ASBURY CIRCUIT RIDER

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FEBRUARY 1, 2026

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Neighbors (Epiphany)

A concept known as "emotional intelligence" gets top billing in the psychological and organizational literature of our day. Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to understand, regulate, and responsibly express emotion, as a core foundation for healthy relationships, wise decision-making, and effective leadership. Like cognitive intelligence, we all possess varying degrees of these capacities, but we're all crippled to some degree by life experiences, poor role models, DNA, and our environment. *Page 2*

Suffering (Epiphany)

Who are the peacemakers in times of haunting wars?" Olena Tovianska asks from Irpin, Ukraine. She does not ask as a distant observer or a detached theologian, but as someone living inside the question. War is not an abstract concept where she lives; it constructs daily reality. Olena is a translator by profession, but her ministry reaches deeper—she explores how the performing arts can help traumatized communities begin to heal.

Page 16

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Neighbors (Epiphany)

cont. from pg 1

Emotional development is a lifelong process that begins in our earliest relationships, but continues into adulthood. Secure attachments in childhood, supportive learning environments, and models of self-reflection and empathy help develop the emotional skills that enable adults to regulate impulses, understand others' distress, and respond with sensitivity rather than defensiveness. Conversely, deficits in emotional formation—whether from trauma, neglect, or patterns of avoidance—can make it harder for well-meaning adults to engage with others in ways that are healthy and life-giving.

Experts describe emotional intelligence not merely as feeling what we feel, but as the capacity to recognize our emotions, to reflect on how they shape our choices, and to integrate that awareness into how we get along with others. Those of us who develop these competencies tend to be better at empathy, conflict resolution, and navigating complexity with compassion rather than with impulse or reactivity.

Importantly, emotional maturity is not simply a matter of age or experience. It isn't guaranteed by the passing of years alone. Instead, it involves conscious growth: learning to accept one's emotions without being ruled by them, developing empathy for others that is distinct from self-interest, and choosing responses that reflect wisdom rather than instinct. This capacity to pause, reflect, and act with integrity shapes not only personal well-being but also the quality of our civic and communal life.

In recent years, psychologists and behavioral scholars have offered candid conversations about the emotional lives and public conduct of leaders in high office. Some have described certain leadership patterns in terms of malignant narcissism—a blend of grandiosity, hypersensitivity to criticism, and intolerance of vulnerability that reshapes how individuals perceive threats and respond to others.

Others note that when leaders exhibit high levels of traits such as entitlement, low empathy, a need for constant affirmation, and a readiness to manipulate information for their own advantage—traits associated in research with the so-called "Dark Triad"—the result is not merely individual insecurity but a relational style that dehumanizes and degrades others.

In professional ethical discussions, clinicians remind us that diagnosis is not appropriate without direct clinical evaluation. But many also acknowledge a duty to warn when patterns of emotional instability and reactive behavior among public figures have clear consequences for others' well-being and for institutions tasked with protecting human dignity.

It would be easy to hear these descriptions and imagine that they apply only to someone else—to leaders, to public figures, to people whose brokenness is amplified by power. But that would miss a harder and more hopeful truth: the traits being described are not foreign to us. They are common human strategies for coping with fear, shame, and vulnerability.
A common reaction is to blame the victim when confronted with tragedy.

Our own emotional formation—how we learned to cope with shame, fear, and vulnerability—matters deeply here. Each of us carries scars that sometimes urge us to avoid discomfort. What makes a person a good neighbor, however, is not lack of fear but the courage to love despite it. Fear blames, but love heals.

Most of us know what it is like to defend ourselves by diminishing others. Most of us know the temptation to avoid situations that might demand empathy we feel unequipped to offer. Most of us, at one time or another, have protected ourselves by insisting we do not need anyone.

Page 14

IN OUR PRAYERS

Virginia Bigger
Sylvia Pittman
Mirium Watson
Richard Oram
Jonathon Misner

FRIENDS AND LOVED ONES WHO ARE HOMEBOUND OR IN NURSING CARE

Dean Lamoreaux
Norma Buzzard
Nancy Elston

COMING UP THIS WEEK: FEBRUARY 2—8

Feb 2	Mon		
Feb 3	Tue	9:00am-until gone	Produce will be available each week, along with canned goods, until further notice
		12Noon-6pm	Taco Tuesday in Fellowship Hall
Feb 4	Wed	11am-1pm	Angel Closet at South Flint Soup Kitchen
Feb 5	Thu		
Feb 6	Fri		
Feb 7	Sat		
Feb 8	Sun	10:30am	New Beginnings Contemporary Worship

FLINT MISSION ZONE MEETING: Asbury UMC will be hosting this Zone meeting on Tuesday, February 17, 2026 at 1pm in the Asbury Library. Please mark your calendars. Any questions, feel free to call Michele Weston 810-624-1184.

****** PLEASE TURN IN YOUR 2025 END OF YEAR REPORTS TO ME ASAP...**

(We are live on *Facebook* and our newly launched *YouTube channel*. You can find these links along with more information about us on our website at (*FlintAsbury.org*.)

Upcoming Worship Series "Epiphany"

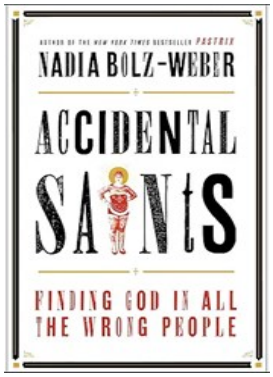
As we begin a new year, we live in a world marked by rapid change, deep division, and widespread exhaustion. Many of us sense that something essential is being revealed—but we are not always sure what to do with what we see. This *Epiphany* series asks a simple but demanding question: What do we need to see more clearly now?

Take a close look at the image above. What do you see? Why was this image chosen for a series on epiphanies?

A figure stands alone in ruins—crumbling walls, peeling paint, debris scattered across the floor. The space feels abandoned, forgotten, and left to chaos and decay. But look closer. The figure isn't looking at the destruction around them. They're looking through it, toward an archway that frames brilliant light streaming in from beyond.

Page 6

Book Club News



For our Epiphany series, we'll be reading Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* as our companion book. But here's the twist: we're not reading it cover to cover. We're reading it thematically—jumping around to match each week's sermon focus.

Before you panic, hear us out.

If you haven't met Nadia Bolz-Weber yet, prepare yourself. She's a heavily tattooed, foul-mouthed Lutheran pastor who founded House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver—a church for people who don't fit anywhere else. She's exactly the kind of person religious folks might dismiss, which is precisely why her voice matters.

Accidental Saints tells 19 stories of how Bolz-Weber discovered that the people who drove her crazy, the ones she wanted nothing to do with, kept turning out to be her teachers. God, it seems, has a sense of humor about who gets to deliver divine truth.

The book is funny, honest, and deeply faithful. Bolz-Weber writes about depression, addiction, difficult people, and the messy reality of trying to follow Jesus without any of the usual religious polish. She refuses to sanitize her stories or offer easy answers. Instead, she tells the truth about what it actually looks like when broken people encounter a God who loves them anyway.

Page 12

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Anthony & Jim	Ushers
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Yasheah & Mirium	Nursery
Christine	Cafe

Upcoming Worship Series — "Epiphany"

This is a threshold moment. Not the comfortable kind where you stand safely on one side deciding whether to cross. This is the kind where you've already stepped through—where the doorway behind you has closed, and the only way forward is toward that light ahead, even if you can't yet see exactly where it leads.

That's where we find ourselves as we begin 2026.

Over seven weeks, we will explore epiphanies that matter for this moment—epiphanies about limits, truth, neighbors, suffering, and responsibility. These are not abstract ideas. They are ways of seeing that shape how we live together, how we love, and how we act with integrity in the world God so loves.

In our tradition, the season of Epiphany begins with the Magi—outsiders to Israel's faith, culture, and story. They were immigrants. Strangers who traveled far to encounter Jesus. While there, a dream warned them about King Herod's true intentions, and they had to find another way home. They couldn't return the way they came.

Having seen what they'd seen, the old road was closed. They'd crossed a threshold. There was no going back.

Epiphany reminds us that God's self-disclosure is rarely confined to familiar places or familiar people. And while thresholds are intended as two-way, for entering and exiting, the reality is that once we cross, we don't return the same.

That's the invitation of this series: to name what we've seen, to stand honestly in the ruins of what's broken, and to keep our eyes fixed on the light ahead rather than exhausting ourselves trying to force our way back through doors that have closed behind us.

Epiphany is not about having all the answers. It is about learning to see—and then deciding how we will live in response.

Page 7

Upcoming Worship Series — "Epiphany"

Here is the outline of our series:

Episode	Sundays	Title	Scripture
One	Jan 4	Strangers	Matthew 2:1–12
Two	Jan 11	Limits	Mark 6:30-32
Three	Jan 18	Truth	John 8:31-32
Four	Jan 25	Neighbors	Luke 10:25-37
Five	Feb 1	Suffering	Matthew 2:16-18
Six	Feb 8	Responsibility	James 2:14-17;
Seven	Feb 15	Transformation	Matthew 2:12

Each week we'll explore these epiphanies alongside Nadia Bolz-Weber's book *Accidental Saints* (see our Book Club article for details). Her raw, honest stories about encountering God in unexpected places will deepen our journey through this season.

Look again at that figure in the ruins, standing at the threshold, facing the light. That's us. That's where this series begins.

Join us starting January 4 as we ask together: What do we need to see more clearly now? And having seen it, how will we live?

We can't go back to 2025. And who would want to given the chaos that unfolded across our nation. Likewise, we can't unsee what we've already witnessed. The only question is: will we keep moving toward the light, or exhaust ourselves trying to force our way back through a door that's already closed? This Epiphany, we choose the light. We choose to see clearly. And we choose to let that clarity change how we live.

The threshold is behind us. The journey begins January 4.

Please join us each Sunday at 10:30 a.m. We share our weekly episodes on ***Facebook*** and our ***YouTube channel***, and go live at 10:30 a.m. You can find these links and more information about us, or join our live broadcast on our ***website, FlintAsburyChurch.org***.

Pastor Tommy

Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).


GROW
ENGAGE
Feed Flint
DISTRIBUTE

"Feed Flint"


A meal goes a long way for a senior living alone, a family struggling to make ends meet, or a child fearful of empty shelves at home. But for the residents of Flint who carry the effects of lead-tainted water, nutrition is critical. Feed Flint provides locally grown, chemical-free, fresh produce to residents living in and around Flint. And we're hoping that you can help us provide 10,000 meals this summer.
Feed Flint includes takeout meals, produce boxes with recipes, and home deliveries as part of our work to guide and support families in moving to sustainable abundance. The reality is that Michigan's food insecurity levels got worse during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this summer's recovery is leaving behind those at the most risk of having to miss meals.
Flint families continue to struggle with the ongoing effects of the water crisis.
We're bringing together the resources of the Asbury Community Development Corporation. This includes Asbury Farms, the South Flint Soup Kitchen, the Asbury Community Help Center, multiple food pantries, and our Sizzling Culture Mobile Food Trailer. Our plan is to care for our neighbors when they need it most. We accept all people as they are, and our doors are always open to anyone.
Asbury Farms provides locally grown produce used to create fabulous and nutritious meals. Our seed-to-table approach is community-based. This not only helps families make it through emergencies and crises. We help move families towards sustainable abundance.
Our Sizzling Culture program provides jobs and new skills to our city's youth. This includes year-round employment. Our staff and most of our volunteers come from the neighborhoods we support. We call this sustainable abundance because families move from need-based on scarcity to enough based on community-generated abundance.
Our work is also about food and justice. Our vision is a revitalized community where every resident can use their talents and passions for the common good, where children grow into active citizens. And all residents can enjoy safety, good health, and a culture that fosters life-long learning and satisfying lives. This summer, help us address food insecurity and strengthen Flint's budding local food system by supporting the Feed Flint campaign. Thank you for taking the time to see what we're doing and considering how you can help.
Donate to our Feed Flint Campaign by visiting:
flintasbury.org/feed-flint-donate

LIFE GROUP QUESTIONS & MORE:

A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping. Rachel is crying for her children; she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead.

Matthew 2:16-18

NOTES FROM WORSHIP

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QUESTIONS FOR LIFE GROUPS:

1. Read Matthew 2:16-18 and the article in this week's Circuit Rider titled Suffering.

2. This week, let's refuse to minimize suffering—our own or anyone else's. Let's tell the truth, lament, and not rush towards resolution. Second, let's pay attention to where suffering is hidden and who is being silenced. In our community, in our systems, and in our own lives, noticing is not passive—it is the beginning of faithfulness.

3. Third, let's resolve to act according to our capacity, not our guilt. Some will speak publicly. Others will show up quietly. Some will advocate. Others will accompany. And when we cannot act, we bless and support those who do.

4. How can your group members help you be more receptive to hearing and understanding the Word of God this week? Pray for one another to be blessed by the Holy Spirit with greater courage.

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Why Read Thematically?

Each Sunday, we'll explore a different epiphany—limits, truth, neighbors, suffering, responsibility. We want the book to deepen what you're hearing in worship, not just run parallel to it. So we're assigning chapters that connect directly with each week's theme.

For example, when we talk about truth-telling on MLK weekend (Week 3), you'll have just read Bolz-Weber's raw account of preaching at a Sandy Hook funeral and her critique of mission-trip savior complexes. When we talk about embodied action (Week 6), you'll have just read her foot-washing stories. The connection matters.

At about 200 pages total with 19 chapters, we're planning to read 2-3 chapters per week (roughly 25-30 pages). Bolz-Weber's writing is conversational and moves quickly—you won't need a theology degree or three hours of uninterrupted time.

Here's a taste of what you're in for. Bolz-Weber writes: "God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings. My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word."

If you're tired of pretending everything is fine, if you're weary of religious performance, if you've ever wondered whether God shows up in the mess—this book is for you.

Let's read together and see what God wants to show us.

If you choose to follow along, here is our plan:

Sunday's	Chapters	Themes
Jan 4	Intro, Chs 1-2	Seeing what's missing
Jan 11	Chs 3, 4, & 9	We're not so good
Jan 18	Chs 5, 8, & 11	The truth sets us free
Jan 25	Chs 6, 10, & 12	Loving real people
Feb 1	Chs 7, 14, & 17	Sitting in pain
Feb 8	Chs 13, 15, & 16	Faith in action
Feb 15	Chs 18, 19 & Concl	Home by another road

Yes, we're skipping around. Yes, you'll get all 19 chapters by the end. No, the world won't end if you read them out of order.

But What If I'm a Sequential Reader?

Look, we get it. Some of you break out in hives, figuratively, at the thought of reading Chapter 9 before Chapter 5. Your inner librarian is screaming. You color-code your calendar and alphabetize your spices.

So, here's your permission slip: Read the book however you want.

If reading straight through from page 1 brings you joy and keeps you engaged, do that. You'll still benefit from the series, and honestly, the chapters work both ways—they tell a coherent story sequentially, AND they stand alone thematically. Bolz-Weber structures each chapter around a different saint or liturgical moment, so jumping around doesn't break anything essential.

But if you're willing to try something different, give the thematic approach a shot. You might discover that reading Chapter 8 (Sandy Hook) right before hearing a sermon about truth-telling on MLK weekend creates connections you wouldn't have noticed reading it in order. Sometimes disruption leads to epiphany. Which is, after all, what this whole series is about.

We'll have a few new books available for purchase at $7 each. Additional copies of the paperback edition are available through Amazon for under $11, and used copies in good condition are even less. This book may also be available at the local library.

Our Book Club does not meet as a group. However, our weekly messages reference that week's chapters. You can anticipate spoiler alerts unless you keep up with the pace. You can purchase your own copy or visit your local library.

You can contact our office with questions by phone or simply type your question or enter a prayer request on our website's homepage — FlintAsburyChurch.org.

Pastor Tommy

Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).

Cash or checks can be sent to/dropped off at South Flint Soup Kitchen, 3410 Fenton Road, Flint, MI 48507. Please make checks out to South Flint Soup Kitchen!

Online at www.mightycause.com/feedflint

Donations can be dropped off Monday-Friday 11am-12Noon. Calling ahead is not necessary, but our needs change frequently, so calling ahead of time is a good idea!

Give time! We need volunteers!!! Volunteers arrive at 9:30am and are done by 12:30pm. Tasks include handing out lunches, assisting in the Angel Closet, light cleaning, putting together items to pass out to clients, and more.

Refer people!!

Questions??? Call 810-239-3427

or email southflintsoupkitchen@gmail.com

These are not signs of moral failure so much as unhealed emotional formation. They are the scars left by lives lived under pressure—by wounds we did not choose, fears we did not invent, and lessons we absorbed long before we knew we were learning them. Crossing to the other side of the road, away from victims, is often the body's way of saying, this feels like too much.

This is why none of us is meant to function alone.

Healthy emotional life—whether in families, churches, or nations—depends on interdependence. We need others to name what we cannot see in ourselves, to slow us down when fear accelerates us, to remind us of our shared humanity when our instincts push us toward isolation or domination. The problem is not that we have these traits; the problem is when they go unchecked, unchallenged, and unhealed—especially when combined with authority.

Fortunately, the gospel speaks a clear word of hope. Scripture assumes our brokenness long before we confess it. God does not wait for us to be emotionally whole before offering grace. Instead, God meets us precisely in our fear, our defensiveness, and our avoidance—offering not condemnation, but formation.

Grace is not permission to remain as we are. Grace is the power that makes growth possible. To remember that fear blames, but love heals.

God works through relationships—through community, accountability, and love—to strengthen our capacity for empathy, restraint, and compassion. God does not remove our scars overnight, but God gives us something stronger than fear: an inner freedom that allows us to move toward others even when every instinct tells us to cross the road.

This is why Jesus never asks whether we are wounded. He knows we are. The question He presses is whether our wounds will be allowed to rule us—or whether grace will teach us a different way.

Most of us are blessed to live in circumstances where our emotional shortcomings cause limited harm. We stumble, we fail, we repair, we grow. But the stakes change when emotional brokenness is paired with unchecked power. That is why formation matters—not only for our private lives, but for our shared life as neighbors.

Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan is well known even outside its place in Luke's Gospel. But it is important to pause and consider one of the deeper dynamics at work in that parable: the development of emotional maturity over the course of a life. Luke shares both the parable and the backstory in his gospel.

A group of legal experts confronted Jesus, looking for a way to trip Him while blowing their own horns. One of them asks Jesus what one needs to do to please God and thus receive eternal life. Jesus, in His usual manner of responding in such situations, asks a question. "How do you interpret what scripture tells you?"

The way Jesus reacts doesn't appear to assume anything about the questioner's intentions or preexisting bias. And his answer seems consistent with how Jesus would answer the question. "Love God and your neighbor," he replies.

But after Jesus acknowledged that He agreed with his answer, the expert pressed further. Luke says that he was trying to justify himself, which makes me wonder about the man's emotional intelligence. Nevertheless, his question is a good one. "Who is my neighbor?"

Page 17

Jenna Russell, writing for the New York Times, noted that Facebook comments were mixed, with several thanking the church for "speaking truth to power." While another person posted that "the devil has infiltrated the church." Elizabeth Doris-Gustin, 67, a longtime neighbor of the parish, said this: "You might not agree with everything, but it makes you think. I wish a few more churches would be this bold."

Nativity scenes appeared across the country this year without the Holy Family. They still have a stable. There are animals. The structure looks familiar. But Mary and Joseph—and sometimes the child—are missing. Often, no explanation is offered. The scene is simply incomplete.

That image lingers, because it feels familiar.

There is a growing sense that something essential has been removed—not destroyed, just displaced and not argued away, just quietly set aside. Over the past year in particular, many have felt it: a loss of hope we once assumed would always be there.

Many of us hope that our country will mirror our values, shaped by the teachings of Christ. This is different than making Christianity a national religion, since our hopes mirror those of most of the world's religions. It is the hope that strangers can be welcomed without fear, that truth can matter more than power, that the vulnerable are worth protecting, and that the future can be more just than the present.

Instead, something has shifted: fear has been normalized, suspicion has been rewarded, cruelty has been excused as realism, and outsiders have become convenient symbols for everything we're anxious about. What's been lost is not confidence or comfort—it's moral imagination. The ability to believe that we can be better than our worst instincts.

This is the hope many feel has slipped through our fingers—not because it was weak, but because it was treated as expendable.

Matthew begins his telling of the Christmas story with people who don't belong. And that tension feels uncomfortably familiar. They're not neighbors. Not insiders. Not people who already belong. Nor are they shepherds from nearby fields. Neither are they neighbors from Bethlehem. And they're certainly not faithful insiders who know the songs and the scriptures by heart. No, they're just strangers from somewhere else.

At least three individuals, "Matthew tells us—scholars from the East, likely Persian—make their way across borders and through uncertainty, guided by a sign they cannot fully explain. They arrive in Jerusalem with a question that unsettles everyone who hears it: Where is the child who has been born King?

They came from different customs, different food, and likely had different assumptions about how the world works and how God speaks. They dressed differently. They likely spoke an ancient Persian dialect (Iran) and also Aramaic, the language of the Holy Family. Nevertheless, they somehow show up in Matthew's gospel as the ones paying attention.

Their journey is long, uncertain, and risky. They cross borders. They travel through unfamiliar territory. They rely on hospitality that they cannot guarantee. And when they finally arrive in Jerusalem—the religious and political center—they don't find welcome.

They are not looking for something new. They are looking for something true. They're looking for hope.

So they do what makes sense. They go to the palace, where they find Herod. Herod listens, but not with curiosity. He asks questions, but not because he wants to learn. He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

Page 17

Her words do not deny the ugliness of war. They refuse to look away from wounds and tragedies. Instead, she asks whether there are people courageous enough to stand with victims and confront aggressors. Implicit in her question is a harder one: what happens to human beings when power is exercised without accountability, restraint, or compassion?

The suffering Olena describes is not unique to Ukraine, even if the bombs and ruins are more visible there. Around the world—and closer to home—suffering often begins with a failure of leadership to live as God intends we live together and to protect rather than exploit the vulnerable. It's happening to immigrants living in Minneapolis who came to this country with great anticipation

Research consistently shows that people do not leave their homelands casually. Studies of immigration to the United States reveal that while economic opportunity matters, a significant number of immigrants cite violence, insecurity, and the collapse of basic freedoms as central reasons for leaving. Immigration, for many, is not ambition—it is escape. It is an act of survival in response to cruelty, corruption, or fear that has become unbearable.

That story continues once people arrive here. Journalists have documented families who fled violence, bled violence, followed every instruction given by the U.S. government, attended hearings, checked in regularly, and tried to build quiet, faithful lives—only to find themselves suddenly detained, separated, or living under constant threat.

Moreover, the suffering caused by aggressive immigration enforcement is not limited to those who lack authorization. In practice, it falls most heavily on people of color from countries viewed as disposable or suspect by those in power. The result is a form of suffering that experts describe as chronic and corrosive: parents afraid to drive, children anxious about school, entire communities learning to remain invisible. Like war, it is suffering shaped by decisions made far away, by leaders who will never meet the people who bear the cost.

Human beings respond to this kind of suffering in predictable ways. Trauma specialists tell us that prolonged fear and uncertainty rewire the nervous system; people live in a constant state of alert, unable to rest. Sociologists note that when suffering is paired with powerlessness, it erodes dignity and hope.

Those watching from the outside often respond differently. Some turn away, overwhelmed by the scale of pain.

Others explain it away, insisting it is necessary, deserved, or inevitable. Still others grow numb, scrolling past one more story of loss because paying attention feels too heavy. Yet voices like Olena's refuse that numbing. They insist that suffering is not a statistic or a political inconvenience—it is a moral summons.

Across war zones and immigration courts alike, the pattern is clear. When leaders cling to power through fear, ordinary people suffer. And when suffering is ignored, justified, or hidden, it multiplies. The question Olena asks from Ukraine echoes here as well: Where are the peacemakers? Who is willing to face the ugliness without looking away, to plant seeds of courage, to stand with the wounded and name the truth about what is being done to them?

At the same time, we need to be honest about something else. For many of our neighbors here in Flint, especially those who rely on shelters and warming centers, like the one run by Catholic Charities, suffering is not something they read about in the news. It is something they wake up with in their bodies. Chronic illness, untreated pain, exhaustion, anxiety, and the daily stress of not knowing where they will sleep or how they will be cared for weigh heavily on them.

Page 19

After all, if we're to love our neighbor, isn't it important to establish boundaries? There are a lot of people in this world, and most of us will only meet a tiny percentage of them. Who counts and doesn't count in this critical question of who we're expected to show love towards.

Jesus responds with a story to illustrate rather than offering specific boundaries. In His story, a man is in need of assistance. Two people see his desperation as he lies helpless, but cross to the side of the road to avoid stopping. A third man stops and goes to great lengths to offer help.

Who pass by are a priest and a Levite. These are prominent, powerful people with access to power and resources. But instead of stopping, they both move quickly past the wounded man. Jesus doesn't say that they chose not to help out of malice. But why did they not offer assistance?

Let's speculate by putting ourselves in their sandals. What if both walked by without helping because of their own emotional framework? What if their emotional maturity was shaped by fear, rule-keeping, or avoidance, leaving them unable to see or to stay with suffering?

The priest and the Levite cross to the other side, perhaps telling themselves there must be a reason this man ended up here. When fear takes hold, it's easier to explain suffering away, assign fault, and protect ourselves by distancing ourselves from the wounded. Fear blames the victim.

The one who stopped to give aid, on the other hand, was a Samaritan. This information would not go unnoticed by those listening. They would have bristled at the idea of a person from Samaria playing the role of hero in the story. In today's context, this might be an undocumented immigrant that we've been led to believe is dangerous.

Which one of these three acted like a neighbor toward the man? The one who was kind to him. Go, then, and do the same.

Luke 10:25-37

The Samaritan demonstrates a different emotional posture. He notices the wounded stranger, and his heart is moved. To see another person fully—to refuse to reduce them to failure or fault—is an act of love. Healing begins not when wounds disappear, but when someone stays.

He interrupts his journey to engage in the work of mercy. The Samaritan stops, draws near, and tends what is broken. Fear blames. Love heals.

"Who was a neighbor to the person in need?" Jesus asked as He finished telling His story. "The one who gave assistance," the expert responded. Jesus concludes His response to the man's original question with, "Go and do likewise."

The story Jesus told does not ask whether we have scars. Jesus knows we do. The question before us is this: whether our own formation teaches us show love to others in crisis, or to put a safe distance between us and those who suffer?

Luke's story insists that maturity is not the absence of fear, but the courage to love anyway. Fear blames. Love heals.

This week's chapters from our companion book remind us that emotional formation—the willingness to know ourselves, to accept ourselves honestly, and to share who we are with others—is not merely a private endeavor. It is the soil in which neighborly love grows.

As we prepare to respond to Jesus's challenge about who our neighbor is, we can begin by admitting where our own emotional development has helped us show compassion—and where it has hindered us from entering into the suffering, confusion, and need of others.

In our reading this week, Nadia reminds us that our spiritual lives are shaped not only by what we believe but by what we learned early on about survival, power, and self-protection.

In Chapter 6, she invites us to revisit Jesus' unsettling image of the thief in the night—not as someone who steals what matters most, but as Christ who quietly takes away what we never truly needed in the first place: our illusions of control, our defenses, our carefully constructed identities.

Jesus does not steal our life; He steals the false selves we cling to because they make us feel safe. That kind of theft is terrifying to anyone whose emotional life has been formed around vigilance and fear. Trauma does not make someone cruel, but it does train the body and mind to avoid danger at all costs. When the nervous system is shaped by threat, the instinct is not to move toward pain, but away from it—to bypass, to numb, to survive.

Read through that lens, the priest and the Levite are not monsters. They may simply be people whose emotional formation has taught them that stopping is unsafe, closeness is costly, and vulnerability is dangerous. Crossing to the other side can feel like wisdom when fear is in charge.

Nadia confesses her own deeply ingrained belief that she does not need others. Independence, she realizes, had become not a strength but a shield. To need no one is to remain unexposed, unaccountable, and unentangled. But it is also to remain isolated. This is another way emotional brokenness shows itself—not as panic, but as self-sufficiency hardened into pride. When we believe we do not need others, relationships become optional, and neighbors become expendable.

In Chapter 12, we learn from Bobbie and Amy what it means to see one another. They recognize one another's humanity, not despite their brokenness, but within it. They are not winners in the conventional sense. They have not mastered life. But they have learned something essential: to see another person fully—to refuse to reduce them to a problem, a burden, or a loser—is already an act of love. And that kind of seeing requires emotional maturity and courage.

Taken together, these stories help us name a difficult truth: the inability to love and accept others is rarely a sign of strength. More often, it is a symptom of fear, emotional injury, or unresolved need. Crossing to the other side—whether from a wounded man, a struggling neighbor, or a suffering people—is not neutrality. It is a learned response to a perceived threat.

And here is where this becomes uncomfortably personal. All of us carry emotional scars. All of us have moments when something inside us whispers, keep moving… don't get involved… protect yourself. The gospel does not deny this reality. Instead, it asks whether we will allow those instincts to have the final word. Most of us, by grace and practice, find the inner strength to move toward others anyway. And when we fail, the harm we cause is usually limited.

But not everyone holds power in the same way. When emotional brokenness goes unexamined in positions of great authority, its consequences multiply. The refusal to see others as neighbors becomes policy. The inability to need others becomes isolation. Fear, unchecked, becomes cruelty.

For someone already overwhelmed by their own survival, stories of war in Ukraine or immigrant families facing deportation can feel distant, even unbearable. It is not indifference; it is depletion. Compassion is hard to extend when every ounce of energy is already spent just getting through the day.

The same is true for many who will hear or read these words. Much suffering is hidden. Some are grieving losses no one else sees. Others are carrying medical diagnoses, financial strain, fractured relationships, or deep loneliness in silence. For them, global suffering does not always put their pain "in perspective." More often, it adds to the weight.

Scripture never asks suffering people to minimize their own pain in order to care about others. Instead, it recognizes that suffering has many faces—and that God's concern is wide enough to hold them all at once.

Matthew begins his gospel with a story that feels just close enough to the cruelty we're witnessing today to feel like a foreshadowing of things to come. Matthew tells us that when visitors from the East arrive in Jerusalem, asking about a newborn king, King Herod is not curious, but terrified. After Jesus was born, the king feared his power might be challenged, so he ordered the slaughter of the children.

Matthew includes a haunting reference to an older Scripture—words about Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted. Matthew is not quoting poetry at random. He is reaching back into Israel's memory of trauma, exile, and loss, reminding his readers that the suffering surrounding Jesus is not new, and it is not ignored by God. To understand what Matthew is doing, we need to listen carefully to that earlier story—and to why tears, not triumph, are the first sounds that surround the birth of the Savior.

When Matthew quotes, "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children," he is reaching back to the prophet Jeremiah. Rachel, one of Israel's matriarchs, had long been remembered as the symbolic mother of the nation. In Jeremiah's time, her "weeping" names one of Israel's deepest collective traumas: the Babylonian exile.

Ramah was a place where captives were gathered before being marched away from their homes, their land, and their future. Parents watched children disappear. Families were torn apart. The loss was so profound that Jeremiah describes Rachel refusing comfort—not because comfort is cruel, but because grief that deep cannot be rushed.

Scripture does not ask us to pretend this grief isn't real. In fact, it gives us language when our own words fail. Psalm 13 cries out, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" This is not a loss of faith, but it is faith refusing to lie. Like Rachel's tears, this lament is allowed to stand. God does not interrupt it with explanations. God receives it.

In Jeremiah, Rachel's tears are not the end of the story. God speaks words of promise: "Keep your voice from weeping… There is hope for your future." Importantly, the hope does not erase the grief. God does not scold Rachel for her tears or tell her to move on. The promise comes after the lament, not instead of it. In Israel's faith, grief is not a failure of belief—it is part of faithful remembering. God allows the tears to stand.

A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping, Rachel is crying for her children, she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead.

Matthew 2:16-18

This matters for anyone who is suffering now. Jeremiah does not ask wounded people to pretend the exile wasn't devastating. He gives them language for their pain and assures them that God hears it.

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When Matthew brings Rachel's weeping into his Gospel, he does something striking. He places Jesus' story squarely inside a history of unresolved grief. Herod orders the killing of children not because they are dangerous, but because he is afraid. Like tyrants before him, he confuses vulnerability with threat and responds with violence. Mothers weep. Families mourn. Innocent lives are lost. And Matthew does not soften the horror.

Just as important is what Matthew does not say. He does not explain why God "allowed" this to happen. He does not suggest the suffering was necessary or redemptive in the moment. He does not rush us toward resurrection language or silver linings. Instead, he insists that the birth of Jesus occurs in a world where abusive power causes suffering, and leaders still sacrifice the vulnerable to preserve themselves, and where grief is real and justified.

For people suffering today—whether from war, displacement, poverty, illness, or quiet despair—this honesty matters. Matthew refuses to turn suffering into a theological puzzle to be solved. He tells the truth: the coming of Christ does not immediately end tyranny or prevent tragedy. What it does is place God inside the story of suffering, not above it or outside it.

It can be tempting, in the face of suffering that seems overwhelming, to reach for familiar spiritual phrases — "God has a plan," or" It will all work out for good." But too often these words end up minimizing pain, as if suffering must be explained rather than felt.

would be remiss if I didn't lift up the story of five-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos and his father, Adrian Conejo Arias. The two were taken into custody recently in Minnesota by federal immigration agents. They were not arrested for violence or for wrongdoing of any kind. In fact, they were in the midst of an active asylum case that they had pursued legally and patiently.

Images of Liam, wearing a blue bunny hat and a Spider-Man backpack as he was led away by agents, quickly became a symbol of how vulnerable lives are affected by enforcement practices enacted by the current administration. Community members and school officials reported that the boy had just come home from preschool when the agents approached, and observers raised serious questions about the way the operation was conducted.

The outcry that followed was neither quiet nor abstract. People — from teachers to lawmakers to advocates — spoke up. Protests formed outside the detention facility in Texas where they were held, with demonstrators insisting that children are not criminals and calling for humane treatment. State and national leaders pressed for accountability and urged respect for the family's right to due process. A federal judge ruled that neither Liam nor his father could be deported or transferred while their case proceeds in court, affirming the basic legal principle that no one can be removed from the country without due process of law.

These responses matter for our vision of what faithful presence looks like. Courageous witness is not found in denial of suffering, nor in shrugging helplessly at cruelty, but in speaking truth — even when it is uncomfortable or costly. People came forward despite their fear, despite knowing that raising their voices might invite backlash. Their actions reflect what our companion book describes as hope that engages reality rather than escaping it — the kind of hope that stands with suffering people instead of patting them from afar with clichés.

And this is precisely the kind of vision God casts for us: a vision in which suffering is acknowledged fully, where power is held accountable, and where the community of faith refuses to let injustice go unnoticed. To stand against suffering is not the same as believing suffering is

Page 26

What is salient for us isn't clinical labels—but the observable patterns we all see when emotional immaturity is coupled with power: a low capacity for empathy, a quickness to dehumanize, and an instinct to defend oneself by objectifying others. These are the same dynamics that incline hearts to cross to the other side of the road rather than stop, stay, and care for the wounded.

By the end of Jesus' story, the question has shifted. It is no longer, Who is my neighbor? The question is, will I cross to the other side of the road?

The road itself is unavoidable. We all encounter suffering, disruption, and need. We all feel the pull of fear—the instinct to explain pain away, to protect ourselves, to blame the wounded so we don't have to stop. Scripture does not deny that fear. It names it honestly.

But Jesus tells this story to show us that fear does not have to decide the direction of our lives.

The Samaritan is not fearless. He is formed. He allows compassion to interrupt him. He sees the wounded man not as a problem to solve or a failure to explain, but as a human being to be loved. He crosses the road toward him—and healing begins there. Healing begins when we stop pretending we don't need one another, when we allow ourselves to be seen and to see, when we refuse to reduce others to their wounds or our fears.

Jesus tells us this truth through stories, instruction, and action: Fear blames. Love heals. And every day—quietly, deliberately—we choose which one will guide our steps.

That same choice confronts us again and again. Sometimes it appears in public debates or national crises. More often, it shows up quietly—in conversations we avoid, judgments we make too quickly, neighbors we pass without really seeing. Each time fear urges us to blame or dismiss, we are given another opportunity to ask a better question: What would it look like to move toward healing?

This week, that may mean pausing when fear feels justified, and blame comes easily. It may mean resisting the urge to explain someone's suffering instead of acknowledging it. It may mean allowing ourselves to need others rather than insisting on self-sufficiency. Love rarely begins with certainty. It begins with attention.

We are not meant to practice this alone. Emotional and spiritual maturity grow in community—through relationships that slow us down, challenge us, and remind us of who we are when fear narrows our vision. God works through one another to form us into people who can stay present, cross toward suffering, and choose compassion even when it costs us something.

We live in a world where blame is easy and rewarded, where fear is amplified and normalized, where turning away is often mistaken for wisdom or strength. But the gospel tells a different story—and offers a different way: Fear blames. Love heals.

The road will be there again tomorrow. By grace, may we notice it—and may God give us the courage to cross it toward love. You can join us each Sunday in person or online by clicking the button on our ***website's*** homepage. ***Click here to watch***. This button takes you to our ***YouTube channel***. You can find more information about us on our website at ***FlintAsburyChurch.org***.

This is a reminder that we publish a weekly newsletter called the Circuit Rider. You can request this publication by email by sending a request to ***FlintAsburyUMC@gmail.com***, or let us know when you send a message through our ***website***. We post an archive of past editions on our website under Connect - choose ***Newsletters***.

Pastor Tommy

Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).

Richard Wood. *"Does Malignant Narcissism Fit Trump?"* © Clio's Psyche, Volume 31 - Number 1, Fall 2024. Retrieved from: ***link***

absent. It is saying — with our actions, our voices, and our compassion — that cruelty does not have the last word and that God's presence is with the wounded.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, in this week's chapters from our companion book, reminds us that God does not hide uncomfortable truths behind platitudes. God stands in the midst of suffering, with those who mourn and with those whose lives have been caught up in cruelty and fear, and calls us to stand with them, too.

God is with those who suffer in Ukraine, with families seeking refuge, and with every neighbor whose pain is unseen or unheard. God calls us not to minimize their experiences but to walk alongside them — advocating, witnessing, and giving voice to their dignity. This is what it means to see suffering the way God sees it: not as a test to be explained, but as a reality to be met with courage, compassion, and justice.

For those at the warming center in Flint, for those navigating chronic illness, for those carrying grief or fear they rarely name out loud, this story does not demand more than they can give. It does not ask them to fix the world or feel compassion they do not have the energy to feel. It simply says this: God sees suffering clearly, names it honestly, and refuses to look away. Rachel's tears matter. Ukrainian tears matter. Immigrant tears matter. Your tears matter.

Matthew's Gospel begins not with triumph, but with mourning—because God is not afraid of grief. And because salvation does not begin by denying how broken the world is, but by entering it fully.

From the beginning of Jesus' story, Matthew tells us that God chooses to enter a world shaped by tyrants rather than wait for a safer one. Rachel's tears are not dismissed. Families fleeing violence are not invisible. Those who suffer in body, spirit, or circumstance are not asked to justify their pain or find meaning in it too quickly. God stands with those who suffer—and stands against the forces that cause suffering. That is not sentiment. That is the moral arc of the gospel.

So what does faith look like in a world like this? It does not require us to carry suffering we do not have the capacity to carry. It does not demand perfect words or heroic action from everyone. What it does call for is honesty, presence, and courage—expressed differently depending on who we are and where we stand.

You can join us each Sunday in person or online by clicking the button on our ***website's*** homepage. ***Click here to watch***. This button takes you to our ***YouTube channel***. You can find more information about us on our website at ***FlintAsburyChurch.org***.

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Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*. NY: Convergent Books, 2015. (ISBN 978-1-60142-755-7).

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