

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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March 1, 2019
RICH YOUNG RULER

Readings for today: Leviticus 24:1-25:46, Mark 10:13-31, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 10:20-21

The story of the rich young ruler is one of the more well-known in the gospels. Jesus is traveling up to Jerusalem, preparing to lay down His life for the sins of the world. Along the way, a young man approaches Him with urgent question..."What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with the typical Jewish answer. "Keep the commandments." The young man gets excited. "I've kept them all since my youth." Jesus looks him with love in His eyes. He knows what's coming. Knows He's about to expose the idolatry of the young man's heart. "Go. Sell all you have. Give it to the poor. And come follow Me." The young man turns away.

There are so many dynamics in play here. The longing of the young man for eternal life. The tender love of Jesus as He looks into the young man's heart. The faithfulness of the young man as he sought to honor God by keeping all the commandments. The challenge and invitation Jesus offers the young man. The deep sorrow he feels as he turns away.

I find these same dynamics in play in my own heart on a regular basis. I too long for eternal life. I wonder at times if I have done enough. I question my own faithfulness. Thankfully, I have also experienced the tender love of Jesus as He ministers to my heart. Assures me of His forgiveness and grace. Reminds me my salvation doesn't rest on my work. I too have sought to keep God's commandments. To live faithfully according to His Word. And I have felt the bite of Jesus' challenge to give all I have away for the sake of the gospel.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Try reading it again but slowly. Savor every word. Ponder every question. Reflect on every statement. Allow God's Word to sink deep into your soul. Do you feel the urgency of the young man's initial question? The pride of knowing you live faithfully according to God's Will? The sorrow of the young man's rejection? Have you experienced the tenderness of Jesus? Do you know you are the object of His unfailing love? Have you found the courage to walk by faith, sell all you have, and follow Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 25:47-27:13, Mark 10:32-52, Psalms 45, Proverbs 10:22

March 2, 2019
CONSEQUENCES

Readings for today: Leviticus 25:47-27:13, Mark 10:32-52, Psalms 45, Proverbs 10:22

I grew up in a home where good behavior was rewarded and bad behavior punished. There were consequences to one's actions. Positive. Negative. Otherwise. It is tempting to read Leviticus 26 and assume the Kingdom of God works much the same. Follow God's rules and you will be blessed. Ignore God's rules and you will be cursed. Obey God and it will go well with you. Disobey God and life will get hard. The text itself promises rain, good harvests, great victories, and the abiding presence of God to those who are faithful and it warns those who are unfaithful of famine, drought, defeat, and abandonment.

There is a branch of Christianity that makes much of verses like these. They promise health and wealth to those who have enough faith. They encourage people to put God to the test. To use their obedience to get what they want from God. When things don't go well, they blame the victim. They tell people they obviously haven't been obedient enough. They don't have enough faith. They tolerate too much sin in their lives. It's a toxic version of the Christian faith.

So what can we draw from verses like these? They seem so clear. Their promises so sure. Like every passage in Scripture, we have to read them against the backdrop of the larger story. The covenant of works was first established with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were given clear instructions, a law to follow, and the promise of paradise. However, they disobeyed. In their disobedience, the very ground began to reject them. All the curses listed in Leviticus 26 came to pass as humanity was exiled from Eden into a now broken, hostile, and sinful world. From this point forward, life would be chaotic and unstable. One could do all the right things but still experience the curse. One could do all the wrong things and seemingly receive the blessing. The world turned upside down.

Only God can make things right again and thankfully, He establishes the covenant of grace. Established on His unconditional love and predestined according to His sovereign will, God reaches out to humanity. He clothes Adam and Eve after their sin. He saves Noah and his family from the flood. He taps Abram and Sarai on the shoulder in Ur. None of these people are perfect. None of them are able to keep the Law or earn the blessings promised in Leviticus 26. But all of them walk with God. Their hearts are hungry for more of His glory. More of His presence. More of His love. They want nothing more than to serve Him faithfully all of their lives. Sin prevents them from being able to do this perfectly but it never stops them in their tracks. Even more important, sin presents no barrier for God. He reaches out to them in spite of their sin. In the midst of their disobedience. In the face of their rebellion and He grants them grace. He rejoices with them when the rains come and harvests are good and their enemies are put to flight. He grieves with them when they face drought, famine, disease, and death. No matter where they go or what they do, God is with them.

God is with you, friends! He promises never to leave you or forsake you! He is with you when you wake. With you when you sleep. With you when you work. With you when you play. There is never a moment when you are alone. This is great news! God loves us so much and continues to show us grace even in our sin.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 27:14-34, Numbers 1, Mark 11:1-26, Psalms 46, Proverbs 10:23

March 3, 2019
9/11

Readings for today: Leviticus 27:14-34, Numbers 1, Mark 11:1-26, Psalms 46, Proverbs 10:23

I once knew a man who was serving as a pastor in New York City when the towers fell. His church was located on Fifth Avenue just a few miles north of the World Trade Center in mid-town Manhattan. On the day when the planes hit the towers, Manhattan was in chaos. Billows of ash and smoke filled the streets. Police sirens filled the air as first responders rushed to the scene. People were terrified and running scared. My friend was in his office that day. He heard the commotion. He looked out his window and saw what was happening. He threw on his clergy robe and ran out into the streets to bring as many people as possible into his sanctuary. Hundreds of people filled the space. Weeping. Covered head to toe in ash. Most in shock over what they had just witnessed. They did not know each other. They had been brought together by great tragedy. And in the midst of the gathering, my friend got up to speak.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress...Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” (Psalms 46:1-7, 10-11)

After the service, many people approached my friend asking for the source of his comforting words. Was it some famous poet? Philosopher? Some eastern mystic or guru? They were surprised to hear these words came from the Bible. In the weeks and months ahead, many of those same people would return to the church to seek comfort. It became a safe space for them to process their pain. Many of them received Christ and began a new walk of faith. It was a powerful example of the Living Word of God in action. God drawing His people to Himself in the midst of a national tragedy.

God is still a refuge and strength to those who seek Him. A very present help in trouble. Those who love God do not need fear though the earth gives way or the mountains crumble into the heart of the sea. We do not fear because we see the river that flows in the midst of the city of God. A river whose streams make glad the heart of God. Because God is with us, we shall not be moved for to live is Christ and to die is gain. So let the nations rage. Let the kingdoms of this world totter. The Lord of hosts is with us, friends! The God of Jacob is our refuge!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 2-3, Mark 11:27-12:17, Psalms 47, Proverbs 10:24-25

March 4, 2019
PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Numbers 2-3, Mark 11:27-12:17, Psalms 47, Proverbs 10:24-25

Yesterday I had the pleasure of worshiping alongside a beautiful little four year old in our church family. She had wandered from her dad and ended up in the seat next to me where she could watch her mom lead us in singing. She was fascinated watching her. She tried to copy her motions. Tried to sing some of the words. Finally, her desire to be with her mom got the best of her and she started shuffling slowly but surely towards the platform. With each step, she looked back waiting to see how I would respond. I simply smiled and waved. She kept going. She got to the first step and turned around. Suddenly she became very aware of the whole congregation. She paused and started to lay down. That's when dad stepped in.

It's a precious story. One that teaches us about the power of perspective. The little girl held a limited view of what her mom was actually doing until she got to the platform and her eyes were opened to the hundreds of people in the room following her mom's lead. In our reading for today, Jesus shares a parable that's intended to broaden our perspective as well. You and I have such a limited view of the world. We tend to focus on what's right in front of us and fail to grasp the bigger picture. We are trapped within the time/space continuum and are forced to take life as it comes. We do not have the capacity to grasp the infinite with our finite minds. So Jesus reminds us what God's been up to all along.

A man planted a vineyard. Protected it with a wall and a tower. Made it productive with a wine press. He entrusted it to some tenants and then departed. Sound familiar? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Light and darkness. Sun, moon, stars, and planets. Water and land. Trees, bushes, and flowers. Animals, fish, birds, and insects. God made them all. Placed them on this earth. And then entrusted it to our care. To the creature He made in His own image. Humanity was given this one charge. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Exercise dominion over all I have made. Sadly, the tenants rebelled. They beat and killed the servants who were sent to check in on them. Finally, the vineyard owner sent his son. Surely they will recognize him when he comes! They do indeed and they murder him in cold blood, thinking if they get rid of the heir, they will inherit the vineyard. Humanity rebelled against God. Went their own way. Chose their own destiny. The result has been thousands of years of pain and suffering, exploitation and abuse, violence and death. God hates what He sees. Hates what's happening to His world. So He sends prophet after prophet to remind humanity of her high calling. But humanity rejects and beats and even kills the prophets. So God - in the ultimate act of love and mercy and grace - sends His Son. Surely they will listen to Him! It's not to be. Humanity takes Jesus and hangs Him on a cross, thinking if we get rid of the heir we can establish our reign and rule on the earth. What will happen to those tenants when the owner finally comes? What will happen to humanity when God finally comes? Judgment. Punishment. Eternal death.

How do you make sense of the world around you? Do you look at things from God's perspective or do you trust only what your eyes can see? What your hands can touch? What your senses can perceive? Friends, it is so easy to lose sight of who truly owns the world. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of believing we are the center of the universe. Yes, God loves us but not in a sentimental, sappy, enabling kind of way. His love is fierce and loyal and jealous. He will brook no rivals. He will not compete with the things of this world for your attention. He will not allow you to persist in sin or call good "evil" or evil "good." God defines the reality into which we must fit...not the other way around. And He disciplines those He loves, constantly making and remaking us into the image of Christ.

No matter what you may be going through in your life right now – good, bad, or ugly – ask God to help you see your life through His eyes. Ask Him to give you His perspective and rejoice in how He uses even the hardest of trials to make you into the image of His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 4-5, Mark 12:18-37, Psalms 48, Proverbs 10:26

March 5, 2019
PROXIMITY

Readings for today: Numbers 4-5, Mark 12:18-37, Psalms 48, Proverbs 10:26

It's amazing how history repeats itself. I meet so many people who have the same exact question as the scribe who approached Jesus in today's reading. "Which commandment is the most important of all?" It's a loaded question for sure. I often have to dig deeper to get the heart of why they're asking. Is it because they're trying to find a loophole? A godly excuse to go on living as they did before they met Christ? Is it because they're new to the whole Christian thing and honestly do not know? Is it because their heart has been pierced with repentance and they want to please God? There are all kinds of reasons people ask this question and their answers reveal their proximity to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is the Kingdom and His answer reflects the truth of who He is. "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) There is no hesitation. No confusion. Jesus quotes the famous Shema which is the heartbeat of the Jewish faith and then ties it to the love of neighbor. It's a beautifully distilled picture of God's heart for His people. It's what all the rules and regulations from Leviticus and Numbers point to and find their fulfillment in. What God desires more than anything else is a relationship with His people. He loves them and He longs to see His love returned.

The scribe understands this as well. Listen to his response which Jesus affirms. "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:32-33) He gets it. An expert in the Law, he doesn't confuse the Law with God. Doesn't confuse keeping the Law with a relationship with God. He understands that everything he's been taught. Everything he's dedicated his life to as a legal expert. Everything he teaches others under his authority points beyond itself to this one great truth...love God with all you are and all you have and love your neighbor as yourself.

There's a part of me that thinks we should simply preach this passage over and over again. For until we master it – or it masters us - we cannot go any further. All the theology and Bible study and mission trips and tithing and praying won't matter if we have not grasped what it means to love God with all our heart and mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the foundation for all the rest. This is the core of what we believe. It is essential to who we are as Christians. Now, will we ever arrive? Will we ever do this perfectly? Of course not. Let's not let our imperfections give us an excuse to dodge the issue. Despite our sinful condition, loving God and loving neighbor should be our all-consuming passion. It should be the first thing we think of every morning as we wake and the last thing we think of before we go to sleep. How can I love God more? How can I love my neighbor more? How can I so rest in Christ that these desires naturally arise from a heart that's been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? These are the thoughts that should occupy our minds far more than the mundane challenges we face every day. Friends, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:1-3)

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 6-7, Mark 12:38-13:13, Psalms 49, Proverbs 10:27-28

March 6, 2019
THE BIBLE'S PRAYERBOOK

Readings for today: Numbers 6-7, Mark 12:38-13:13, Psalms 49, Proverbs 10:27-28

When I read through the Psalms I try to imagine what the composer must be experiencing. What is he referencing when he says, ““But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” (Psalms 49:15) Is it disease? Is it depression? Is it life circumstances? Is he fearful of the future? Afraid of his enemies? Is he having a hard time being patient for God’s Will to come about? Or the flip side, what happened that caused David to write, “When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before your presence. For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne, giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish; you have blotted out their name forever and ever. The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins; their cities you rooted out; the very memory of them has perished.” (Psalms 9:3-6) Had he just won another victory? Had he just put his enemies to flight? Is he referring here to the Philistines or to the people who were still following the house of Saul in Israel? Can he sense the fulfillment of God’s promises are near? As always, I love David’s honesty and transparency...“Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalms 10:1) He’s not afraid to cry out to God from the depths of his heart.

Throughout history, the people of God have returned over and over again to the Psalms to learn how to pray. They have used them as a guide for prayer. They have prayed these words back to God. Made them their own. Prayer can be difficult. It’s challenging to move beyond the rote prayers we learned in our youth. It’s challenging to be honest and real with God. Frequently it can feel like our words are inadequate. Self-centered. Foolish. Like they bounce off the ceiling back into our laps. So many Christians I know and love struggle with prayer. Often when they ask me how they should pray, I will point them to the Psalms. Not just to repeat the words but to reflect on them and make them their own. Reflect on the feelings and emotions. Reflect on the heart of what David is saying. Let his heart’s cry resonate with your heart’s cry and lead you to express your deepest thoughts to God.

Our God is safe. He is a refuge. A stronghold. Our deliverer. We are the apple of His eye and He hides us in the shadow of His wings. He is our protector. Our comforter. Our friend. We can tell Him anything. The deepest desires of our hearts are not hidden from Him. Nor are the wounds. The hurts. The disappointments. The fears. The failures. God rejoices with us when we experience success. When the victories come in our lives. God weeps with us when struggle. When we grieve. God fights our battles for us. We may not always understand His ways. We may not always agree with His timing. His answer can be “No” just as easily as it can be “Yes.” It can even be “Not Yet.” Through it all, God is God and we are not and prayer reminds us the best place to be is at His feet.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 8-9, Mark 13:14-37, Psalms 50, Proverbs 10:29-30

March 7, 2019
A HOLY PRIESTHOOD

Readings for today: Numbers 8-9, Mark 13:14-37, Psalms 50, Proverbs 10:29-30

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine...For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary.” (Numbers 8:14, 16-19)

Israel belonged to God. They were His chosen possession out of all the nations of the earth. He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and thereby laid claim to their very lives. They were not their own. They were not “free” to choose or not choose God. He had chosen them. He had saved them. He had rescued them. He had made His covenant with them. No matter where they went or what they did or how they acted, they remained His children forever. In order to remind them of this great and awesome truth, God told Moses to set aside one entire tribe...the Levites. They would not be counted in the census. They would not be considered “part” of Israel. They would have no inheritance in the Promised Land. Their “inheritance” would be God Himself. They would be set aside to serve Him in His Tabernacle and, later, His Temple. They would play specific roles within the worshiping life of Israel. They would guard the sanctuary. They would set it up, tear it down, and transport it day after day. From birth they were set apart, consecrated to the Lord’s service. It was not a vocation they chose but a calling God had placed on their lives.

Fast forward a few thousand years. One greater than Moses is born. A high priest greater than Aaron has come. The Old Covenant is fulfilled. The New Covenant is established. “In speaking of a new covenant, Jesus makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” (Hebrews 8:13) The reality is the Old Covenant was always temporal. Always bound to a particular cultural situation. Always designed to point us to a new and better covenant which Jesus Himself would die and rise to guarantee. “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.” (Hebrews 7:22) The ceremonial laws of Israel were culturally bound to a particular time and place. To a particular situation in history. Even the moral law which remains binding only serves to show us our weakness and imperfections. Therefore, it is useless to save. “For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.” (Hebrews 7:18-19) Jesus is that better hope! And through His life, death, and resurrection, God once again lays claim to our lives. He chooses us. He redeems us. He purchases us with His own blood. And because He Himself is the eternal high priest, interceding for us continually in the heavens. And because He Himself is the eternal sacrifice, fully atoning for the full weight of all our sin. “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him...” (Hebrews 7:25)

In Christ, we belong to God. We are His treasured possession. His chosen people. As such, we are not our own. Our lives are not our own. Our future is not our own. All that we have and all that we are and all that we achieve is not ours to hold onto but rather ours to offer in service to God. How different would life be if we understood this great truth?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 10-11:23, Mark 14:1-21, Psalms 51, Proverbs 10:31-32

March 8, 2019
THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Numbers 10-11:23, Mark 14:1-21, Psalms 51, Proverbs 10:31-32

A few days ago, an old article began reappearing in my Twitter feed. Written for Forbes, it lists the nine toughest leadership roles in our culture today. Pastors come in at #5. "Being a pastor is like death by a thousand paper cuts....You're scrutinized and criticized from top to bottom, stem to stern. You work for an invisible, perfect Boss, and you're supposed to lead a ragtag gaggle of volunteers towards God's coming future. It's like herding cats, but harder." Now I am not sure my job is any harder than anyone else's but I do sympathize with the sentiments of the article. Leadership is hard. The burden is heavy. The struggle is real. No matter what sphere of life you are called to lead in – and I truly believe all of us are "leaders" in one sphere or another - it comes with a lot of stress. How one responds to the stress often determines the success or failure of the leader.

Moses felt the stress of leadership. Listen to what he says to the Lord after what seems like the umpteenth time the people of Israel complained. "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness." (Numbers 11:11-15) Think about all Moses had accomplished up to this point. At eighty years of age, he had returned to Egypt where he was wanted for murder to confront Pharaoh. After levying plague after plague, he successfully secured freedom for the people of Israel. He leads them out with great wealth and possessions. He parts the Red Sea. Feeds them in the wilderness. Brings water from a rock. He performs miracle after miracle and yet Israel remains so ungrateful. They continue to grumble and complain. At the first sign of hardship, they start whining about going back to Egypt. They criticize and attack his leadership. They come after his family. They question his ability. Can you imagine how frustrating this must have been?

So Moses asks God to kill him. He's tired. He's weary. He's depressed. He's anxious. He's come to the end of himself. He's on empty. He's got nothing left. Ever felt like that? Interestingly enough, the toughest job Forbes lists in its article is parenting. Staying at home to raise the kids. Anyone who's ever been a parent knows the struggle of watching your kids grow up. The joy and the sorrow. The excitement and the anxiety. The pride and the fear. It's quite a roller coaster. Moses sees himself as a kind of parent to Israel. Like God put him in charge of raising hundreds of thousands of children. Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Did I nurse them as they grew? How am I going to feed them? How am I going to provide for them? How am I going to raise them to maturity? The burden is simply too great so he cries out in anguish and despair.

Look at how God responds. "Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone." (Numbers 11:16-17) God doesn't leave Moses alone. He provides friends and colleagues to share the load. It is not up to Moses to do this on his own. This project doesn't rise or fall with Moses. Seventy elders are raised up by God to help lead and guide the people. They are filled with the same Spirit. They are given some of the same gifts. They will lighten the load.

Why is leadership so hard? Because we too often go it alone. I've known too many pastors who crash and burn because they have no friends. No colleagues to share their burdens with. I've known too many moms and dads who refuse to let others come alongside them and help. I've known too many business leaders who think their

business cannot survive without them. Too many teachers who believe the success or failure of each child rests on them.

Friends, leadership is a gift to be shared. I know I would not be where I am today without a phenomenal wife who stands by my side. Four great kids who are learning to take responsibility for themselves. Elders in our church who prayerfully seek the mind of Christ and are eager to share the burden. A staff team that truly loves and supports one another. It is awesome. Who has God put in your life to share the load? Who has God raised up to carry the burden with you? Don't be afraid to ask God for help! Ask Him to do for you what He did for Moses.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 11:24-13, Mark 14:22-52, Psalms 52, Proverbs 11:1-3

March 9, 2019
OUT OF THE BOX

Readings for today: Numbers 11:24-13, Mark 14:22-52, Psalms 52, Proverbs 11:1-3

God's ways are not our ways. Just as soon as we try to squeeze God into some kind of box, He breaks out. 70 elders are raised up to help lead the nation. They gather at the sanctuary to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is poured out and shockingly, two men who remained in the camp start to prophesy. Joshua, jealous for his mentor Moses, wants to stop them but Moses recognizes God cannot be confined to Joshua's box. Israel receives the Law of God forbidding intermarriage with those who are not part of God's people. Miriam and Aaron want to apply God's law to Moses' marriage. They believe his marriage to a Cushite woman disqualifies him on some level from being the supreme leader of Israel. But God reminds them He will not be confined to their box. "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth...And God said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord." (Numbers 12:3, 6, 8) Twelve spies are sent into the Promised Land. They find it to be a good land. A fruitful land. A blessed land. Flowing in milk and honey. It is everything God promised. But there is a problem. "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we...The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Numbers 13:31-33) In their fear, they take their eyes off of God. Despite all the miracles they've seen and experienced, they still put God in a box.

How often do we make the same mistake? How much do we limit God through our disbelief? How many times do we stick God in a box? Maybe it's our theology. We believe more in our theological system than we do in Christ. Maybe it's our culture. We believe more in our cultural understandings of the gospel than we do in the gospel itself. Maybe it's our human frailty. We trust more in our own wisdom and strength than we do in God.

This is deeply challenging and deeply practical. The other day, I spent time with several middle and high school boys. We talked about how Jesus requires us to sacrifice everything in order to follow Him. Our wealth. Our gifts and talents and abilities. Our success. Our future. Everything that we have and all that we are is to be surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. In return, Jesus offers us eternal life. Abundant life. Kingdom life. Life so precious and beautiful and glorious, it absolutely dwarfs whatever we may experience in this world. But we live in this world. And the expectations of this world too often frame how we understand God. So we have to fight to stay focused on Jesus. To see the world through His eyes. To let His expectations shape our expectations and His promises shape our understanding of life, the world, and our future.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14:1-15:16, Mark 14:53-72, Psalms 53, Proverbs 11:4

March 10, 2019
MISSING A DAY

Readings for today: Numbers 14:1-15:16, Mark 14:53-72, Psalms 53, Proverbs 11:4

So I missed a day. The combination of Daylight Savings, traveling to Portland, speaking at a missions conference, and returning home for a sermon planning retreat left me no time to sit quietly with the Lord and reflect on His Word. Some days are like that, aren't they? You wake up late. Rush to get the kids dressed and off to school. Barely get to work on time. You're already behind. You cruise throughout your day, knocking stuff off your list. You pick the kids up after school. Take them to practice. Hit fast food along the way because you're going to be at the dance studio or baseball diamond all afternoon and evening. They do their homework in the car. You finally get home and you're exhausted. It's called life. And we live it with the pedal down most of the time.

Here's the thing to remember. God is with you. Every step of the way. He's with you as you rush to get ready in the morning. He's in the car as you drive your kids to school or commute to work. He's there at the office waiting for you. He's guiding your hands throughout the day. He loves watching your children do what they love after school. He's giving them wisdom as they do their homework. He's there when your head hits the pillow at night. Missing a day in your Bible reading or falling behind in your Bible in a Year reading plan has no bearing on His love for you. He is a good Father. He sees your life and understands the pressure you're under. He's not trying to add one more thing to your already overloaded schedule.

So yesterday was crazy for me. But I've learned over the years how to tune my heart into God no matter what I may be engaged in. Yes, I didn't get to my reading but I did sense God's abiding presence in everything I said and did. I had a fantastic time at Portland Christian Center with some friends who have become very dear to me. Preaching at their missions conference was one of the great blessings of my life. I loved meeting their missionaries and encouraging them. Loved spending time with spiritual mentors like Ray and Linda Noah. Loved connecting with my wife as I sat in the lounge at the airport waiting for my flight. Loved re-connecting with Pastor Gary and Pastor Matt at the airport before being heading up the mountain for our retreat. Throughout it all, God ministered to my heart. Encouraged my soul. Stirred an even greater passion in me for what He's doing in the world. This is the fruit of a strong devotional life and I hope you sense something similar being born in your own life as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 15:17-16:40, Mark 15, Psalms 54, Proverbs 11:5-6

March 11, 2019
REFUSING TO ACCEPT OUR PLACE

Readings for today: Numbers 15:17-16:40, Mark 15, Psalms 54, Proverbs 11:5-6

Today's reading strikes a chord every time I come across it. "They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?'" (Numbers 16:3) I resonate with the sons of Korah. I tend to agree with their complaint. I too want to believe that every single human being is equal in the eyes of the Lord and worthy of serving in His presence. I've been raised in a democracy after all and trained from birth to believe one can achieve anything if they just set their minds to it.

This is part of what makes the Bible so challenging. There is a significant cultural gap between the ancient near east culture of Israel and the 21st century United States. Israel was no democracy. God Himself was her king. As such, He held the power of life and death in His hands. He decided who got to serve and what role they would play. Moses was God's appointed leader. Aaron was God's appointed priest. The rest of the Levites each had their appointed role as well. But it was clear they were not satisfied. They too aspired to the priesthood. They too aspired to lead.

Theologian Sally McFague has persuasively argued that sin is the refusal to accept our place. From the very beginning, the reach of human beings has always exceeded their grasp. Adam and Eve were not content with their role in the Garden of Eden so they ate the fruit in order to become like God. The people who built the Tower of Babel sought to make a name for themselves on the earth. The pagan nations of the earth created their own gods who they could manipulate and control. This has always been the case with human beings and Israel is no different. The families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram all wanted more so they rebelled against God's ordained leadership and suffered the consequences. Their supernatural death served as a stark warning to all of Israel of the cost of rebelling against God.

It's a scary story. It's not one we read our children at bedtime. But it is worth pondering and praying over. Our sinful hearts are naturally wired to rebel against God. We are naturally inclined towards sin and evil. We naturally refuse to accept our place in God's created order. Jesus shows us a different way. He shows us the path of true obedience as He accepts His Father's will and submits to death on a cross. It's a beautiful picture of faithfulness that results in the salvation of all who believe.

Salvation comes to those who submit their lives to Christ. To those who accept His Lordship over their lives. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. Jesus is indeed enthroned on the praises of His people but He does not maintain His Lordship by popular vote. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess – whether they want to or not - that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 16:41-18:32, Mark 16, Psalms 55, Proverbs 11:7

March 12, 2019
SIGNS AND WONDERS

Readings for today: Numbers 16:41-18:32, Mark 16, Psalms 55, Proverbs 11:7

One of the things we hear about when we go to Africa are all the signs and wonders God is accomplishing through His people. Healings. Casting out demons. Miraculous deliverance from those who are trying to kill them. These stories are incredibly common where we go in Ethiopia and it makes me think immediately of the Great Commission from the Gospel of Mark.

“And Jesus said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:15-18)

As westerners, we have a hard time with miracles. We tend to doubt they actually exist. We look for more natural explanations. Why did Aaron's rod bud? Why did the early Christians or those in the developing world seem to have the ability to cast out demons? Heal the sick? Speak in tongues? Tread on serpents and scorpions without being injured? We want to know if these things are real or if these other Christians are gifted with some special ability not accessible to us?

However interesting these questions may be, they are not the main ones we should be asking. God gives signs and wonders – in whatever form - to authenticate His message to us. They are not ends in themselves but serve to confirm what God has already said. Why did Aaron's rod bud? God was confirming his leadership publicly in front of all of Israel. Why did the early Christians have the ability to cast out demons, heal the sick, and speak in tongues? God was confirming the truth of the gospel in front of both the Jewish and pagan world. What is the primary sign for us today? The Bible. It is a miracle all its own. 66 books written over several centuries by different authors all declaring the same message. God confirming what He has to say through His Word to His people.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 19-20, Luke 1:1-25, Psalms 56, Proverbs 11:8

March 13, 2019
JOHN THE BAPTIST

Readings for today: Numbers 19-20, Luke 1:1-25, Psalms 56, Proverbs 11:8

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:13-17)

John the Baptist is one of the most remarkable figures in all the Bible. Miraculously conceived. Filled by the Holy Spirit while he was still in the womb. Nazarite from birth. From the beginning, John was destined for greatness. It was his special calling to prepare the way for the Lord. To make ready the people for Jesus. To turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to Yahweh. John was Elijah reborn. He had the same spirit. The same power. He spoke with the same authority. And the people came to him in droves.

John was very popular in his day. His fame grew to the point where he caught the eye of Herod and the other ruling elite. The crowds he drew were large. The message he preached strong. At the height of his influence, John baptizes even Jesus Himself. This represents the turning point in his ministry. From this point forward he would decrease while Jesus increased. His own disciples would leave him to follow Jesus. One might think John would grow jealous or anxious or frustrated. Not so. John knew his role. John understood his place. It would be his particular glory to build up a ministry so that he might hand it off to Jesus.

John's story is a powerful one for us preachers. We spend our lives ministering to the congregations God places under our care. We pour our hearts into growing our churches deep and wide. We reach the lost. We disciple believers. We engage in God's mission both domestically and abroad. However, as our ministry influence grows so does our pride. We start to believe our own hype. We start to believe we play some kind of indispensable role in God's Kingdom. And when called to hand our ministries off to someone else – be it another leader or successor - we often struggle. Our pride gets in the way. I've seen it happen time and time again. I've experienced it in my own heart as well.

Reflecting on John the Baptist is good for me. I know my gifts pale in comparison to him. I know my calling is to the ordinary whereas his was to the extraordinary. Certainly, no one would ever mistake me for Elijah! ;-) Many years ago, God spoke three words to me very clearly in a time of prayer. These three words have become the foundation of my life and ministry. They are three words I repeat to myself almost every day as I serve the Lord.

Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. First, God wants me to labor in obscurity. To be content in the field where He's planted me. To not seek greener pastures than the ones He's provided. Second, God wants me to embrace anonymity. At the end of the day I want Jesus' name to be famous. As the arc of my career comes to a close, I hope to retire as the church janitor. That would be a truly glorious end to my ministry. Third, pursue insignificance. The true measure of a pastor is not in the crowds she can draw. It's not the influence he wields. It's not the buildings she builds or the number of ministries he launches. It's her deep love and devotion to God. It's his willingness to perform the most menial of tasks in service to Christ. This is my heart. This is my calling. This is what I learn from John the Baptist.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21:1-22:20, Luke 1:26-56, Psalms 57:1-11, Proverbs 11:9-11

March 14, 2019
THE HUMILITY OF MARY

Readings for today: Numbers 21:1-22:20, Luke 1:26-56, Psalms 57:1-11, Proverbs 11:9-11

Mary is one of the most remarkable people in history. Chosen by God to bear the Savior of the world, this young teenage girl humbly accepts God's call on her life. No fighting. No resisting. No arguing. She simply says, "I am the Lord's servant." Would that we all could exhibit the humility of Mary!

Humanity's major problem has always been pride. Fundamentally, we want to be gods. We want to be in charge of our lives. We hate submission. We despise humility. We scoff at the meek. From the moment we come out of the womb, we are already at war with any kind of authority in our lives.

Mary understands her place. She understands her life is not her own. She is the clay and God is the potter. So when Gabriel brings her the news of what's about to take place inside her womb, she embraces her call. When her cousin Elizabeth prophetically confirms the good news of her pregnancy, she rejoices. Her Magnificat is considered to be one of the greatest pieces of ancient poetry/verse ever written.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

I love the notes she hits. God's faithfulness. God's blessing. God's mercy. God's glory. God's holiness. God's strength. God's honor. This is a hymn of praise to God for all He has done not only for her but for her people Israel. She understands this is not about her...this is about the salvation of the world. This is about God fulfilling His promises. Ancient prophecies now coming true. Mary sees all this and is thankful she gets to play her part in God's great salvation story.

Mary trusts God with her life. She trusts God with her future. This pregnancy puts everything at risk for her. Joseph is considering divorce. Her family would be utterly ashamed. Her community scandalized. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo would have destroyed her reputation. She is literally staring death in the face as a pregnant, unwed mother with a scarlet letter branded across her chest. Still she believes. Still she submits. Still she trusts.

What about us? Do we see the world as Mary sees it? Do we see our lives as Mary saw hers? God has placed a call on each one of us. Every single person is called to play their part in the Kingdom of God. We are put here on this earth to be God's instruments. To be used as He so chooses. Humility means accepting and embracing God's absolute authority over every facet of our lives. It means rejoicing at the idea that He would choose us to accomplish His divine plan. This is the truth that formed the bedrock of Mary's life. Does it form yours?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 22:21-23:30, Luke 1:57-80, Psalms 58, Proverbs 11:12-13

March 15, 2019
HONEST PRAYER

Readings for today: Numbers 22:21-23:30, Luke 1:57-80, Psalms 58, Proverbs 11:12-13

How do you pray? With eyes closed, hands folded, head bowed? Do you follow a formula like the Lord's Prayer? Do you ever worry about saying the wrong thing? Are you afraid to offend God? Afraid to express your true emotions before Him? Do your prayers every look like those of the Psalmist?

"Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter. O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun. Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away! The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth." (Psalms 58:1-11)

The prayers God loves the most are the prayers that come from the heart. The prayers that seem wrenched from the depths of our souls. The prayers that express our deepest longings. Our greatest fears. Our sharpest pains. All our hopes and dreams. When you read the Psalms, you are reading the prayerbook of the Bible. You are reading a record of the written prayers the people of God have been praying for centuries. They often include anger and rage. They often call for vengeance and the death of enemies. And these things run so counter to the gospel.

How should we read the Psalms? My encouragement is to read them less as ethical instructions and more as an invitation to be honest before God. To bring all your emotions and feelings and reactions before the Lord and lay them at His feet. God is a big boy. He can handle whatever you throw at Him. He is not afraid of your feelings and He is not easily offended. His love for you is truly unconditional and there is no condemnation in His presence. There is only grace and mercy and righteousness and peace. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever so you can count on Him to always be faithful. His promises are sure. His love is eternal. Trust Him enough to be honest with Him in prayer.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 24-25, Luke 2:1-35, Psalms 59, Proverbs 11:14

March 16, 2019
GOD AND BAAL

Readings for today: Numbers 24-25, Luke 2:1-35, Psalms 59, Proverbs 11:14

One cannot read too far into the Scriptures before encountering a false god named Baal. Baal was a Canaanite god worshiped in many different ways by many different tribes. Baal is typically understood to be the storm god. The god of weather and fertility. In an agrarian culture, one can easily see how such a god would gain ascendance and become the primary object of worship along with his divine consort, Astarte. Worshiping Baal involved ritual sex. Priests and priestesses would copulate with worshipers who came to make offerings at the shrine. On high holy days, the community would gather and engage in large-scale orgies as they sought to commune with Baal. Some Baal cults went to the extreme often sacrificing children or worshiping their own excrement. Yes, you read that last part right. Their worship literally involved the uncovering of the rectum - the most shameful part of the human body according to the Jews due to its almost permanent state of uncleanness - and depositing their waste on the altar. Such was life under the cult of Baal-Peor.

Baal-Peor literally means “Lord of the open holes” or Lord of the rectum according to Jewish sources. Their worship was the very definition of ritual uncleanness. The very antithesis of Israelite worship. God hates Baal worship. Hates it for what it represents. Hates what it does to His divine-image bearers. Hates how it de-humanizes and demeans. He is disgusted by it. Offended by it. So when His own people - the people He miraculously saved and sustained - begin to worship Baal-Peor, He responds with swift, righteous judgment. A plague is unleashed. Perhaps originating from the very waste the Moabites worshiped, killing 24,000 Israelites. Things would have been much worse except for Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, who takes up a spear and kills an Israelite man and Moabite woman as they engaged in ritual sex in front of Moses and the gathered congregation at the entrance of the Tabernacle itself!

This incident at Peor is so horrifying, it becomes a watchword for future generations of Israelites. It will be used as a metaphor in both the Psalms and prophetic literature to describe extreme acts of unfaithfulness on the part of God’s people.

Sadly, Baal worship is experiencing a revival. Perhaps not in the extreme form represented by Baal-Peor but certainly in the sexual liberties of 21st century American culture. Sex has become a god in our world. Lust has been mainstreamed. Altars to Eros have been erected all over and command millions of worshipers. Sexual restraint is considered unholy. The denial of sexual desire almost criminal. Speaking out against the god of sex blasphemous. Baal has even ensnared millions of Christians as well. Pornography. Sexual promiscuity. Adultery. Homosexuality. Serial divorce. You name it, the American church has condoned it. And where has it led us? Broken marriages. Abortion. Abuse. Sexually transmitted disease. Broken families and broken relationships. The consequences are legion.

Against this rising tide of paganism stands Jesus. He affirms God’s design for holy sexuality within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. He speaks out against the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes. He calls for sexual restraint in His Sermon on the Mount. He sets us free from the enslaving power of sexual desire and He offers us the far more fulfilling life of holiness instead.

Are you struggling with sexual temptation in your life? Have you experienced sexual brokenness and shame? Do you feel enslaved to your sexual desires? Jesus offers you freedom. Jesus offers forgiveness. Our faith in Jesus gives us the power to live a holy life and experience the joy that comes from submitting our sexual desires to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 26:1-51, Luke 2:36-52, Psalms 60, Proverbs 11:15

March 17, 2019
GROWING IN WISDOM AND STATURE

Readings for today: Numbers 26:1-51, Luke 2:36-52, Psalms 60, Proverbs 11:15

What are your impressions of Jesus? Can you imagine Him as a baby in Mary's arms? As a toddler in Joseph's carpentry shop? Running around with the other boys in Nazareth? Do you think He ever felt awkward? This sense that He was not like the rest? I imagine Jesus did. I imagine He felt set apart from a very early age.

Many myths and stories have been told about the so-called "lost years" of Jesus. The years of Jesus' childhood that none of the gospel writers bother to write down. Some say Jesus went to study with the gurus of India. Some say He spent His time with the Essenes and His cousin John. Still others believe He traveled to England with Joseph of Arimathea. All of these theories are completely bogus of course. Tales spun to satisfy a curiosity that simply will not accept the truth. Jesus lived a very ordinary life as the oldest son of Joseph and Mary. He apprenticed in His father's carpentry business. He studied Torah with the rabbis. He simply "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)

Of course, there were glimpses of the extraordinary in Jesus' life. Like the time at the Temple when He was twelve years old. Joseph and Mary make their annual trek to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. After the celebration is over, they begin to make their way home. Since villages all tended to travel together, they assumed Jesus was with their group. However, after they get a day's journey out, they realize Jesus is not with them and they panic. They rush back to Jerusalem. Search the city for three whole days only to find Him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. "Why have you treated us like this?" Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. Jesus responds by humbling himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Meanwhile Mary adds this event to the list she's treasuring in her heart. Angelic visitations. Miraculous conception. Awe-inspiring birth. Shepherds, wise men, and others worshiping her little boy. Old Simeon proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. 84 year old Anna saying the most amazing things. Surely Mary must have seen something special in Jesus. Something she did not see in her other children. And now this latest episode where her twelve year old son, displaying a wisdom beyond His years, amazing the teachers of the law in the Temple with His understanding. What a privilege to have a front row seat to all that God was doing in and through Jesus. To watch Him grow in wisdom and stature and favor with both God and man. Mary could not have been more proud.

So let me ask you this question...is Jesus growing on you? Do you find yourself trusting in His wisdom? Trusting in His strength? Is Jesus "increasing" in your eyes? Has He found favor with you like He has for so many billions throughout the world today?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 26:52-28:15, Luke 3:1-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 11:16-17

March 18, 2019
BIBLICAL FEMINISM

Readings for today: Numbers 26:52-28:15, Luke 3:1-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 11:16-17

Today's reading includes a remarkable story. Five women appear before the gathered leadership of Israel at the Tabernacle to present one of the earliest recorded lawsuits in history. Their claim? Their father died without a male heir which means his inheritance is now in jeopardy. He was not part of the rebellion of Korah so they have legitimate standing to bring his case before the Lord. And they ask Moses to grant them their father's property rights so they can preserve the family line.

I cannot imagine the courage this course of action must have taken. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah knew very well that women did not have any rights in the ancient near east. Not in Israel and certainly not in the nations that surrounded them. Women were considered property in that time. Not even counted as human beings. At the death of their father or brothers or husbands, they were not entitled to any inheritance and were often left destitute. Fast forward a few centuries and we will see this scene play itself out in the book of Ruth where Naomi loses not only her husband but also her two sons, leaving her to fend for herself.

So imagine you are one of these five women. Raised to believe you have no rights. Your primary value is to bear sons to your future husband so his family line can be preserved. Now imagine making the decision to approach Moses and the gathered leadership of Israel in front of the Tabernacle itself to present your case. You know what you are about to do has never been done. You know what you are about to ask for has never happened before. You know there's a good chance your petition will fail but you courageously step forward anyway. You argue persuasively for the preservation of your father's inheritance and you make the audacious claim to be counted among your father's brothers.

I would have loved to see the look on Moses' face. Was it shock? Confusion? Did he smile at the women's boldness? There is no indication in the text one way or another. What we do know is Moses recuses himself and takes their petition to the Lord. This, in itself, is a strong affirmation of the women. And then there is the response from God. I have to believe their courage brought a smile to His face and He issues a new law for Israel. From this point forward, "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter." (Numbers 27:8) A statute still used today as legal precedent by the American Bar Association.

The Bible is a history of God's interactions with many different human cultures. Human culture, by definition, is always corrupt and unjust. God is at work constantly bending the arc of human history towards justice. Towards righteousness. Here is a clear case where God honors the rights of women, granting them a unique status when compared to other ancient near east societies. There is a direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and Deborah who served as judge and spiritual leader for all of Israel. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the female disciples who gathered round Jesus and remained faithful to Him even to the end when all the other male disciples had long since fled. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the women Paul affirms like Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia who was "excellent among the apostles." God is still doing this work today as women continue to be affirmed as strong and gifted leaders across all sectors of human society.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 28:16-29:40, Luke 3:23-38, Psalms 62, Proverbs 11:18-19

March 19, 2019
THE POWER OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Readings for today: Numbers 28:16-29:40, Luke 3:23-38, Psalms 62, Proverbs 11:18-19

I am learning how to pray. For almost twenty-five years, I've been following the same prayer routine. I make lists. I journal. I read devotional books. I listen to music. All in a monumental effort to stay focused as I talk to God. It's been hard. There are so many things on my mind. My wife. My children. My family. My friends. The needs of my church family. Missionaries I love serving overseas. The problems in our country today. My thoughts go a million different directions so prayer is hard for me. Always has been.

Last fall, I was interviewing an Ethiopian pastor. He's probably twenty years old. Maybe a 7th grade education. He's risking his life to bring the gospel to a village almost one hundred kilometers from his home. I asked him how he prayed. He talked about his walks to and from the village where he serves. He talked about the silence. The solitude. And how God speaks to him during his travel time. I cannot imagine the burdens this man carries. Burdens for his family. His friends. The people he serves. The poverty they live with every day. The struggle for food and water and medical care. And yet prayer is as natural to him as breathing.

So I asked this man to teach me to pray. He encouraged me to spend far less time on my lists. Stop the journaling. Put aside the books. Turn off the music. He encouraged me to rise early before the sun comes up and just sit silently with God. Let my thoughts run loose until they run out of steam. Sit in solitude until the voices in my head subside enough for me to hear the still, small voice of God.

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken. How long will all of you attack a man to batter him, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence? They only plan to thrust him down from his high position. They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." (Psalms 62:1-8)

So I am learning to pray. Since my trip to Ethiopia last fall, I have been rising early. Getting up before the sun. Praying over my family before I leave the house. Heading up to the church where I sit silently in the sanctuary with my Lord. I let my thoughts go. I've learned to stop trying so hard to focus. After about thirty to forty-five minutes, I find my mind starts to clear. God starts to speak. Scripture begins to fill my head and heart. And I begin to walk the pews. Praying over each seat. Praying over the people who sit in those seats every Sunday. (Yes, I know our "seating chart..." ha!) Praying through the Scriptures God has brought to mind. The peace that comes over me is profound. It carries me through the rest of my day.

What does your prayer life look like? Is it hard for you like it is for me? Does it look like that of the Psalmist? Or my Ethiopian friend? Or does your prayer life look more like what mine has been? What would it look like to truly engage God on His terms? To wait for Him in silence and solitude? Does that even seem possible in the midst of your busy life? Let me encourage you to start small. Five or ten minutes in the morning before anyone gets up. At night after everyone goes to bed. Perhaps on your lunch break. Stay away from your tech. Put aside any distractions. Just you and God. Spend as much time as you need before Him until your mind clears, your heart calms, and you begin to hear His voice.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 30-31, Luke 4:1-30, Psalms 63, Proverbs 11:20-21

March 20, 2019
HOLY WAR

Readings for today: Numbers 30-31, Luke 4:1-30, Psalms 63, Proverbs 11:20-21

Crusades. Holy War. Jihad. Violence sanctioned by God Himself. In Numbers 31, God directs Moses and Israel to attack Midian. "Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people." Who was Midian and what had they done to Israel to cause judgment to fall on them in such an extreme fashion?

Midian was a son of Abraham and his servant Keturah. While Abraham was still living, he sent Midian away so that there would be no competition for Isaac's inheritance. Midian presumably thrived over the years becoming a great tribal nation. Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold to Midianite traders as they made their way to Egypt. Moses fled to Midian to escape Egyptian justice and actually married a Midianite woman. As Moses learned to lead the nation of Israel, he leaned on his father-in-law, a Midianite priest, for advice but Israel's close association with Midian would come back to haunt them as they began to intermarry with them and co-mingle their worship practices. This results in judgment as God pours out His wrath on Israel through a plague which is only stopped when Phinehas kills Cozbi, daughter of a Midianite chief named Zur, and her husband Zimri who was the son of a Simeonite chief. Furthermore, the Midianites had allied themselves with the Moabites, setting themselves in opposition to Israel, and called on one of their prophets - Balaam - to come and curse the people of God.

You may remember the 2nd Commandment. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me," (Exodus 20:4-5) God is jealous for His divine Name. Jealous for His divine Glory. Jealous for His relationship with His people. He makes clear over and over again throughout the Scriptures that He will brook no rivals. So when Israel begins to worship the Midianite gods, God takes action. He calls for holy war. He commands His people to attack Midian and "execute the Lord's vengeance." Israel is successful. They kill all the males that come against them. They take the women and children hostage. They plunder their possessions. Then they go one step further. As an act of ritual purity, they kill all the male children and any women who is not a virgin. It is brutal. It is horrifying. It is judgment.

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn't square with our culturally notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how our God could ever act in such ways. This is where we come face to face with God's holiness. God's righteousness. God's justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He will not let it go. He will not overlook our sin. He will not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. Repentance is the only appropriate response of the creature when confronted by the Creator and this is the lesson we must all take away. God will not be mocked. Not back then. Not now. Not in the future. God is a God of love and mercy and grace but He is also a God of holiness and righteousness and justice. He is quick to forgive the sin of those who repent but He is also faithful to judge those who persist in their rebellion. Humble yourself before the Lord before it is too late.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 32:1-33:39, Luke 4:31-44, Psalms 64, Proverbs 11:22

March 21, 2019
COVENANT COMMUNITY

Readings for today: Numbers 32:1-33:39, Luke 4:31-5:11, Psalms 64, Proverbs 11:22

There is a difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract is ultimately self-centered. You enter into a relationship in order to get your needs met. You agree with another party to serve them so long as they agree to serve you. As soon as they fail or fall down on the job, the contract is broken and you are set free from any obligations. A covenant is different. It is ultimately “other-centered.” Yes, there is still an agreement between two parties. Yes, the agreement involves both parties getting their needs met. But it recognizes that failure is part of life. People are not perfect. Expectations are not always met. People’s feelings do get hurt. Covenants, however, cannot be broken. Forgiveness and grace are extended and reconciliation pursued instead of simply walking away.

The people of Israel have made it. They are on the cusp of the Promised Land. Two of the tribes – Reuben and Gad - want to settle down in the land they’ve just conquered. This puts the covenant relationship of the people of God to the test. If they hold to a contractual understanding of community then Reuben and Gad have no incentive to go further. Their needs are met. They’ve received their inheritance. They can build their cities and feed their livestock and plant their fields and raise their families. They can walk away. But Moses reminds them their relationship runs much deeper. They are part of the covenant people of God. As such, their work isn’t done until all the tribes come into their own. This isn’t about them. They are not the center of the universe. They cannot use the other tribes to serve their own purposes. The other tribes sacrificed a great deal to help them claim their territory and now it is their turn to do the same. Furthermore, there are dire consequences associated with breaking the covenant. The previous generation wandered for forty years under the judgment of God for failing to keep their covenant promises. Would this generation make the same mistake?

Tragically, we live in a narcissistic age. The spirit of the age is selfishness. Self-esteem. Self-care. Self-help. Self-centeredness is the rule rather than the exception. As such, all our relationships are fundamentally contractual in nature. As soon as we are let down. As soon as we are disappointed. As soon as our expectations are not met. As soon as we get bored. We break fellowship. We walk away. The results are devastating. Fruitful partnerships dissolve. Successful businesses fail. Loving marriages end in divorce. Churches split. It’s heartbreaking.

The spirit of our age infects everyone. None of us are immune. I cannot tell you how many parents I’ve talked to who have switched their kids from school to school or team to team because their child experiences disappointment. I cannot tell you how many people I’ve talked to who jump from church to church because they aren’t “getting fed”, their needs aren’t “getting met”, or they’ve been disappointed and let down. I cannot tell you the number of couples I’ve counseled who tell me they’ve fallen “out of love” or the spark has “gone out” or they have irreconcilable differences and are getting divorced...again.

The heart of the gospel is the covenant God makes with us to be our God no matter what. To be our God no matter how many times we fail or let Him down. God is faithful. Period. Nothing can separate us from His love and He wants us to exhibit the same kind of covenant commitment in our relationships with one another. Frankly, this is why we take vows when we join a church. To remind ourselves that we need each other. To remind ourselves that we are committed to each other. Through thick and thin. In good times and in bad. For better or for worse. We are all part of the same family and as such need to stick it out even when things get hard. There’s only one way this works. Grace. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. The gospel given concrete expression in each of our lives. The reality is you will only experience the grace and forgiveness of God as you extend grace and forgiveness to others. These two are inexorably tied together. They cannot be experienced independent of one another. If you cannot find it in your heart to forgive those who hurt you. If you cannot find it in your heart to extend grace to those who disappoint you or let you down. If you would rather walk away than reconcile then you are committing the grave sin of breaking a covenant relationship and you will fall under God’s judgment. He will discipline you until the covenant is restored for this is His will for your life and mine.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33:40-35:34, Luke 5:12-28, Psalms 65, Proverbs 11:23

March 22, 2019
THE DEPENDENCE OF JESUS

Readings for today: Numbers 33:40-35:34, Luke 5:12-28, Psalms 65, Proverbs 11:23

Who is Jesus? Who do you understand Him to be? A Superman? Some kind of Marvel character? A human being endowed with extraordinary powers? Do you see Him as divine? God clothing Himself in human flesh much like you or I put on a suit or a dress in the morning? Is He an enlightened human being? A great moral teacher? A magician who performed magic tricks of healing?

There's a great line in verse 17 of our reading today. "The power of the Lord was with Him to heal." Wait a minute. Are you suggesting there might be a time when the power of the Lord was NOT with Him to heal? Are you suggesting that there might be times when Jesus didn't have all the power and authority in heaven and on earth to command legions of angels? Are you suggesting that Jesus – the very Son of God, the 2nd member of the Trinity - somehow had given up His divine prerogatives and powers when He became a human being?

Yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting. Furthermore, it's not me who suggests it but Scripture itself. In Philippians 2:7, the Apostle Paul writes, "Jesus emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." What did Jesus empty Himself of? All His divine rights. All His divine power. All His divine glory. He put all that aside. Gave it all up in order to become a human being. To be born in the likeness of men and women.

Jesus was made like us in every way according to Hebrews 2:17. He lived a life like ours. He died a death like ours. He united Himself to us so that He might raise us to new life with Him. So what does this mean? It means Jesus – like you and me - had to learn obedience. "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered." He had to learn how to depend on His Father for all things. This was the source of His temptation in the wilderness. To break His dependence on His Father and provide for Himself. Protect Himself. Promote Himself. The perfection of Jesus isn't so much that He followed the Law perfectly - although He absolutely did - it was that He lived in complete and utter dependence on the Father. He truly walked by faith and not by sight. So when Jesus stretched out His hand to heal, He was depending on His Father to provide the power. When Jesus confronted and cast out demons, He was depending on His Father to give Him the authority. When Jesus suffered on the cross, He cried out because for the first time His connection to His Father was broken. Through it all Jesus remained truly God and yet became truly human. This is the mystery of the Incarnation.

What does all this mean? Jesus Himself told His disciples, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) Greater works? Than Jesus? Are you kidding me? Surely Jesus isn't serious? Friends, the gospel is the power of God for all who believe. Trusting in the power of the gospel means learning to live as Jesus lived...in complete and utter dependence on the Father. To let your life become a conduit of grace and mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation. To let your life become the channel through which the love of God flows. This was the secret to Jesus' life here on earth. It is why He was able to heal. Why He was able to cast out demons. Why He was able to confront powers and principalities. Why He was able to completely free from the cares and worries of this world.

Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus believed His Father would provide all He needed in this life and the next. Jesus had faith His Father was with Him every moment of every day. Those who follow Jesus. Those who believe in Him. Those who place their trust in Him. Those who actively seek to align their lives with His life will experience many of the same things Jesus experienced. They will share in both His glory and His suffering. Why? Because this is God's plan to save the world. To use us as His instruments to bring peace and healing and hope to a world that lives in darkness and despair.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Luke 5:29-6:11, Psalms 66, Proverbs 11:24-26

March 23, 2019
THE BROKEN HEART OF GOD

Readings for today: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Luke 5:29-6:11, Psalms 66, Proverbs 11:24-26

Today's Psalm speaks deeply to my heart. "Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip." I love God. I love to praise God. I have dedicated my life to God. My life is rich and full and blessed as a result. I can look back on my life and see where God has helped me. Delivered me. Saved me. Strengthened me. I can see where He's comforted me. Protected me. Healed me. Sustained me. Like the Psalmist I bless my God for these things.

However, the Psalmist goes on. What is he blessing and praising God for? Trial. Struggle. Suffering. "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water..." Do I praise God in the midst of the storm? Do I bless God when the cares and worries of this world seem overwhelming? Do I give thanks for the suffering? I wish I could say I do. When I reflect on my life there is a lot of pain and heartbreak. I have taken a lot of shots over the years. Suffered many wounds. I live in pain. There is no balm for what I feel. No pill I can take that will make it all go away. My soul aches and there is no cure.

I have asked God, "Why?" Why do I feel this way? Why can I not escape the pain? Why do I have to suffer so? His answer is always the same. "You asked me to break your heart with the things that break my heart. To give you eyes to see the world as I see it. I am answering your prayer. I am giving you my heart and it is a broken one. Broken for the sin and suffering and pain of the world." So I am learning to give God praise. To bless God, as the Psalmist does, for the trials. "Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance...Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!" (Psalms 66:8-12, 16-20)

The call to suffering is real, friends, for all who follow Christ. It is a call to self-denial. A call to crucifixion. A call to compassion which literally means "to suffer with." We suffer as God suffers not for ourselves but for the sake of those we love. Those we live among. Those we encounter in our world. And the promise of the gospel is this...if we suffer with Christ, we will receive His glory. If we join Christ in His death, we will surely be joined to Him in resurrection. If we share in the sufferings of Christ, we will also share in His comfort. So praise Him, friends! Praise Christ! Bless Christ! Honor Christ! He is with you!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 2-3, Luke 6:12-38, Psalms 67, Proverbs 11:27

March 24, 2019
THE LORD'S PRAYER LIFE

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 2-3, Luke 6:12-38, Psalms 67, Proverbs 11:27

“In these days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.” (Luke 6:12)

Passages like this have been an enigma to me for most of my life. I learned to pray with my mother. When I would grow up, we would pray every night before bed. “Now I lay me down to sleep...” It was the same prayer followed by the same requests for family and friends. What it lacked in depth, it more than made up in creating a discipline that continues to this day. As I grew older, I layered in the Lord’s Prayer that I memorized in church. Eventually, I grew more comfortable so my prayers became more conversational. I would tell God all my fears. All my struggles. All my heartaches. Even though I wasn’t sure He was listening, I still kept up the habit. Then I came to faith in Christ. All of a sudden “prayer” took on a whole new meaning.

I fell in love with prayer. I treasured my time with God. I looked forward to spending time with Him. He became the first thought when I woke up and the last thought before I went to sleep. Even so, praying all night? Not in my wheelhouse. In fact, anything longer than ten or fifteen minutes was a stretch. Most of the time I would just fall asleep. So I’ve always felt a little guilty when I come across this verse and others like it.

But then, in 2009, I faced the greatest crisis of my life. My marriage was struggling. My relationships with my kids were strained. My work was cratering. I was depressed and anxious and afraid. I couldn’t sleep. I would stay up most nights pacing the floor. And in those moments, I turned to prayer. I cried out to God. I searched the Scriptures. I began to intentionally listen for the first time in my life and God answered. He confronted my sin. He assured me of His forgiveness and grace. And He directed me to the changes I needed to make in my life. My marriage began to get better. My relationships with my children improved. I received clear guidance to resign my job. God began to heal my heart. But I still wasn’t getting much sleep so I kept on praying. Now my prayers were for the future. Where would we go? What would we do? How would I provide for my family? For three straight months I averaged about two to three hours of sleep a night. But again, God was faithful to meet me there. In the darkness. In the silence. In the middle of the night with only the Bible for company.

It was a powerful time for me and it taught me something about Jesus’ prayer life. Praying all night was not necessarily Jesus’ regular practice. That would be impossible. Jesus was fully human and needed rest. But when Jesus faced a difficult situation. When Jesus needed guidance. When Jesus was choosing the Twelve or dealing with the emotions of His imminent execution, He spent the night in prayer. He turned to His Heavenly Father for strength and wisdom.

Most of us are carrying a heavy load. We are stressed. We are struggling. We are depressed. We are afraid. We are anxious. Many of the people I meet with tell me they have a hard time sleeping. But rather than turn to prayer, they turn to their technology. They scroll Twitter or Instagram. For hours. And never receive a bit of comfort. If anything, it only adds to their stress. Eventually, their mental health is impacted. Studies show a direct correlation between the amount of time we spend on social media and the high rates of depression in our society. So let me offer a radical suggestion. Instead of turning on your phone, go to your Heavenly Father in prayer. Talk to Him. Spend time with Him. Get your Bible out and sit in His Presence. Listen for His voice. Let His Spirit minister to you as only He can. In this way, you will find yourself praying like Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4, Luke 6:30-7:10, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 11:28

March 25, 2019
MOSES' FINAL SERMON

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4, Luke 6:30-7:10, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 11:28

Congratulations! You have made it through what some consider to be one of the toughest stretches in all the Bible. Leviticus. Numbers. These are challenging books to be sure. Pat yourself on the back as we dig into Deuteronomy.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament as it were. His final chance to encourage. Challenge. Confront. Comfort. He's now led Israel for decades. And he was no spring chicken when he got started! He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Under the mighty hand of God, he has created a system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable accomplishment.

Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. What would you say in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address God's people, what would be on your heart and mind? What would you want them to know moving forward? What lessons would you hope they learned?

One of my favorite speeches of all time was delivered April 3, 1968 by Martin Luther King Jr. on the eve of his assassination. He sounds a lot like Moses in my mind. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like any man, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." I think at the end of the day Moses, like King, was happy. He knew he couldn't go over to the Promised Land but he died knowing his great work was finished. He had witnessed the salvation of God's people. He had seen the glory of the Lord.

When you finish your life, how will you feel? When you look back at all you've experienced. All you've accomplished. All you set out to do. When you think about your family. Your children. Your grandchildren. What will you want them to know about you? Say about you? Remember about you? Will it have anything to do with your faith in Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 5-6, Luke 7:11-35, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 11:29-31

March 26, 2019
ALIGNMENT

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 5-6, Luke 7:11-35, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 11:29-31

Many years ago, I had a lawnmower that went out of alignment. I think it happened when I mowed my yard during the cleanup after a hurricane. I was mulching all the downed branches and leaves when I hit a stump buried in the grass. The blade immediately stuck. The torque wrenched something deep inside the engine. From that moment forward, a shimmy began to develop. It was out of alignment. I did get two more years out of that lawnmower before it literally fell apart on me as I was mowing one day. The shimmy had loosened almost every screw holding the engine together and they all fell out at once.

You and I were made to live for God. We were saved by God. Delivered by God. Chosen by God. He created us. He shaped and formed us in our mother's wombs. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God's own hands. As such, He knows what's best for us. He knows what leads to human flourishing and fulfillment. He knows what makes us tick and how we can find the deepest satisfaction in life. This is why He tells us, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) It's why He gives us the Ten Commandments. It's why He revealed Himself to His people at Horeb and it's why He still reveals Himself to us today. It's why He's so passionate about us teaching His ways to our children and our children's children. Because God wants them to know what they were made for as well.

Why do you think God gets so angry when we chase after other gods? Why is God so direct with us about true worship? Because God knows at the root of idolatry lies a heart that is out of alignment. And if we choose to live out of alignment with God's purposes and God's will for very long, something deep within us will begin to shake. A shimmy will develop that eventually will break loose. Our lives will be disrupted. We will literally fall apart because we are not in sync with our Creator. Over and over again, God promises that those who rebel against Him will eventually fall. Those who refuse to acknowledge Him will eventually be put to shame. Those who challenge His authority will eventually be defeated. God is a jealous God and He will not allow His creatures to live out of alignment with His will.

I know that sounds harsh so let me put it another way. A more relational way. God will not allow the creatures He made in His own image to live out of alignment with His love. You see, His love and His will are the same. There is no difference between the two. The commandments of God are not arbitrary but designed specifically to teach us how to love God and each other. They are the concrete examples of what it means to walk in God's love. They are not a list of demands you have to fulfill to earn God's love. They are not a set of steps you have to take in order to gain God's love. They are the fullest expression of how we live for God. They help align our hearts with God's heart and the more we find ourselves loving God's commands, the more we'll find ourselves walking in God's love. Where do you need to ask God to align your heart today?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 7-8, Luke 7:36-8:3, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 12:1

March 27, 2019
THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 7-8, Luke 7:36-8:3, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 12:1

One of the things I love most about God is His great faithfulness. God always delivers on His promises. God always keeps His Word. God will never abandon His people. As I've mentioned before, Deuteronomy is Moses' last sermon to Israel. He has led these people for decades. They've seen incredible miracles. They've experienced hardship and suffering. Now they stand on the cusp of the Promised Land. They can look over the Jordan River and see the land God has given them. But they also know the land isn't empty. There are rival nations already living there. Pagan tribes who engage in all kinds of detestable worship practices. Driving them out will not be easy. It will require a long season of sustained warfare that will test their faith in God.

So Moses reminds them of all God has done. Reminds them of why they were chosen in the first place. I love his words. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations," (Deuteronomy 7:6-9) God tends to stand on the side of the weak. The oppressed. The enslaved. He takes the side of the poor, the outcast, the sinner. He did not choose Egypt or Assyria or Babylon or any of the other far more powerful Ancient Near East empires. He chose Israel. He was faithful to the oath He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He refused to abandon His people to a life of slavery and death.

God is faithful. He keeps the covenant. He is steadfast in His love. He is the guarantor of our relationship. Why can we count on God? Why can we trust God? Why can we believe God? Because He is faithful. To Himself. Faithful to His own character and nature. God never changes. He is who He says He is. That is why His name is "I am who I am." Friends, no matter where life finds you today, God is faithful. He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you for He is faithful.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 9-10, Luke 8:4-21, Psalms 69:19-36, proverbs 12:2-3

March 28, 2019
HUMILITY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 9-10, Luke 8:4-21, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 12:2-3

“When the humble see their salvation they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive.” (Psalms 69:32)

The great faithfulness of God should elicit humility in our hearts. When we come face to face with God’s greatness. God’s righteousness. God’s holiness. God’s unconditional love and grace. We should fall to our knees in gratitude and thanksgiving. We know ourselves. We know our sins. We know we are not perfect. We know our struggles. We know what we’ve suffered. We know the choices we make. We know the ways we’ve treated others or failed to reach out to those in need. We are a broken people. Our history is a tragic one.

God’s Word is clear. It is not because of our righteousness that God saves. It’s not because of our goodness that God delivers. It is not because we are better than anyone else that God reaches down to us. God’s love comes to us in the depths of the darkness of our condition and lights the way. God’s grace is unmerited. It cannot be earned or achieved no matter how hard we work. It cannot be bought no matter how much we give. God’s favor is not something we can ever lay hold of in our own strength no matter how hard we try. It simply comes to us as an act of unconditional love.

This was true for Israel as much as it is true for us. Not your righteousness. Not your righteousness. Not your righteousness. Over and over again like a refrain. God making it clear He is not acting on their behalf because they are good. In fact, it’s the opposite. They are stubborn and sinful and prone to wander. Just like us. No, God acts purely out of love and this should humble us deeply. It should set us free to be honest with ourselves and one another. To acknowledge our fears and our failures. To be transparent about our doubts and struggles and heartaches. Our relationship with God through Christ provides a secure foundation on which we can build our broken lives.

Pride lies at the root of every sin. Pride warps our view of ourselves and others. Warps our view of the world around us. Makes us think wrong is right and right is wrong. Pride makes us think down is up and up is down. Pride exchanges the truth of God for a lie and we see the results all around us. Our world is suffering. Depression. Anxiety. Fear. Suicide. Substance abuse. Divorce. Sexual promiscuity is destroying relationships as well as contributing to the rise of STD’s. It’s like humanity has made a covenant with death. This breaks God’s heart. It is not what He intends. So He reaches down to save us from ourselves. Lift us out of the holes we dig for ourselves. Set us free from the prison we find ourselves in. Praise be to God for His great faithfulness and love!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 11-12, Luke 8:22-39, Psalms 70, Proverbs 12:4

March 29, 2019
WHAT HAS THE LORD DONE FOR YOU?

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 11-12, Luke 8:22-39, Psalms 70, Proverbs 12:4

I love today's reading. I have met men like the one Jesus encountered in the tombs. They are outcast. They are isolated. They are alone. They have no friends. They have no hope. They hear all kinds of voices. Their lives are a train wreck. Often addicted, they use drugs or alcohol or both just to get some peace and quiet. The demons they face may be emotional, mental, and/or spiritual. Their challenges are so great, no one wants anything to do with them. They often end up in prison. That's where I encountered them. And their plight is heartbreaking.

The man Jesus meets is tormented. Naked. Alone. Starving. Living in ritual impurity among the dead. He might as well be dead himself. He has no hope. No future. No peace. However, for some reason unknown to Luke, this man goes to the shore side on this particular day at this particular time and meets Jesus as He steps out onto the sand. The demons within him recoil in fear as they recognize the Son of God. They know they have no power over this man. All their fear tactics will not sway Jesus from His mission to set yet another captive free. Jesus casts them out. They flee into a herd of pigs. Chaos ensues. The pigs stampede into the lake and drown. This draws a crowd. The people come out from the city to see what the commotion is all about and they are shocked to see the man sitting next to Jesus in his right mind. Rather than rejoice, this scares them to death. What can this mean? What has just happened? What's next? They ask Jesus to leave. The man wants to follow Him. Jesus instead sends him back to his city. Back to his town. Back to his village. Back to his family. Back to his community with these words, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." (Interestingly enough, Mark's gospel tells the story of what happens when Jesus makes a second visit to this same region. Rather than run from Jesus in fear, the people respond in faith. This man's witness clearly has changed the region.)

Telling others about Jesus is not complicated. It's simply telling your story and making sure people know what part Jesus has to play in it. I remember sitting with an atheist friend of mine. He and I first met in a coffee shop outside Madison, WI. He and his wife had just had twins and we bonded over the shared experience. Our relationship began when I asked him to share his story which he was more than happy to do. After he got done, he turned the tables on me and asked me to share my story. Well...I can't share my story without talking about how Jesus met me as a college student and changed the trajectory of my life forever. As our friendship blossomed, he kept coming back wanting to hear more about Jesus. It was a beautiful thing.

What has the Lord done for you? And do you share it regularly and often with others? What miracles has God worked in your life? Do you let the people around you know? What blessings has God bestowed on you? Do you publicly give Him the credit? What testimony has God given you? Do you tell it to those you meet? Let me encourage to start. Talk to your neighbors. Your friends. Your co-workers. Take someone out for coffee. Grab a drink to share. Let them know what God has done and then watch God use your story to change their story all for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 13-15, Luke 8:40-9:6, Psalms 71, Proverbs 12:5-7

March 30, 2019
WALK BY FAITH

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 13-15, Luke 8:40-9:6, Psalms 71, Proverbs 12:5-7

“And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. And he said to them, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere.” (Luke 9:1-6)

It’s fascinating to read this passage as I board a plane to Ethiopia to train church planters. The men and women I have the privilege of spending time with over the next two weeks actually take this verse literally. They exhibit power and authority over demons. They cure disease. They heal. They raise the dead in some cases. I have seen it with my own eyes. Most of all, they proclaim the Kingdom of God in the villages where they go and plant churches by the hundreds if not thousands. It’s truly amazing. They have no money. No possessions. So they can take nothing for their journey. They go to villages where they have no family or friends or social contacts. They count on the hospitality of the town for provision. It is not always easy. They are often persecuted. Beaten. Attacked. Threatened. They are going to villages where the gospel has never been heard. Almost all of them carry scars. Some of them even die for their faith. Through it all, God is at work. He is changing entire nations.

It’s humbling and convicting to ponder what a verse like this looks for my own life. I gave my life to Christ over twenty-five years ago. Committed myself to His service. I’ve been in pastoral ministry for almost twenty years now and have made sacrifices along the way. My family has lived on public assistance. We’ve struggled to make ends meet. Relied on the hospitality and generosity of the congregations we’ve served. It has not been easy. But I have never faced persecution. Never been attacked for my faith. Never felt threatened. I’ve also never healed anyone. Never cast out a demon. Never cured any disease. I have preached the Kingdom of God faithfully over the years all over the United States. God has used what meager gifts I have to offer to change lives and grow His Kingdom.

Sometimes we can get caught up wondering why the supernatural doesn’t happen as often in the US as it does overseas. Part of it is because we are bored with the miracles that happen all around us everyday. Doctors and nurses who perform incredible acts of healing. Psychologists and psychiatrists who treat mental health. Local church pastors who cast out more demons than they know simply by walking with people through the ups and downs of life. Familiarity breeds contempt. However, another part has to do with our struggle to walk by faith. We’ve been given so much. Most of us have access to resources that most of the rest of the world can only dream of. And as Jesus said, “It is harder for a rich man to get into heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” We place our trust in ourselves. In our ability to provide. In our plans and strategies. We would never go on a journey with no staff, bag, bread, or money. We would never leave our luggage at home. We would never show up unannounced in a new village. These things just don’t fit our paradigm. And perhaps that’s why we don’t see the miracles.

I always learn so much from my Ethiopian brothers and sisters. I am confident this trip will be no different. I am always asking God to show me what the next step is for my life and my ministry in Parker, CO. Walking by faith in America is different than walking by faith in Africa. But the same God is at work in both places. Where do you need to start walking by faith in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 16-17, Luke 9:7-27, Psalms 72, Proverbs 12:8-9

March 31, 2019
REMEMBERING AND REJOICING

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-17, Luke 9:7-27, Psalms 72, Proverbs 12:8-9

“You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.” (Exodus 16:12)

How do you feel when you reflect on the Law of God? Do you feel frustrated? Resentful? Upset? Do you feel like your freedom is being impinged? God is being arbitrary? Do you feel the Law is bigoted? Outdated? Immoral even?

I think about all the rules and regulations Israel was commanded to follow. Rules regarding their clothes. What they could eat or drink. How they should spend their time. When they could do business and when they had to close up shop. I imagine it was tempting for them to think of these laws as limiting. Restrictive. Capricious. As if God was setting out to take all the fun out of their lives. But then Moses reminds them of whence they came. They were slaves in Egypt. They came from nothing. They had nothing. They were nothing. Until God found them. Until God saved them. Until God delivered them and made them His own. Gave them His name. Chose them out of all the people on the face of the earth to reflect His glory. To be a holy nation. A royal priesthood.

God’s Law is not arbitrary or random or designed to take the fun out of life. It serves to remind us who we are and, more importantly, whose we are. We belong to God. He delivered us from slavery to sin. He lifted us up out of the pit and the miry clay. He put a new song in our hearts. The song of the redeemed. He gave us a new identity as His child. He adopted us into His family. He gives us the gift of eternal life. God didn’t have to do any of these things. It would have been perfectly just to let us die in our sin. But God is merciful. God is gracious. God is faithful. He desires to save not destroy.

Whenever we are tempted to question the commandments of God. Whenever we are tempted to push back on God’s standard for holiness. Whenever we are tempted to doubt the wisdom and knowledge and motivations of God. Whenever we are tempted to rebel, throw them off, go our own way. It is important to remember where we came from. Who we were without Christ. Who we would be without Christ. Where we would be without His love and compassion. Our eternal destiny absent His gift of eternal life. Remember and rejoice, friends! God loves you! God saved you! God delivered you! Joyfully follow Him! Joyfully pursue holiness! Joyfully embrace the life God’s calling you to lead so you can be the person He created and redeemed you to be!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 18-20, Luke 9:28-50, Psalms 73, Proverbs 12:10