

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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January 1, 2019
HUMAN DIGNITY

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2, Matthew 1-2:12, Psalms 1, Proverbs 1:1-6

Imago Dei. The image of God. In the beginning, God created human beings in His image. Male and female He created them. Made to be like Him. Made to reflect His glory. Made to be loved by Him. Out of the dust, He fashioned us. He breathed into our lungs His very breath. His very Spirit. It was not good for us to be alone so He made us a partner. A helpmate. The formation of community. The very first relationship. So intimate was this relationship between man and woman, humanity and God, that they were naked and unashamed.

What a beautiful picture of the innate worth and dignity given to every single human being! This passage forms the foundation of our modern day understanding of universal human rights. It's why we naturally resist - Christian or not - the Darwinian "classification" of human beings. It's why "de-humanization" in whatever form is so horrifying. One of the worst things we can do from a biblical perspective is treat another human being, another divine image-bearer, as somehow less than what they are.

I remember fighting this battle when I served as a prison chaplain. New Jersey State Prison is the maximum security facility for the state. Death row used to be housed there. It's where they send the worst kind of criminals. When I was there, 60% of the inmates were serving sentences for murder of one degree or another. The rest had committed some form of violent crime. I believe one of the reasons my ministry was so effective over the two years I was there is because I treated the men with dignity and respect. I honored them as "image-bearers" and they, in turn, honored me. I stayed in touch with many of the men over the years since I left and it has been a joy to watch them grow and change and, in some cases, re-enter society.

Sadly, treating others with dignity and respect is something that escapes our culture. We engage in "de-humanizing" talk on a daily basis. Turn on cable television. Listen to people talk at your local bar or coffee shop. Scroll through your Twitter feed. It's brutal. Leaders in every sector of society seem to be getting in on the act. Politics. Education. Business. Even the church. We demonize. We character assassinate. We seek to tear down those who disagree with us. Those who think differently than us. Those who come from different countries, different ethnicities, different sexual orientations, you name it. We marginalize and ostracize and persecute and the results are devastating. Depression. Despair. Pain. Suffering. Violence. Even death.

Here's the first hard biblical truth...every single human being is made in the image of God and is loved unconditionally by God. Every single human being is worthy of dignity and respect. Every human being is made for relationship and community. To hate another human being is to hate someone God loves. To treat another human being with disrespect is to disrespect someone God has formed and fashioned with His own hands. To isolate another human being from relationship or ostracize them from community is to place them in a condition God Himself refused to do. "It is not good for man to be alone..."

Does this mean we simply remain passive in the face of evil? No. Does it mean we let people walk all over us? Absolutely not. Does it mean we can't set boundaries on unhealthy people? Of course it doesn't. What it means is that even in the worst of situations. When we are confronting an abuser or someone who has committed an act of violence against us or those we love. When a police officer exercises force to protect us or our military men and women fight an enemy in some faraway land. When someone hurts our feelings or betrays our trust. Even in these situations, we refuse to let anger or revenge or hatred drive us to "de-humanizing" words or actions. We refuse to diminish the image of God in that other person or persons. We ask God to give us the strength to see them as He sees them and to treat them as His justice and righteousness demands.

As you make your New Year's Resolutions, let me suggest one that could be a game-changer. Resolve to treat everyone you meet and interact with socially, professionally, personally, even on social media as an image-bearer of God. Someone endowed with divine worth and dignity. Someone who is beloved by God Himself. You will be amazed at how this transforms your perspective and brings blessing into your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-4, Matthew 2:13-3:6, Psalms 2:1-12, Proverbs 1:7-9

January 2, 2019
SHAME

Readings for today: Genesis 3-4, Matthew 2:13-3:6, Psalms 2, Proverbs 1:7-9

Do you remember the first time you experienced shame? Psychologists consider it one of our deepest, most primal emotions. It arises internally and is reinforced externally from the time we are very young. It is an important emotion. Those who are incapable of experiencing shame are often socio or psychopathic. Their inability to feel this emotion cripples them in significant ways. On the flip side, many experience excessive feelings of shame which can be just as crippling. How have you dealt with shame? Do you bury it? Deny it? Medicate it? Try to find ways to numb it? This, of course, forms the bedrock of the research Brene Brown has become famous for. Her initial TED talk on shame went viral and still remains one of the most popular. She's written several New York Times' bestsellers on the subject as well so clearly there is a hunger in our culture for healthy ways of dealing with our deep-seated shame.

Where does shame come from? Psychologists have puzzled over this for decades. The Bible, however, is clear. Shame is the first emotion human beings feel in the wake of their sin. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. They break God's command. They disobey and rebel, all in an attempt to become like God. What initially tastes so sweet turns bitter in the stomach as their eyes are opened to what they have just done. They experience shame and their first instinct is to cover up. Hide their nakedness. From each other. From God. "Where are you?" God calls out. As if He doesn't already know. Adam and Eve feel exposed. They don't feel safe. So they play the blame game. The woman caused me to eat! The serpent tricked me! Careful readers will take note how they try to turn this back on God. As if it were His fault for creating woman and the serpent or even putting the tree there in the first place.

God is gracious, however. He doesn't want them to live forever in their shame. So He makes them clothes to cover their nakedness and He banishes them from paradise lest they stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life. But the cycle of shame continues. Cain's "face falls" when his offering is not accepted. This is a very Middle Eastern way of saying Cain was ashamed. His shame eventually led to violence as he kills his own brother in cold blood. The murder of his brother leads to more shame when he's confronted by God. "My punishment is greater than I can bear..." Once again, God is gracious and places a special mark on Cain to protect him. Shame is not just an Old Testament idea. It was shame that caused Herod to lash out and kill all the infants in and around Bethlehem. Embarrassed by the betrayal of the wise men, he commits infanticide. It was shame that drove the people to John the Baptist where they repented and confessed their sins and were baptized. It is the lack of shame on the part of the nations that the Psalmist calling attention to when he encourages them serve the Lord with fear and trembling. Thankfully, God extends grace once again as the nations are encouraged to find refuge in Him.

"Where are you?" The question God first asked Adam and Eve in the Garden persists to this day. It comes to each of us and meets us right where we are in life. It comes as an invitation. A scary one to be sure! It is the invitation to be vulnerable. Exposed. Naked before the Lord. To confess our sins and let Him into the deepest recesses of our being. The dark places we all have in our hearts where we bury those things that cause us the greatest shame. God wants into those places. He wants to shed the light of His grace into the darkness of our hearts so that we may finally experience true healing. True peace. And rest securely in His unconditional love. He wants us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is nothing that can separate us from Him which is why He sent His only Son into the world. On the cross, Jesus bore not just our sin but our shame as well. He endured utter and complete humiliation so we would not have to. This, friends, is the great news of the gospel! The good news that was preached to Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and all their descendants even to you and me today. Believe it! Embrace it! Accept God's invitation! Kiss the Son and be set free from your shame!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 5-7, Matthew 3:7-4:11, Psalms 3, Proverbs 1:10-19

January 3, 2019
THE DESCENT OF MAN

Readings for today: Genesis 5-7, Matthew 3:7-4:11, Psalm 3, Proverbs 1:10-19

In 1871, Charles Darwin published the culmination of his life's work. Titled The Descent of Man, it applied general evolutionary theory to human beings. Human beings, Darwin argues, are "descended" from more primitive life forms and subject to natural selection much like every other lifeform in the world. Of course, "Descent" is somewhat of a double entendre because Darwin's theory also levels the playing field between human beings and the rest of the animal world. We are not special. We are not set apart. We certainly are not made in the image of God, have no divine mandate, and therefore no kind of descendant status over the rest of creation. Though there is some debate about Darwin's own views, his theory has been used to justify all kinds of evil. Racism. Eugenics. Social Darwinism and the Final Solution. If humanity is not set apart by God. If humanity is not special in any way. If humanity is just another animal species than we are NOT endowed with any inalienable rights and therefore might makes right. Natural selection is just. It's survival of the fittest and only the strongest survive.

Strangely enough, the Bible also talks about the "Descent of Man." Not in terms of biological evolution but in terms of moral devolution. We will see this story set on repeat throughout the Scriptures. God makes a covenant with a human family. The descendants of that particular human family become morally compromised over time. Their corruption eventually becomes so great that God responds with righteous anger and judgment. God then starts over with a new covenant with a new human family and the cycle begins anew. Some might argue this calls God's judgment into question. Why do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result? Isn't that the definition of insanity? This is not, of course, the argument the Bible makes. The point the Bible sets out to prove is the utter futility of humanity. Humanity is, simply put - a lost cause. Sin corrupts everything it touches. Infecting every heart. Polluting every mind. Silencing every soul. There is no hope for us unless God Himself decides to intervene.

Thankfully this is exactly what God does. The Bible is a record of God's interventions in human history over time. He intervened with Adam and Eve, clothing them in an act of grace before sending them out of the Garden into a world ruined by sin. As the generations that come after them descend into further chaos, devolving to the point where God Himself grieves over what He has made, He intervenes yet again. He starts over by delivering Noah and his family from the flood. One can only imagine what it must have been like for Noah as he watched the world around him drown. I cannot fathom the pain and suffering he must have witnessed. But that is nothing compared to the pain God experienced as He watched His good creation drown in evil and sin. Grieving over what He made, He makes the terrible decision to cleanse the world by destroying it.

Fast forward thousands of years. The world is still writhing in pain. Still ravaged by sin. Still drowning in evil. God's heart continues to break. He grieves over what He has made and He makes the terrible decision to send His Beloved Son into the world to cleanse it once and for all. Jesus appears before his cousin John to be baptized. All of the Old Testament prophecies are coming to fulfillment. Jesus will be destroyed so the world can be saved. Jesus will suffer so you and I can be set free. Jesus will drown in order to rescue all of creation. This is the good news of the gospel, friends!

I know the world around us suffers. There is injustice. There is pain. There is heartache and heartbreak. Hatred, evil, and sin still seemingly run amuck. Human systems cannot stem the tide. Human beings cannot save the day. Our only hope is God. And thankfully, He is eternally faithful. Place your trust in Him and you will never be put to shame!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-10, Matthew 4:12-25, Psalm 4, Proverbs 1:20-23

January 4, 2019
CREATION MANDATE

Readings for today: Genesis 8-10, Matthew 4:12-25, Psalms 4, Proverbs 1:20-23

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything...And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it." (Genesis 9:1-3, 7)

As I've mentioned before, we will see a pattern repeat itself throughout the Bible. Humanity is lifted up by God. Loved by God. Blessed by God. God covenants with them to be their God and they to be His people. We saw this happen with Adam and Eve. We saw this happen with Seth. We see this happening with Noah and his family. We will see it with Abram and Sarai and the rest of the patriarchs/matriarchs. We will see it with Moses and Joshua. Samuel and David. Finally, we will see this pattern find it's completion and fulfillment in Jesus Himself. God continuing to pursue His people throughout history. However, despite God's faithfulness, humanity remains faithless. We abandon Him. We abandon His ways. We rebel against His laws. We reject His will. Our lives descend into chaos and pain and death. Thus the need for covenant renewal.

The words above from Genesis 9 should sound familiar. They are a restatement of the creation mandate God first gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1. "And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth...Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:28-31) This is God's will for all humanity. He creates us so we will be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with His image. His glory. His love. His grace. His purpose for our lives is dominion. He has given the entire earth over to our care. Every plant. Every tree. Every animal. Every bird. Every fish. And this is very good in God's eyes.

The problem, of course, is we are such terrible stewards. We exploit the earth for its resources. We consume far more than we need or could ever want. We over-indulge. We are gluttonous. We are drunkards. We are wasteful. And this is no politically liberal diatribe. Facts are facts. We use and abuse the earth to satisfy our every desire. Look at the amount of trash in our oceans. Look at the amount of waste in our landfills. Look at the obesity rates in our country or the rates of addiction. Think about your own life and how this manifests itself. Where do you over-indulge? Where do you drink or eat or use energy to excess? Consider a personal audit of your finances and your time and your talent...how much of it is being spent on you or your family? And how much of it is being directed outward towards the planet God has entrusted into your care? Towards others who are in need? Towards God and His ministry in the world?

Creation care is a divine mandate. We should be concerned about our footprint on the earth. We should be concerned about climate change and how much of it is man-made. We should be constantly seeking renewable and sustainable ways to use energy. We should consider our rate of consumption. Not because we are being forced to culturally. Not because we align with some kind of political party or another. Not because ranchers and farmers and oil and gas folks are evil. They are not. No, we engage on these issues because we are Christians and God has given us dominion. Furthermore, we know God expects us to exercise that dominion unselfishly, for the good of the world He loves so much. In this way, we are actually practicing for heaven. We are getting prepared for glory. For when the new heavens and new earth come, the creation mandate will be renewed once again and we will be sent out to care for all God has made for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 11-13:4, Matthew 5:1-26, Psalms 5, Proverbs 1:24-28

January 5, 2019
THE PRIDE OF HUMANITY

Readings for today: Genesis 11-13:4, Matthew 5:1-26, Psalms 5, Proverbs 1:24-28

"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4)

It makes perfect sense. The children and grandchildren and other descendants of Noah walked off the ark into a strange, new world. A world that had radically changed. A world that must have seemed so foreign. Everything they once knew was gone. All the cities. All the towns. All the villages. All the fields. All the forests. Everything had died. Everything was ruined. It would now be their task to rebuild. To restore. To make the earth fruitful again. God had given them a clear command. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. That all sounds well and good until you're actually faced with the prospect of hiking over the next hill into the unknown. Much easier to stay together. Much easier to stay comfortable. Much easier to stay safe.

Why build a tower that stretches to the heavens? Because no matter how far afield I go, I can look back and still see it standing in the distance. It becomes a sort of "North Star" for me, always leading me home. Always giving me a sense of safety and security. We don't like being "off the map." We don't like being "off the grid." We don't like being in places that are unfamiliar. And yet, the call of God still remains. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth.

What was the mistake of Noah's descendants? Why did God bring judgment on them and confuse their languages? Two things. First, they wanted to make a name for themselves. This is the same mistake Adam and Eve made. It's the same lie from the devil that we've been falling for ever since that first encounter in the Garden. We can be like God. We can do what is right in our own eyes. In our pride, we continue to reject God's will and His ways and the result of our sin is always judgment. For God is eternally faithful and He will not allow our sin to stand. Second, they were directly disobeying God. He had clearly told them to fill the earth. They stayed together. They refused to scatter. They refused to bring restoration back to an earth ruined by the flood. And yet, this is what they were made for! This is what they were saved for! To be God's agents of blessing as they exercised godly dominion over all He has made.

Think about your own life. How often do we choose safety and security over God? How often do we seek to make a name for ourselves rather than lift up the Name that is above every other name? Look at your calendars. Look at your budget. Look at your relationships. Are you fulfilling God's mandate? Are you fruitful for the Lord? Are you multiplying yourself by sharing the good news and bringing others to Christ? Are you filling the earth with God's blessing as you give and serve in His Name? Or are you spending your money and your time and your energy on yourself? Your family? Your children? Those you love? Those who speak your language? Those with whom you are most comfortable? God has called you to more than this. God has a greater plan for your life than safety and security. God wants you to be part of His great renewal project! He wants you to be part of His great redemption plan! His design is for you to place all your resources. All your time. All your energy at His disposal for the salvation of the world. Does that include your family and friends? Of course. Is it limited to your family and friends? Of course not.

God's Word to you today is this...break out of your holy huddle! Give generously of your time, energy, attention, and wealth for the building up of God's Kingdom! Be fruitful! Multiply! Fill the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 13:5-15:21, Matthew 5:27-48, Psalms 6, Proverbs 1:29-33

January 6, 2019
THE STAKES ARE ETERNAL

Readings for today: Genesis 13:5-15:21, Matthew 5:27-48, Psalms 6, Proverbs 1:29-33

Getting a late start today. Might be a pattern on Sundays so let me apologize in advance. Today's reading includes one of the most profound scenes in all of Scripture. God has made a promise to Abram. He will have a son. Even in his old age. His family would eventually grow so numerous, they would outnumber the stars in the sky. This is heady stuff for an octogenarian ancient near east patriarch with no children of his own. But Abram believes God. He is fully confident God is able to do what He has promised. And because Abram has faith, it is credited to him as righteousness.

God, however, isn't done. He seals His covenant with an elaborate ritual. Abram is to get a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon. He cuts them in half - except for the birds - and lays them opposite each other in a line. This creates an aisle of sorts down the center. The vultures swoop in, attracted by all the blood, but Abram drives them off. Eventually the sun sets and Abram falls asleep. In the darkness, this marvelous thing takes place. A smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass through the pieces. God manifesting Himself as light in the darkness. He comes to Abram who remains asleep, essentially sealing His promise with an oath. If God were to ever break covenant with Abram, He would become like the pieces of the animals on the ground. If God were to ever fail to uphold his covenant, He would have to die.

This is remarkable for several reasons. First of all, in the ancient near east it is always the lesser party who walks through the pieces. It is Abram who should be putting his life on the line. Second, this covenant ceremony is completely one-sided. Abram is asleep! No matter what Abram does, God is binding Himself to him and his descendants forever. Third, by choosing to walk through the pieces, God essentially is telling Abram He will cease to exist should any of His promises fail. This is a foreshadowing of what will take place on the Cross where God does indeed make Himself like the animals on the ground. His body broken. His blood shed. All for you. All for me. There literally is no story like this in any other religion on earth. No other religious faith believes in a God who is so radically faithful. This is what sets our God apart. And we love Him for it.

Fast forward a few thousand years. The Apostle Paul is preaching the gospel all over the Mediterranean. Gentiles are coming to faith in huge numbers and he's trying to process the fact that the Holy Spirit is being poured out on non-Jews. He turns back to this story. He realizes that the children God promises to Abram are not just flesh and blood but children by faith. Abram's descendants do indeed outnumber the stars in the sky because literally billions of people down throughout history have placed their faith in the God of Abram who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 16-18:15, Matthew 6:1-24, Psalms 7, Proverbs 2:1-5

January 7, 2019
THE GOD WHO SEES

Readings for today: Genesis 16-18:15, Matthew 6:1-24, Psalms 7, Proverbs 2:1-5

It is both comforting and convicting to know we've caught God's attention. He is faithful. Eternally so. His eyes never leave us. His presence never forsakes us. He is with us when we wake. He is with us when we sleep. He is with us at work, at school, at home. There is never a moment that escapes His glance. Never a time when our thoughts or actions are hidden from His sight.

This is incredibly encouraging when we are suffering like Hagar. A woman who gets caught up in a power struggle between her master and mistress. A woman who's marginalized. Mistreated. Abused. She runs into the wilderness, fearing for her life. She doesn't know where she is going only that she cannot remain in Sarai's household. She is pregnant. Alone. Afraid. But God is with her. He sees her. He meets her along the way. Meets her in the wilderness. Meets her in her desperation. And He gives her a promise. Her son will grow strong and powerful. He will eventually break free from the bonds of slavery. God will bless him.

This reminder is incredibly convicting when we are engaged in sin like Sarai. A woman struggling with her own fears and failures and shame. She lashes out. She mistreats Hagar though she was the one who put her in this position in the first place. She lashes out at her husband who had agreed to the plan. She even laughs at God when He suggests she will bear a son within a year.

The same God who sees our pain is the same God who sees our sin and thankfully, He meets us with grace. Perhaps you find yourself in pain today. You are suffering. Struggling. The new year has not gotten off to a great start. You feel accused. You feel mistreated. Everything in you wants to run. Get away from it all. Take comfort in the fact that God sees what you are going through and He will look after you as surely as He looked after Hagar. Perhaps you find yourself locked in sin. Thoughts. Attitudes. Actions that you know do not line up with God's Word. You've been battling these demons for years or maybe you've simply been content to live in sin. Be warned! God will not be mocked! And He sees everything you do. What you believe to be hidden. What you believe to be secret. The work you've done to fool everyone around you is not unknown to God. He sees it all and He is actively at work to bring you to repentance.

Grace is truly a double-edged sword. It hits us where it hurts and it brings both comfort and conviction. Will you receive the grace of God today? Will you turn and meet the gaze of the "God who sees?" The God is faithful to look after us in our sin and in our suffering?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 18:16-19:38, Matthew 6:25-7:14, Psalms 8, Proverbs 2:6-15

January 8, 2019
PRIORITIES

Readings for today: Genesis 18:16-19:38, Matthew 6:25-7:14, Psalms 8, Proverbs 2:6-15

I spend a lot of my week meeting with people over a cup of coffee or glass of wine. We talk about family. We talk about jobs. We talk about school. We talk about the future. We talk about the past. We talk about success. We talk about failure. We talk about life. In almost every case, the conversation eventually comes around to balance. How do we balance all the priorities we have in life? Many of the people I meet with are hard chargers. They have worked hard. Achieved much. They have spouses and children who they love dearly. But they're struggling because there never seems to be enough time to get everything done. And that doesn't feel good. So again, how to balance everything?

I used to believe in balance myself. I tried for years to balance my time with my wife, my four kids, my church family, my mission commitments, seminary teaching, etc. It was exhausting. Thankfully, God sent an older, wiser mentor into my life who shared with me some of the best advice I've ever received. "Balance is bogus, Doug." Balance is bogus? What was this guy talking about? Everyone talks about balance! The whole self-help section at the bookstore is all about balance! But something in what he said struck a chord so I listened. "Balance is bogus because it is impossible – even unfaithful – to try to give everything in your life equal time. If you strive for balance, you will feel like you are always falling short in every area." That's exactly how I felt! "The key", he argued, "is to put Christ at the center of everything you do." Put Christ at the center of your marriage. Christ at the center of your relationship with your children. Christ at the center of your professional life. "If you do that, you will find yourself becoming fully present to everyone and in everything."

This is what I believe Jesus meant when he said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the rest will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33) If we put Christ at the center of every relationship and every task, we will find ourselves less distracted. Less tempted to multi-task. And the people we are with will feel more valued. The time spent more fruitful. This results in greater efficiency as the quality of our time/work increases. With this increase in quality comes a corresponding decrease in a need for quantity. We will spend less time in some areas which frees up more time for other priorities. It really becomes a virtuous cycle which deepens every relationship and results in greater impact.

One quick personal example. When I got to Princeton, I was deeply insecure. I didn't feel I belonged. I wasn't worthy of admission to such a prestigious place. Certainly not with my 2.3 GPA from college! HA! So I worked my tail off that first semester. Studied every night. Studied every weekend. Poured all kinds of time and energy and effort into school. My wife felt neglected. I struggled to spend time with my eight month old daughter. It was a rough three months and I didn't have much to show for it because my grades were average at best. Then I went on Christmas break. Fought with God a bit. Asked Him why He sent me to seminary if it was going to be so difficult. He responded. Challenged me to re-examine my priorities. Follow Matthew 6:33. Put Him to the test. Long story short, I did. I went back for the 2nd semester and only gave Princeton two nights a week and one day on the weekend. The rest of the time I dedicated to family and to ministry in the local church. My grades shot through the roof. My family and I made some great friendships and had some great adventures. The church we served flourished. I even got to volunteer as a chaplain at the maximum security prison. It was one of the best three years of our lives.

Ever since that experience I have found that when I truly prioritize my life around the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, blessing follows. My life becomes rich and full and deeply meaningful. It's not always easy but it is always significant because I know the Lord is with me. I trust my labor is not in vain. Friends, what priorities are you pursuing in your life right now? How are you putting Christ at the center? Reading the Bible every day is a great first step! Worshiping God each week is another great step! Asking God to help you find Him at the center of everything you're involved in is another way to put Matt. 6:33 into practice. Let me encourage you to re-examine your priorities through the lens of Christ. Look at your world through His eyes and then align your life to what you see.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 7:15-29, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 2:16-22

January 9, 2019
FEAR VS. FAITH

Readings for today: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 7:15-29, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 2:16-22

Fear is a powerful motivator. Often driving us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. Make choices out of desperation rather than faith. Fear drove Sarah to mistreat Hagar and eventually cast her out of the house with her son Ishmael. Fear drove Lot's daughters to commit incest with their father. Fear drove Abraham to lie about his relationship with his wife. Fear drives a lot of things in our lives as well. I imagine if we sat and reflected for a moment, we can all think back to choices we've made that we regret that were driven by similar fears.

One of the most famous stories in all of Scripture is the sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the subject of amazing artwork throughout the centuries. It has influenced the plot lines of famous works of literature. There is just something deeply (and darkly) compelling about this story for believers and non-believers alike. An old man taking his son. His only son. The son whom he loves and offering him as a sacrifice. In our minds eye, we can see them climbing the mountain together. Abraham with the fire and knife. Isaac carrying the wood. Along the way, Isaac poignantly questions his father, "My father!" And Abraham said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." You can almost imagine Abraham answering Isaac with tears in his eyes. They get to the top of the mountain. Abraham builds an altar. Binds his own son. Lays him down. Raises the knife. And that's when God steps in. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

I've often wondered what kind of impact this experience would have had on Abraham and Isaac? What impact would this have on their relationship? How often in the years ahead did they look back and reflect on this moment? Did Abraham ever feel the need to ask for forgiveness? Would that have been enough to address the trauma Isaac would have felt? And yet, even their special father/son relationship was not as important to Abraham as his relationship with God. He believed God. He trusted God. He had faith in God. The writer of Hebrews, as he looked back on this story and reflected on Abraham's faith, says Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb. 11:19) No matter what, Abraham knew God had promised him a son. He knew Isaac was that son. He knew the future rested on this son. And he trusted God even when it seemed like His commands put all that at risk.

Some might argue this whole scene makes God into a monster. What kind of God demands human sacrifice? Christians know it's simply foreshadowing. Fast forward a few thousand years and we have another Father and Son having this same conversation in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Son asking the Father if this is truly what the Father commands. If there can't be another way. One can almost see the Father answer His Son. His only Son. The Son whom He loves with tears in His eyes. So Jesus takes up the cross. Climbs the SAME exact mountain Abraham and Isaac did so many centuries before. Is laid on the altar. The Father raises His Hand – there is no ram to take Jesus' place - and takes His Son's life. All to save humanity from our sin. From our fear.

What are you afraid of today? What's driving the choices you make? Is it fear of what others might say? Fear of facing the consequences of your actions? Fear of losing something you love? Have faith, friends! Believe in God! Trust God! Honor God! Look to the Cross and consider the great love He has for you! As you fix your eyes on Jesus, you will feel the fears that so often drive us loosening their grip and giving way to faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 23-24:51, Matthew 8:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 3:1-6

January 10, 2019
DESIRING GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 23-24:51, Matthew 8:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 3:1-6

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart...” (Proverbs 3:5) This may be one of the hardest things for me to do. Trust in the Lord with all of my mind? Check. I love the life of the mind. I love to learn. Love to read. Love to reflect on the Word of God. Trust in the Lord with all of my strength? Check. I work hard to align my outward life with God’s laws. I believe His ways are the best ways to live. I have no doubt a life lived according to His Word is a truly blessed life. Now please understand I am not perfect in either of these areas. I am as much a sinner as the next person. But where I really struggle is to love God with all my heart. To desire God from the depths of my being.

We are all creatures of desire. Driven more by emotion than we care to admit. We may think we are primarily rational creatures. Products of a Cartesian worldview whose foundation was built on the axiom, “I think therefore I am” but this is a lie. We mainly live in the back of the brain stem. We react. We respond. Love. Hate. Fear. Lust. Primal emotions seated in the most reptilian section of our brains. We meet someone for the first time and feel attraction. We see an image on television and experience hate. We scroll through our Twitter feed and our blood pressure rises. The world encourages us to get in touch with our emotions. To embrace them. To let them define who we are. The problems with this approach are legion. Rates of depression, self-harm, and suicide are now at historic levels and rising. The amount of vitriol on cable television and social media is overwhelming. The casual way we treat our relationships is tearing the social fabric of our lives apart. People feel more isolated than ever which leads to more pain. As they experience more pain, they isolate further. It’s a vicious cycle with no end in sight.

For most of my life I have believed the answer lies in the transformation of the mind. Behavioral change flowing from new thought processes we begin in our brains and are held accountable to through relationship. What I am learning is that this approach often fails because it doesn’t touch the heart. One cannot change one’s desires simply by thinking/wishing them away. One cannot change one’s desires through self-discipline. No matter how much we may white-knuckle our sobriety, we simply are not strong enough to resist so we succumb. We give in. And the shame we experience only reinforces and compounds our sin.

So what’s the answer? Are we left at the mercy of our desires? Are we doomed to ride the roller coaster of our emotions forever? No. The answer is to “trust God with all your heart.” To fan the flames of your affections for God. To invest in your relationship with Him through prayer, meditation on Scripture, worship, and mission. Like any relationship, love must be cultivated. Love must be intentionally nurtured. It doesn’t grow in healthy ways on its own and you will not fall more deeply in love with God unless you spend time with Him. As your love for God grows, you will find the other loves of your life reordered. The attractions of your life will begin to change. They will be shaped more and more by God’s desires than your own. In short, you will experience transformation.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24:52-26:16, Matthew 8:18-34, Psalms 10, Proverbs 3:7-8

January 11, 2019
WALKING WITH WISDOM

Readings for today: Genesis 24:52-26:16, Matthew 8:18-34, Psalms 10, Proverbs 3:7-8

“Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.” (Proverbs 3:7-8)

I think the biggest part of my job as a pastor is helping people learn to walk with wisdom. True wisdom. Godly wisdom. Wisdom that finds its source in the fear of the Lord. Too many of us walk according to our own wisdom. We do what is right in our own eyes. We think we know what's best for us. We do not. The evidence is legion. We are so prone to self-destruction. So prone to self-condemnation. So prone to self-promotion. We are so prone to self...

This is not new. Hopefully, as you read the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs, you can see how they struggled to walk with wisdom as well. Noah got drunk. Lot chose the wrong neighborhood in which to live. Abraham lied about his relationship with his wife. TWICE! And Isaac makes the same mistake. Things do not get much better. Rebekah is a schemer and teaches her son Jacob all too well. Joseph is arrogant. Moses is insecure. Miriam jealous. The list goes on and on. The men and women of the Bible are just as broken as we are and just as prone to act in their own self-interest. This has been our problem since the beginning. We prefer our own wisdom to God's.

Proverbs, however, teaches us a different path. Fear the Lord. Turn from evil. Walk in God's wisdom and you will find the healing and refreshment your heart is longing for. How many of us woke up tired this morning? Exhausted by the race we are running? How many of us barely got any sleep last night because of the pain we're carrying? How many of us find ourselves making the same mistake over and over again? Trapped in the same endless loop? How many of us feel depressed? Isolated? All alone? How many of us walk with fear and shame on a daily basis? How many of us – if we're honest - know our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts? And what does it come as such a shock to us when the houses we build on sand crumble at the first sign of storm? Why do we keep playing this game? Why are we so bound and determined to do things our own way? Why do we keep putting “Self” at the center of our lives in place of God?

God wants to heal your pain. God wants to mend your broken heart. God wants to restore the ruins of your life and lift you out of your shame. God has told you there is nothing that will ever come between you and His love. He has set you free in Christ from all judgment and condemnation. He offers you forgiveness and unending grace. His love is steadfast, true, loyal, and unconditional. Trust the Lord! Trust He knows what's best for you! Trust His Word! Trust what He tells you! Trust His love! He will never leave you or forsake you! Turn from evil. Turn from sin. Turn from self. Turn to Christ! Take His yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 26:17-27:46, Matthew 9:1-17, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 3:9-10

January 12, 2019
REFLECTION

Readings for today: Genesis 26:17-27:46, Matthew 9:1-17, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 3:9-10

Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Rebekah. Jacob. Leah. Rachel. These are the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. Men and women we look up to. Examples of faith. Paragons of virtue. Inspiration for millions. Then we actually sit down and read their stories. The bubble bursts. The image shatters. Off the pedestal they fall. Their families are dysfunctional. Full of deceit and greed and a lust for power. Their relationships are broken. Brother against brother. Wives against husbands. Homes in disarray. Reading their stories causes all kinds of questions, doubts, even fears to arise in our hearts. Who are these people? What's wrong with them? Why do they make such poor choices? Why does God use them? Why are they God's chosen people and not someone else? We find ourselves sympathizing with underdogs like Hagar, Ishmael, and Esau. What did they do wrong? Why weren't they chosen?

Reading the Bible is hard. Reflecting on the Bible even harder. The reality is we all want to keep these stories at arm's length. We want to externalize these people as if they are not us. As if we do not make the same mistakes every single day. As if our culture is any less evil and immoral. As one friend of mine pointed out recently, moms and dads in our city sell their kids into slavery every single day. We just don't want to see it. (She works with this population and is an expert in her field.) As much as we look back and want to judge the men and women we read about in the Scriptures, we are no different. We are just as sinful. Just as prideful. Just as prone to jockeying for power, influence, and control. Our relationships are just as broken. We too struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to not seek vengeance when we are hurt.

What makes the Bible so hard to read is that it holds a mirror up to our souls. It exposes our depravity even as it tells us stories of the depravity of the mothers and fathers of our faith. It forces us to come to grips with the fact that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and none of us is clean. This drives us to our knees where we do NOT want to be. It drives us to submission. Drives us to surrender. Our only hope is grace. The grace of God. The love of God. The decision God makes to reach down and save us. We don't like being at the mercy of God. We don't like being reminded we are not in control of our own destiny. We don't like the idea that our salvation depends on God's sovereign choice alone not some fundamental principle of fairness.

Prayerful reflection on these stories is not complete until we turn our questions inward. Who am I? What's wrong with me? Where do I struggle with sin? Why do I make such poor choices? Part of this process is allowing the Bible to interrogate us as much as we are interrogating it. Allowing the Word of God to question us as much as we may question it. This is the dialogue God seeks with us when we read His Word. What is God after? Submission. Surrender. He wants us to finally bow before Him and open our hands and hearts to receive His grace. Just like Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Rebekah. Jacob. Leah. Rachel. This is what set them apart. Their faith. Their fundamental belief that God was able to do all He had promised. May you walk in that same faith today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 28-29, Matthew 9:18-38, Psalm 11, Proverbs 3:11-12

January 13, 2019
DO YOU BELIEVE?

Readings for today: Genesis 28-29, Matthew 9:18-38, Psalm 11, Proverbs 3:11-12

This morning I had the opportunity to preach at a sister church. A church who is in a significant time of transition. They are about to embark on a search for a new senior pastor which will usher in a new season of ministry. It's been four years since they had strong, consistent pastoral leadership. Their beloved pastor was called to a different church. They went through one search but that particular pastor only stayed two years and had a very rocky tenure. Many people left. The church began to struggle. Fear and anxiety settled in. But in the last eighteen months, they have begun to recover. They have strong, godly leaders who have stepped forward. Their staff is exceptional. Their elders seek the mind of Christ. I left deeply impressed by their heart for Jesus and for their community. I know they are in great hands.

One of the things we talked about today was how to walk by faith. Faith tends to be a nebulous term in our culture. Even when you talk to Christians, it seems very hard to define. Some see faith as an intellectual assent to a set of ideas. Others see faith as blind and uncritical. Still others view faith as an emotion we feel. Tingles running down our spine. Warm feelings filling our heart. That kind of thing. Jesus defines it much differently. In Matthew 9, Jesus performs a series of miraculous healings. A young woman is raised from the dead. Another woman is healed from a chronic menstrual disorder. Two blind men receive back their sight and a mute man is given the ability to speak. In the middle of all this action, Jesus poses this question to the blind men when they ask for mercy, "Do you believe I am able to do this?" They do. Jesus stretches out his hand to heal.

There are more than a few definitions of faith in the Bible but this is one of my favorite. Faith is being fully convinced God is able to do what He has promised. Faith is not blind. Faith is not wishful thinking. Faith is not intellectual assent. It is walking. Acting. Moving in full confidence that God is able to do what He says He will do. Jesus asks the blind men if they believe He is able. The blind men believe and they are healed. They place their trust in Christ no matter the outcome. Is Jesus able? Yes, He is. Will Jesus always heal? Not necessarily. Does that mean we somehow lack faith? Absolutely not! Faith is not trusting in a particular outcome but trusting in the One who can do all things according to His perfect will.

We talked about the faith of Abram this morning at the church where I preached. Abram is the perfect example of faith not because he was perfect or always got things right. He clearly did not! But Abram believed God. Abram was fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised. He trusted God to lead him to the Promised Land. Trusted God to give him a son. Trusted God to bless him, make his name great, and make his descendants a great nation. All of which God accomplished and more. Abram saw all this before it happened. He believed it before it came to pass. He trusted it enough to turn his entire life upside down.

What about you? Do you believe God? Do you believe He is able to do what He has promised? Do you believe God for your marriage? For your children? For your job? For your future? For your finances? Do you trust God enough to let Him run your life? Are you willing to submit to Him and take a Sabbath? One day out of every seven to rest? Are you willing to submit to Him and give generously and sacrificially and regularly to the Lord...no strings attached? Are you willing to submit to Him and let go of the sinful pleasures you secretly delight in on a daily basis? This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to faith, friends. Do you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 30-31:16, Matthew 10:1-23, Psalms 12, Proverbs 3:13-15

January 14, 2019
GOSPEL = POWER

Readings for today: Genesis 30-31:16, Matthew 10:1-23, Psalms 12, Proverbs 3:13-15

“And Jesus called to him his twelve disciples and gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.” (Matthew 10:1)

The gospel is not an idea. Not a philosophy. Not a moral code. It is quite literally the power of God. To receive the gospel is to receive this power. To believe the gospel is to be filled with this power. To lay hold of the gospel is to lay hold of this power. The power of God fills the life of every believer, granting us authority and dominion over all God has made. Jesus gave power to His disciples. As they went out proclaiming the gospel, they would cast out demons. Heal disease. Raise the dead. These signs and wonders would serve to authenticate the message they were preaching.

I have seen this in action. The church in Africa is growing at an exponential rate. The preaching of the gospel is accompanied by signs and wonders. The church planters we support are filled with power as they go forth. They cast out demons. They heal disease. They raise the dead. They survive beatings, stonings, stabbing, shootings, and miraculously recover. I have personally witnessed miraculous healings. I have personally witnessed resurrection. I have personally seen demonic spirits get cast out. To see the power of God in action is awe-inspiring to say the least. It brings me to my knees.

How do we access such power? By keeping the first and greatest commandment. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The more we love God, the more we serve God. The more we serve God, the more He equips us with power for that service. The more we sacrifice for God, the more He provides for us. The more we relinquish to God, the more He is able to use us. The secret to the power of the early disciples or modern-day African church planters or persecuted believers in China is their whole-hearted devotion to Christ. They do not try to live a double life. They do not try to have their cake and eat it too. They understand that holding onto the things of this world while laying hold of the world to come will only pull them apart. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot live with a foot in both Kingdoms. You either give yourself fully over to Christ and die to self or you hold onto “Self” and lose your grip on Christ. There is no neutral ground here.

So that brings up a really hard question we all have to face...if we are not experiencing the power and presence of Christ in our lives then it is highly likely we have allowed some other “love” to gain a foothold. It could be a relationship we can’t live without. A lifestyle we refuse to relinquish. A preferred future we can’t let go of. A dream we won’t let die. It could be a sin we’ve allowed to enslave us. A lie we start to believe. How does one discern? How do we know? Engage in some healthy, prayerful self-reflection. Look at the life of Christ. What about Him do you find unattractive or unrealistic? Is there anything about what He teaches or how He lived that you find yourself resisting? When you hear His words and see His love, do you find yourself disbelieving on some level? Do you trust the lies of your own heart over the truth Jesus preaches?

This is where the rubber meets the road in the Christian life. Following Jesus is a lifelong struggle to crucify the flesh with all its sinful desires and allow the Holy Spirit to align us more with Christ. It is a long obedience in the same direction. A marathon not a sprint. It forces us to constantly grapple with our greatest enemy...Self. But here’s the good news! The more the “self” dies, the more the power of God manifests itself in our lives. The more the power of God manifests itself, the more the “self” dies. This is the promise of the gospel and it lies within reach of every single person who calls on the name of the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 31:17-32:12, Matthew 10:24-11:6, Psalms 13, Proverbs 3:16-18

January 15, 2019
RECKONING

Readings for today: Genesis 31:17-32:12, Matthew 10:24-11:6, Psalms 13, Proverbs 3:16-18

There comes a time in every person's life when their sin catches up to them. The bill for their mistakes and misdeeds finally comes due. You cannot run forever. You cannot hide forever. You cannot escape from your past. It must be faced. Jacob had spent his entire life scheming to get ahead. A master manipulator, he had robbed his brother of his birthright. Robbed Laban of his flocks and herds. Done everything in his power to get ahead. Secure his own future. He even tried to "deal" with God. "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Genesis 28:20-22)

Now Jacob's caught between a rock and a hard place. He's burned his bridges with Laban so he can't go back. The stone they set up serves as a constant reminder of his past sins. He is afraid to go forward. His past is coming back to haunt him. Esau, his brother, is on his way with four hundred men. Doesn't sound like he's forgotten everything that happened all those years ago. Jacob is stuck. He's out of options. No more games. No more cards to play. He's got to face the music. (That's a whole lot of cliches...) God has him right where He wants him.

God is sovereign. He orchestrates all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Jacob has been called. Jacob is loved. Jacob is about to meet God face to face. Unbeknownst to Jacob, God has been looking forward to this moment. God has been planning for this moment. God has brought Jacob to this point because God wants to do something in Jacob's life that will change him forever. But Jacob has to be broken. Jacob must be forced to submit. Jacob must be brought to the end of himself and meet God on His terms.

How many of us are facing a similar situation? We've schemed and manipulated our way as far as we can go. We've accumulated wealth and possessions along the way but it has come at no small cost. We've left some bodies in our wake. We've damaged our own souls in the process. All of us know what this feels like. It's the way we shade the truth just a bit to come out ahead. The way we take credit for someone else's work. The way we tell our stories as if we were the hero. It's the way we orchestrate life, primarily for our own benefit. We probably have even tried to bargain with God. None of us are clean. All of us have a little Jacob in us. And most, if not all of us, will face a reckoning. A moment in time when the house of cards we've built comes crashing down. Our marriage fails. Our business crumbles. Our creditors come calling. Our kids call us out. We come face to face with the consequences of our addictions.

The great news is God is waiting for us there. He is waiting for us in that space. Waiting to meet us face to face. Deal with us mano y mano. He has been patiently waiting. Patiently working. Patiently bringing us to this point where have no other choice but to surrender. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. It's also the best thing for us. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop pretending. Turn and face your fear. Turn and face your God. Let Him transform your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 32:13-34:31, Matthew 11:7-30, Psalms 14, Proverbs 3:19-20

January 16, 2019
BROKEN

Readings for today: Genesis 32:13-34:31, Matthew 11:7-30, Psalms 14, Proverbs 3:19-20

One of the things I love most about God is His willingness to wrestle with us. His willingness to get down in the mud with us. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty. Not afraid to engage us in the deepest, darkest places of our hearts. Not afraid of our outbursts of anger. Not afraid of our doubts and questions. We can bring all this to God. Meet Him unafraid and unashamed and struggle with Him over His sovereign will for our lives. God is not after robots. He is not after automatons. He doesn't want uncritical, unthinking obedience. He wants our hearts. He wants our souls. He wants our bodies. He wants our minds. He wants all of us. Every part of us must eventually surrender to Him. And that's a fight because our sinful nature pushes back.

My mother would tell you I've always been independent. Even as a child. I didn't like to cuddle. Didn't like to be held. I would push back against her when she would try to wrap me up in her arms. When I got older and headed off for my first day of school, I shed no tears. Just got out of the car and walked towards the school no looking back. The other day, she and I had breakfast together. We talked about how I am still pretty independent. She loves me. She's proud of me. She'd love for me to need her for something. Anything. I do the same thing with God if I am honest. I push back. I don't like to be wrapped up in His arms. I want to be independent. Do my own thing. I don't want to need Him. I like to pretend like I have it all together. Like I'm good on my own. It's all a lie of course. I do need God. I do need my mom. I am not an independent creature. It is not good for me to be alone.

It's taken some hard experiences for me to learn this about myself. Experiences that almost cost me everything and everyone I hold dear. Like Jacob, I know what it's like to wrestle with God all night. I've been there and done that. I've battled Him. I've fought with Him. I've watched the sun rise and set only to do it all over again. This was my life in the fall of 2009. I averaged 2-3 hours of sleep a night for a few months. God and I went to war over my life. My family. My ministry. My future. Finally, there came a point where He simply broke me. He broke my heart. He broke my spirit. He broke my pride. And while the pain was intense and real, there was relief as well. A profound sense of freedom flooded my being. I've never been the same since.

Where have you wrestled like Jacob? Where are you wrestling like Jacob? Where are you mad at God? Frustrated with God? Upset with God? What questions do you have for Him? Doubts? Fears that need to be expressed? Where are you resisting Him? Pushing back against His will? Struggling to accept His sovereign plan? Today's passage invites you into the ring! To grapple with God honestly! God's a big boy! He can handle everything you throw at Him and more! Let your guard down and lay it all out before your Lord. Fight Him until you break before His relentless love and grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 35-36, Matthew 12:1-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 3:21-26

January 17, 2019
CHARMED LIVES?

Readings for today: Genesis 35-36, Matthew 12:1-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 3:21-26

When I first became a Christian and started reading the Bible, I made the false assumption that the men and women of the Bible lived charmed lives. Once they came to faith everything was good. They grew healthy and wealthy and happy and nothing bad ever happened to them because the Lord was on their side. This reading became deeply problematic for me for a couple of reasons. First, it certainly didn't square with my own life experience. I found myself frequently struggling with hardship and pain. Second, the more I read and the more closely I read, I realized these men and women were just as messed up as I was!

For example, Jacob wrestles with God. Fights with Him all night and as dawn breaks, obtains a blessing. Gets a new name. Essentially a new future. One would think Jacob would walk faithfully from this point forward having had this intense, face to face encounter with God. Not so! Jacob again lies to his brother Esau. He actually never shows up in Seir as he promised. Jacob refuses to demand justice for his daughter's honor thereby opening the door for his sons to take matters into their own hands. Jacob lives in fear of the tribal nations that surround them. Even his journey to Bethel seems fraught with danger. Finally, grief hits him hard as he loses his beloved wife Rachel in childbirth and his father soon after. Life in the ancient near east was not easy. Even for a man who walked with God.

Over and over again, the Bible declares God is with His people. God protects His people. God guards the lives of His people. God blesses His people. How can this be true when we read about such tragedy in the life of Jacob? Or we experience similar tragedy and heartache in our own lives? The answer – if we have the ears to hear - is that we, like Jacob, are simply sojourners in this world. We are just passing through. And while it is true that God gives us a home. God gives us a name. God blesses us to be a blessing. It is also equally true that health and wealth and happiness are not going to be found this side of heaven. We may experience these things for a season. Perhaps even a long season. But death comes for us all. Poverty comes for us all because we can't take anything with us. Sadness and grief find us as we face our own mortality or the mortality of those we love.

Strangely enough, we all know this isn't right. Even the ardent atheist experiences death as a violation of sorts. It's why so much work is being put into longevity projects. Billions being spent to find the "aging gene" in order to turn it off. We want to live forever. We know we should live forever. It's a primal instinct embedded deep within us. We were made to be fruitful. To multiply. To fill the earth. This is the creation mandate and we see it renewed here in Jacob – now Israel's - life. "And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body." (Genesis 35:11) This mandate transcends our lives on earth. It follows us into eternity. It gets passed down through the generations. It will not end even when Christ returns.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 37-38, Matthew 12:22-45, Psalms 16, Proverbs 3:27-32

January 18, 2019
THE COUNSEL OF GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 37-38, Matthew 12:22-45, Psalms 16, Proverbs 3:27-32

“I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.” (Psalms 16:7-8)

How do I hear the voice of God? It's one of the most common and heartfelt questions I get asked. I hear from older men and women who've been in church all their lives. I hear from young men and women who are just getting started. I hear it from students and children who want to know if God is real. I hear it from those in crisis who cry out in desperation. I hear it from the proud who think God needs to prove Himself to them. I hear it from the humble who just wish God would show up for them. People from all walks of life and backgrounds and experiences. All wanting the same thing. All wanting to hear the counsel of God.

David heard from God. A man after God's own heart, David seemingly enjoyed a special relationship with the Lord. He spoke to Him frequently and God answered. Their conversations form so much of the content of the book of the Bible we call the Psalms. They are hymns of praise. Hymns of thanksgiving. Hymns of lament. Hymns proclaiming the goodness and glory of God. Hymns plumbing the depths of human suffering and pain. The full range of emotion is present in these words as David calls out to God.

What does it look like for you to call out for God? And are you willing to wait for Him to answer? To train your ears to hear and your heart to understand His voice? Part of the reason David enjoyed such an intimate relationship with God is because of the time he spent in God's presence in prayer and worship. David loved to worship. He danced before the Lord. Sang before the Lord. Offered sacrifices before the Lord. David loved to talk to God. One gets the sense he prayed for hours on end. As a result, when God answered David, he was prepared to hear. He recognized God's voice. Among all the other voices clamoring for attention in his life, David could tune in to what God was saying. God was David's counsel because David made an intentional effort to always set the Lord before him. To fix his eyes on God. Keep Him at his right hand. Lean on Him in times of trouble. Seek Him in times of confusion. Cry out to Him in times of pain.

Do you set the Lord always before you? What does your devotional life look like? How regular is it? Do you take your time or do you rush through? Do you read the Scriptures reflectively or are they just words on a page? When you pray, do you do all the talking? Do you make any space for listening? When times of trial and temptation come, do you lean on Him for support? Or do you believe you have it all handled? This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes our experience of God. We have to enter His presence with a sense of expectation that He is actually there to meet with us. Waiting for us. And that He has some things to say. We do this every day. Every week. Every month. Over a number of years and our ability to discern God's voice will grow. Our hearts and minds will be tuned in and we will find uninterrupted communion with God.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 39-41:16, Matthew 12:46-13:23, Psalms 17, Proverbs 3:33-35

January 19, 2019
LIFE WITH GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 39-41:16, Matthew 12:46-13:23, Psalms 17, Proverbs 3:33-35

Over and over again we read how the Lord was with Joseph. He was with him at the heights of his success. He was with him in the depths of his failures. With him when he was rapidly climbing in favor. With him when he was falsely accused and imprisoned. No matter where Joseph went, God was at his side. How do we know? Because of the fruit his life produced. Joseph was a humble man. He submitted his life to God's will. He walked in God's ways. He refused to let bitterness or anger or fear get the best of him. Whatever others may intend for evil, Joseph knew God could turn to good if he would trust Him. Joseph's life is a model of faithfulness. A model of humility. A model of walking with open hands and an open heart to however the Lord would choose to work. Joseph's steps were determined for him. He did not choose to go to Egypt. Did not choose to be part of Potipher's house. Did not choose to be thrown in prison. Did not choose to serve Pharaoh. Joseph, like Daniel after him, simply chose to grow where he was planted. Like the seed that fell on good soil, his life bore thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold for the Lord. And the result was the blessing of a pagan nation.

I am sure Joseph had his moments. Perhaps he cried out like the Psalmist to God for vindication. Cried out for justice. Cried out for peace. I am sure Joseph spent many a dark night in the prison cell asking God why this had happened. Reflecting what God wanted to teach him. I am sure Joseph's faith was put to the test by his experiences and yet through it all, Joseph chooses the path of faithfulness. The path of trust. Come hell or high water, Joseph throws his lot in with God. It's a powerful testimony.

What about us? What does our life look like when we experience the ups and downs? When we are attacked and falsely accused? When the people around us. The people who are supposed to love us intend evil and seek to harm us. What happens then? How do we respond? So often, I find myself reacting in one of two ways. I lash out. I go on the attack. I violently defend myself if necessary. Or I run. I curl up in the fetal position. I let my fears get the best of me and I try to hide. Neither approach is gospel-centered. Neither approach is faithful. God calls us to place our trust in Him. To seek our approval in Him. To place our faith in His will and His way and ultimately, His vindication. To walk with the Lord means blooming where He plants us. Blessing the people He has placed around us be they Christian or pagan. We walk in His ways on the mountaintop when things are going great and in the valley when things are hard. We accept both good and evil from his hands like Job. As we do so, God produces in us a great harvest of righteousness.

So where does life find you today? And where are you placing your trust? Is it in your circumstances? In the people around you and their opinions of you? Is it being shaped by your successes or failures? Or is your hope in God? Like the Psalmist, do you find your satisfaction in being with Him? "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness." (Psalms 17:15)

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41:17-42:17, Matthew 13: 24-46, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 4:1-6

January 20, 2019
THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for today: Genesis 41:17-42:17, Matthew 13: 24-46, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 4:1-6

I spent the week in Orlando with some great friends. Colleagues who serve churches much like my own. We get together a couple of times of year to share, encourage, challenge, and pray for each other. Some of them are experiencing a season of blessing. Their church is growing. Programs are being launched. Buildings are being built. The lost are being saved. Others are experiencing a season of struggle. Money is tight. Programs are suffering. Attendance has dropped. Their church is in conflict. Life in the church is never easy. Not over the long haul. Not if one makes the commitment to put down roots in a local community. Churches are full both the lost and the saved. Sinners and saints. Lukewarm Christians and those who are on fire for the Lord. It's a volatile mix. One spark can blow it all up.

This is why I find such comfort in the words of Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." (Matthew 13:24-30) Why are these words comforting? Because they remind me of the reality of life in the Kingdom this side of heaven. It is not pure. It is not holy. We will not all be on the same page or in the same place spiritually. We will frustrate each other. We will hurt each other. We will disappoint each other. We will let each other down. Such is life in the real church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that if our "ideal" of community ever got in the way of "real" community then it's a sure sign we've created an idol. I see this taking place all over the church today. A lot of people talk about their desire for "authenticity" but when you dig a little deeper what you find is they want people to be authentically just like them. They are unwilling to let the other person be authentically "other" because that requires hard work. Emotional investment. Active listening. Wrestling with differences. I saw this in Mobile, AL at the church I served when we had a young African-American become a member. One of our older members pulled me aside. "Blacks and whites don't worship together", she said. Rather than get angry with her or dismiss her. The young man and I engaged her. I sat down with her and took her through the Scriptures. The young man loved her and treated her with respect. The result was a radical transformation in this woman's heart. She had grown up with segregation. It was all she knew and her worldview was being challenged by the gospel. Thankfully, the young man could see that and ministered to her even though it was difficult. When he went to seminary a few years later, this woman became one of his financial supporters and prayer partners. It was awesome to witness!

The church is God's field. Planted with both wheat and weeds. None of us know who is who. None of us can see what's happening in the human heart. Many who appear outwardly Christian may just be going through the motions. Others who appear to be struggling with the faith may be deeply faithful. All we can do is love each other like Jesus. Unconditionally. Relentlessly. Steadfastly. Loyally. Even recklessly at times. As we do this over the long haul. Weeks. Months. Years. Generations. God's promise is we will be shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine. We will be washed and sanctified and prepared for glory. Embrace the journey, friends. Embrace the struggle. Embrace the community where God has planted you and let Him bring the increase in your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 42:18-43:34, Matthew 13:47-14:12, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 4:7-10

January 21, 2019
THE LIFE WE'VE ALWAYS WANTED

Readings for today: Genesis 42:18-43:34, Matthew 13:47-14:12, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 4:7-10

Ultimately, there are two ways to live. You can live honestly. Openly. Transparently. Vulnerably. Daily practicing unconditional love and forgiveness and reconciliation. The result being a life of peace. A life of deep joy. A life of gracious self-acceptance because you have nothing to hide. Nothing to fear. Nothing to protect. No false self to prop up. Or you can live dishonestly. Secretively. Opaquely. Guarding your heart against any pain and suffering. You can love conditionally. Forgive selectively. Refuse to reconcile. The result is a life of guilt. A life of fleeting joy. A life of self-regret because you have lots to hide. Lots to fear and be anxious about. Self-protection becomes your highest aim because the image you project to the world has to be carefully curated for self-promotion.

Sadly, the majority of the people who live with us and among us and around us choose the latter of the two scenarios. Recently, I read an editorial from a major news outlet extolling the virtues of cutting people out of one's life. The premise from the author was that her life was better without her mother. DNA doesn't matter. Biological connections simply aren't worth it. We should discard anyone in our lives who we deem to be "toxic." Now are there scenarios where estrangement needs to happen? Of course. Some people are so abusive - verbally, emotionally, physically, spiritually - that we need to cut them off. But such tragedies are never to be celebrated. Another editorial I read attempted to normalize the mutilation of the body. Still a third attempted to normalize sexual relationships between adults and minors. The brokenness of our world is legion. It is breathtaking in scope and heartbreakingly deep. And it leads in a direct line to the rise of suicide, depression, anxiety-disorders, opioid and other drug abuse, alcoholism, sexual addiction, etc. The fruit of our lives is rotten. We know it. So we medicate it.

The Joseph narrative reveals a similar dynamic. As a young man, Joseph was an insufferable fool. The favored son of an aging father from his beloved wife, he was given all kinds of privilege and power in the family. Resentment grew to the point where his own brothers wanted to kill him. After throwing him in a pit, they made the fateful decision to sell him into slavery instead so they could turn a profit. This tragic act will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Fast forward a few decades. Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. He has saved the nation from a devastating famine and now the whole world comes to humble itself before him. His own brothers make the journey and he immediately recognizes them. But he too is suspicious. Why are they here? What do they want? Most importantly, do they regret the decision they made all those years ago? So he puts them to the test. They believe they're being punished for the sins of their past. The pain is real. It extends back to Jacob, their father, who has to undergo the pain of letting his youngest son – the only son he has left from the wife he loved – go to Egypt with no guarantee he'll return. Reuben attempts to assuage his father's concern. "Kill my two sons if I don't return with Benjamin." What kind of monster would Jacob have to be to kill his own grandchildren? The dysfunction here is real.

We all live dysfunctional lives to some extent. We all find ourselves living on the spectrum between the two poles I outlined above. I imagine most of us have days when we are honest and open and transparent and real. I imagine we also have days when we are guarded, dishonest, and secretive. I imagine most of us have days when we are able to love unconditionally. Forgive generously. Reconcile freely. And I imagine we have days when love is difficult. Forgiveness a pipe dream. Reconciliation beyond us. The goal of the Christian life is to surrender more and more each day to the Holy Spirit and let Him move us closer to the abundant life God promises us and away from the self-centered life we naturally choose. It's not easy. Our bodies, minds, and emotions often rebel. The act of submission is a courageous choice we all have to make in a world that will never celebrate following Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 14:13-36, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 4:11-13

January 22, 2019
PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 14:13-36, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 4:11-13

Perspective: Joseph looking back over the course of his life. All he's endured. The trials and tribulations. Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely accused and imprisoned. Given position and power in a great empire. All of it by God's hand. All of it to fulfill God's plan. What was intended for evil, God intended for good and many were saved.

Perspective: Jesus looks out on a crowd. They are hungry. They are thirsty. They were sick. He had compassion. He saw them through His Father's eyes. He miraculously fed them from five loaves and two fishes. He brought healing and wholeness. He showed them the Kingdom. They were more than satisfied.

Perspective: Jesus is walking across the water to a boat in the middle of a fierce storm. The wind and the waves are tossing the little craft back and forth. The men on board are afraid for their lives. Jesus tells them not to be calm. To keep their eyes on him. One of them, Peter, asks to go to Jesus. Jesus invites him out onto the water. He finds himself walking but soon the fear sets in. The waves are too much. The wind too strong. His faith fails and he begins to sink. Jesus reaches down and rescues him and then settles the storm with a word as he gets into the boat.

Perspective: David composing a Psalm of praise for his salvation from King Saul. He's been on the run for a very long time. He's barely escaped death more than once. Through no fault of his own, he's become the king's enemy. But God is with him. God has granted him the victory.

Joseph. David. Peter. The crowds following Jesus. They are all very much alike. They come to God with their needs. Their wants. Their desires. Their hopes. Their dreams. But their horizons are too small. As is often the case, they look at things from a worldly perspective. Their faith fails. What they need is God's perspective. They need to take a step back and see things through God's eyes. Understand God is at work even in the darkest and hardest of times. Trust His faithfulness. Trust His love. Trust His grace.

Where do you need God's perspective today? Are you overwhelmed by the challenges you face? Anxious and afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Are you bound by your past? The abuse you suffered? The pain you endured? Have you been falsely accused? Falsely imprisoned? Falsely cut out of the life of someone you love? Is the house of cards you've built starting to come down around you? Look to Christ! Lift your eyes above the hills! Above the wind and the waves! Above the storm that rages all around you! Place your hope and trust in God and He will see you through!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 46-47, Matthew 15:1-28, Psalms 19, Proverbs 4:14-19

January 23, 2019
THE WAYS OF GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 46-47, Matthew 15:1-28, Psalms 19, Proverbs 4:14-19

“Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.”
(Matthew 15:14)

This verse seems so apropos in our world today where godly leadership is in such short supply. Our political leaders are easy targets, of course. Their hypocrisy is obvious. Their decisions are mostly self-serving. They seem to love self-promotion. They routinely place party loyalty above the collective good of the nation. Godly principles are sacrificed on the altar of expediency. But before we rush to cast the first stone, let's be honest and acknowledge we are not much different. The decisions we make on a daily basis in our homes, schools, businesses and churches are often guided by selfish desires. We are not immune from the temptation to compromise our godly character for the sake of material gain. The rise of social media gives us all a platform to self-promote. We routinely place loyalty to ourselves above the common good. We are all blind if we're honest.

God's Word is given to us as a gift to open our eyes. To help us see the poverty of our condition. To help us come to grips with the depravity of our hearts. Without Christ, we are all wicked, stumbling about in the deep darkness. With Christ, we are made righteous. Our hearts yearn for God. We want to walk in His ways and allow His commands to guide our lives. As we pursue Christ, our righteousness begins to shine like the dawn and as we grow in Christ, the light of our lives shines brighter and brighter with each passing year. I love how Proverbs 4 put it, “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.” (Proverbs 4:18-19)

Why read the Bible? Why pick up this dusty old book? Why does it continue to be the most translated, most purchased, and most treasured book of all time? Because there is something hardwired deep into our souls that knows the truth. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb...” (Psalms 19:7-10) The single most important thing you can do for your own spiritual growth is to meditate on God's Word. To reflect daily and prayerfully on what He has to say. To absorb what God has to say about life. About our world. About love. About grace. About righteousness and holiness and what it means to live for Him. There simply is no substitute. No shortcut. No other way to truly know the Lord than to read His Word over and over again.

I love how the Psalmist concludes his song of praise. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalms 19:14) Open our eyes that we may see the glories of your Word, Father! Lead us in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake! Let our light shine like the dawn in our darkened world that many will see and believe Your Truth today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 48-49, Matthew 15:29-16:12, Psalms 20, Proverbs 4:20-27

January 24, 2019
THE BLESSING

Readings for today: Genesis 48-49, Matthew 15:29-16:12, Psalms 20, Proverbs 4:20-27

One could argue the main theme of the book of Genesis is blessing. From the opening pages of Scripture, it is clear God desires to bless His people. He blessed Adam and Eve. He blessed Noah and his family. He blessed Abraham and Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Joseph and Asenath. None of these people were perfect. None of them did anything to merit God's blessing. In fact, they were often disobedient and sinful and prideful and rebellious. Cain kills Abel. Noah gets drunk and curses his grandson. Abraham lies about his relationship with Sarah. Sarah gets impatient with God's promise and gives Abraham her servant. The consequences of these actions are significant. Each of the characters in the Genesis story face hardship and suffering. They know pain intimately. But God never abandons them. He continues to walk with them and bless them as their hearts return to Him.

God is not the only one who blesses. We bless as well. In chapter 49 of Genesis, Jacob calls his sons to his deathbed. He is fulfilling his patriarchal duty to pass on the blessings of his fathers. This blessing has to do with power and position within the growing family. It has to do with how the inheritance will be divided and who will lead after Jacob has gone. The blessing carries what passes for legal weight in an ancient near east context. Much like English common law, it is more unwritten than written and it will determine the future for each young man and their descendants.

Rueben is deposed as firstborn for sexual immorality. Simeon and Levi for their unrestrained rage and violence that put the family at risk. Judah will now become the leader after Jacob dies and his line will reign and rule over all of Israel. Zebulun will become a tribe of merchants and traders. Issachar will serve his brothers well. From Dan will come the judges. Spiritual leaders for Israel in the time before the kings. Not much is said about Gad, Asher, and Naphtali but the implication of blessing is clear. Special treatment is reserved for Jacob's favored son, Joseph, for all he has endured. And Jacob ends his blessing by calling into question the character of his youngest son Benjamin. Again, these are not just words. With these words would come a certain amount of wealth and possessions. A certain amount of power and authority. A certain position within the family structure and hierarchy. To top things off, these words carry prophetic overtones as well. Even though Jacob's eyes are failing, he's sees the future for each of his boys laid out before him.

Think about the power of blessing in your own life. What kind of blessing – if any - did you receive from your mom or dad? What kind of blessing has come down your family line as a result of the faithfulness of a forefather or mother? How intentional are you as a parent about blessing your own children? Have you shared with them what you see in their future? One of the things I encourage those who are in hospice care to do is call their children and grandchildren and pass on a blessing. It is a powerful testimony that can last for generations. Of course, blessings are not just reserved for those we love. How do you bless your co-workers or classmates? How do you bless your friends and neighbors? How do you bless your brothers and sisters in Christ in your church family? How do you bless even your enemies and those who sin against you? Remember, God's blessings in no way are dependent on the actions of sinful humanity. They are a product of His grace. The same should be true for us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 50, Exodus 1-2:10, Matthew 16:13-17:9, Psalms 21, Proverbs 5:1-6

January 25, 2019
EVERYDAY HEROISM

Readings for today: Genesis 50, Exodus 1-2:10, Matthew 16:13-17:9, Psalms 21, Proverbs 5:1-6

“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” (Exodus 1:8) One of the darkest chapters in Israel’s history begins with these ominous words. A new Pharaoh has risen. One who did not know Joseph. One who had forgotten what God had done for Egypt through Joseph. One who saw Joseph’s descendants as a threat to his power. One can understand his trepidation. A foreign people living on the eastern edge of the Nile delta who have multiplied exceedingly over the generations and grown strong. They worship a strange god you do not know. They have strange customs you do not follow. They speak a foreign language you do not understand. It is easy to understand the source of this new Pharaoh’s fear.

So he takes action. He enslaves them. Subjects them to abuse, harsh treatment, and a lifetime of hard labor. But the more they oppressed the Israelites, the more numerous and powerful they became. Anxious about the potential of an uprising, Pharaoh calls for draconian population control. He orders the midwives to kill every male child that is born. In this way, he hopes to reduce their numbers to a more manageable size. But the midwives courageously defy the king. Denying themselves, they save the male children from death. It’s an incredible act of faith.

Shiprah and Puah. Their names are important. Two ordinary women engaged in an ordinary profession. There is nothing remarkable about them. Nothing special or unique. They have no biblical training. No seminary degree. They come from no special lineage and carry no family name. We do not know their tribe or their background. We simply know their names. Their occupation. And the one thing that does set them apart...their fear of God. These two women pave the way for Israel’s deliverer, Moses, to be born. They make it possible for God’s salvation to come. Through their act of selfless obedience, they create the conditions for what will become the seminal event in Judaism. The Exodus. Without them, there is no Charlton Heston. :-) No Ten Commandments. No Moses. Without them, there is no parting of the Red Sea or journey to the Promised Land. Without them, the Hebrews eventually die out. Cease to exist. The covenant God made with Abraham would be broken and all of salvation history go defunct. All because two women decided to obey God and perform their professional duties faithfully under threat of death.

Do you think about your profession in this way? Do you connect what you do with what you believe? Is God on your radar screen as you go about your day to day activities? It’s amazing how often God uses the ordinary and mundane to accomplish His purposes. In my experience, it is not the pastors and church leaders who move the dial of the Kingdom but the faithful man or woman who often goes unnoticed. They spend their days working at their job. Caring for their families. Praying and studying the Bible. And eternity moves at the sound of their voice. The wheel of God’s salvation history turns by their hand. It’s truly amazing. What could God do with an accountant? A truck driver? A fast food worker? A sanitation engineer? What could God do with a doctor? A lawyer? A university professor? What could God do with a teacher? A mother? A father? A friend? The answer is...everything. Anything. God uses those who are available and humble and willing. Does that describe you?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 2:11-3:22, Matthew 17:10-27, Psalms 22, Proverbs 5:7-14

January 26, 2019
GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for today: Exodus 2:11-3:22, Matthew 17:10-27, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 5:7-14

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalms 22:1)

Many will recognize these words as the ones Jesus utters while hanging on the cross. It is the cry of dereliction. The Son of God actually becoming sin for us. Taking on all the collective guilt of the human race – past, present, and future. In that moment, the Father turns His face away from His Son. The Spirit is withdrawn. The Son hangs alone. Abandoned. Forsaken. He literally is in hell.

What many don't realize is Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. A common practice among God's people for centuries. Whenever we do not have the words to express our pain, we turn to the Psalms. There we find the words we do not have and we pray with the saints who have gone before us. Jesus takes up this time-honored practice in His own suffering. In His moment of greatest agony and despair, these words are wrenched from the depths of His soul. Why have you forsaken me? I cry out by day but you do not answer me. I am scorned by man and despised by the people. I am poured out like water and my bones are out of joint. Though the Gospel writers only place the first words of Psalm 22 on the lips of Jesus, it is highly likely Jesus recited this whole Psalm as He died. For it is not simply a Psalm of lament but a Psalm of hope as well! “O Lord, my help, come quickly to my aid...Deliver my soul from the sword...Save me from the mouth of the lion...For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him...All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.” (Psalms 22:19-21, 24, 27) Yes, even in His darkest moment, Jesus placed His trust in His Heavenly Father.

What about us? The language of Psalm 22 authorizes deep lament. It honors our grief. It gives voice to our pain. God is not afraid of our suffering. God does not turn His back on us when we hurt. He wants us to bring all our heartaches and heartbreaks before Him. Lay them at His feet. Share with Him our deepest fears and darkest doubts. He does not shy away from our cries of dereliction. Instead, He meets us there. He waits for us at rock bottom. When our strength finally fails and our hope is gone. In the darkest moments of our lives, God is with us.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 4-5:21, Matthew 18:1-20, Psalm 22:19-31, Proverbs 5:15-21

January 27, 2019
EXCUSES

Readings for today: Exodus 4-5:21, Matthew 18:1-20, Psalm 22:19-31, Proverbs 5:15-21

Excuses. We all have them. We all have reasons why things have not gone the way we want. Why we can't live up to our responsibilities. Can't keep our promises. Can't fulfill our obligations. We make excuses in our marriages and families. We make excuses at work and at school. We even make excuses for why we cannot worship God in the way He deserves and the way He demands. We have all kinds of reasons. Some of them are good reasons. Some of them are bad reasons. Some of them have nothing to do with the matter at hand.

Maybe you didn't realize it but some of our greatest heroes/heroines of the faith also made excuses. Take Moses for example. I get it. He's eighty years old. He's built a life in Midian. He's gotten married. He has children. He has a thriving business. It's a lot to give up to go back to a country where he's wanted for murder. It's a lot to go back to a people who've already rejected his leadership. He doesn't think they'll believe him when he claims to speak for God. He doesn't think they'll listen when he describes his burning bush experience. Besides, he's not a great speaker anyway. He's not confident. Not good in front of people. He stutters. He stammers. He has a hard time making his point. He's frankly not what you'd expect in a strong charismatic leader.

Even the best of us make excuses. Thankfully, God doesn't take them seriously. Thankfully, God blows right past all our reasons for why this or that won't work. Why this or that plan will fail. Why we are not the right man or woman for the job. He gives us signs to encourage our faint hearts. A staff that turns into a snake. A hand that becomes leprous and is made clean. Water turning to blood as it's poured on the ground. An unexpected phone call from a friend. A fresh Word from Scripture. An answer to prayer. A surprise gift. All of these signs are from the Lord that we can indeed do what He's asking us to do...if we have the eyes to see and the hearts to understand them as such. Furthermore, He reminds us who gave us our gifts and talents in the first place! "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." (Exodus 4:11-12) God is not limited by our lack of ability or confidence. The One who made us will equip us for every good work. Finally, God sends others to help us out along the way. For every Moses, there is an Aaron. For every Paul, there is a Barnabus. This is how God works. Always in community. Always through relationships. No man or woman is an island. The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone.

So what excuses have you been making? What's been holding you back from serving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? What's keeping you from community? Is it fear? Is it failure? Is it brokenness? Is it in? Have you been hurt? Wounded? Are you too old? Too young? Too busy? God has a plan for your life. God wants to use you for His Kingdom purposes in this world. God has blessed you to be a blessing. Stop making excuses and place your trust in God. The One who calls you will provide you with everything you need to accomplish His work.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 5:22-7:25, Matthew 18:21-19:12, Psalms 23, Proverbs 5:22-23

January 28, 2019
GOD ISN'T FAIR

Readings for today: Exodus 5:22-7:25, Matthew 18:21-19:12, Psalms 23, Proverbs 5:22-23

Today we have to grapple with one of the deepest mysteries in all of Scripture. God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Before we even get started, let's acknowledge the obvious. We hate this truth. It runs counter to everything we've been raised to believe about free will, everyone getting a choice, God loving everyone, etc. It calls into question God's justice. God's righteousness. How could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith? And yet, if we are courageous enough to take the text at face value, we are left with no other conclusion.

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you." (Ex. 7:3)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..." (Ex. 10:1)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go." (Ex. 10:20)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go." (Ex. 10:27)

"Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." (Ex. 11:10)

God is relentless with this man. He will not let him repent. He will not let him escape judgment. He will not let him give in until his nation lies in ruins. God will not let up until there is no doubt who is God and who is not. (Remember, Pharaoh was worshiped as a god by his people.) Now this is hard for us. This is a different side to God that we aren't used to. A God who reigns over the affairs of humanity. A God who rules over the universe with a firm hand. A God who is to be feared as much as loved. A God who will tolerate no rivals. No equals. So again, the question is pressed...how could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith?

The key is how we define righteousness. Do we define it from a human perspective? Or a Biblical one? According to Scripture, God's highest aim is NOT the salvation of His people. As important as this is, it is merely the means God chooses to achieve a higher end. What is that "higher end?" The full display of God's power and glory and majesty and sovereignty over all creation. God's greatest aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His grand design calls for all creation to honor His great name. This is the purpose for which we were created and it is clearly revealed in the Exodus narrative.

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." (Ex. 7:3-5)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your

son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:1-2)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 11:9)

And the Apostle Paul affirms God's purposes when he looked back on the Exodus story. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." (Rom. 9:17)

The point is clear. God will make His name known. And He chooses to make His name known through "vessels of mercy" (His people) and "vessels of wrath" (not His people). And lest we think this somehow compromises God's justice or righteousness or goodness or just isn't fair; we have to remember our condition before God. All of us are dead in our trespasses. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us deserve death and the torments of hell forever. We are in NO position – broken, sinful, and rebellious as we are - to pass judgment on God. God is free to choose to use whomever He wills in whatever way He wills and this in no way compromises His integrity.

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should be scared of God? Does it mean we are at the mercy of a God who is arbitrary and capricious? Not at all. In Jesus Christ, God has provided the perfect Passover Lamb! He Himself has become the sacrifice that saves! His blood delivers us from the angel of death! And because we have no idea whom God has chosen, we should go forth and gladly, even boldly, share this good news with the world!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 8-9, Matthew 19:13-30, Psalms 24, Proverbs 6:1-5

January 29, 2019
HEAVENLY TREASURE

Readings for today: Exodus 8-9, Matthew 19:13-30, Psalms 24, Proverbs 6:1-5

“What good deed must I do to earn eternal life?” Such a good question. Such a common question. One I find a lot of people asking in my line of work. Have I done enough? Have I been good enough? Will my life be weighed in the scales and found wanting? Will St. Peter open the gates to me? I cannot tell you how many times I have had this conversation with someone who is near death. Lying on their deathbed, they so often want to know if they’ve done enough to earn their way into heaven.

It makes me sad but I get it. We’ve been raised in a culture of self-sufficiency. The great American myth is the Horatio Alger story. The rags to riches account of a young man who works hard to improve his lot in life. We talk about pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. No such thing as a free lunch. We assume that if we work hard over a long period of time, we will be successful. But then reality hits us in the face. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, “It’s all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel just to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.” Life has a way of creating obstacles for us. Especially if we are economically disadvantaged or belong to a minority group. And this truth points us to the even deeper reality that we are all - black, white, rich, poor, gay, straight, trans, cis - spiritually dead. How can one keep the commandments as Jesus suggests when one’s heart is corrupted by sin?

It’s easy to think that what Jesus is proposing here is strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. He’s not. Pay close attention to how he responds to the young man. “You’ve kept the commandments? All of them since your youth? Let’s put that to the test shall we? Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor.” The clear implication is that if the young man had indeed been keeping the commandments since his youth, his heart would be so deeply in love with God he’d have no problem letting go of all his material possessions. Furthermore, he would surely recognize the Author of those Ten Commandments when He stood in front of him and would give ANYTHING to follow Him! Sadly, he does not thus betraying where his true loyalties lie. He doesn’t love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He’s been fooling himself all along. And therefore eternal life will remain out of reach.

This is shocking news to the disciples. “Who then can be saved if not this rich young man who’s done everything right his whole life?” It’s not about how our life appears on the outside but what’s on the inside that counts. It’s what we do but what we love that matters most. Do we love God? If so, we will joyfully leave “houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands” in Jesus’ name. Are we storing up treasure in heaven? Then we will gladly relinquish our wealth and possessions in Jesus’ name. Are we seeking God’s Kingdom? Then we will be more than willing to sacrifice our political, cultural, and social power/influence in Jesus’ name. Only when our hearts are oriented towards heaven. Oriented towards the Kingdom. Oriented towards Jesus, will we receive the gift He has promised. Eternal life.

Is this possible for us to achieve? Can we lay hold of faith like we do our bootstraps? No, we cannot. All we can do is open our hearts to Jesus. Receive the Holy Spirit and let Him do the work of regeneration that we are unable to do. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 10:1-12:13, Matthew 20:1-28, Psalms 25, Proverbs 6:12-15

January 30, 2019
IS GOD A COMMUNIST?

Readings for today: Exodus 10:1-12:13, Matthew 20:1-28, Psalms 25, Proverbs 6:12-15

It just doesn't seem fair. To pay laborers who work all day the same wage as those who show up at the 11th hour. I am pretty confident if I were one of the people the master hired at dawn. If I worked all day in the hot sun. If I were tired and weary and worn out from picking grapes and pruning vines. I would be resentful of those who came later in the day. I would assume the master would make things "right" and pay me according to what I deserve. And at the end of the day, when the wages were being handed out and I saw the master hand a denarius to those who came at the very end, I am sure I would expect some kind of bonus. The fact that the master pays me the same as he does all the rest would make me angry too.

It feels like communism. Making sure everyone gets paid the same regardless of the disparity in how much they worked. It feels like the current political debates that seek to move us towards a more European socialist model of government. Free healthcare. Free college. And everyone getting a living wage regardless of how hard they work. Perhaps this is the next logical step for a generation who always got a participation trophy. Where everyone needed the same affirmation lest we make people feel bad. If you are like me, this kind of thinking is frustrating. In the "real world" there are winners and losers. Social Darwinism is a real thing. People are not all the same. They do not have the same gifts and talents and abilities. They do not have the same work ethic. They do not have the same opportunities. Some face more barriers than others. Some have more advantages than others. This is just life. So the story Jesus tells about paying those who worked for one hour the same as those who slaved all day just doesn't sit well.

Grace never sits well. Not with me. Not with anyone. That's really the heart of this story. It has less to do with economics or the rights of workers and employers and a whole lot more to do with the extravagant grace of God. God chooses to reward those who are late to the party as much as He chooses to reward those who are already in. Grace is the currency of God's Kingdom. It has this leveling effect. Through grace, the first become last. No longer defined by their achievements and success. Through grace, the last become first. No longer defined by their failures and shame. Greatness in the Kingdom is defined by those who selflessly serve. Those who courageously follow the example of the Master who did not come to be served by to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

Grace shifts our perspective. Rather than be frustrated that the workers who came at the 11th hour were paid as much as those who came in the first hour, grace causes us to rejoice that everyone got the chance to work at all! No one was left out! No one was left standing in the marketplace to go hungry! No one had to go home and tell their wives and children they couldn't find a job! Grace celebrates the incredible generosity of the Master who extravagantly gives to all in need! This isn't about communism, socialism, capitalism, or any other "isms" you can think of! When Jesus comes again to establish His reign and rule on the earth, all the "isms" of this world will perish. They are corrupt man-made systems not fit for the glory of the coming Kingdom of God. No, God's Kingdom runs on grace. It's sustained by grace. It's powered by grace. And the great news is this...grace is a renewable, sustainable, clean source of energy that will last for all eternity!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 12:14-13:16, Matthew 20:29-21:22, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 6:12-15

January 31, 2019
ROCK BOTTOM

Readings for today: Exodus 12:14-13:16, Matthew 20:29-21:22, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 6:12-15

Have you ever felt like you've hit rock bottom? You've exhausted all your resources. Worn out all your connections. Come to the end of all your strength. You have no moves left to make. No options left to consider. All the doors seem closed. Strangely enough, it's a good place to be. When we finally come to the end of ourselves, we are ready to turn to God.

Pharaoh hit rock bottom. He stood by and watched as plague after plague devastated his country. He hardened his heart when the Nile turned to blood. He steeled his resolve when the flies, frogs, and locusts swarmed. He refused to yield in the face of fiery hail and a three-day eclipse of the sun. Finally, the firstborn in every single home in Egypt are killed in a single night. The cries of grief and pain rise up throughout the land. The angel of death even visits the palace. His own child dies in his arms. He finally breaks. He relents and lets God's people go.

Where were you when you hit rock bottom? What did it look like? How did it feel? I've hit rock bottom multiple times in my life. The first was on the campus of the University of Colorado. I was drinking too much. Skipping class. Flushing my tuition down the toilet. Rock bottom came in the form of a letter from the school letting me know I would not be invited back for the fall semester. I had flunked out. I was a failure. All my hopes and dreams came crashing down around me. I broke. I relented. I surrendered to God.

I hit rock bottom a second time in Sun Prairie, WI. I went there to plant a church. I had everything I needed. Plenty of money. A new, rapidly growing community. A vision and a heart to reach lost people. But I got crossways with the board. Sharp disagreements theologically and methodologically doomed the work from the start. I did not respond well. I fell into a depression. I turned inward. I withdrew. The church plant imploded. I was a failure. All my hopes and dreams came crashing down again. I broke. I relented. I surrendered to God.

I don't know where life finds you today. Perhaps you feel like you're approaching rock bottom. Perhaps you feel like you're already there. Maybe you feel like you've been there a long time and can't seem to find your way out. My encouragement? Let your heart break. Let go of your will and your way. Surrender to God.

God loves it when we hit rock bottom. In fact, I believe that's where God likes to hang out. He loves to meet us in those spaces where we feel so overwhelmed. So helpless. So hopeless. So lost and alone. It is there that God does His best work. It is there that we are at our most humble. Most open. Most willing to obey. Don't make the same mistake I made or the same mistake Pharaoh made. Don't harden your heart. Don't steel your resolve. Don't tighten your grip. Let go and let God. He stands ready to help those who turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 13:17-15:18, Matthew 21:23-46, Psalms 26, Proverbs 6:16-19