that 1 t chili seasoning. Assemble tacos with the chicken, mayo mixture, and Brussels, then top with the garnishes.

Shallow bowls – These shallow oversized bowls are THE BEST for dips, rice and pasta bowls, or other dishes served in individual bowls. I love them so much. Recently, I used one for a great dip:

Loaded Hummus:

- Store bought or homemade hummus
- Cucumbers
- Kalamata olives
- Grape tomatoes
- Red onion

Chop the veggies into small pieces. Spread the hummus across the bottom of the bowl. Arrange the veggies on top, and eat with pita chips. The bomb. Great for a dinner by the fire, watching a movie.

Little prep/dip bowls – I have a few sets of these. Some are super small for little ingredients when cooking. Another set are a bit larger for dips, alongside a dish like eggplant fries. These were SO GOOD – I was quite surprised at how good these were!

Eggplant Fries:

- 2 large eggs
- ½ c grated Parmesan
- ½ c toasted wheat germ
- 1 t Italian seasoning
- ¾ t garlic salt
- 1 medium eggplant
- Cooking spray
- 1 cup meatless pasta sauce, warmed

Preheat broiler. In shallow bowl, whisk eggs. In another shallow bowl, mix cheese, wheat germ and seasonings. Trim ends of eggplant and cut into ½ in thick slices, then cut those slices into ½ in strips. Dip eggplant in eggs, then coat with mixture. Place on a baking sheet coated with cooking spray.

Spritz eggplant with additional spray, broil 4 inches from the heat about 3 minutes. Turn eggplant, spritz again, and broil til golden brown – about 1-2 minutes. Serve immediately with pasta sauce.

Soup bowls – Do you have a set? My favorite set is from Lakeside Collections because it has a tray alongside for the crackers. The cutest!

Rosemary Lentil Soup

- 1 T olive oil
- 1 ½ cup diced onion
- 1 T minced garlic
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- 1 ½ cup lentils
- 48 oz rosemary lemon chicken bone broth
- 2 c Swiss chard, chopped
- 10 oz diced butternut squash
- 1 T kosher salt

Heat oil over medium heat, add onions and garlic til onions are translucent. Add in tomatoes and lentils. Cook 4-5 minutes til the tomatoes begin to wrinkle, then add broth. Bring to a boil and cook 15 minutes. Reduce to simmer and add in chard and squash. Cook an additional 15 minutes til lentils are cooked through. Season with salt and enjoy.

Werthers soft caramels – I love to keep bags of these in the pantry for nights when we just want apples, melted caramel, mini chocolate chips and chopped nuts – a great dinner alternative!

You just add a bit of milk and slowly microwave and stir (like 20 sec increments). Arrange on a pretty plate and you're done!

OXO mixing bowls – This set is my fave, with the rubber bottom and stainless steel insides. They've lasted and lasted! And you always need different sizes for mixing and making.

[Amazon.com: OXO Good Grips 3-Piece Stainless-Steel Mixing Bowl Set: Kitchen & Dining](#)

Sheet Pan Nachos

- Tortilla chips
- Black beans, one can rinsed and drained
- Sweet potatoes, peeled, small diced
- Lime juice
- Chili lime seasoning
- Grape tomatoes, halved
- Scallions, sliced
- Cilantro
- Avocado
- Mexican grated cheese

Mix the potatoes, beans and chili lime seasoning and lime juice in mixing bowl, with 1 T canola oil. Arrange chips on a rimmed baking sheet, then top with bean mixture. Add grape tomatoes and cheese on top, and bake at 350 about 20 minutes until cheese is browned. Remove and top with scallions, cilantro and avocado. Add salsa on top, if you wish!

THREE MOMS – OUR FAVES

We asked our three moms to weigh in on their favorite sites or apps or all the things they browse, listen to or like, and to share that with us for the new year. After all, moms need resources and encouragement and down time to be entertained, learn something new, or just chill and watch. Our three moms have nine littles between them all, from ages 10 down to 2. Here's what they are saying to tune into, this New Year of 2021.

I don't listen to many podcasts or read blogs, but usually when I do listen it's music. However...

I follow Bloom Podcast, done by a friend of mine, Sarah Walters. She was mentor in my Christian sorority. She is a licensed counselor and started a podcast discussing the differences of all our mental and spiritual health, and mindset. She talks about how to heal and grow, and common reasons we might feel jealous or envious. It is designed to encourage us all to find that we are enough and to be content with what we have now. It's very practical and tangible, and she's very easy to listen to. She is based in Austin, Texas. You can find this on Spotify.

Some of my favorite Instagram accounts are (ones I actually go to and check!):

Candace Cameron Bure – She was DJ from *Full House* and she's a believer and a mom. She talks about mom life and business life and her faith. (candacebure)

Nicole Walters – She has adopted three children and she's hilarious. She runs her own business. So she shares marketing, career, and life. She's so fun to follow! (nicolewalters)

Joanna Gaines – for décor ideas and she and her family are so fun to follow! (joannagaines)

Jasmine Roth – has a show on HGTV – super practical ideas on house designs and décor and DIY. (jasminerothofficial)

The people I "follow" the most are my family and friends! I know that sounds cheesy but that is truly the case. I get so many ideas, suggestions, encouragement from just following family/friends on Facebook or Instagram - or through phone calls. If I had to pick certain blogs/apps/account I would pick:

1. *A Bundle of Thyme* because it provides great ideas on activities to do with kids, encouragement for your marriage and yourself!
2. Busy Toddler (Susie Allison) on Instagram - you have to check her out if you are looking for creative ideas to entertain and enlighten your kids at home. Her sensory boxes are GENIUS!

Other than that, I get most of my encouragement, ideas, parenting tips from my close family/friends, God's word, and other parenting books. I would love to start listening to more podcasts but I'll add to my "one day" list...when my kids are a little older and life isn't so demanding...

It's hard for me find time to listen or browse, as I barely make it through the day, because of this crazy season! However, I do the Bible Recap – a podcast that recaps my bible reading for the day.

Our kids are part of Orange Curriculum through our church – but I rarely get to it. There's a parent's app for that.

In the evenings our family participates in an 806 prayer or on the way to school, I do a verse of the day – through the Bible App. 806 is the time we as a community gather on our porches to pray.

Jamie Ivey has a great podcast for moms, where a gathering takes place to talk about all things in life – and it's so inspiring and fresh.

Have a New Kid by Friday is a really good parenting podcast. They share simple parenting principles and common sense psychology – check it out!

The Briefing by Albert Mohler. It's a daily analysis of new world events from a Christian world view. It's really good! [The Briefing - AlbertMohler.com](http://TheBriefing-AlbertMohler.com)

Tried and True – Shop Small – by Marcy Lytle

Over the holidays, I tried to shop small businesses. There was even a special weekend devoted to shopping “small” where individual artisans and shops were open for shoppers to learn and buy and enjoy their creations! So I thought it would be fun to share my favorite small businesses and what I’ve bought there, and how I love it all so much! As you use up your Christmas cash or now look for something for yourself, consider these shops!

You’re a Peach – This young woman is new on the business scene, and I’ve ordered jewelry from her – handmade and crafted – so unique. Boxed so pretty, as well, when it’s mailed. Love her Instagram page!

Shop Alma – I met this friend at a booth where I bought several pieces, and have continued to see her around at other events. She is always changing the inventory and has some really cute tops!

[Alma Boutique: Chic, Trendy, & Affordable Women's Clothing Online \(shopatalma.com\)](http://shopatalma.com)

The Humming Bird and the Beagle – I’ve known her almost her entire life, and didn’t know she was so artistic! I framed one of her art pieces and have it in my den, along with earrings and a necklace. She creates, and it results in beauty!

[The Hummingbird and The Beagle](#)

Mad Dash Mixes – I’ve been following this company for a while, and love their mixes that make weeknight meals delightful. Seriously, every mix I’ve tried so far has made a super delicious dish!

[Making Your Life a Little Easier. - Mad Dash Mixes](#)

Small Town Elegance – We visited this store on vacation in Uvalde, Texas, and I loved their clothes and the prices. It’s a small shop, super sweet owners, and it was on the corner of the quaint downtown. Follow on Instagram.

Nancy Hallmark Pottery – We met this lady and her artwork at a vendor show at Brentwood Social House in Austin, and fell in love with her one-of-a-kind bowls and mugs. I seriously want to start collecting bowls!

[Home | Nancy Hallmark Pottery \(square.site\)](http://square.site)

ALV Art Studio – This is a young mom of four, and her artwork is so pretty. We bought a trinket dish and bookmark from her booth at a small business event in Pflugerville, Texas. The colors are stunning.

[Handcrafted Fluid Art and Resin Decor and Earrings – ALV Art Studio](#)

Oh the Joy – This Nuskin seller (my daughter) works harder than anyone I know. She knows her products, she offers sales all the time, and she delivers some of the best skin care – I have many of her products! You can shop her site on line, or through Facebook.

[@kamrinwolfe | Linktree](#)

Redefine Design – The owner of this home décor company used to be my favorite weather person on the news and then she left...and reappeared on Instagram! She has lot of creative ideas (I recently added wood beads because I saw one of her posts!). Check out her site!

[Redefine Designs Co.](#)

Bright Box – Not sure they are small any more, but I'm including them here, anyway. They send curated boxes of cheer to people, ones you can pick or ones they have put together – all at a VERY affordable price. They're super CUTE and both recipients I've sent one too loved them!

[Brightbox | Spreading Happiness One Box at a Time \(brightboxes.shop\)](#)

Gem Junkie – This shop has been around, but I'm including it because the prices are so small but the cuteness is so big! \$5 earrings! I love them all. Check out the selection!

[SHOP | gemjunkie \(wixsite.com\)](#)

What are some of your favorite small shops? Share below so that we can all enjoy!



HOME

Practical Parenting – Represent – by Marcy Lytle

My son-in-law shared a story recently with our church about how he disciplined his youngest. The kids had gone out to play and had been instructed to clean up the dog poop in the yard, but the youngest DID NOT want to do it. He was not happy; in fact, he was angry and picked up a golf club in the backyard, and threw it – hard. It went right through the back window of the house!

Needless to say, Dad was upset and started out the back door to reprimand and scold, but he stopped. He saw his son in the corner of the yard crying, totally aware of what he'd done and he knew it was bad. My son-in-law said he stopped and felt a tug at his heart and in his mind that asked the question, "How are you going to represent Me to your son?"

Dad waited until his anger subsided and then exited the back door, and that 5 year old son was already repentant and sorry. Waiting it out, allowing Dad to calm down, and enabling Son to soak in, resulted in a moment of repentance, forgiveness and acceptance that MIGHT not have happened if Dad had screamed and slammed the door and railed in anger.

I've thought about his story now for days, and how we all have misrepresented God to our children many times. We're human. We get angry at disobedience, it upsets us that our kids don't listen, and we get tired (so tired) when we are trying to work, raise a family, keep life going, and then...the kids! It's normal for us to scream and lose it, BUT stopping to consider our representation of HIM to our kids is such a wonderful thing to do!

God says if we need wisdom, we can ask Him and he will give it to us – liberally. He also says to not provoke our kids to wrath. It's hard to ask for wisdom when we're in a rage, and it's almost impossible to not provoke when glass shards are in the carpet.

But look again at this story and what happened when Dad stopped and heard His voice, and that question:

"How are you going to represent me to your son?"

I've found that lots of times the reason we misrepresent God to our children is because we don't know God's character ourselves, or we had harsh parents, as well. But if we can stop and learn, ask for help, and grow in patience, our kids WILL respond.

- God says a soft answer turns away wrath. We can't give soft answers in the heat of a moment.
- The father of the prodigal son welcomed him with a royal robe. If our fists are up, our arms are not open, and there's no robe in sight.
- A fruit of the spirit is gentleness. Rage and gentleness cannot exist together in the same boxing ring. The rage has to subside; lie down and surrender, so that gentleness wins.
- We are to train up our children, because they're going to mess up and step out of line. But our children are not lions to be whipped onto a podium. They are sheep that are to be led to green pastures and still waters.

We all know what we're "supposed to do" and we fail. That's okay. At those times, we can ask our kids to forgive us. That's huge. But the more we practice stopping, listening and waiting before we react to disobedient children, the more repentance will take place before we ever say a word.

I Don't Do Teens – A New Room – by Marcy Lytle

It's a New Year, the holidays are over, and here we are in 2021. Our teens have suffered right along with us, waiting for the pandemic to end, while they too have a stream of emotions from all of the weirdness in the world. But they probably don't have the skillset of how to relate those emotions or handle them, well. We haven't even figured that one out, and we're the parents! And just like we sometimes need a little newness in our wardrobe or the house, etc., our teens might be happy with a little newness as well.

What if that newness came in changing up their bedroom? After all, it just might be the catalyst that sends them into 2021 with a bright attitude of hope and joy. Here are a few tips on how to change up their room (or let them do it) without breaking the bank, painting the entire room or making it a project that takes way too long. Little changes can bring about a lot of fun.

1. **Start with the desk.** Ask your teen to peruse the internet for pictures of desks and organizers, etc. for an example of how they'd like it to look. Maybe you have bins or baskets in the house they could use, or they could even visit the Dollar Store for bins and use washi tape or decals to personalize them. Encourage them to organize loose items into bins, and then add a few "theme" pieces to their desk – maybe a succulent, a framed print or picture, or their favorite collector's item or award. [Storage Organizers - Dollar Tree, Inc.](#) [Amazon.com : washi tape](#)
2. **New bedding.** This can get pricey, so if the comforter is still good, opt for 1-2 new throw pillows. Or even just order covers for their existing pillows. Amazon has a lot of choices! Perhaps there's a blanket on sale in January (a great time to buy them!) they could fold across the end, or a cool "statement" pillow for front and center! [Amazon.com : teen pillows](#)
3. **One wall makeover.** Consider letting them make one wall over with a huge art piece of some kind. It might be a piece of fabric with an image on it they love, and they could hang it like a mural. Maybe there are some stick-on decals or lettering they'd like to script across the wall – a favorite verse, or lyric to a song, or words to encourage. [Amazon.com : wall decals teen](#)
4. **The dreaded closet.** Teens and closets are usually a stinky messy mix. Offer to get in there and help with big baskets and bins. Or purchase a drawer set at a thrift store, to place in there to get things off the floor. Give them a large box for tossing what they no longer wear, consider using all white plastic hangers, and help them make a small wall area for dressing – with a mirror and a small shelf or jewelry organizer. [Amazon.com: Jewelry Organizer Wall Mounted Set of 3, Wood Hanging Jewelry Organizer Holder with Removable Bracelet Rod and 24 Hooks,for Hanging Rings, Earrings, Necklace Holder \(Toasted brown\): Home Improvement](#)
5. **Add a mirror.** Mirrors can be costly, but there are often great options at the discount stores. Adding a mirror in a corner or on a wall can make their room seem larger, and add so much. They could even embellish it to their own taste! [Amazon.com : teen mirrors for bedroom](#)

6. **A new rug.** Maybe their current carpet situation is a sight you'd rather not look at, or their room looks like a mishmash and needs something to pull all the colors together. Stand back and ask them to envision a new rug to pull it all together. Perhaps a geometrical one, or a solid plush rug, or something really different. Check out IKEA!
7. **Hang pictures.** Teens usually have lots of pictures on their phones of their friends and places and fun, so let them print out a few and help them make a collage on a shelf or hanging on a wall, or even from a string. There are so many picture options for walls, and all so cute! [Amazon.com : picture hangers string and clips](#)

Before you start, ask your teen to go through those above seven, add their own, and figure costs of all of their "ideas" and even draw it out on paper, so they can see how each new idea is going to work and fit into their space. And, of course, a big cleanup will need to happen BEFORE any up-do takes place. But that's okay – a new space might be the motivation. And helping them clean and having fun conversations and laughs might be fun for the two of you, as well! Just pick one thing at a time, as money affords, and get started on their new room and new outlook and new joy for 2021.

Chipped China - All Things Bright & Beautiful – by Jennifer Lytle

Do you recall when [this song](#) was revived and sung in churches around the early '90s? With this new year, I feel Holy Spirit asking me to allow that song to reverberate in my soul. It's a season to embrace the beauty of . . . all things . . . bright . . . and beautiful?

It's a gift to endure with joy the learning curve, the growth stage, the not quite there yet phase. It's a gift to witness with wonder the toddling babe, persistently striving to take care of himself while creating more mess for you. It's . . . a gift . . . to [celebrate socially distant holidays](#) . . . or welcome in new public servants, both locally and nationally.

I feel Holy Spirit inviting me to look anew at the things I easily could grumble about to even the most remote stranger. It's not hard to find *something* to be frustrated with or exhausted by . . .

This past spring, when my son was learning to ride a bike without training wheels, I found joy only in the idea of achieving my goal (I can honestly say, it was my goal and not my son's). I had been coaching our son. It sounded something like this,

“Just try.”

“You won't be able to do it unless you do it.”

“You have to jump on there!”

My coaching seemed to do anything but encourage him, so I gave him some space and started to continue on our trek.

For a reason I can no longer recall, I was pushing my husband's bike instead of riding my own. The seat was way too tall, yet the coach in me wondered what sort of example I was setting by keeping my own two feet safely on the ground. I did not feel comfortable jumping on that bike and going for it, but I wanted to show myself and my son that,

“I can do it. So can you.”

I ended up riding while standing and ultimately was able to sit on the edge of the seat and push the pedals with the tips of my toes. I even rode that bike up a hill despite my lack of preparation or properly fitted equipment. It wasn't my son's achievement I ultimately became content with - it was my own. Though I had and exercised the skill I wished for my son, my perspective shifted and I found something new to find joy and contentment in.

May Jesus fill your heart with all things bright and beautiful in this new season, too. May Jesus breathe life into the weary places of your mind.

But you, LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, the One who lifts my head high.

-Psalms 3:3

An Adage a Day - All Dressed Up – by Carole Gilbert

Do you ever find yourself “all dressed up and nowhere to go?” It is the New Year! I want to get dressed up and I want to go somewhere. But that does not always happen. And I might be a little odd, but I have my stay at home clothes and my going shopping or errand clothes. I also have my Sunday best clothes. Are you like me? And my clothes are in style and out of style, but I think they are all my style and cute as a button.

During the pandemic I wore my stay at home clothes all the time. I would see Marcy Lytle, the owner of this magazine, posting cute outfits and I would wonder if she only wore them out on the town? This started to inspire me.

After a few months of looking at my errand clothes and not putting them on I decided I needed to wear them anyway, even if I am not going to “gad about town,” as the English say. At the drop of a hat I started to do this. And it made me feel “dressed to the nines” instead of feeling like I was at “sixes and sevens.”

The English use these idioms with numbers to describe how they are feeling. Nines refers to perfection, or to the highest degree you can be. Sixes and sevens refer to confusion or disorder. I think I would rather be “dressed to the nines” than dressed in disorder and I would definitely rather be prepared to go even if the going doesn’t happen. That’s what the idiom “all dressed up with nowhere to go” means and it came about in the early 1900’s. It is in reference to being prepared for something that will probably not come about. I like being prepared and I like the feeling I get when I am dressed to the nines.

I remember a time my husband and I were all dressed up with nowhere to go. It was our anniversary and he had rented a limousine to take us to our evening out destination in grand style. He even got me a corsage to wear. Our children and the babysitter wanted to see inside the limo before we left. We let them sit inside it for a few minutes and as my oldest son got out, he began to be sick right beside the limousine. So, we got out also, only to go back into our home with our sick child and send the babysitter on her way. We did get to go on a limo ride a few years later and I treated my children with kid-gloves until we left.

So, after thinking this through, I decide to wear my nicer shopping clothes whether I was leaving home or not. It helps me feel uplifted and ready for the day. And I am sure my husband likes it too. Maybe it is time for you to go ahead and knock your socks off. Don’t be a plain Jane. Wear those in style or out of style clothes. Be a fashionista, like Marcy. We all need to feel a little more uplifted these days. I am not saying to wear your Sunday best to cook supper, but then again, why not? Give it a try, maybe you and I are cut from the same cloth.

I think Timothy had women in mind when he wrote 1 Timothy 6:7-8, “for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.”

Sounds like Timothy understood us girls well. I may sometimes feel like I have nothing to wear but at the drop of a hat I realize that, thanks to God, I have everything I need.

A Night to Remember – Hot Dog! – by Marcy Lytle

We recently purchased a cute hot dog maker to use with the kiddos. It's so fun, and we couldn't wait to try it out. Hot dogs are usually eaten in the summer at picnics or ball games. But what about having hot dogs with the kids in January, picnic style, in front of the fire while learning about the "length" of his love! Purchase those bun length franks, some buns and toppings, and you're set up to learn about the great love of God.

Preparation: Set up a hot dog station, and include Nathan's Hot Dogs if you can find them, along with buns and toppings. Have a tape measure or ruler available.

About how long is your hot dog? (Let the kids guess and then measure). Can you guess how long God's arms are? Isaiah 59:1 says Behold, the Lord's hand is not so short that it cannot save..." That means it extends all the way around the world to the farthest reach to every person. Those are some long arms!

Do you love everything about hot dogs? (Let the kids talk about their own individual toppings and how each person is different, but that's the beauty of hot dogs – we can customize them to our taste!) Did you know that God loves the whole world and has us all in his hands, no matter our differences? John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that if we believe we have eternal life!

Have you ever wondered who invented the hot dog? Hot dogs, or frankfurters, originated in Germany. But the man who popularized them in the U.S. was Nathan Handwerker, a Jewish immigrant. He lived on hot dogs for a year and saved \$300 slicing buns, until he was able to have his own stand. He charged half of his competitor's prices, 5 cents, and people flocked to his stand – and Nathan's Hot Dogs were born! The greatest inventor of all time, however, is God! It says in Genesis 1 that he created the heavens and the earth. That means he created Nathan and he created you and me!

What is your favorite topping? Mustard and ketchup are the most common condiments for hot dogs, as well as relish and chili. Or do you just prefer plain? Did you know God doesn't have a favorite, because he loves us all so much? In Ephesians 2 it says that God is rich in mercy and because of his great love (limitless love!) he gave to us, the gift of eternal life – even though death was our sure sentence because of sin! He tops us with his love, all of us equally. He loves you, he loves me, and his taste is all-encompassing. If he were to enjoy a hot dog, he'd probably top it with everything on the table!

Have you heard of a hot dog song? People often exclaim "Hot dog!" when they're excited about something that just happened. Maybe they found a missing piece to a puzzle, or won a contest. They might jump up and down and exclaim "Hot dog!" Did you know there's a really old song called "Hot Diggity Dog" that was sung almost 80 years ago! Take a listen! That's exactly what God sings about us every time he sees our face. Zephaniah 3:17 says, "He delights in us! The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing."

Who knew that eating hot dogs could teach us so much about the length of God's great love, how he created us to be loved by Him, and how excited he gets over loving us, his creation!

[Hot Diggity \(Dog Ziggity Boom\) — Perry Como | Last.fm](#)

Tiny Living – Maybe This Year – by Leyanne Enterline

Twas' the season...it was that time again!

I have never felt that I am never prepared for Christmas. It's like a sneak attack or something! I so want to be ahead of the game and especially during this "quarantine" I felt like I should've had the time to get ready, but that didn't happen.

The little decorations that we had were still in a box on top of a bunk bed, no presents had been ordered, and Christmas cards had not been made... agghhh! Where did the time go?

I had to get my winter clothes out of a storage container we had, and for some reason winter snuck up on me, too! I'm so used to our Texas heat I was again not ready for the early freeze here!

Anyone else with me?

Please tell me we have some others procrastinators out there!

The good news about living tiny is that there is not much room for anything, so it didn't take probably but an hour to put everything up. Now if only I had been that quick on figuring out what to get everyone for Christmas!

Our decor consisted of a tiny white tree that I placed on top of our giant dog crate. We had mini decorations for the tree, and I had a cute wooden Christmas block I placed in the bathroom with a Christmas hand towel and some lights outside. That's about it.

It was a tiny living Christmas, but the kids still enjoyed it and that's where we are right now.

I dream of the day of a huge Christmas tree, maybe 2021, with lots of decorations and big star on top!

But for our memories of 2020, we decorated tiny...and didn't miss a joy.

Remember loves grows best in tiny spaces.



YOU

Strengthening Your Core – Weight – by Marcy Lytle

If I'm around a group of women and hear them talk on and on about weight, diets, how awful they look (when they look just fine), I usually walk away. When I read (like I did recently) a headline that says something like "Adele is skinny and gorgeous" I cringe. And when someone comments to a friend that she looks so good now that she's shed 50 pounds, it makes me sad.

Weight is a big deal among women, and I'm hoping to tackle one issue a month this year, in this column to talk about. This month's topic is weight. I'm sure there are some women that don't think about it much, but there are others that obsess about it. I remember as a teen that I weighed every morning and freaked out if I was two pounds heavier than the day before.

Let me stop here and say I'm not addressing weight issues that cause health problems. That's a whole other story. I'm addressing weight problems that cause confident women to become depressed over not looking "as good as she does" their entire lives.

I've been guilty of this. And I still find myself sighing when I look in the mirror and don't see what I want to see!

Here are a few ways of how to tell if weight is too much a part of our minds:

- We become depressed if we enjoy one chocolate cookie.
- We over exercise (where it interferes with life) so that we "feel good" about ourselves.
- We constantly go from one diet to the next, and never really enjoy a meal.
- We think if we lose a certain number of pounds, then we'll be happy.
- We avoid eating at all; then we binge because we are ravenously hungry.
- We silently judge other women that we see as being overweight.
- We envy those who are thin and "pretty."

I'm not a therapist or a psychologist by any means, but I know what I've experienced as I've grown up and gotten older. I remember the pressure from peers to look good in a bathing suit. I recall being afraid I'd be asked if I was pregnant if my stomach wasn't flat, after I got married. I recall feeling guilty because I ate the bun on a burger, when my friend opted for bun-less. I felt upset when a friend commented that I looked "heavier" than when she saw me last (a few months after my son was born). Yeah, that last comment was rude, but...

It's a good thing to think back and see if we can identify how we feel when it comes to weight issues. I really think the reason we're so obsessed is because media has presented skinny as being equal to pretty. And who doesn't want to feel pretty?

One thing I personally have quit doing is weighing. Again, health is super important – that's not the issue here. It's self-image and preconceived notions. I know when I feel a bit bloated or when I've over eaten. But for me, back when I weighed daily, I did let it bother me ALL DAY if the scales climbed a few pounds. I also ask to not be weighed when I visit the doctor. They have said okay every time.

Maybe there's one thing you can do this year to love your image as you are. We are all made differently. I've had cellulite since I was 16 and I envied the girls that had none (which are few, by the way). I don't like the spaces between my teeth, but that's the teeth I have! And I'm not as thin as I'd like to be and probably won't ever be.

Let's be part of a group, or start a group, that doesn't obsess about weight on our own bodies or other women, but we only look at the eyes and see the heart – and speak love and feel loved.

Weight. Don't let it be an issue that shouldn't be one. Make one step toward walking lighter this year, without shedding a pound.

Life Right Now - Under the Mask – by Hanna Bouck

Do you ever get nervous to share your faith?

If you do, you are in good company. You see, I have moved all over the globe for the cause of the gospel. Parents are pastors, lived multiple summers in Latin America to share Jesus, traveled to the Middle East, and Europe for the same reasons... But gosh dang it, I get SO nervous to share my faith here at home. It's not even those who don't believe that cause the stress (I don't have expectations on those who don't know.) Even though I do want to walk in humility around those that don't believe, but no... It's honestly the Christian community that oftentimes puts me on edge. We put SO much pressure on the body of believers to believe a certain theology (yes theology is important), fellowship a certain way (yes, community is important), attend every event, be the one with your hands held high, but alas -- you have anxiety? How dare you even think of taking a medication? Jesus heals and I am believing that for you today! (Is it bad to say thank you and I am believing that too, but this is helping me until healing happens?)

What about just *being*?

What about those of us who Jesus meets in the quiet places?

I find myself nervous to share my faith because I have received so much criticism over how I should do better, that fear and shame creep in and I would rather walk with my head down than have to smile at the non-believer in the aisle across from me. And I HATE that. So what is one to-do? What about faith over fear? What about mercy over judgement?

Honestly, there are so many questions I have and am still walking out. Wearing these masks have given me something else to hide behind; an easy out because 'the world sucks right now so I have an excuse to let my attitude as well!' Until, I am laughing in the aisle with my husband and a woman looks over at me and says, 'I can see that smile in your eyes. No need to hide it!' (True story) and I stand in shock and suddenly realize that the gateway to my soul is the most visible part of my face now.

So here is what I'm attempting to do to share my faith. I smile under the mask, A LOT. I wave to strangers and humbly tell them to have a blessed day. I talk to my neighbors and acquaintances and let them know that they are in my prayers and if they ever need a hand to hold or person to talk to, my table is always open. I also love my family and do my best to hear their hopes, fears, and dreams about the world and pray for them in their day-to-days often.

Honestly, I am still working out what fully and boldly sharing my faith looks like wholly. And I will be for a while. But know that if you need to take off whatever physical or conspired mask you're wearing, leave a message below. Know you're in my prayers, I'll hold your hand through it as long as you let me, and you always have a seat to ask questions at my table.

Holding you close...

Hey Hey!

My name is Hannah Bouck

I am a believer, newlywed, and mama of 2 cutie pups!

I am from a little bit of everywhere, but currently reside in the great state of Texas.
Want to connect?

You can find me on instagram at @hannah_bouck
or on my business account @youre_apeachco

Hope to hear from you soon!

-holding you close: HB

Healthy Habits – Before – by Marcy Lytle

I was sharing some of my before bedtime skin care products on Instagram, and someone asked me to share the morning skin routine as well, before my day begins. That question made me realize that there are a lot of healthy routines we do “before” we do something else, that are so important! Before bedtime and before our day starts are just two examples! I’m sharing them below:

Before bedtime – Of course, we wash our faces, like our moms told us to! I just use a Neutrogena face wash for removing makeup, and Almay eye pads for taking off mascara, but then before bed – I have a few products I feel help me so much. I love the night cream by Nuskin, as well as the eye cream. Neither is scented, which is important to me. I don’t want to go to bed with an aroma of perfume - not my thing. In the winter, I love JR Watkins peppermint lotion on my dry hands, and I include lip balm of some sort, as well. That’s it! Before bedtime routines allow our faces and skin to soak in, relax, and become a part of what makes us sleep well!

Before the day starts – Of course, we wash our face again! But the morning is so different than the night! I use a threesome from Gruene Witch Apothecary – their coffee facial soap bar, the hazelwitch toner, and the anti-aging moisturizing. I’ve seen all three of these products make a difference in my skin – from softening, to fading age spots, to tightening and awakening so well! So that’s before the day...before I put on my makeup...before I face the world.

Before I speak – Thinking is the healthy habit of choice, here. It’s so hard to stop and think before our mouths engage. We hear him say something and we assume he meant this, so we say that, and sparks fly – not the romantic kind, either! So many unhealthy arguments and wounds and pains in the heart can be avoided if we just stop and think that perhaps we misunderstood, maybe we are being too sensitive, or does it really matter – that flippant thing they said? Are we really going to let it ruin our relationship?

Before dinner – Maybe this sounds silly, but prepping ourselves before we eat is a good healthy habit as well. Drinking a tall glass of water curbs those hunger pains and might just keep us from overeating. Choosing to only make one plate with sensible servings and no seconds is another good healthy habit, once we begin it and keep it going. Saying thanks before we eat is another healthy thing to do, to remind us of his good provision which calms our souls and makes our food digest so much better!

Before leaving the house – We all know that the new routine is to make sure our bags have hand sanitizer, as well as masks. But it’s a good thing to have a “covid” bag in the car as well, in case we forget – one with those same things inside – as well as wipes! Another healthy habit is to consider our shoes. Will they be comfortable and safe for the activities where we’re going? We can leave an extra pair in the car at all times!

Before we begin our to-do list – I don’t know about you, but my to-do list can sometimes stress me out before my day begins! It’s a good practice to write down all that’s in our head, so that it’s there and we can then look at it. It’s also good to delegate to others, some of the things we

need help with. YES. Ask for help. And then it's good to prioritize. If we can't wash and vacuum the car today, it can wait. It won't destroy our day if we continue with a little extra leaves and grass on the floorboard, if doing so enables us to lay our heads back against the pillow for a quick nap.

Before saying yes – Some of us are better at saying no than others, but we all need to take up the healthy habit of knowing when to say each answer. Maybe we need to say yes to more things, instead of hibernating because we've become used to not dealing with people. Maybe we need to say no more often, because too many people know we're available and don't leave us alone. Wisdom, ask for wisdom, then give the answer that brings peace.

What other "before" habits can we think of that are healthy and wise? I can think of lots more, but I'll stop with these seven...before you grow tired of reading...

Strategic Women - Mary of Bethany and the First Alabaster Box – by Debbie Haynes

Back in the day, Jewish women were barred from public speaking. They couldn't even read the Torah out loud, worship in the synagogue was segregated, and the law was explicit: "He who talks with a woman in public brings evil upon himself," and "One is not so much as to even greet a woman." I can't imagine living among such oppression.

However, Jesus treated women very differently and in doing so, encountered criticism. He valued women, even in an anti-women culture, and he treated them with love, dignity and respect. And there were two women that not only talked to Jesus, but actually touched him, the first one being the topic of this story in this New Year.

This first woman poured out costly oil from a most treasured alabaster box. Alabaster is semi-translucent and comes in several shades, from pure white to a dark creamy color, with veins running through. The stone was precious and represented purity and transparency. Alabaster was given to daughters as they approached marrying age, sort of like a dowry. It could be a box, a bottle or a jar or vase. The oil inside was called spikenard, what we might know as lavender today. The more ornate the vessel and the more costly the oil inside, the better chance a daughter had of marrying well! So it wasn't uncommon for Mary to have this box, *but the way she chose to use it* certainly was.

Mary of Bethany was a bit of a rebel but also the quintessential worshipper. She seated herself at the feet of Jesus instead of helping Martha in the kitchen, and Jesus said she had chosen "the better thing." It was also this Mary that Jesus asked to see when heard that his friend Lazarus had died. Some say the reason Jesus wept was because Mary hadn't quite recognized Jesus as the Son of God, yet. However, when she heard Jesus pray and saw her brother alive again, she knew.

In John 12, Mary took her own alabaster box and broke it and anointed Jesus' feet in worship of full recognition of who He was. She anointed Jesus' head and his feet! When the disciples saw this, they chastised her for wasting the ointment, when it could have been used for the poor. Judas, who later betrayed Jesus, scolded Mary. But Jesus rose to Mary's defense stating, "Leave her alone; against the day of my burying she has done this. The poor you will have with you always, but not me." And, helping the poor probably wasn't even on the minds of the disciples, but rather just chastising her in front of Jesus.

Mary was brave in her encounters with Jesus, but she was also pure and transparent. It may have taken her a little time to recognize fully just who He was, but when she did – she did it with gusto! She GAVE out of her treasure.

In the books of Matthew and Mark, Jesus said she did "what she could" and that what she did will be memorialized for all time. And she has been. Her story reminds us that even when we are slow to recognize who Jesus is, He always knows who we are and accepts our lavish gifts that we lay at his feet. He's approachable...always.

You and I don't have alabaster boxes or expensive ointment, or the opportunity to physically sit at Jesus' feet. But we can sit in His presence and reach out and touch Him. We can recognize

who He is and also choose to give him our all, trusting that He will receive it with joy, just because He loves us that much and values his most prized possession – those he's created for worship and relationship with Him.

Women, of all races, shapes and background – none is excluded from – but all are welcome to see Him, recognize Him, and experience His great love and acceptance.

Life in a Nutshell – One Resolution – by Jill Montz

I rarely make New Year's Resolutions anymore. Mainly because I tend to break them in less than two months, two weeks, or once it was even less than two hours. I'm not the most disciplined when it comes to upholding bargains with myself. Now if I were to make a commitment to you, my *obliger* tendencies (check out the book by Gretchen Rubin called *The Four Tendencies*. It's amazing!) would kick in and there is more than a good chance I would follow through. However, when it comes to me and making commitments to myself, I tend to let things slide. Do you do that, as well? Are you more apt to let yourself down before you let others down? According to Rubin, *obligers* are the largest category so I can't be alone here!

This New Year's Eve, when the clock strikes midnight, I plan to make ONE New Year's Resolution - and I have a feeling I can keep this one.

For all of 2021...I resolve to be more grateful.

After 2020 and all its ups and downs, I still have so much to be grateful for! The fact alone that I survived this crazy year when so many didn't is a good starting point. I know of many that passed from this world over to the next from either Covid-19, cancer, car wrecks, or a myriad of other reasons. My heart literally ached daily from news I heard about the struggles people endured. It seemed like an even greater number suffered losses and heartbreaks in just the last few months. It was all so painful and so tragic that I couldn't help but grieve with them.

However, I do have so much to be grateful for even in these hard days. As I write, in these moments, I am putting in close to 70 hours per week at my job. We are busy, and for that I am grateful. It means my business is surviving the economic crisis we have seen affect so many. I am grateful for the customers who choose to shop at my stores or order online. I am so grateful for the staff that works right along beside me for all those extra hours to make sure our products go out on time and our stores are stocked the next day. I am so grateful I have a job to go to in 2021, and I pray I that I still do for many years to come.

So many others are faced with much more than physical weariness. They are facing financial, emotional, and spiritual hardships that might not end any time soon. So every night I am grateful for tired feet, aching legs, and a sore back. That just means I am fortunate enough to work hard each day.

I am grateful for the hectic schedule I have with my daughter, Dotty. Everything in the month of April was cancelled (I still have the blank calendar to prove it) and it was so sad to have nothing to look forward to. So this year, when our weekends consist of games, practices, parties, sleepovers, shopping trips, and more I will be grateful that my calendar is full because that means my life is full of friends and memory-making opportunities. I am always grateful for those things! And even on the days when we have nothing planned, I will be grateful for the pause in life.

If 2020 taught me anything, it taught me how to pause better; how to appreciate white space in my calendar more than I used to. It is definitely fun to go and do and see and be with our people but I know my body, mind, and soul needs rest, too. The ability to enjoy the rest helps me to also enjoy the busy times. Without appropriate rest, we all burn out! God knows that, and so we have this gift of the Sabbath. I am grateful to have the downtime to reflect, revive, and reenergize all aspects of my life. I just hope I don't ever have a whole month again to do so like we did this past year!

Finally, I am so grateful for the tribe that surrounds me daily. My family, friends, staff, church family, Dotty's friends and their families, and a whole host of others are present. These people make my life more colorful just by being in it. They give my life joy and peace; hope and perseverance; love and laughter; strength and courage; and just enough sass and sarcasm to keep things interesting. These are my people. They stand with me, they stand for me, and they stand when I can't stand anymore. They make the days better just by being a part of them, and I am so very, very grateful for each and every one of them.

While I know all the problems, troubles, and trials of 2020 did not magically disappear like Cinderella's dress and stagecoach at the strike of midnight in December, I do know that I will hold on tightly to that glass slipper of gratitude that remains, regardless of the circumstances. Most of all, no matter what I face, I am never alone. I have a Father in Heaven who loves me and who never leaves or forsakes me, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Hopefully, when I write my January article for 2022 I can tell you all how I did with my one resolution to be more grateful. I am sure I will have better days than others, but I pray that overall I keep a grateful spirit from the beginning of the New Year on January 1st until the last seconds of December, and beyond. But let's get real. We all know I fell asleep on New Year's Eve long before midnight...and let me just say I am so grateful for that, too.



MARRIAGE

Date Night Fun – January Advent – by Marcy Lytle

What if...we continue the theme of Christmas and the holidays and make date night all about little niceties and treats and sweets and lovelies every night of the month – with an advent of sorts – for date night! Why not? Perhaps money is tight, you're sad the holidays are over, you're not really in the mood to go out or decide on something creative at home. But you DO have a few minutes each day to remind each other of the love you have and the fun you both are!

31 days of romantic "date night" moments:

1. Leave a mint on his pillow
2. Write a note and place it by his coffee mug
3. Tell him the most attractive physical quality you love
4. Do one of his chores
5. Make a dessert for two
6. Wear each other's socks
7. Send him a song that reminds you of him
8. Rub his back
9. Write a note in lipstick on his mirror
10. Compliment his outfit
11. Hold his hand
12. Ask how his work is going
13. Send him a card in the mail (yes, to your house)
14. Watch his pick for movie night
15. Take out the trash
16. Dress up and invite him to a candlelit dinner
17. Purchase a coffee and surprise him
18. Prepare a hot bath/shower for him with new soap
19. Go out for fast food dessert
20. Pray for him and offer him a verbal blessing
21. Indulge in chocolate with him
22. Sit by the firepit and look into his eyes
23. Encourage him with a verse for the year
24. Ask him outside to stargaze one night, cider in hand
25. Have breakfast together at night
26. Buy him a surprise after-Christmas gift
27. Text him something sweet
28. Write a poem and place by his sink
29. Purchase and give him a magazine he'd like (Family Handyman, i.e.)
30. Surprise hug him five times today.
31. Wink at him across the room

In This Together – Maybe Today – by Bekah Holland

I took a break from writing for a while. Mostly because life was just coming at me so fast and so hard that I couldn't keep up with even one more thing. But I think I also hoped that maybe, if I took a step back, I could come back with things figured out. Or at least a step above hot mess. But, as I sit here, well past my deadline because I completely forgot, I may actually be less hot but more mess. I don't have the first clue about marriage, other than I happen to be married, and we haven't killed each other yet.

Some days, I feel like I may just have finally gotten a handle on how to balance the wife, person, mother, daughter roles I find myself juggling. But most of the time, I feel like I've had the wind knocked out of me. I find myself failing at some or all of those things. I'm too lenient with my kids and then I'm too strict. I don't take time to take care of myself and then I take too much and my family feels neglected. I run around trying to keep things clean and managed and then I look at the mess that's built when I ignore it for a while, and then realize I have no idea how to find the middle ground.

Life is hard, y'all. It can be ugly and messy, chaotic and heartbreaking and sometimes it just doesn't feel like it's worth it. Most of the time, I run around, trying to control things and people, protect everyone from everything, keep the peace and some semblance of calm. And then, when I stop for just a bit, thinking, maybe everything is going to be okay, it isn't okay again and I start all over.

I do know that my desperation to control things and keep people happy is ridiculous. I know it in my head. I'm pretty sure I might even know it in my heart. But I'm realizing that while most of it is coming from a place of love, wanting to protect the people I love, a good bit of it is coming from a place of fear. Fear over someone getting hurt or angry. Fear that someone will say or do something that can't be taken back. Fear of pain and heartbreak. Fear that everyone that I love will spontaneously combust. Not literally, but that's how it feels when I make myself sit with it instead of running from one thing to the next.

How do we stop operating out of fear? No idea. I don't have any answers. I'm just trying to doggie paddle through this life I'm in without drowning. But I believe that...

while I don't have any answers, God does.

while I can't see a way out, God does, and...

while I'm busy running around making more of a mess of things, God's just waiting.

He's waiting for me to turn to Him to find my rest. Waiting to replace my fear with peace.

For someone who desperately craves peace, I stubbornly hang on to my chaos. I run from conflict but it's only temporary. What God has for me isn't a Bandaid. It's not triage. But I walk in and out of His plan for me like it's a local Starbucks with a quick fix pick me up. I want to stay. Okay, I want to want to stay. I want to learn from my mistakes and never forget the peace I have when I feel safe despite the storm. But I don't always remember. I take it back and try to control it and we start this whole mess all over again.

Someday, I hope to be able to write and tell you I've figured it all out, or learned to stop pretending like I can take everything on myself and trying to feign calm. Today isn't that day, but maybe today I'll take a step toward doing just one thing a little better. In recovery programs,

they stress the importance of taking everything just one day, one hour, one minute at a time. So that's where I'm going to start. Just taking the next step. Even if it's just a shuffle, at least I'll be shuffling toward a place where I can walk in confidence as a wife, a mother, a friend and a person, closing the gap between where I am and my purpose.

"Just do the next right thing. One thing at a time. That'll take you home." Glennon Doyle

For Better or Worse - What I Love About You – by Kaelin Scott

I still remember the things that initially attracted me to my husband. He was funny most of all – he could always make me laugh! He was also confident and secure in himself, and he had a strong relationship with God. Obviously, I thought he was cute, too. And okay, as a girl from Colorado, I was captivated by his strong Texas accent. He was everything I wanted, and I knew I wanted to spend forever with him.

A lot of life has happened since we said, “I do.” But when I stop and look at my husband, he is still all of the things I loved about him in the beginning. We were young when we got married, and we’ve both done a lot of growing up since then. But the essential ingredients that make up my husband are absolutely still there. He still makes me laugh more than anybody else, especially with dumb jokes that nobody else would understand. He’s still confident in himself, and even more so in his relationship with God. I don’t really notice his accent anymore, but that’s because I’ve now developed one of my own. I’m a certified Texan now, no doubt about it!

It is so easy to get caught up in difficulties and see only the negatives, especially when you spend a lot of time with somebody. I often get tempted to focus on my husband’s faults or shortcomings, while seemingly forgetting that I have plenty of my own. And I also sometimes forget what originally drew me to him. But the truth is that those things are still there, and I can still choose to cherish them. The rose-colored glasses may have worn off a long time ago, but he’s still the same amazing person I fell in love with. Just because we’ve gotten older and been through hardships added more members to our family, that doesn’t mean he’s stopped being my person. Sometimes I just have to sort through lots of other junk in my mind in order to remember that.

Here’s one thing I did a couple years ago to remind myself how awesome my husband is: I wrote a list of things I love about him and taped it to my bathroom mirror. That way, when life gets hard or we start to bicker and fight, I can look at that list and remember how much I love him. It’s good to refresh my memory every once in a while, and it helps me not to blame life’s issues and challenges on him. Plus, he can see the list too and get a boost of confidence from it whenever he reads it. That’s a win-win if you ask me!

If you’re having a hard time liking your spouse at the moment, I encourage you to make a list of things you love about them. If that’s too difficult right now, then start with the things you initially fell in love with. I’m betting if you really look, you’ll discover that those things are still there. It might look different now than it used to, but those qualities have most likely remained. Reminding yourself of those things can help you keep a positive and loving perspective toward your spouse.

We can all use a refresher every now and then. Why not start at the beginning and remember all the good times? Cheers to a happy new year, full of love and laughter, with the one God has given you!

After 40 Years – Those Gifts – by Marcy Lytle

Christmas just passed. And I know SO MANY couples that don't even get each other any gifts. I don't know what they do. Maybe they spend funds on a project in the house, or opt to just give the kids gifts. But I enjoy my husband buying me gifts, and I love buying for him. He's not good at gift buying on his own, and I'm super picky, so I hand him my list way back in September. I include links, and specifics, and I try to make it easy for him. I know it's a labor of love for him to shop, because it's just not his thing.

However, I really like opening gifts on Christmas that are from him! So we both continue to give gifts year after year. Some say that when they get older they no longer "need" or "want" anything, but somehow I always do! And he always acquiesces. Even though it's hard for him to do, he does it. He knows I love that he actually buys the gifts (and doesn't have my kids do it – that's just wrong!), he also wraps them, and he even includes stocking gifts, too!

Early in our marriage, he gave me a frying pan for Christmas. That was impersonal.

Another Christmas, I got a shirt I detested. And I just couldn't make myself wear it.

One Christmas, he gave me a small kitchen appliance (that was expensive) that I didn't want and wouldn't use!

I've given him grill accessories, only to find them in the garage a year later, unopened.

I've thought he needed a certain tool, or gadget as well, but he didn't really care for it.

So one might think, "Why do you keep giving each other gifts?"

For us, there's something about the process of sacrificing our time and taxing our brains and hearts to give. I don't want to end up around a Christmas tree one year where it's all about the kids, and we adults just sit and watch. I want to always be amazed at how meticulous he is at wrapping (seriously, I've never seen tape applied any straighter!). I like it that he's willing to buy me things that are fun and maybe just whimsical and then sign his name, so that my heart flutters when I untie the bow. It still does! I also want to grow in my appreciation of the gifts he does include, ones not on my list (and I am growing, although ever so slowly!) And I want us to continue practicing this art of giving, as long as we can.

For years, my dad used to ask me 2-3 days before Christmas what Mom might want, and then he asked me to purchase it. This hurt my heart, every time. And I could tell it hurt Mom's heart as well, because she knew he did that. And I'm guessing they never had a conversation about giving, and expectations, and all of that...or maybe they did...and neither listened. But that observation made me purpose to be different in our marriage.

What was Christmas like for you? Maybe you're okay with how you gave or didn't give gifts, or maybe you weren't. But I'd say it's worth a conversation about those kinds of things. Maybe he doesn't know, and maybe you don't realize. I've been a real butt on Christmas, and I've had to work on my attitude of gratitude. And I hope that no matter how many years we live together, we always find something under the tree with our name on it that we've bought and wrapped

especially for each other. Even if it's not perfect, it's there, and it's so fun to get and to give gifts to each other...always...because we're ever learning and ever growing and I hope...ever giving.



ENCOURAGEMENT

Firmly Planted – Fire – by Dina Cavazos

Whether by necessity, happenstance, or design, I've had a wood burning stove of some kind in all but one house I've lived in over the last forty years. Over time, experience has taught me a few things about fire. Building a fire from scratch, tending it, and keeping it going 24/7 is an exercise in observation; couple that with a wise, softly speaking teacher...I would say fire can speak mysteries.

My very first wood stove came as a gift. This was early on in "the second twenty years" of my life. (Read my story **The Next Twenty Years** in the February 2020 Thyme archives.) We had "upgraded" from a school bus to a mobile home on two acres. Someone in the wonderful church I belonged to at the time had a store that sold wood burning stoves and accessories. As a house-warming gift (no pun intended!), they gave us a choice of a \$500 gift certificate or a wood stove. We chose the wood stove (one made for mobile homes)—one of the few wise choices we made during that time. That stove witnessed and participated in many stories I could tell, but that's for another time.

The second and third stoves came with the two historic houses I lived in several years later. If you've ever lived in an old house that hasn't been sufficiently renovated, you know they're drafty. Wood is a welcome supplement to any kind of heat—it gives you something warm to back up to.

My current house has a heat pump—efficient for cooling, but, when temperatures are in the 30's, it doesn't heat well unless you switch on the (expensive) electric heat strips. I bought the house in December 2006 (without a wood stove) and I was cold all winter. It seemed the heater ran continually but I didn't feel warm, ever. I determined not to go through another winter like that, and the next Fall I bought my Homestead soapstone stove. I've had it now for fourteen years—it's by far the best of all and I consider it one of the best investments I've made.

That's my wood stove history—but what about Fire? That's the real substance of my story. Fire is a fascinating natural phenomenon. I can't begin to explain it—scientific minds can do that—I can only experience it, appreciate it, and learn from it. There are very real dangers with fire—I've had a couple of scary moments—but those aren't the moments I'm talking about. It's the moments fire speaks to my soul...when I'm staring into the depths and suddenly, or sometimes slowly, I begin to see...

A fire begins small. A layer of balled up newspaper, next, kindling placed crosswise, then two or three bigger sticks crossing on top, then a little bigger piece on top...the key is air flow between them all and graduating sizes. Air feeds the fire and each layer provides fuel for the next. Once it's burning, I carefully lay bigger pieces of wood on top until it catches, progressing to logs that keep the fire going. Too big a piece on top too soon will smother the fire. *Some friendships are like that...probably most of them, says Fire. Start small, be patient, build trust, give room to breathe. Don't smother with too much too soon—heavy burdens of expectations, unnecessary opinions, or unsolicited advice.*

Once the fire is going strong, I have to keep feeding it and adjusting the airflow--sometimes by poking it a bit. A bigger log can last awhile, but it will go out if I wait too long before adding more wood. I can build it back up if there are still coals, but if it goes out I have to start from scratch again. Fire lovingly reminds me: *a strong friendship can handle the big stuff, but don't just drop it and leave it. Adjust the "airflow" by communicating and have that difficult conversation to clear the air. Don't ignore signs of tension or distance, and be kind, sensitive, and attentive. A good friendship, like a good fire, needs to be fed and tended.*

One of the clearest messages I remember was during a time of isolation from my Christian brothers and sisters. Going through a period of “I can connect with God on my own, thank you,” I wasn’t plugged in anywhere with others who could encourage and support my walk in the Way. I stared at the fire burning just one log—mostly black, glowing red on the edges, about to go out with not enough coals to bolster it—and I knew that was me. *A log alone can’t sustain itself. There has to be a solid bed of coals underneath to keep a log going, and it’s best to have at least two pieces of wood burning together to keep the fire going.* I don’t think that needs any explanation, and I can testify it’s a FIRE FACT and a LIFE FACT—all upper case in my book.

Is this just common sense, or do think that Fire can speak mysteries through the voice of its Creator? In my humble opinion, a personal message is both profound and a mystery. I love that, and I also love the toasty dry warmth of wood heat. I guess I’ll keep using my wood stove as long as I can lift a log.

The king said to Daniel,

“Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries.”

(Daniel 2:47)

Rooted in Love - Hand-Me-Downs – by Kaelin Scott

I think it's so fun getting hand-me-down clothes for my kids. There's something really special about having them wear clothes that were worn by our friends and family before us. I also enjoy passing old clothes on to others' kids when mine outgrow them. It's like passing love along to share for a little while. And it can be expensive buying clothes for kids who outgrow them at hyperspeed, so it's nice to bless someone with a gift to save them money.

Kind of like clothes, I love having wisdom and encouragement passed down from older and more experienced mamas, and passing it on to others too. Motherhood is such a challenging and ever-changing experience that it's nice to support and hold each other up. Having other moms around you in all walks of life is such a blessing and a unique way of spreading love. Helping each other through hard times and tiresome days is what community is all about, and the community of mothers is a really special one. Even if you don't have advice for a fellow mama, praying for each other does wonders. Just being there and saying, "I'm with you" is a huge gift of love.

There is so much "mom shaming" going around on the internet today, and it kind of makes me sick. Instead of supporting and encouraging others, women are bashing and judging each other publicly. All that does is create an atmosphere of fear and self-loathing. It's hard enough being a mom without people criticizing our every move. We're all doing the best we can for our kids, and maybe that looks different for some than it does for others. It isn't our right to condemn another mom's choices or tell her she's wrong. Instead, we should make it our mission to encourage every mama we meet and make her feel like she's the best mother in the world.

The more we encourage someone, the more confident they will be. And I think confidence goes a long way toward finding success. If we want to raise a bright and happy generation of children, then we need to have bright and happy mothers. And one way we can help make that happen is by being kind to each other. If we're an older mama and we see a younger one in need, we don't have to be afraid to offer help. She might just be too afraid to ask. And if we're that younger mama and we don't know what to do, we can find someone who's been there before and seek her advice.

Don't ever be ashamed of yourself as a mother. We're all learning and we all make mistakes, but we keep growing and improving just like we do in other areas of life. Be a friend and encourage your fellow mothers. The buddy system is highly effective, you know. Walking through the challenges of motherhood together is much easier than facing them alone.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6

Simple Truths - False Expectations – by Erica Simmons

I love telling a story using songs because there are so many ways God speaks to me through music. Sometimes, it is through the title like Tasha Cobb-Leonard's "Gracefully Broken." This title represents an amazing image of who our God is and what He does with us. It starts with the magnificent image of our God's love for us and His grace, and ends with the hard truth that as a Christian I do not want to deal with: being broken.

I'm not in a state of brokenness, but the unpleasant truth is that I have stuff in me that I hold onto so hard that God has to break me in order for me to turn it loose. Over the last year, I have found myself in this very situation. It's a situation that was caused by my false expectations and my unwillingness to let them go. This has caused me to struggle in a way that I never have before. I quite honestly had my foundation shaken in a way that caused me to struggle with my faith, but God spoke to me through music. He helped me to see the grace in the brokenness. These song lyrics are beautiful and you will be blessed as you listen to them. [Gracefully Broken](#)

You may be wondering what in the world could have shaken my foundation to the point that my faith was put to the greatest test it has ever faced. I have discovered that the answer lies not in the situation, but in my heart. Simply put,

I had a crisis of faith, because I did not have faith.

I know that sounds like I am talking in circles but I am not. The only way our faith can be shaken is when we have a lack of faith. Faith is a choice, and we choose to believe the Word and promises of God or we do not. I was caught up in looking at the current situation and completely lost sight of the promises and the truth of God's word.

A good example of this can be seen in the Cookie situation...

Almost two years ago when my son Jordan was dealing with the loss of a friend in a tragic accident, he fell into such well of grief that I gave in and allowed him and his brother Jeremiah to adopt a dog. Jordan soon realized that what he expected it to be like to have a dog and the reality of what it was really like to have a dog were two vastly different things. In the end, we rehomed her with a friend of his. A few weeks ago, he was asked to dog sit while his friend went hunting. We were blown away by how different Cookie was. She was behaving in a way that we all wanted/expected when we adopted her. We all had our false expectations when we first adopted her, as we all had this vision of what it was going to be like to have a dog. We could/would not look beyond the current situation, and therefore gave up.

That is what I had done, as well. I carried around these false expectations...and when reality hit, I chose to focus on the now and not the promise. [Dara Maclean's Nobody but You](#) song is a perfect example of this point. Listen, if you can, to the lyrics. What an AWESOME song and message. Did you honestly expect that song to be what it was after hearing the beginning? What a wonderful surprise this song was for me. However, if I had just focused on the now as I started listening or not moved past the beginning music, I would have missed the beauty.

Don't let your now keep you from the promise. Don't give up on God.

Hanging onto and focusing on the promise does not always take away the pain in the brokenness. He never promises there will be no pain, but He does promise He will always be

with us. This next song beautifully captures this promise to me, [Another in the Fire Hillsong United](#).

These songs do not take away the hurt, they don't speed up the journey, but they do help me along the way. They encourage, they provide another avenue for God to speak to me and not just in difficult seasons. I will say that there are days I think I am almost to at the end of this season in my life and other days when I feel I right back at the beginning of it. What I can definitely say with 100% certainty is that I am not in this season alone. And neither are you.

Unearthly Thing - Healthy Soul = Blessing Dispenser A New Resolution – by Angela Dolbear

It goes without saying, but I'll say it anyway because it's so true.

2020 was a harsh year.

But God prevails. Always. His loving kindness is everlasting and is pandemic-proof. That's for sure.

I learned a lot wading through the muck and the mire of 2020. I have finally learned to be less controlled by fear and anxiety. This has been a long, hard-fought lesson of which I have only gained victory over through mass amount of prayer and really good Biblical teaching.

I got some of that excellent teaching last Sunday, which I am still reflecting on and applying five days later, so I thought I would share it with you.

[Pastor Lyle spoke](#) about turning anxiety into acceptance, and then turning that acceptance into adoration for God, all through looking at Mary's response to the angel Gabriel's message about the virgin birth. Pastor explained how in [Luke 1](#), we can see Mary's mindset over her unexpected pregnancy progress through her responses. So beautiful! Mary could have been stoned to death for being an unwed pregnant girl, and she knew that. But she showed no fear. And not only does she trust God and accept His calling for her, but she praised and adored Him for it. There's so much more in the teaching, and I encourage you to give it a listen.

So I learned it's how I respond to circumstances that reveals the health of my soul. Mary had a healthy soul. Being full of God's grace (and not fear or anxiety) makes it so I can do what God wants me to do.

"A healthy soul is a soul at peace and at rest. It isn't upset, worried, angry, ashamed, or fearful. It is strong and steady, full of love, joy, hope, compassion toward others, and confidence in God. It can handle the ups and downs of life graciously and go through everyday life with ease," Joyce Meyer wrote in her October 7, 2020 [devotional](#). "Any situation might cause you to think you really cannot have a healthy soul, but they don't have the power to keep you from becoming whole again. Actually, the fact that you're going through these things is not a hindrance to a healthy soul; it's the reason you need one! The healthier your soul is, the stronger you will be, and the better you'll be able to handle your most challenging circumstances."

Meyer goes on to explain that we can't control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to our circumstances, and that God gave us the fruit of self-control. I love the Amplified Bible translation of Galatians 5:22–23:

"But the fruit of the Spirit [the result of His presence within us] is love [unselfish concern for others], joy, [inner] peace, patience [not the ability to wait, but how we act while waiting], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law."

The part about "how we act while waiting" stings me more than a little, I must admit.

I need to remember that I can ask God for help with anything. There are so many holy words describing His love for me and His unending willingness to help me.

I am just beginning to learn that it's much better to face challenges with a healthy soul than with a weak or wounded one. When it is well with my soul, I am optimally suited to be used by God, standing ready to be a blessing to someone else. I am open to hear His prompting to give a word of encouragement to others whenever it is needed, or lend a helping hand.

Or to share the Gospel, which is my ultimate goal, which I make sure is written into the stories in all my novels.

Becoming a Blessing Dispenser

God put His love in our hearts when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, and this love is dispensed through us to help others. A good place to see a picture of this idea is in Genesis 12:2, where God told Abraham He would bless him and make him a person who dispensed blessings to others:

“And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you [abundantly],
And make your name great (exalted, distinguished);
And you shall be a blessing [a source of great good to others]...”

The thing that really struck me in that portion of Scripture is that it is God who does the making of the blessing dispenser. He does it. I don't have to try to do it myself, or expect myself to see and act on the needs of others. God does it. That is a huge relief to me, and something to bow my head in gratitude and praise for.

Out of the store of grace and blessings God has placed in us, we get to bestow blessings on others. That's enough to get me excited to get out of bed every day. It is my prayer that God helps me see and seize opportunities to love people whenever He wills it.

A healthy soul is a worthy goal for all of us. It sometimes seems impossible to achieve, let alone maintain a soul that is healthy, but all things are possible with Him (please see [Matthew 19:26](#)).

Prayer Prompt: Father, please show me how to attain and maintain a healthy soul. I know that all things are possible with You, and thank You in advance for helping me heal, and in turn become Your blessing dispenser. In Jesus' name, amen.

Angela Dolbear is the author of contemporary Christian novels, such as THE GARDEN KEY Series, and THE TORMENTOR'S TALE, all available in paperback, Kindle and audiobook formats on Amazon. Angela writes real, relevant, relatable, and reverent fiction, with an aim toward spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ, while inspiring readers to laugh, cry, and crave certain varieties of food. She loves reading, writing and leading worship music with her husband Tim at their church in Nashville, Tennessee. Please drop by and sing-up for news and free goodies at <http://www.angeladolbear.com/subscribe.htm>. Blessings to you!

Moving Forward – God’s Rest – by Pam Charro

We all know that Jesus came to restore our relationship with the Father and that understanding offers us peace and rest. But did you know that refusing that rest is considered disobedience by God?

So what does obedience look like?

When the Israelites left Egypt and were wandering in the desert, God promised them that they would inherit a land of milk and honey. What he didn't tell them was that giants were living there at the time, and it didn't appear that it would be easy to get them to leave. Wouldn't you think that God would understand their dismay and difficulty in believing? Why was he so hard on them? Surely facing reality is not a sin?

But the bible clearly states that God has no problem with us facing reality. All of the great heroes of the faith also had adversity and acknowledged it. The problem was that God had already parted the Red Sea, given water from a rock, and fed his people with manna and meat. They had received multiple opportunities to see God perform miracles on their behalf and to grow in their confidence in his provision for them. Yet they stubbornly refused to view their difficulties as small in comparison to their great God. And so Hebrews states that because they did not add faith in God's finished work to their knowledge, they were disobedient.

What about us today? When we have problems, and I'm pretty sure we do from time to time, do we call to mind all that God has already done to prove himself trustworthy? Or do we immediately panic and wish for earlier times? Our God is the same today and is ready to provide miracles when we remember who he is and rest in that knowledge. He loves to show up when we have a seemingly impossible situation, so that he can be our solution.

I do not want God to consider me to be disobedient. I want to enter his rest!

Lord, during these challenging times, remind my heart of your constant faithfulness to me so that I will respond by putting my trust in you. You have already proven your love for me and you deserve every bit of my confidence in your finished work.



FRESH THYME

FRESH THYME - Lead Them

I've written about this before, I think. Or maybe it's just been in my head and never put to words. It's the thought that as much as kindness is important and necessary, kindness alone won't save our nation or world. Kindness might lead people to a pool of still water to drink, but unless there's water in that tank, they'll wander elsewhere.

What am I referring to? It's the amazing rise and fall of kindness and Jesus.

On the one hand, kindness is everywhere if we look for it, even among the unrest. I saw acts of kindness, especially at Christmas time, where amazing gifts were given to the needy. I believe people know the beauty and return on giving to others, because there are lots of non-profits, lots of folks that volunteer, and so many that are so kind to animals – taking them in as family. And this is completely awesome, and biblical. In fact, in Romans 2:4 it says kindness leads us to repentance. So kindness is HUGE!

What troubles me is how Jesus and the ultimate act of kindness offered on the cross for all mankind is not being shared hand in hand with our kindness. Don't get me wrong. I'm not sure how to do this effectively. We all know that fear is not a good motivator for relationship, especially those of us that were raised with a stern religious teaching. We have also seen that just talking about Jesus and then slandering our neighbor or hating and lying and cheating complete negates anything we've said, and it misrepresents who Jesus is, altogether.

So, back to kindness. Isn't showing kindness toward others showing them Jesus? I would say it is. BUT there's this thing at the end of that sentence above – repentance. That's the water in the still pond that we all need to drink, once the kindness of God has been revealed to us. Once we are the recipient of kindness, we need to see further into the kindness of God that loved the world so much that he GAVE his Son.

I can pay it forward in Starbucks drive-thru, and the person behind me will feel special. I can smile because I gave selflessly at Christmas to help others have plenty, and that kindness will warm the hearts of those that receive. I can smile and listen to a clerk in the store and tell her to "Have a nice day," and it might make her day actually feel nice. And I can be kind to my neighbor by pulling up his trash can, and it might result in a wave next time I see him.

And all of that kindness is SO GOOD. It's leading people, modeling Christ, showing them unconditional love, and putting their needs above ours. It's completely and totally a wonderful thing to teach our children – to be kind – no matter what. Kindness breaks down walls and produces thankful hearts.

But that kindness, when those who have received it follow us to the still clear water to drink, has to be coupled with the story of Jesus and our need for him, our need to repent. And repentance is just the simple act of admitting our faults and our needs, asking forgiveness, believing in Jesus and his GREAT LOVE, and then accepting that freedom that comes from the amazing love offered to every single person on the earth.

That's the message that HAS to be coupled with our kindness. How do we do this? I suppose we look for more opportunities to speak, to represent Him well, and to know that story ourselves. If we have been given and shown kindness, we have received mercy and experienced forgiveness, and we live at peace and not in fear for our future, we need to be ready and willing to speak up say why and how.

It's His kindness that leads us to repentance. And kind acts alone aren't enough. We have to be forgiven, offer forgiveness, believe and then live.

It's taken me decades of living and growing and laying aside fear and untruths, in favor of knowing and growing and loving the God who loves me, for me to realize this. And I'm not good at sharing His story when I'm kind to others. Just saying, "Jesus loves you," doesn't seem to be the answer. Neither does the answer seem to be shaking an accusing finger.

However, maybe if I show my own repentant heart by the way I treat others, ask forgiveness, live at peace with my family and neighbors, speak the truth and never gossip, love my husband well and soak in the goodness of his Word daily...then perhaps they'll ask why and I can tell them. Or better yet, I can hope I find boldness to be kind and represent Him well, and pray for open doors I actually see – to be kind AND fill my tank with something amazing they will want to drink when led to the water's edge.

Jesus, the name above all names, the name by which we can all be saved. Saved from what, you might ask? From death, fear, effects of sin, our own foul attitudes, and everything else that kills us in this world. Because He first loved us, offered the supreme sacrificial act of kindness, and all we have to do is believe.

Strengthening Your Core – Signs Everywhere – by Marcy Lytle

This past Sunday our pastor shared a funny story. He moved here from Wisconsin several years ago, and he and his wife often saw our signs in Central Texas that say, “Turn around. Don’t drown.” They chuckled and thought how silly...because they didn’t know about flash floods in our area! However, we that have lived here know all about them and we heed those signs!

He continued his story of how one day they were on their way back from the coast and it started raining and within minutes, they had to pull over and wait, as water rose up the tires of their car. Needless to say, they learned really quickly about the meaning behind the sign, and that it wasn’t silly at all. It was the truth!

I thought that story was interesting, because I too have traveled to other parts of the country and noted their signs that we don’t have here. “Moose Crossing” is one in particular. We even went on a hunt for moose in that area, but we didn’t see any. “Snow plows ahead” is another sign that is just not seen in my town AT ALL...ever.

I remember when I was teaching my kids how to drive, there was an entire section devoted to learning to read the highway signs and heeding what they say. “Construction zone ahead” warns us to slow down and look for workers. “Yield” signs, unheeded, can cause a wreck for sure! And when driving in uncharted territory, like new cities or states or countries, signs have to be heeded!! There are signs on a stretch of highway here that say it’s a dangerous road with lots of wrecks – that’s a sign that brings fear and sobriety!

Back to our pastor’s story...

The reason the sign seemed silly and funny to our pastor was because it was unfamiliar, he had never experienced a flash flood, and the message seemed irrelevant.

This made me think about sayings and directives in the bible that we sometimes never read or heed, until we’re in danger and need...or until we are in a season of life when rains come down hard, or the sun beats too hot.

God told Lot’s wife “Don’t look back”

He told Samson “Don’t cut your hair”

He directed Noah and said “Rain is coming”

He tells us “Acknowledge me and I will make straight paths”

He says “If you lack wisdom, ask me”

He encourages “Run with perseverance”

He instructs “Make every effort to live at peace”

He enlightens “All things work together for good”

He speaks truth “All scripture is God-breathed”

There are literally “signs” or directives or instruction throughout the bible that offer us safety if we become familiar with them. Sometimes, it takes living life to become familiar, because that particular directive isn’t something we look for, until we turn that corner or experience that curve.

Signs like “Turn around. Don’t Drown.” are placed around our town as reminders of what our weather can do in a moment’s time.

It’s the same with his Word, but we have to read it, notice it, believe it, and heed it.

If he says all things work together for good, then when life is bad – we can follow that truth. When we have no idea what road or path to take, we can remember that directive to ask him for wisdom – and we can know that he will grant it. If he’s warned us to forget our past and move on, we need to obey that and not look back.

It’s a new year, 2021. Hopefully, we will be able to travel again. And when we do, there will be new signs to notice and obey when we cross every state line. And there are new signs and directives He’s placed in our paths as well, to follow the way of peace, joy and love as we walk with him through dark valleys and sunlit hills, skipping along or resting beside still waters.

What sign is on your path today? Not seeing any? Open his Word and learn about his character and direction and love, and ask him to illuminate the sign you need to see...today. And if there’s no sign on your path today, then follow him to still waters and drink and stay awhile until you move on again...

Have you ever seen the sign pictured above? Me either...

FRESH THYME - Uncheerable – by Marcy Lytle

Is the title of this article even a word? I know it's a feeling, because I've been there, and I'm guess you have been there as well. It's one of those feelings that we feel on a day when nothing anyone says will cheer us up, because frankly – we don't want to be cheery! There are some days when we just feel down, either for very good reasons, or for no identifiable reason at all and we feel UNCHEERABLE!

It could be a day when we feel lonely, especially in these past months, when friends' calls and hugs and attention are all but none. We feel sad, but we don't want clichés or our husbands to try and cheer us up. We just want to be alone and wallow in our *uncheeriness*. Is that a word? Probably not, but it is today.

My grandmother had a sign in her kitchen that said something like, *One day I was sad and melancholy and I heard a voice say – Cheer up – things could be worse. So I cheered up, and sure enough – things got worse.* I used to laugh at that sign, and what it said has stuck with me all these years!

So...I'm not going to include scripture verses here (because we can look them up, if we want them), I'm not going to give us practical exercises or ways to change our stinking thinking (we probably already know those, as well.) What I want to do is say,

It's Okay!

Maybe that's what we need to hear in uncheerable moments, or on uncheerable days. None of us wants to live an uncheerable life, as that would be most miserable. But to feel uncheerable, wanting to be left alone and not spoken to for a few moments or hours is pretty darn normal.

Seasons come and go, and it's interesting to note that one of those four seasons is where everything is dormant and life is hidden beneath the ground, and animals hibernate, and the skies are bleak. It's called winter...the season we're in right now. It's part of the year that we encounter over and over again, and it's part of the cycle. There's a reason for winter.

The ground rests. The animals sleep. And there's nothing we can do to awaken the plants or stir the animals, because it's part of what happens in the cycle of life.

However, we all know that temperatures rise, the ice thaws, the green reappears and blooms start showing. And it's not because they were coerced to awaken or stimulated or prodded. Their roots were deep, the fall rains prepared the ground for dormancy, and spring just knew when to show up.

So if you're having an uncheerable moment or day, just take a nap, chill, hide away, or do nothing. You're not a terrible person if you don't want to be awakened to cheer and shout. Tomorrow's another day, and spring will come for sure, so it might just be your time to rest and dig deep and wait...

Whether “things” get worse or better doesn’t really matter when you’re planted by the river, because the seasons don’t stay...they give way to the next one...to that cheery season of blossoms and aromas and sunshine.

It will come. And it’s okay to not want to hear that right now...

FRESH THYME - We Say We Will...

I've been so guilty of saying I'll do something and then not doing it. And I've also been guilty of being upset at others for doing the same thing. For example, when we run into an old friend while out shopping and it just blurts out of our mouth as we're leaving,

"It was so good to see you. Let's get together very soon."

And yet, we don't really mean it, and we never call that friend, and she never calls us, and that encounter is gone and forgotten.

Another example is finding out a friend has a new business or has written a new book, and we are so excited (or seem to be) and we tell them we will check it out. But as time goes by, we've forgotten about their newness because our life is busy, and we never even visit their website or read their book. We said we would. And we didn't.

What about those friends that say, "Let's get together for a date," or "Why don't we have lunch?" and then they never call. And we don't call them because they said they'd call us, and we are tired of being the initiator. Or...we wait for them to call and they don't, so we assume they were lying and don't really like us.

Haven't you found yourself in one of those thought streams above, or have you too been guilty of spurting out sentiments you don't really mean, or verbalizing intentions but then never following through? Is it a bad thing? I think it's hurtful, to those we talk to and to ourselves when we hear those words of hope, only to never see that friend again.

The pandemic hasn't done friendships any favors. Some folks we used to see on a regular basis, ones we thought really enjoyed our company, have just disappeared into their homes or behind their four walls or somewhere...and we haven't heard from them. Or maybe it's we who have just grown tired of the effort that has to be made to connect with others, so we just don't do it. After all, we have our jobs, our routines and our own families, and we don't have any emotional energy left to spend.

I'm there. In all of those thoughts and rationales and sentiments.

I am hoping, however, that I will be more careful about my words that I speak to others.

- If I say I want to meet up, I hope I really mean it and follow through.
- If she says she's wants to have lunch, I hope she will call me. And if she doesn't, I can call her.
- If I feel everyone is slipping away, I hope I can offer grace and reach out, anyway.
- If I feel myself hibernating and pitying life, I hope I give thanks and look up and reach out for the joy...

of relationship.

I've been disappointed in how we've all reacted to the pandemic, although we all should offer ourselves grace, because we've not lived in a world like this before. Who knew a year ago that

we'd all be told to stay indoors, avoid others, don't touch or hug, and certainly don't sit and linger for visits indoors over an extended period of time. Pretty soon, that became our norm and we forgot the importance of connections because they were too difficult and risky to make.

I don't know the answer going forward, or how much longer we will have to avoid others. It's getting old. But I do know that we have to be intentional this year to watch our words, guard our hearts, and continue to love.

We all need connection. And if it can't happen in person as much as we'd like, we have to text, call, meet at a distance, and care. And our words have to count for something, or we just need to stop saying them.

I hope I am cautious, thoughtful, and intentional on committing myself to notice and care about a friend, and then follow up. And I hope others will do the same with me. At the very least, it's something for us all to think about, as we gather together in different ways and by different means and with different mask-covered faces.

We can't stop loving and sharing, it's how we will thrive and bless others, and be blessed. And we must listen to what we say and then when we say it...do it.