

BIBLE IN A YEAR

**THE READING PLAN IS TAKEN FROM
“READING GOD’S STORY: ONE-YEAR CHRONOLOGICAL PLAN” BY YOU VERSION**

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English Standard Version**

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STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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APRIL

April 2, 2018 A NEW ERA

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 1, 2, 3

April 3, 2018 ALL THINGS NEW

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

April 4, 2018 REJECTION

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 9, 10, 11, 12

April 5, 2018 WHOLE-HEARTED DEVOTION

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 13, 14, 15, 16

April 6, 2018 TRUSTING GOD

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 17, 18, 19, 20 and Psalm 59

April 7, 2018 GOD'S WILL AND GOD'S WAY

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 21, 22, 23, 24, and Psalm 91

April 9, 2018 AUTHENTIC PRAYER

Readings for the day: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52

April 10, 2018 TURN TO GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142

April 11, 2018 LOVE YOUR ENEMIES???

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 25, 26, 27 and Psalms 17, 73

April 12, 2018 GOD IS MY HELPER

Readings for the day: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

April 13, 2018 EPITAPH: WHAT MESSAGE WILL BE WRITTEN ON YOUR TOMBSTONE?

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 28, 29, 30, 31, and 1 Chronicles 10

April 14, 2018 WORSHIP

Readings for the day: Psalms 121, 123, 124, 125, 128, 129, 130

April 16, 2018 CONTRADICTIONS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 1, 2, 3, 4

April 17, 2018 PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for the day: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21

April 18, 2018 FAMILY HISTORY

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 1, 2, and Psalms 43, 44

April 19, 2018 GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

Readings for the day: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87

April 20, 2018 CONNECTION

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 3, 4, 5

April 21, 2018 EVANGELISM

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 6 and Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78

April 23, 2018 DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Readings for the day: Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93

April 24, 2018 GENEALOGY AND RACE

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 7, 8, 9

April 25, 2018 UNITY

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11, 12, and Psalm 133

April 26, 2018 TRUE WORSHIP

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:11-25, 6, and 1 Chronicles 13, 14, 15, 16

April 27, 2018 SERENITY

Readings for the day: Psalms 15, 23, 24, 25, 47

April 29, 2018 WHO IS GOD?

Readings for the day: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107

April 30, 2018 WHO'S BUILDING YOUR HOUSE?

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalms 1, 2, 33, 127, 132

April 2, 2018
A NEW ERA

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 1, 2, 3

Today's reading represents a transition point in salvation history. As we've already seen, things are really bad in Israel. The people do not honor God. They do not have leaders who honor God. They are simply going through the motions of worship. Saying all the right things. Making all the right sacrifices. But in their hearts, they reject God. The rebel against His Law. Their priests are a disaster, engaging in sexual immorality. Making a mockery of the sacrificial system. Abusing their spiritual authority. Eli and his sons are the last in the line of the judges. A corrupt time in Israel's history that heartens back to the days of the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, and slavery in Egypt. At each of these points, God raised up a new leader. A godly leader. Someone who sought Him with all their heart and was "blameless" (not perfect) in their generation.

Noah. Abraham. Moses. Now it's Samuel's turn to take up the mantle of leadership and lead Israel back to Yahweh. Samuel is really a bridge from the time of the Judges to the time of the Kings. He will oversee a major transition in the life of Israel as they go from a bunch of tribes, each with their own identity, to one nation under a strong, centralized monarchy. It's also striking to note Samuel's age when he receives this call. Noah, Abraham, and Moses were all old men. Well beyond their prime. Samuel is a young boy. Not yet come into his own. The message here? God can use anyone at anytime to accomplish His purposes.

"Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord in the presence of Eli. And the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was." (1 Samuel 3:1-3)

Several things stand out in this passage. The Word of the Lord was rare. There was no vision. Eli, the current judge and spiritual leader of Israel, was going blind. All of these are connected. Israel was so mired in sin that God had gone almost silent. Throughout the Bible we see this dynamic in play.

"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)

"For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes." (Jeremiah 16:17)

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13)

God will not be mocked. When God's people continue to turn to sin instead of turning to Him in faithfulness, He will withdraw His presence. He will withhold His Word. He will give "them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...give them up to dishonorable passions...give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) And that is exactly what had taken place in Israel and in Eli's own family. Eli failed to discipline and restrain his sons. Hophni and Phineas are the very definition of corrupt religious leaders who manipulate the faith for their own benefit. And though things look okay on the outside – i.e. sacrifices are being made, prayers are being said, worship is taking place – the people of God are spiritually dying. (By the way, we see these same things happening in our world today. Think of the health and wealth preachers who speak to thousands every week. Or the Christian self-help gurus who masquerade as preachers. Or the many preachers who have fallen into sin, reject any kind of accountability or spiritual authority or process of repentance, and then get back into the pulpit. As incredible as it seems, faithlessness is often very popular and faithfulness unpopular.)

Thankfully, all hope is not lost! The lamp of God had not yet gone out! A young boy lies down in the temple of the Lord ready to receive His Word anew! Note the differences between Eli and Samuel. Eli is old. Infirm. Going blind. Samuel is young. Strong. His eyesight is clear. Eli is alone. Lying down in his own place. Samuel is also alone but makes his bed in the temple to be near the ark of God. Eli is associated in this passage with the rarity of God's Word and a lack of vision. Samuel is associated with hope because light still flickered in the lamp of God.

"The world has yet to see what God can do with a man (or woman) fully consecrated to him." (Attributed to Dwight L. Moody) Spiritual revival always begins with one person fully devoting themselves to God. Samuel was set apart from conception to be such a man. His mother gave him to the Lord to be raised in the temple. He was open to hear God's call when it came. As a result, revival did come to Israel. "And Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh, for the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the Lord." (1 Samuel 3:19-21)

Where do you find yourself in this story? Are you like Eli, Hophi, and Phineas? Enslaved to your sinful desires? Pursuing a life apart from God? Is the Word of the Lord rare in your life? Let me strongly encourage you to go before the Lord in honest, even ruthless, self-examination. Ask God to show you the areas of your life that need to be surrendered. Are you like Samuel? Do you have a heart for God? Let me encourage you to dig deep into His Word. Dedicate daily time in prayer. Listen for God's voice as it comes to you through His Word or through other believers or through your own personal prayer time. And when He speaks, may you answer with Samuel, "Speak Lord! Your servant is listening."

April 3, 2018
ALL THINGS NEW

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 4, 5, 6, 7, 8

Imagine you are living in ancient Israel during the time of the judges. You have no Bible. You have no synagogue. You have no centralized system of government. Every now and again, a charismatic leader rises up and for a time you have peace. For a time you seek after God. But pretty soon you lapse back into your old ways. You live in a very tribal culture. Every tribe around you has its own gods and goddesses and its own way of worship that seems to have been working for them. As you build your house and plant your crops and grow your family, you grow complacent. The incredible miracles God worked on your behalf recede further and further. You are preoccupied with the present. What you will eat. What you will wear. Will your wife get pregnant this year? How many lambs will be born this spring? What will the harvest yield? Sure, you go up each year to Shiloh to make your sacrifices but then it's back to normal. And "normal" doesn't really include God.

It's actually not hard to imagine, is it? This is familiar territory for all of us. How many of us own a Bible but rarely open it? How many of us belong to a church but rarely go to worship? We too live in a "tribal" culture whether it's our family, social group, political party, etc. Everyone of those tribes has its own "gods" and "goddesses" and different ways of worship. And if we aren't careful, we can get sucked in. We buy our homes. We grow our families. We work hard. We play hard. And we too can get complacent. The miracles and blessings of God can become commonplace in our lives as well. We too are preoccupied with the present. What we will eat. What we will wear. What kind of home we will live in. Will I get a raise this year? A promotion? Will my child make the team? Will I get into my dream college? Will I get my dream job? Will I meet the man or woman of my dreams? Sure, we go to worship on Christmas and Easter just in case but then it's quickly back to normal. And "normal" doesn't really include God.

Enter Samuel. A man sent by God to bring Israel back. To remind her of her covenant commitments. To have no other gods before God. To worship no idols. To honor God's name and keep the Sabbath. "Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." (1 Samuel 7:3) Samuel led Israel during a very difficult period in her history. She had suffered a heartbreak defeat at the hands of the Philistines. The ark of God had been captured. Her priests had been killed. All hope seemed lost. And then along came Samuel to remind her of God. To challenge her to return to God with her whole heart. To put aside all the other gods and goddesses. To cleanse herself of all the false worship she had engaged in. To come back to God and watch Him work yet another miracle on her behalf. This is exactly what happened. God brought them a great victory over their enemies. The Philistines were subdued. Territory was reclaimed. Hope was restored.

What enemies are you facing today? What battles are you fighting? Anxiety? Depression? Grief? Chronic pain? Is your marriage failing? Your family crumbling? Your work suffering? Are you facing a scary diagnosis? A terminal illness? Are you struggling with loneliness? A lack of deep friendships? Do you feel overwhelmed? Too busy? Under too much pressure? What enemies do you face? And are you willing to make the sacrifices necessary to reorient your heart towards God in the midst of it all? Are you ready for the radical shift you will need to put aside the "gods" you've been worshiping and return to the Lord with your whole heart? Here are four practical ways to wrap your life around the God who loves you and who promises to fight your battles on your behalf...

Spend time daily with Jesus. Read His Word. Pray. Sit in silence and just talk to Him.
Spend time weekly in corporate worship with a local church. Gather with other believers so you can be encouraged and equipped on a regular basis to face the challenges of this life.

Find a small group of close Christian friends who you can share life with. Eat together. Pray together. Share together. Hold each other accountable to pursuing Jesus.

Find a way to serve God and His Kingdom. Give back. Bless others. Be generous with your time and talent and treasure. It feels good to give our lives in service to something greater than ourselves.

Practice these disciplines over a lifetime and you will be amazed at the transformation that takes place. They will help you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus even in the middle of difficult trials and His promise is He will carry you through.

April 4, 2018
REJECTION

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 9, 10, 11, 12

Raise your hand if you like rejection? That's what I thought. No one does. I hate it. Over the course of my life, I've been rejected by girls I've asked out. Colleges I wanted to attend. Promotions I thought I'd earned. I was rejected by the first seminary I applied to and countless numbers of churches I contacted when I was graduating from seminary looking for a pastoral position. I've had ideas rejected that I believed would rejuvenate dying ministries. I've had visions rejected that I believed would transform the church. I've been personally rejected by congregational members whom I disappointed for some reason along the way. None of it's easy. All of it hurts. Perhaps that's why I like Samuel so much. He struggles with rejection as well.

Samuel is as faithful a man as it gets in the Bible. A man who dedicates his whole life to serving God and His people. Samuel has judged Israel for decades. Given his heart and soul to them. He has led them in war and in peace. Through seed time and harvest. In every season of life, he has been there for them. Faithfully praying for them. Faithfully serving them. Faithfully loving them and pointing them back to Yahweh. But now that he's old, they reject him. Or at least that's how he feels. "But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." (1 Samuel 8:6) He knew the shortcomings of his sons. He knew they didn't walk in his ways. That didn't make their words sting any less. Samuel experienced Israel's desire for a king as a repudiation of all he had accomplished over the course of his life. That's a hard place to be.

But Samuel doesn't just look to the opinions of people. He also looks to God. And in the midst of his disappointment, he does this extraordinary thing...he prays. And as he prays, God changes his perspective. "And Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are also doing to you. Now then, obey their voice; only you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." (1 Samuel 8:6-9) Compared to the faithful works of the Lord, what Samuel had accomplished was insignificant! Samuel had indeed judged Israel well for years. God had done so for centuries. Samuel had indeed led them in war and in peace. God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness, conquered the Promised Land, and been faithful to them even in the midst of their unfaithfulness. Samuel had given his heart and soul to them but nothing compared to what God had sacrificed for them.

Hear me very clearly. God is not trying to give Samuel a guilt trip! Just helping Samuel see the bigger picture. What was taking place in the hearts of the people was the same pattern that had already been repeated ad nauseum since Adam and Eve fell. Humanity wanted nothing to do with God! They would do everything they could to escape His rule and reign. So after centuries of being led by God, they now turned and demanded a human ruler so they could be just like the other nations. Can you imagine the pain God must have felt when His chosen people rejected the very relationship that made them so special?

Where have you been disappointed in your life? Rejected? Betrayed? How do you respond? God calls Samuel to not only forgive but to actually anoint Israel's new king. Where is God calling you to forgive? Who is God calling you to forgive? And how is God calling you to take the next step? Not only to forgive but also to seek the welfare of those who have rejected you in the first place? Welcome to the upside-down ways of the Kingdom!

April 5, 2018
WHOLE-HEARTED DEVOTION

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 13, 14, 15, 16

For those interested, Rick Yohn (retired pastor and professor) recently released a new book titled, "A Love Story from God", that will help guide you as you read through the Scriptures. Find him on Sunday mornings at PEPC or go to his website at www.rickyohnministries.org.

"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7)

What does it mean to love God with a "whole" heart? To be fully devoted to Him? To make Him our first love? Does it mean outward perfection? King Saul literally stood head and shoulders above his countrymen. (1 Sam. 10:23) Eliab, David's older brother, clearly was an impressive physical specimen. (1 Sam. 16:6) Does it mean achievement or success? I am sure God could easily have lined up a hundred other men who had accomplished a heck of a lot more than David. Is it based on wealth or privilege? Or perhaps great moral character? What kind of heart does God treasure in a man or woman? The key is found in 1 Sam. 15:22-23..."Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry." Humility. Submission. Obedience. These are the qualities on which God places supreme value. Are we willing to listen? Willing to follow? Willing to surrender our plans in favor of God's plan for our lives? Are we willing to trust God even when our circumstances seem bleak? Are we willing to obey even when it's hard?

King Saul was a half-hearted man. Though he was chosen by God and instructed by Samuel in the "rights and duties" of godly kingship, his heart was divided. At times, Saul was faithful and found great success. At other times, he was unfaithful and found only heartbreak. In times of conflict, Saul seemed to trust in God and therefore win victory after victory. In times of preparation or peace, Saul seemed to forget God and trust in his own understanding. The unlawful sacrifice at Gilgal. A rash vow during the heat of battle. A refusal to devote the Amalekites to destruction. These events illustrate the half-hearted devotion Saul paid to Yahweh and it eventually cost him everything. The kingdom was literally ripped from his hands. The Spirit of the Lord departed from him. And he ended up tormented and paranoid.

King David was a whole-hearted man. As we will see as we keep reading, David was a man after God's own heart. This doesn't make him perfect. His failures are massive and significant and costly. But through it all, David keeps seeking after God. David keeps humbling himself before God. David keeps returning to God in repentance. And God loves David. Honors David. Promises to give the throne to his descendants for generations.

So time to take stock. Time to step back and honestly examine your own heart. Are you half-hearted or whole-hearted in your devotion to God? Half-hearted or whole-hearted in your love for Jesus? How do you know? We've already seen that it doesn't necessarily depend on our outward appearance or achievement or actions. We can't count on the image we project to the world to save us. We have to be strong and courageous enough to take the inward journey into the heart. What do we find there? A love for God? A desire to serve Him? Please Him? Be with Him? Do we find in our hearts a hunger and thirst for righteousness? A deep awareness of the poverty of our own spiritual condition? Do we grieve over our sin? These are important questions that serve as a "diagnostic" to help us discern the spiritual condition of our hearts.

April 6, 2018
TRUSTING GOD

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 17, 18, 19, 20 and Psalm 59

What does it mean to trust God? As Christians, we talk about it all the time. But what does that actually look like in real life? David was a strong young man. A man entrusted with protecting the wealth of his family. A man who spent his days and nights out in the fields. Through all kinds of weather. Suffering all kinds of hardship. Fighting off lions and bears and other wild animals. David is no novice to conflict. No fearful young boy. His confidence has been forged in the fires of hardship and struggle.

Now he stands next to his brother as Goliath taunts the armies of Israel. David has as much right to be there as anyone. He may be a little younger but he's just as qualified. There were no standing professional armies in those days so most of the warriors who had gathered to fight for Saul were much like him. Farmers. Sheep herders. Men of the fields. Men of the forge. Men who spent most of their lives in other professions. Goliath was an exception. He truly was a professional warrior. Someone who had trained for battle since his youth. A man of imposing size who the Philistines used to strike fear in their enemies. He challenges Israel. More importantly, he challenges God Himself.

David trusts God. David attributes his past success to the Lord. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37) David has faced incredible odds before. Fighting off lions and bears is no joke! It required courage to track those animals down and save his sheep. And it will require courage to go out and face this Philistine. David doesn't blink. He grabs his sling and a few stones and off he goes.

It's one thing to say you trust God. It's another to actually place yourself in a situation where that trust is put to the test. "Trusting God" for David meant defending his flocks against lions and bears. "Trusting God" for David meant going out to face the Philistine giant. "Trusting God" for David meant not retaliating when Saul became jealous and sought to kill him. "Trusting God" for David meant continuing to serve Saul even though he was being treated unjustly. Over and over again, David trusts God with his life. His reputation. His relationships. His future. Remember, he's already been anointed the next king!!! One would think he might try to grasp after what is rightfully his. Manipulate things in his favor. Use Saul's mental instability to his own advantage. Imagine him standing on the field of battle, having just cut off Goliath's head. Is there a better time to claim your throne? David does none of these things because David trusts God to work things out according to His will and His way and in His time.

So...do you trust God? Where are you trusting God in your life right now? Where is it hard to trust God? What hardships and struggles are you facing? What does trust look like for you in those specific situations? "Trusting God" is no an abstract concept but a way of life that finds concrete expression in the everyday.

April 7, 2018
GOD'S WILL AND GOD'S WAY

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 21, 22, 23, 24, and Psalm 91

Imagine having everything you ever wanted within your grasp? Position. Power. Peace. You have the opportunity with a single stroke to bring it about. Imagine spending your life defending yourself against injustice. On the run for crimes you did not commit. Falsely accused by your enemy. And now you have the chance to end it. All you have to do is take matters into your own hands. A sudden strike in the darkness and you could lay hold of all God had promised.

The temptation to bring about the will of God in our own way and own time is very real. David faced it in the cave when Saul came in to relieve himself. Jesus faced it in the wilderness when the enemy offered him all the kingdoms of the world without the cross. You and I face it everyday as well in big and small ways. Yes, we know the will of God for our lives. We know His Word. We know His Truth. We know His Law. We know what He desires for us. But we get impatient. We get frustrated. We get anxious. We get afraid. And in our fear, we take matters into our own hands.

I remember vividly sitting down at a coffee shop one morning in Sun Prairie, WI. Kristi and I had been seeking God's will for many months. God had led us to resign from a difficult and painful ministry position. He had led us to a great church family who welcomed us in to help us heal. He had provided a sixty day severance package that we lived on while we waited for Him to reveal what was next. Through a mutual friend, God had connected us to a church in Parker, CO that was just beginning their search for a new senior pastor. But these things take time and I was growing anxious. I was afraid. The church in Parker was literally my only job prospect. I had no other options. How would I feed my family if it fell through? How would I pay the rent? Was my career in ministry over? Was it time to go do something else? All these thoughts ran through my head as the weeks passed and the wheels of the search process slowly turned. I was getting about two to three hours of sleep a night. I would pace the hours away praying and crying out to God.

One Saturday evening, I made up my mind. Enough was enough. I needed to expand my search. I needed to look at other ministry positions. I needed more options. So I told Kristi I would start looking the next morning. She and I went to bed. She tossed and turned all night, suffering from the sudden onset of a migraine. I did my normal pacing routine. We were both deeply unsettled. Eventually, morning dawned. I showered. Got dressed. Headed over to the coffee shop, laptop in hand to begin my day. I ordered my regular cup of black coffee. Sat down at my favorite table. Opened up the browser on my computer. Just as I went to type, I heard the word "NO" in my mind. It was clear. It was loud. It was startling. I looked around. Shook my head. Went to type. Again came the word..."NO!" This time I jumped a little. I looked around again. No one else was in the shop. Just me and the barista who was in the back. So I tried a third time to type. "NO!" I sat back. I looked out the window. I knew it was the Lord. Calling me to trust. Calling me to be patient. Calling me to wait on Him to reveal His will rather than make my own plans. I called Kristi. Told her what had happened. Told her God wasn't allowing me to apply to any other positions and that we just needed to wait for Him to reveal what would happen with the church in Parker. Immediately she felt the pain from her migraine lift and relief flood her body. It was frankly one of the most incredible moments in our lives.

God's ways are not our ways. All of us would have counseled David to take Saul's life in the cave that day. Put an end to the running. Put an end to the civil war. Kill your enemy and take your rightful place on the throne of Israel. All of us would have counseled Jesus to avoid the cross. To accept the deal the devil was offering. Accomplish all the Father has sent You to do without the suffering and pain. We all compromise. We all rationalize. We all have our excuses for why we don't follow the will of God. Why we don't walk in His ways. Why we don't wait on His timing. The reality is we are always looking out for number one. We are always

looking out for our own interests first before we look to the interests of others. Even God. But David was a man after God's own heart. He refused to take matters into his own hands. He refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed even though Saul was an evil and corrupt king. He trusted all God had promised would be fulfilled in God's time and in God's way. Just like Jesus did in the wilderness. Just like Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Friends, take a step back. Take your hands off the wheel. Relinquish control. Let go. Trust God to fulfill His promises in His perfect timing and according to His perfect will.

April 9, 2018
AUTHENTIC PRAYER

Readings for the day: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52

The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. 150 prayers written by God's people. Written in times of celebration. Commemorating great victories and triumphs. Written in the midst of despair, exile, and defeat. Written for use in worship like the Psalms of Ascent. Written for very specific occasions. Written in the midst of real life.

David is on the run. He is being pursued by his own people. Betrayed by his own king. Unjustly accused. He has lost his position. His home. His family. One would think such circumstances would lead to bitterness and despair. Anger and frustration. Fear and uncertainty. These are honest feelings and David doesn't shy away from acknowledging them. "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life." (Psalms 31:9-13) One can hear in his words the anguish and heartbreak. He is afraid. He doesn't know what the future holds. There are no guarantees he will escape. So he brings these feelings authentically before the Lord. He humbles himself before his God. He knows the Lord sees his afflictions.

At the same time, David prays in faith for his very real needs. He prays for God's protection. "In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!" (Psalms 31:1-2)

He prays for God's guidance and wisdom. "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock." (Psalms 27:4-5)

He prays for God's comfort and provision. "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalms 34:17-19)

And most of all, David lifts his eyes above his current circumstances to praise God for who He is! God is worthy of praise even when we find ourselves in the middle of the most difficult times of our lives. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!" (Psalms 34:1-3)

One of the greatest lies the enemy tries to tell us is that our needs don't matter to God. They are too small. Too insignificant to demand His attention. The enemy tries to convince us that we are a burden to our Heavenly Father and praying authentically somehow makes us unholy or unworthy. David teaches us otherwise. He is raw. He is real. He is emotional. He is bold. He enjoys such close intimate fellowship with God that he can literally tell God anything. And that is what God desires from everyone of His children.

What is your prayer life like? Is it real? Authentic? Or are there things you are afraid to share with your Heavenly Father? Areas of your life you try to hide? Do you fear coming into His presence? Afraid of what He might do? What He might say? What He might think? Do you trust God's gracious character? His unconditional love? His mercies which are new every morning? Do you believe God is generous towards you? Having an inexhaustible supply of time and attention? Do you know nothing is insignificant to God? Not one need. Not one desire. Do you bring your requests humbly before Him, trusting He knows best what you need? I'd encourage you to use the Psalms as a model, a guide, for your prayers. Let David lead you to a deeper understanding of your relationship with God.

April 10, 2018
TURN TO GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142

It's a powerful thing to read the Psalms in context. To read them within the context of the person's life who wrote them. David is not in a good place. He's not in an easy place. He is running for his life. He is living in the wilderness. He has gathered around him a pretty motley crew of people. He can never rest. He is never safe. He is never fully secure. Anxiety and fear are constant companions. This is not his fault. It's not something he brought on himself. He is not facing the consequences of his choices. No, it's the opposite. He is being unfairly treated. Falsely accused of crimes he did not commit. All David has ever done is try to serve his king faithfully and well. He has fought for Saul. Bled for Saul. Won victory after victory for Saul. When Saul was troubled, it was David who played the harp to calm his soul. All that for what? Betrayal? And now he's being hunted like an animal.

But how does David respond? Does he play the victim? No! He turns to God. "Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly. When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can flesh do to me?...This I know, that God is for me. In God, whose word I praise, in the Lord, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I shall not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Psalms 56:1-4, 9-11) This is what I love about David. He honestly acknowledges his fears. He doesn't try to pretend like his life is going well. He's being trampled. He's being oppressed. He's being attacked by his enemies. However, rather than respond in kind. Rather than give into his fear. Rather than play the victim and rail against the betrayal and injustice. David places his trust in God. He praises God. He keeps his eyes fixed on God. What happens as a result? This incredible confidence. What can man do to me? Take my life? Take my future? Take my possessions? Big deal. I trust in God. I place my faith in God. I know God is for me so who can stand against me?

We live in a world where it is common to play the victim. We seem to be unable to handle disappointment. We avoid responsibility. We blame-shift. We feel "wounded." "Hurt." "Betrayed." And we believe this gives us license to end relationships. Avoid hard conversations. Escape the Biblical call for forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration. Someone lets us down? We cut them out of our lives. We get confronted at work? We find another job. Someone holds us accountable? We stop talking to them. A friend hurts our feelings? We move on. Such behaviors are rampant both in our society and in the church. Study after study has been done on the lack of "resiliency" in our culture. We seem to be unable to handle suffering. Pain. Heartbreak. Disappointment. We seem to be unequipped to have hard, honest conversations. We seem to be too scared to face our own internal demons so we project them onto those around us. Especially those we are closest to. So marriages fail. Families break apart. Friendships end. All we are doing is perpetuating a cycle of brokenness.

Would that we would follow David's example! In the face of all the hardship and suffering and injustice and pain and disappointment and betrayal...David looked to God! He took refuge in God! He cried out to God! He asked God to search his own heart so that he may not sin! Most of all, he praised God for he recognized that it is often in the "wilderness" when we are "on the run" from our enemies that God does His best work in us. Shaping. Forming. Forging our character. Making us into the people He created and called us to be.

April 11, 2018
LOVE YOUR ENEMIES???

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 25, 26, 27 and Psalms 17, 73

This past week I preached from the Sermon on the Mount. “Love your enemies!” Jesus says. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you.” (Luke 6:27-28) Frankly, it sounds crazy. Mixed up. Naive. Until I read about David. And I watch him spare Saul’s life over and over again. I watch him refuse to lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed. I watch him restrain his anger. His desire for revenge. David had every right to strike Saul down when he caught him in the cave. Had every right to pin Saul to the ground with his own spear when he infiltrated the camp. But over and over again, David refrained. Why is that?

I believe David understood on some level what Jesus would later teach. God’s great desire is for everyone to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. (1 Tim. 2:4) This includes a man like Saul. Evil. Paranoid. Drunk with power. This includes a man like Nabal. Proud. Arrogant. Hard-hearted. This includes a man like David who himself will succumb to the temptations to use his power for his own purposes. It includes a man like Doug Resler who wrestles everyday with pride and ego and selfishness. The reality that David saw. The reality that Jesus taught is that we are all enemies and yet God in His infinite mercy loved us. God in His infinite grace embraced us while we were yet sinners. While we were yet broken. While we were yet weak and wounded and dead in our sin. God came to us. God loved us. God did good to us. God blessed us. God prayed for us. So we should do for others including those who seek our harm.

Some have asked if we run the risk of further traumatizing victims of abuse. It’s a very important question. My response is that love is not passive. It doesn’t make one a doormat. I do not believe Jesus is teaching women to stay with the men who beat them. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to seek out situations where we would suffer. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to simply bow our heads before injustice. David didn’t stay in Saul’s palace! David left. He escaped. He found his way to safety. And then he resisted. Fiercely. Faithfully. With the hope that his persecutor. His abuser. His enemy would eventually see the light. I love what Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” King pursued a path of non-violent resistance always with the hope that white racists would become his brothers. This was his dream. And I believe deep down it was David’s dream for Saul as well.

How do you respond when attacked? How do you respond when people curse you? Have you suffered the trauma of abuse? These are very real experiences that cannot be diminished or dismissed. They impact so many in our culture today. Just look around at the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements. While you may disagree with their political goals, is it not heartbreakingly that so many in our culture feel such fear? And can we not courageously enter into that fear with them with the love of Christ?

April 12, 2018
GOD IS MY HELPER

Readings for the day: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

One of the more disappointing moments in my seminary career came during a preaching class. We were practicing delivering children's sermons and during the course of my presentation I made the statement that I believed God protects His children. The professor stopped the class. She asked me if I truly believed what I had just said. I told her I did. She asked how in the world I could believe that or make such a statement in a world where there is so much pain and suffering. Where children are abused and bullied. Where children are diagnosed with terminal diseases like cancer. Where children often die tragically. She asked me what I thought would happen if I told a child, "God would protect them" and then something bad happened. What would happen to that little child's faith? I have to admit I didn't have much to say. The whole conversation caught me completely off guard.

I have been in ministry now for over twenty years. I have walked with families through all kinds of pain and suffering. I have seen death up close. I have witnessed tragedy. I have experienced it myself. I am not blind to the reality of abuse. I am not blind to the reality of hardship. I am not blind to the struggles so many face. Nor was David when he penned these words in the Psalms. "Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life...For he has delivered me from every trouble, and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies." (Psalms 54:4, 7) David knew pain intimately. Suffering was a constant companion. Death visited him regularly. This was the world he lived in and yet he still looked to God for help. Still looked to God for protection and strength. Somehow, somehow David was able to see beyond the horizons of this life to the life to come. He knew God deeply. He knew God could be trusted. He knew God was good. He knew God loved His people. And so He trusted God for His vindication. Even if it didn't happen in this life. Now David knew nothing of resurrection. Heaven and the afterlife were not categories he would have thought in. But there was an instinct deep within his heart that drew him to God and caused him to trust in His great faithfulness.

Unfortunately, the horizons of our world have shrunk to the point where they only include the boundaries of this life. Even Christians have lost sight of eternity. So focused are we on what happens to us in this life, we lose sight of the bigger picture and greater glory God is working to reveal in us. We lose perspective. We want more from this world than it can actually give. We expect more from this world than it can actually deliver. And because our expectations go unmet. Because our desires go largely unrequited. Because our hopes and dreams fail. We get disappointed. Disillusioned. And we blame God. O that we would learn from David! Rather than blame God, we would look to Him for strength! Rather than rage at God, we would see Him as our helper! Rather than accuse God of not being fair. Not being just. Not being true to His Word. We would look beyond our circumstances, beyond our feelings, and see the eternity God is preparing for us in His Kingdom.

Psalm 18 is one of my favorites. I love the imagery of smoke and thunder and hail and God literally "bending the heavens" to come to our rescue. When things were at their worst, God was at His best. When David teetered on the brink of death and destruction, God was there to pull Him back. And yet, we didn't read any of this in 1 Samuel, did we? I don't remember earthquakes and fire and God showing up in His chariot? What I remember is David faithfully placing His trust in God. What I remember is David literally making God His refuge. What I remember is David in prayer. David seeking God's face. David worshiping God even in the midst of His struggle. And because David did these things, his eyes pierced the veil of this world and God gave him a glimpse of what actually happened when he escaped from Saul.

In the midst of your struggles, do you seek God? When life is at its most difficult, we need to lean ever deeper on Christ. The disciplines of prayer, reading Scripture, and corporate worship become lifelines as we seek God's face. Daily submission to the will of God as revealed in His Word is essential for the believer who makes God her/his help. Daily discernment between good and evil, truth and error, is essential for the believer who makes God her/his refuge. Daily self-denial and taking up our cross is essential for the believer who seeks to follow Jesus.

April 13, 2018

EPITAPH: WHAT MESSAGE WILL BE WRITTEN ON YOUR TOMBSTONE?

Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 28, 29, 30, 31, and 1 Chronicles 10

My dad's family comes from a small town in western Nebraska. If you go to the cemetery there, you will find all my relatives going back several generations. Grossbachs. Reslers. Arenz's. They're all there. You'll see a headstone for my son Caleb and the plots where Kristi and I will be buried as well. It's a beautiful, peaceful place. Every time we go back to Wauneta, we make sure we go out to visit. We walk among our ancestors. We read their names. Birthdates. Deathdates. And ponder the messages they've left for us.

In the final analysis, what message will your life send? What will be written about you after you die? What memories will your children and grandchildren hold onto? How will they speak of you? King Saul ruled Israel for a number of years. He started off well but quickly went off track. His life is one of half-measures. A part of him tries so hard to be faithful to God but a greater part keeps taking matters into his own hands. His fear gets the best of him on so many occasions. And now we read about his death. A horrible one. You can almost see him on top of Mt. Gilboa. Wounded. Pierced through by many arrows. The bodies of his sons lying on the ground around him. He's in pain. Agony. Grief-stricken. Israel has fallen before the Philistines. The glory of the Lord has departed. He's watching it all come crashing down around him and in his despair, he asks his armor-bearer to finish him off before his enemies come and torture him. His armor-bearer refuses so Saul falls on his own sword.

What verdict does the Bible render about this man's life? "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse." (1 Chronicles 10:13-14) Saul's death did not come at the hands of the Philistines. Not ultimately. His fate was sealed when he broke faith with God. When he did not wait all those years ago for Samuel to come and make the right sacrifices. From that point forward, Saul was doomed to perish and every action he took to stave off his fate only served to seal it further. Seeking out the witch of Endor was simply the final straw that broke the camel's back. Saul no longer sought God. No longer pursued God. No longer loved God. And so God put him to death and gave the kingdom to David.

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. Good leadership looks to Yahweh. Evil leadership looks to other gods. A good life is one defined by faithfulness to God. An evil life is one defined by selfishness, greed, and the worship of idols. Saul will forever be remembered by his epitaph in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14. David will forever be remembered as the "man after God's own heart." Who are you?

April 14, 2018
WORSHIP

Readings for the day: Psalms 121, 123, 124, 125, 128, 129, 130

Psalms of Ascent. Psalms 120-134. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. One can almost imagine thousands coming to Jerusalem all singing these songs with one voice. It must have been a powerful, moving scene. In addition, many scholars believe these were the songs Israel sang at different high points in their history like the dedication of Solomon's Temple or the rebuilding of the walls during Nehemiah's time. Over and over again, Israel returned to these psalms to express their faith and trust in God.

Christians have built on this tradition of worship. Many churches throughout the world sing these psalms in worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church sings these psalms every Friday during Vespers. The Roman Catholic Church in the west schedules these psalms to be sung during daily prayer. The goal is to remind Christians we are on our own pilgrimage to a Heavenly Jerusalem and these psalms build the spiritual intensity of the worship service as we prepare for the reading of the gospel. It's a powerful thing to experience.

These psalms are favorites among believers. We love the language of God protecting us. God guiding us. God providing for us. God helping us. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalms 121:1-2) "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid servant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us." (Psalms 123:1-2) "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore." (Psalms 125:1-2) Something happens to us when we gather together to sing these praises. Something transformative. Something life-changing. We are encouraged. We are strengthened. We are blessed by the experience of being in God's presence together.

This is the essence of corporate worship. This is why gathering weekly with a community of believers is so vital to the Christian faith. Yes, I know many of us worship Jesus daily on our own. Yes, I know many of us experience Jesus profoundly as we hike or hunt or spend time in nature. But neglecting the worship of God with the people of God places us at risk. It places us out of step with thousands of years of Christian history. It places us out of step with the will of God as revealed in Scripture. It's frankly arrogant and prideful and foolish to claim we don't need the church. God loves His bride. God loves His children. God loves having His family together. God loves hearing His people sing. God loves meeting His people in the sacraments. God loves teaching His people through His Word. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20)

It is getting harder and harder for Christians to commit to weekly worship. There are so many demands on our time, it is easy to compromise. It is easy to give ourselves a pass. It is easy to assume we can get to it later. But when we privilege other things before corporate worship, we are in grave danger of placing these things above God. We cannot "put God first" and neglect corporate worship. The reality is we cannot love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength without giving Him the worship He deserves and the worship He demands.

April 16, 2018
CONTRADICTIONS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 1, 2, 3, 4

King David is one of the most beloved people in all the Bible. He is tender and compassionate even as he is fierce and ruthless. He is a warrior and a musician. He is a king and a shepherd. And he is as human as they come. I think this is one of the reasons we like him so much. Today's readings show him to be capable of great compassion. He weeps over the death of his enemies. Saul. Jonathan. Abner. Despite their attempts to kill him, he cared deeply for them. He respected them. He did his best to honor them. David is also capable of being ruthless and harsh. He kills the young man who brings him news of Saul's death. He kills the two men who came to him with news of Ish-bosheth's death. Now some might call those latter acts justice since in each case they took the life of the king but it is still brutal nonetheless. David is also capable of great faith. Reflecting on the Psalms over the last several days reveals a man after God's own heart. A man who loves and trusts God. A man who looks to God for help and strength and hope. David is a man of great contradictions.

We are all a people of great contradictions if we're honest. We are all capable of great love. Tender mercy. Deep compassion. Over the course of my life in ministry, I have watched some of the toughest people be so gentle and loving with those who struggle. I have seen hardened criminals breakdown talking about their mothers or estranged children. At the same time, I know we are also capable of rage and anger and hate. We can be ruthless and harsh. If not on the outside then definitely on the inside. We too are judgmental and condemning especially with those who do us wrong. And yet, I've watched in awe as some of these same folks – angry, bitter, frustrated, cynical – turn from those emotions and seek after God. They reach out in faith. They demonstrate, even if on a small scale, a deep love for God. Or at least a deep desire for the love of God. Yes, we are a people of great contradictions.

Here's the really good news. God loves us for who we are. Not for who we should be. Or who we "ought" to be. Or the image of ourselves we project to the world around us. God loves the real you. The real me. The one full of contradictions and struggles and inconsistencies. The one full of virtue and vices. The one full of sin and saintliness. The one who is capable of great good and great evil all in the same day! This is the person God loves. This is the person God laid down His life for. This is the person God wants to spend all of eternity with. God loved David in the midst of his mess. God loves us in the midst of our mess. This, friends, is the heart of the gospel.

April 17, 2018
PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for the day: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21

When I read through the Psalms I try to imagine what David must be experiencing. What is he referencing when he says, “Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O Lord —how long?” (Psalms 6:2-3) 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.

April 18, 2018
FAMILY HISTORY

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 1, 2, and Psalms 43, 44

There is a massive amount of interest in family history these days. With the advent of the internet, one can research from the comfort of one's own home. You can trace your family's origins back centuries. You can see their names. Sometimes get pictures. Find out different tidbits of information about them. What businesses did they run? Who did they marry? What town did they grow up in? You can even send your DNA off and find out who you are related to around the world. My mom and dad did this recently and discovered they had both Neanderthal and Mongolian blood! It was nuts! (Then again, looking back maybe it makes sense...ha!)

Genealogies are important because they root us in a specific history. A specific family. A specific story. Three generations ago, most Americans could tell you a lot about their family history. Mostly they lived in the same small town. Farmed the same land. Got buried in the same cemetery. There was a sense of rootedness to their lives. As the 20th century marched on, people became far more mobile and those connections to their history began to diminish. Sure, they might go back for a visit. Might see mom or dad and show their own kids the house where they grew up. Might be able to tell some of the family story but as time passed even those memories began to fade. Sociologists tell us that current generations are marked by a sense of existential loneliness. They don't know who they are or where they are from. They don't have a sense of "home" or being rooted in a history. They feel aimless and wandering.

The genealogies we read about in Scripture are vitally important. If you've been following along with the reading, you know a lot of these names. You know a lot of their stories. You remember who they are and what they've done. Taken together, they tell the story of God's people and it is important to the Chronicler to situate David within this specific history. Within this specific story. Within this specific family. Not only to demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy – i.e. the scepter shall not depart from Judah – but also to remind the people of God's great faithfulness. David was no accident. David didn't just stumble into the kingship. David didn't rise up on and seize the kingship on his own. This was the outworking of God's salvation plan from the very beginning. Going all the way back to Adam in the Garden of Eden and tracing its way down through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. God has been at work. God has brought about His Will for His people. God has been faithful.

Think about your own life. Think about the legacy you've inherited from your family. Good or bad. Think about where you're from and the stories you tell your children about what it was like growing up. Do you feel connected to something larger than yourself? Do you feel like you are part of a specific history? A specific story? A specific family? And what role has God played or does He play in the unfolding narrative that is your life?

April 19, 2018
GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

Readings for the day: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87

Recently I was given a very special gift. It was one I did not deserve. One I did not earn. It was a generous gift. One might even call it an extravagant gift. When presented with the gift, I found myself going through a range of emotions. Shock. A little embarrassment. Humility. Followed by a deep and profound sense of gratitude and thankfulness.

This gift itself is very special but even more significant is the heart of the giver. What overwhelmed me the most was the love the giver has for me and my family. A love so deep and wide it would prompt them to act in such a generous and gracious way. Again, I do not deserve such love. I am not worthy of such honor. And yet, their love for me remains.

In this is love...not that we loved God but that He loved us. (1 John 4:10) God is the most extravagant giver of all time. His mercies are new every morning. Manna appearing each and every day. He throws open the storehouses of heaven in order to care for those He loves. I love how Psalm 85 puts it, "Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness looks down from the sky. Yes, the Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him and make his footsteps a way." (Psalms 85:9-13) Surely we do not deserve such divine attention! Surely we have not earned such divine blessing! Surely we are not worthy of such an honor and yet God's love remains. He gives what is good. He causes the land to yield its increase. His salvation comes to those who fear Him. His glory fills the earth. God is vigilant. Always watching. Always on the lookout. He never sleeps. He never rests. He never takes a day off. He is there for us in good times and in bad. He is at work when there is scarcity and when there is abundance. He is moving among the rich and poor, drawing them together in such a way that what one lacks, the other provides.

I know it's easy to question such goodness. We look around at the world and we see the starvation. The poverty. The disease. The death. We wonder where God is in the midst of it all. The Bible's answer is clear and unequivocal. He is there. Right in the middle. Right in the thick of things. Saving. Securing. Providing. Comforting. Rescuing people from the bondage of sin and death in this world in order to bring them home to Himself. He's also at work in us. Those who have plenty. Those who have abundance. Those who are healthy and strong and blessed with tremendous resources. He moves on our hearts. He moves in our lives. He propels us out to the ends of the earth to be His hands and feet. What a marvelous thing it is to be invited to partner with God's Spirit in what God is doing to save the world!

It is humbling. It is a little embarrassing. Certainly shocking that God would choose me. But I am overwhelmed by a deep and profound sense of gratefulness and thankfulness. I do not deserve this honor. I have done nothing to earn it. I am unworthy in every which way. But God is gracious. And God's love for me remains. Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift! (2 Corinthians 9:15)

April 20, 2018
CONNECTION

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 3, 4, 5

There is an old story about a pastor who went to visit a parishioner whom he had not seen for a while. It was a cold morning so when the pastor showed up, the man had the coffee hot and a roaring fire going in the fireplace. They both sat down and the pastor asked how things were going. The conversation ranged from work to family to health to life in general. The man was doing well. Finally, the conversation got around to faith. And the man started to talk about how he didn't need the church to worship God. He was doing just fine on his own. Praying. Reading the Bible. Walking through the woods. As he spoke, the pastor didn't judge. Didn't condemn. He simply reached over and with the tongs, took a coal out of the fireplace and placed it on the hearth. As the man spoke, his eyes kept going to the coal. At first it burned nice and hot but as time went on it began to grow cold. Having lost its connection to the fire, it eventually burned out.

Life with God is like that. Life with community is like that. I cannot tell you the number of people I have spoken with over the years who have experienced this loss of connection. Their lives are so busy. Their feelings of isolation and loneliness so strong. The pain they carry is so great and my heart breaks for them. So many of them have nowhere to turn. Their relationship with God has grown cold. Their connection to community is tenuous at best. They have no one to call when they are in crisis. No one to lean on when times get tough, as they always do.

The people of God have always drawn so much strength from one another. The people of God have always felt this strong connection both to those who came before them and to those who come after. The genealogies of the Bible may seem dry and boring at first glance. Just a bunch of names on a page. And yet each person represents a story. Each person represents a connection to God and His promises. Each person has a testimony to share about the faithfulness of God in action. Maybe it's Jabez who prayed to God for protection. Or it's Reuben who experienced the loving discipline of God for his mistakes. Or it's Judah who experienced the grace of God covering His sin. Over and over again, these names tell a story. The story. Our story. This is our family history. Our family tree. And as we tap into this story, we experience a deep connection to the One who made us. The One who loves us. The One who has come to rescue us. Even Jesus Christ.

How are you connecting to God today? How are you connecting to God's people? How are you helping others connect? It's not complex but it can be difficult in the midst of all that life can throw at us. I always recommend four spiritual practices to those who wonder how to begin building connection...

Daily Devotional Time: Spend time each day in prayer and reading/reflecting on Scripture. Find fifteen minutes. Thirty minutes just to be with God. Use your commute. Use your lunch hour. Use your break time. You won't regret it.

Weekly Gathered Worship: Find a local church and plug in. Gather with God's people for worship each week. Don't approach it as a consumer experience (i.e. what did I "get out" of it today) but rather trust God to create a "cascading" effect in your life on a subconscious level through His Spirit as He draws you to Himself.

Join a small group: Find a few Christian friends and start meeting together intentionally for encouragement, vulnerable sharing, and accountability. Pray for each other. Talk to each other. Intentionally do life together. Will it be messy? Yep. Pursuing authentic relationships always is because we are all "authentically" sinful!:-) Press through the difficult conversations. Practice forgiveness and grace. You will find deep connections building as you do.

Find a place to serve God's Kingdom: Don't just build this "connection" for yourself! Find a way to share it with others. As you go out to serve Christ and His Kingdom, you will become someone else's point of connection to God and to community. Isn't that awesome? God will use YOU to be His hands and feet in another person's life. Do these four things over the course of a lifetime and I guarantee...GUARANTEE...you will grow a deep, abiding relationship with Christ and with God's people. Will there be disappointments along the way? Yes. Will you feel hurt at times? Absolutely. Is it easy? Nope. Not in our world. But nothing worth doing is EVER easy and that is particularly true when it comes to the most important relationship in our lives! So place your trust and your hope in Christ and let Him lead you to the abundant life He promises!

April 21, 2018
EVANGELISM

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 6 and Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78

I once worked for a denomination where evangelism was often referred to as the “E” word. It was a pejorative term. They didn’t like it. Didn’t want to do it. Didn’t really believe it necessary on some level. They would much rather focus on social justice and lobby for certain political positions. But talk about Jesus? Share the gospel? That was a non-starter. Every few years, they would produce a survey and at least a few of the questions focused on whether or not belief in Jesus was required for salvation. A majority of pastors and denominational leaders voted “no.” When asked if they had shared their faith with a non-believer in the last year, most of the people sitting in the pew said “no.” No wonder they didn’t like evangelism!

Psalm 78 says, “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done. He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments...” (Psalms 78:4-7) It is God’s greatest desire to be known. To be loved. To be in relationship with His people. It’s why He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden. It’s why He revealed Himself to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It’s why He spoke to Moses from a burning bush. It’s why He delivered Israel with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. It’s why He sends prophets, raises up kings, and, in the fullness of time, sends His only begotten Son into the world. He wants to be known!

The primary instrument He uses to make Himself known is us! His chosen people! His adopted sons and daughters! His bride! His body! His church. It’s why every gospel contains a Great Commission. It’s why the Book of Acts begins with a command to go to the ends of the earth with the message of the gospel. It’s good news! It’s great news! It’s the best news!

Evangelism begins in the home. With our children. Our children’s children. One generation tells the next of the mighty and awesome wonders of God. One generation testifies to the next of all that God has done. Fathers and mothers sharing the good news with their children over dinner. Driving in the car to the next practice. Prayer before bedtime. Grandfathers and grandmothers sharing the good news with their grandchildren as they take them to the zoo. For a walk in the park. Playing with them on the playground. Families worshiping together. Reading Scripture together. Praying together. This is how the faith is passed on. But it doesn’t end in our homes. It extends outward to our neighbors as we engage in acts of service and selfless love. It extends to our co-workers as we connect over coffee breaks and at lunch. It extends to our classmates at recess or on our off-periods together. It extends to those we encounter as we go about our daily lives. A smile. A kind word. Graciously letting someone go in front of us in the line at the grocery store. It extends even further as we engage cross-culturally both locally and abroad. As we serve the less fortunate. Speak for those who have no voice. Care for those who are hurting. Comfort those who are sick. Come alongside those who are lonely. All in the name of Jesus.

A favorite theologian of mine once said, “Christians should all live questionable lives.” Not because we engage in sin but because our lives are such models of grace and unconditional love that it will make people curious. It will make them want to ask us why we live the way we do. This should be true of our children as they grow up in our homes. True for our neighbors who live around us. True for our co-workers and classmates with whom we spend so much time.

So who do you know who needs the gospel? What are you doing to share the good news with them? Are you praying for them? Are you looking for opportunities to engage in spiritual conversations with them? Are you serving them? Blessing them? Have you invited them to join you in worship? Or in small group? Or on a mission? God desires all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. And to accomplish this great mission, God has sent you. God has sent me. God has sent His people into the world.

April 23, 2018
DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

Readings for the day: Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93

Spiritual crisis is real. The consistent witness of God's people throughout history testifies to the fact that there will be seasons when God seems so distant. When our lives seem so dark. When the light of Christ is hard to find. When the comfort of Christ seems long in coming. During such seasons, we feel overwhelmed by fear. Doubt. The cares and worries of this world press in on us. We feel trapped. Alone. Unable to be consoled.

St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish Christian, famously coined the term, "The Dark Night of the Soul." It refers to particular seasons in the Christian life where we feel stripped of God's presence. It's not true, of course. God is still very much present in our lives but we do not feel Him. We do not experience Him. We do not sense His tender mercies and affections. During such seasons, we feel a void. An absence. And it causes us to wrestle on a deep, foundational level with our faith.

I experienced such a season for 19 months while living in Sun Prairie, WI. The ministry I had been called to was failing. My relationship with those I was accountable to was a disaster. I was struggling daily with fear and doubt and depression. So consumed was I by my own needs, I neglected my wife and children. Things got so bad that my wife gave me an ultimatum. It was either her or the ministry. I was at the end of my rope. I resigned. No idea what was next. No idea how I would feed my family. No idea how I would care for those I loved most in this world. I felt so alone. So afraid. For months I cried out to God. I would pace our living room most of the night praying. Begging. Frustrated. Angry. Where was God when I needed Him most? Where was God when things were at their worst? I was in spiritual crisis and it felt like God was not there.

These experiences are not unusual. St. John of the Cross. St. Paul of the Cross. Mother Theresa. All testify to similar experiences, though their "dark nights" lasted decades. The author of Psalm 88 was clearly familiar with his own "dark night." "O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you...For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol...You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep...Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?...O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?...You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness." (Psalms 88:1, 3, 6, 11-12, 14, 18) It's a depressing Psalm. One of the few with no resolution. No final ascription of praise. The psalmist seemingly feels God's absence on a visceral level and is left all alone in darkness.

So why does God allow the dark night of the soul? Why does God not rescue us from the depths of our spiritual crises? What are such experiences seemingly so common and even necessary for the Christian? I believe it is how we learn the meaning of true faith. True faith must move from the head to the heart to the gut. To the depths of our being. It must become the fundamental reality of our existence. It must transcend what we think. It must transcend what we feel. It has to come from a place so deep within that it can never be overcome.

Mother Theresa endured her "dark night" from 1948 until her death in 1997. She once wrote, "Where is my faith? Even deep down... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness... If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul." Some have suggested she lost her faith. Not true! In fact, her suffering was very much like that of Jesus on the cross who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In the end, Mother Theresa hoped her personal letters would be destroyed lest "people think more of me and less of Jesus."

I wouldn't trade those 19 months of spiritual darkness in Wisconsin for anything. God had removed any sense of His affections. God had removed any sense of His abiding presence. Doubts and fears assailed my soul as I was stripped to the bone. In the depths of my despair, I was haunted by this one question...do I really believe? Do I believe in God when nothing makes sense? Do I believe in God when I cannot feel His presence? Do I believe in God when all is darkness all around me? Is God more real to me than my thoughts? My feelings? My fears? My doubts?

There's no way to know the answer to such deep questions unless one is willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death to the other side. Thankfully, at the end of my own dark road, I found God waiting for me there. I found my faith renewed and strengthened in a way I could never have imagined. And I do not harbor any illusions that somehow my journey is at its end or that I won't have to walk yet another dark road in the course of my life. What I do know is that God has driven my faith deep into my gut. Deep into the bedrock of my being. And though it can be shaken, it can never be destroyed because God is more real than my circumstances. God is more real than my feelings. God is more real than my thoughts. God is more real than my doubts. God is more real than my fears. God is the fundamental reality of my life and I am thankful.

April 24, 2018
GENEALOGY AND RACE

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 7, 8, 9

The key verse in today's reading is 1 Chronicles 9:1, "So all Israel was recorded in genealogies, and these are written in the Book of the Kings of Israel. And Judah was taken into exile in Babylon because of their breach of faith." Why are all these names important? Why are the generations laid down with such detail and specificity? Why record Israel according to their respective tribes? What's at stake here? Identity. Connection. History. Even their relationship with God. Israel took their history seriously. They took God's Word seriously. Even after they were carted off to exile in Babylon and were faced with the temptation to intermarry and lose their connection to their past, Israel remained faithful. They knew God had set apart the Levites to serve Him as priests. So the Levites remained set apart even in exile. They knew God had given authority to the tribe of Judah to reign and to rule. So the tribe of Judah continued to serve as princes and leaders for God's people. They knew David and Samuel had set apart certain families as gatekeepers, guardians of the Lord's treasury, etc. So they made sure these families retained those roles. And when Israel finally did return from exile, you see the descendants of these great men and women re-connecting to their glorious past.

Most of us have never been carried into exile. Most of us have not had our identities wiped out. We've not had our history erased. We've not had our connection to our ancestors severed. At the same time, many among us have had this terrible and tragic experience. I think of the Native American men and women I have known. Their people lived on this continent for hundreds of years before the arrival of the first European explorers. They lost their land. They were forcibly relocated. They were forced to forgo the key rituals and give up the key rhythms that connected them to their history and their tribal identity. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking. I think of the African-American men and women I have known. Their ancestors brought over on slave ships across the Atlantic. Their connection to their land severed. Their connection to their history erased. Their connection to their past lost. They were given new names. Were forced to take on new identities. They suffered in slavery for hundreds of years including economic slavery after officially being emancipated during the Civil War. Their stories are terrible and heartbreaking.

It's vital for those of us who have not suffered at the scale of others to humble ourselves and listen to those who have endured such pain and loss. It is important for us to become advocates for them and allies with them in their fight to re-connect to their glorious past. We must pluck up the courage to face the difficult and complex issues that arise as a result. Issues such as national repentance, formal apologies, legal and economic reparations, etc. are not easy to tackle. We must remember how much we rejoiced when the nation of Israel was restored in 1948 and continue to work for similar restoration for our brothers and sisters of color right here at home.

I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers. I know the way forward is difficult. But I have to believe as we work for the good of one another. As we celebrate the history and culture and diversity God has created among human beings on this planet. As we help each other re-connect to something deeper. A deeper identity. A deeper story. A deeper truth. I have to believe God will reveal Himself in that process in a powerful way because this "genealogical impulse" exists within all of us. In a very real sense, Israel's story is our story for all of us can ultimately trace our lineage back to the same common source. Adam and Eve. The first man. The first woman. Made in the image of God by the hand of God for the glory of God. This is truly our heritage.

April 25, 2018
UNITY

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11, 12, and Psalm 133

"Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity!...For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore." Psalms 133:1, 3)

Psalm 133 is my favorite Psalm. Mainly because I have seen it in action. I have seen what happens when God's people truly serve Him with one heart and mind. I have witnessed the miracles that take place when God's people put aside their egos, their needs, their wants, their desires in favor of serving the Kingdom. I have watched God's Spirit move when God's people humble themselves. Deny themselves. Pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. Lay aside their need to be safe, both physically and emotionally. It is powerful. Life-changing. It transforms villages. Towns. Cities. Entire tribes, regions, and nations.

True biblical unity requires us to relinquish "self" in favor of others. It requires us to lose our individual identity in favor of the whole. (Job 38:7) It requires us to consider others more important than ourselves. (Phil. 2:3) It requires us to risk. Risk being hurt. Risk being wounded. Risk feeling rejected. It requires us to have courage. Courage to forgive. Courage to pursue reconciliation. No matter what the cost. No matter how many times we get burned. "Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22) It requires honesty. Transparency. Self-reflection. We must constantly seek to take the log out of our own eyes before we look to take the speck out of our brother's or sister's eye. We have to acknowledge we are both victim and perpetrator in all our relationships.

True biblical unity requires the church to lay aside it's need to compete. Extend it's brand. Criticize other parts of the Body as if "we have no need of them." (1 Cor. 12:21) It requires leadership to get serious about working together. Working with and for one another. Willing to sacrifice our buildings, budgets, and attendance in order to expand God's Kingdom in the communities where we serve. It requires mutual submission and accountability. A willingness to step aside and relinquish our platforms when we fall into sin. It requires a radical commitment to love God and neighbor at the expense of our organizations and institutions. Self-denial and picking up our cross is not just a call to the individual Christian but to the church as a community as well!

True biblical unity requires a radical re-orientation of the heart. It is incredibly difficult and challenging which is why it happens so infrequently in Scripture. The unity David experiences as he builds his kingdom will soon give way to division as his own children betray him. We have to constantly be on guard because we are our own worst enemy. Our hearts naturally resist unity because it requires literal death to self. And we have such a strong instinct for self-preservation.

Ultimately, unity is not something we can achieve through our own strength. It must be a movement of God's Spirit. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13) Have you drunk of the one Spirit? Have you tasted the goodness and glory of God? Are you walking with the Spirit? Keeping in step with Him in all your ways? Unity comes as we relinquish more and more of our lives to the Spirit's control. Both as individuals and as churches gathered in His name.

April 26, 2018
TRUE WORSHIP

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:11-25, 6, and 1 Chronicles 13, 14, 15, 16

What is true worship? Is it a feeling? A style? An experience? How do we know if we've engaged in true worship? Is it because we leave feeling inspired? The preacher's message warmed our hearts? We've eaten the bread and drunk of the cup? The music for the morning matched our musical tastes? What are the hallmarks of true worship? Authenticity? Sincerity? We're able to identify something we get out of it?

Sadly, all of the above are true. Worship in 21st century North America has turned largely inward. It is focused, evaluated, planned, produced for the human experience. It caters to the preferences and tastes of the worshiper. It is designed primarily to make the human being feel inspired, motivated, and connected. This "inward turn" is as true for the small church as it is for the mega-church and every church in between. And it's why we see so many Christians bounce from church to church to church over the course of their lives. Long gone are the days when one would INVEST their entire lives into one community come what may. Long gone are the days when Christians would heed the BIBLICAL command to actually practice forgiveness and reconciliation when relationships get hard. Long gone are the days when Christians would DIE TO SELF, laying aside the consumer tendencies of taste. Preference. Personal favorites. As a result, long gone are the days when the church produced robust, courageous, bold, self-sacrificing disciples of Jesus who would give their lives for the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom of God in this world. Not that it never happens, it just is more then exception rather than the rule.

So what is true worship? It is the worship God both deserves and demands. Believe it or not, God cares deeply how He is worshiped. In 1 Chronicles 13, we see what happens when God's people – with sincere and authentic devotion in their hearts – fail to worship God in the way He commands. The people have gathered. They're excited to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. They call the priests. They call the Levites. They plan a huge celebration. The whole nation is present to witness this incredible moment. They build a new cart to carry the ark in the procession. David and all of Israel are celebrating, singing, dancing before the Lord with all their might. But then an ox stumbles. Uzzah, seeking to protect the ark, puts out his hand to keep it steady. The Lord strikes him down. One can imagine the shock of the crowd. In an instant, all the music and dancing and celebration stops. Silence. Long, prolonged, awkward silence as the people come to grips with what's just happened. David is angry. He pouts for three months, refusing to come to grips with the fact that he himself is somewhat responsible for what happened. His decision to do what was convenient (build a cart to carry the ark) rather than what God demanded (Levites carry the ark on their own shoulders) is ultimately what cost Uzzah his life. Fast forward to 1 Chronicles 15. A different picture emerges. David is ready. He is humble. He submits to God's will. He decrees that "no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord had chosen them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him forever." (1 Chron. 15:2) Once again, the celebration commences. Singing. Dancing. Music. Right sacrifices. God is pleased. God accepts the worship David offers because it is singularly focused on honoring God.

What does true worship look like in our context today? Obviously, none of us know where the Ark of the Covenant resides. (Except Indiana Jones, of course!) The ceremonial laws that governed Old Testament worship have been fulfilled in Christ. Does this set us free then to worship as we choose? To do what feels good? To set the needs of the worshiper above the clear, biblical command to worship God and Him alone?

Pastors/worship leaders...is the primary thrust of your worship planning to bring honor and glory to God? To set Him high and lifted up? Or is it to meet the needs of your people? When you evaluate worship, do you measure it in terms of attendance and the emotional engagement of God's people or the clarity of the gospel message preached through music, Word, and Sacrament?

People of God...is your primary goal in worship to get something out of it? To walk away feeling inspired, emotionally uplifted? Do you evaluate your own experience based on whether you liked the songs that were sung or felt moved by the experience? Do you evaluate the message based on its applicability to your own life?

Please hear me clearly...I am not saying these things are bad. Or should be divorced from our worship experience. I am simply saying they are SECONDARY to our primary duty in worship which is to worship God as He both deserves and demands. This, in fact, is the chief end of our existence.

April 27, 2018
SERENITY

Readings for the day: Psalms 15, 23, 24, 25, 47

Recently, our staff went on a retreat. As a part of our time together, we went through the Enneagram. For those not familiar, the Enneagram is a tool to help a person grow in self-understanding. It helps you identify your basic fears, drives, and desires. It gives you a pathway to health, virtue, and holiness. It also reveals your susceptibility to particular temptations, vices, and stress. I certainly don't pretend to be an expert but even our brief foray into the Enneagram was super helpful as we sought to get to know and understand each other as a team.

I am a "one" on the Enneagram. A perfectionist whose primal fears are corruption, deceit, imbalance, and immorality. These fears lead to stress which creates anxiety. When I am anxious, I tend to be resentful, even angry. My buttons get pushed and I literally can feel my blood begin to boil inside. In the face of these feelings, my temptation is to deny them. Play the hypocrite. Not acknowledge my anger because it is not morally good and therefore must be rejected. This results in continual self-recrimination. The critical voices in my head rise to a cacophony of shame and condemnation as I fail to live up to my own high ideals. It's frankly exhausting.

"O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart..." (Psalms 15:1-2)

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully." (Psalms 24:3-4)

"Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you." (Psalms 25:20-21)

This stuff is music to a "one's" ears. It speaks my love language. Goodness. Righteousness. Moral uprightness. Holy perfection. All good things. All important things. And yet, none of these things actually lead me to health. They do not assuage my anxiety. They only serve to feed my fears. They throw me back on my own strength. My own effort. Which I already know is never enough. So what's a "one" to do? Continue playing the hypocrite? Continuing pretending he or she has it all together? Continue presenting an image to the world that is good and upright and moral?

By no means! The "one" must instead cling to message of Psalm 23. One of my favorites, by the way. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Psalms 23:1-3) Peace comes as I trust in the Lord. Serenity comes as my soul rests in Him. All my stress. All my anxieties. All my fears fade away when I let the Lord be my shepherd. He takes care of all my wants. He makes me lie down and rest in green pastures, beside still waters. These words are balm to my soul.

This morning when I woke, I found my heart had reset to its default position. (This happens pretty much every morning by the way!) As soon as I opened my eyes, the voices in my head start clamoring for attention. "Get up! You have so much to do! So much to accomplish! You're already behind! You're already letting people down! You're already failing!" As I said above, my temptation is to argue. To fight. To try to silence those voices through my own Herculean efforts. But God charts a different path for me. The path of grace. And His Words became my words as I pray, "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me...He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his

testimonies...The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant...Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you." (Psalms 25:1-2, 9-10, 14, 20) As God's voice fills my head and heart, I find the other voices retreating into the background. Yes, they are still there but it's more of a murmur than a roar and I can now go about my day filled with God's peace.

How does God speak to you? To your basic fears? Primal drives? Baseline desires? How does He lead you to health and wholeness and healing and peace?

April 29, 2018
WHO IS GOD?

Readings for the day: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107

Our God is far too small. The human mind is simply too finite to fully comprehend the height and depth and breadth of His majesty and glory and splendor. His wisdom is higher than our wisdom. His ways are higher than our ways. His power is limitless. His knowledge unsearchable. His love unconditional. His grace knows no ends. There is no boundaries to God. No barriers. Nothing He cannot do. Nothing He cannot accomplish. Nothing stands outside His will. Nothing opposes Him. Nothing threatens Him. Nothing can move Him. "For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord..." (Psalms 89:6)

Our God is far too small. In an effort to understand Him, we tend to cut Him down to our size. Reduce Him to a much more manageable state. We question His goodness. We question His omnipotence. We question His wisdom. Rather than stand on the truth that we are made in God's image, we reverse engineer the process. We remake God in our image to our everlasting regret. For the god we "make" is an idol. Weak. Empty. Imperfect. A god who can do nothing, see nothing, accomplish nothing. A god who cannot be trusted or relied upon in the most difficult of circumstances. A god who is helpless in the face of our suffering. Recently, a progressive friend of mine rehashed an old argument on suffering. She wrote, "We have three options in the face of real suffering. 1) God is not good. 2) God is not loving. 3) God is not all-powerful." Her argument is that surely a good and loving and all-powerful God would not allow all the suffering in the world therefore we must question either His goodness, His love, or His power. But this is a false premise. This is an argument made without all the facts. We see from such a limited perspective. Her god is too small.

Consider for a moment what my friend is really asking. If God had chosen to remove suffering and pain from the world at the beginning of time. If, even after Adam and Eve fell into disobedience, God would not allow human beings to suffer the consequences of the choices they make. What would that do to free will? What would that do to human agency? What would that do to human choices? It would destroy them. We would never grow into maturity. Never become the partners God created us to be. And even more fundamentally, it wrecks the whole purpose of the Cross. If suffering and pain is always evil and always to be avoided and always wrong, then the suffering and pain and death of Jesus also falls into that category.

Our God is far too small. And that's we need to immerse ourselves in God's Word. God's Word declares clearly the goodness and love and power of God. "O Lord God of hosts, who is mighty as you are, O Lord, with your faithfulness all around you?...The heavens are yours; the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it, you have founded them....You have a mighty arm; strong is your hand, high your right hand. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." This is our God! The Glory of Israel! He is mighty to save! Mighty to deliver! Faithful in love! Over and over again, our God declares His love for His people. Never leaving them. Never forsaking them. Even when we run from Him, He will relentlessly pursue. Even when we reject Him, He will never abandon us. "My steadfast love I will keep for him forever, and my covenant will stand firm for him. I will establish his offspring forever and his throne as the days of the heavens...Blessed be the Lord forever! Amen and Amen." (Psalms 89:8, 11, 13-14, 28-29, 52)

Friends, there is only one way to see God for who He truly is. Only one way to know God on His terms. First, we must trust His revelation of Himself. We must look to Jesus in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is the pre-eminent and unique and complete revelation of the One True God. Second, we must trust His Word. The Word of God is the unique and authoritative witness to the truth of God. We must trust God's Word and lean not on our own limited understanding. We must trust God's Word more than what we think or how we feel. We must believe God is who He declares Himself to be or we have so little hope.

April 30, 2018
WHO'S BUILDING YOUR HOUSE?

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalms 1, 2, 33, 127, 132

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." (Psalms 127:1)

One of the things I struggle with the most is my desire to be successful. To make my life count. To do something significant. To strive to be the best. These are values ingrained in me from an early age. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. The problem is I too often let these good things become ultimate things in my life. I start to pursue success at the expense of my relationship with God or those I love. I focus on the future rather than finding contentment in the present. I covet what I don't have rather than be thankful for what I do have.

About a year or so ago, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. It wasn't an audible voice or a lightning bolt from heaven or anything like that. It was simply an impression in my heart. A feeling in my gut. A few random thoughts in my head that suddenly coalesced into a message I needed to hear. It was a short message. Three simple words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I was journaling and these three words started ringing over and over again in my head. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. Over the years I've learned to pay attention to these kinds of things in my prayer time so I sat back from my keyboard and asked the Lord to give me further insight into what He was saying. God said, "I want you to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. Pursue insignificance." To be honest, my first thought was, "Wait a minute! That doesn't sound right! Frankly, it sounds unAmerican!" God's answer? "Exactly.":-)

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." King David has a desire to build God a house. It's a godly desire. A good desire. One that is affirmed by Nathan the prophet. But it is not the Lord's will. "But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?...Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 Samuel 7:4-5, 8-13) I love how God flips the tables on David here. It is not David who will build God a house but God who will build David a house! It is not David who will make His own name great but God who will make David's name great!

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David's house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working so hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And yet all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the "building" of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

Over the last year, I've been learning more about the meaning of those three, God-given words in my life.

Obscurity – I love where I am. I love the people I serve. I love the team I get to serve alongside. We are not the largest or fastest growing or most "successful" church but we are a family. We serve God faithfully. We are

producing gospel-fruit on a regular basis. Lives are being changed. People are being transformed. It is awesome to be part of!

Anonymity – I am released from the pressure to perform. To succeed. To self-promote. No one knows my name. This work isn't about me. I love the fact that I don't always have to be up front. Don't always have to preach. Don't always have to be in charge. I am simply one of the pastors at PEPC.

Insignificance – I am deeply aware of how truly insignificant my contributions to the Kingdom of God are in the grand scheme of things. The reality is I will be completely forgotten within a generation or so of my death. My own family won't remember who I was or what I did. All my accomplishments and achievements will quickly turn to dust. And that's okay. Because my significance is not found in what I do but in who God is and I am content simply to serve Him in whatever way He sees fit.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Where do you need to step back and let God build in your life? In what areas do you need to hand over the tools, stop working so hard, and let God take over? Whose blueprint are you operating from? Yours or God's?