

Some mornings are chaos in our household.

We have 3 kids under the age of 8, and as some of you know that it can be difficult to just get out of the house in the mornings.

One particular morning this summer I remember that I got up with my alarm going off and rolled out of bed to a familiar buzz of our house. Our four-year-old was laying still fast asleep next to me (he had at some point in the night slipped into our bed even after I had returned him to his own bed at some unknown twilight hour). The seven-year-old was bouncing around the room, asking where a particular shirt was that she was wanting to wear today. My wife had already gotten up and I could hear her prepping breakfast in the kitchen with the baby who was fussing over something because it wasn't exactly the way she wanted it.

Most of our mornings begin in some form of mostly controlled chaos, yet we push through the morning routines, getting dressed, teeth brushed, and hair brushed – with several reminders that yes you have brush both the front and the back of your head. Breakfast gets made, usually with several different types, oatmeal for this one, cereal for that one, banana over here, you likely know the drill or if not you can probably picture it by now.

Mornings can be chaos.

After all of that, you might imagine that then day can just begin, but no. I haven't even gotten to the most chaotic part yet: leaving the house. Someone can't find their shoes, we forget the packed lunch, friend (that's our son's special toy) gets left behind, we forget to get the change of clothes or refill on diapers that daycare requested yesterday at pick up.

You know the drill.

I remember one particular morning where all of this was going on. I helped get Julia and the baby loaded into the van off to daycare and the gym, while the seven and four-year-old piled into our Subaru. I was the one doing double drop-off duty that morning. After kissing Julia goodbye and waving to the baby, I climbed into my car, double checking that everyone managed to get their seatbelts on. Check and check. So, there I was, finally backing out into our long driveway, and onto the day.

But of course, “friend” - Ian’s snuggly – isn’t in the car, Ian thinks it was left next to the shoe pile when we were getting our shoes on. So, I climbed out of the car and ran back into the house. No snuggly near the shoe pile, so upstairs I roam, stressing about how we really should have left 15 minutes ago to get all the drop off done and me to my morning meeting. There it is, I snatched it and took off down the stairs and towards the garage.

I remember squeezing out the door having to nudge the dogs back inside the house as I closed off the house from the garage. And that’s when I heard it.

I heard that dinging noise that your car makes when you leave the door open when it’s running. Apparently in all my rushing to get everything right (which never happens) that morning I left the car door open when I went back into the house, and there it was dinging, calling me back into the present moment.

Here you are Nick, pause Nick, remember Nick.

That’s was a morning bell, offering me a fresh start, even in the midst of my day that had sort of already begun.

In that moment, I think God reached down and poked me. God through the smallest, and honestly most annoying, noises that exists, reminded me to stop. Even standing here before you now I can remember how it felt in that moment. How touched by God I felt. I was offered a fresh start.

I think we can all use a fresh start. Sometimes life is so full of chaos. The chaos of family, of an unexpected illness or hospitalizations, of the last child leaving the nest headed off to college. Think for just a moment, and I bet you can name a bit of chaos that is swirling around you right now.

(pause) Can you name it?

Chaos fills our lives, and yet Jesus offers each of us again and again reminders, little bells that ring through it all and remind us to whom we belong, absolutely.

My friend tells this story of a sort of spiritual practice she developed back in college. She went to college on a campus that had one of those large old-

style bell tower that used to toll on the hour. Gong. Gong. Gong. 3 o'clock, she would say. That sound was so present in her daily life that she decided to use it as a moment, as a reminder, as an excuse of some sort to offer up the briefest of prayers to God. So, if she was walking out of class and the bell tolled 8 am, she would say a little thank you to God for all those things in her life she was grateful for that day. When the bell tolled 6 pm and she was eating dinner, she would sneak in a prayer between bites saying thank you for someone she was grateful for right then.

What a beautiful practice huh, a prompt that comes every hour of the day to remind you to be grateful. A way to enter the stillness even on the busiest of days, seeking that still point with our God. Each hour, a fresh start.

There are lots of ways for us to work these fresh reminders into our chaotic lives. There are apps which can buzz you on your phone reminding you to pray. There is the ancient practice in the church of praying the hours, pausing at fixed-hours to pray, coming out of the ancient psalmists' tradition, where the psalmist says, "seven times a day, do I praise you."

Singing bells, originally from China and often used by Buddhists, hold a special place for me in my heart, because one of my spiritual teachers, a catholic nun who taught at my Presbyterian seminary about Quaker practices, used to call us into silence together by inviting us to follow the ringing bell into the quiet of the moment. Beth would strike the bell and let it fade, while each and every one of us gathered together learned to follow it into that inner place deep inside of all of us. That place where the whispers of God remind us of our belovedness from which everything tough may be faced.

Perhaps this is just the thing we need, with many of us are moving into a new school year. Because life is about be more chaotic. The chaos of new teachers, new routines, new emotions. Some of us are ready to be headed back, some want just some more days to sleep late and enjoy the summer heat. Some are just fearful of what new buildings, new relationships and time might bring.

If it's not the beginning of the school year for you, then perhaps it's another change that is settling into your life. A new-found sense of mobility or lack thereof, a new diagnosis, a new job, a new friendship, or the soon to be ringing of wedding bells in your life.

Yet, the changing of the seasons in our lives, don't always come when we want them, sometimes they come when we aren't ready to move on, or when we thought we had more time.

Yet, time ticks on, and God is moving with it. And the morning bell represents an opportunity for a fresh start.

In each new day, we are each given an opportunity to reflect, and the morning bell can be just the thing that sets us up to remember, that no matter what happens, no matter if it appears there is nothing but blue skies ahead or if we can't see through the thick fog of the moment, God is there on the other side waiting for us already.

God declares through Paul in his letter to the Romans, where promises sweeping victory is ours through the one who loved us, Jesus Christ. Paul declares that he is "convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created."

Nothing can separate you, from the original blessing that God has already placed inside of you. You are created beautifully and wonderfully made, already a child of God. Despite what pain exists, or hurt is caused, or mistakes are made, each and every person is already and has always been and will always be a child of God.

I want to leave you telling you about this bell, right here on the table, that you heard us ring this morning, and that we'll be ringing throughout this Starting Back series, it is an actual school bell, that rang out in a one room schoolhouse somewhere in franklin county (by Jeff Overfelt's aunt Edna). It has called countless children to attention, it drew them in to let them know that instruction was about to begin. As I pray it does for us this series.

How fitting is that? How fitting is it that a family keepsake like this can serve to push our spiritual growth.

So let us ring it once more, let us ring it as a reminder, let us remind ourselves every time we hear any bell, that we are provided with a fresh

start, a new beginning of sorts, to be reminded that the chaos of our lives does not define us, but that the love that God holds for us, does.

That love defines us and gives us strength to face the chaos.

So, every time you hear a bell like in the car to buckle your seat belt, when you hear the elevator doors close on the way up to your office, when the bell towers on old downtown church buildings ring out, when windchimes stir on the back deck, or you hear even the faintest of sounds of that old dinner bell that calls you to the table.

Each is an opportunity to pause, and to be grateful. Like I was in that morning of chaos in my garage, or my friend as she walked to class, or my spiritual teacher Beth who ran her bell to usher in the silence, or as a friend told me this week, when she was a young mother, and in the car waiting for her children to buckle their seatbelts, she didn't yell at them to do it. She just said, "I love you" and listened for the clicks.

So, may you always hear the great I love you ringing with the morning bell, and may you know that in that moment, God has something special in store for you, if you are only willing to let it usher in a brand-new day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.