

BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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April 1, 2019
MOUNTAINTOPS AND VALLEYS

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

I think we can all sympathize with Jesus on some level. He comes off a mountaintop experience where He is transfigured before His disciples. He recaptures, for a brief moment, the glory He once held in heaven. He meets with Elijah and Moses. Again He hears His Father's voice affirming Him as the beloved Son. But when He comes down the mountain into the valley of life, not much has changed. The people are still driven less by a desire to know Him and follow Him and more by a desire to get their needs met. They see Him as a means to another end rather than the end itself. So Jesus confronts them. Not in anger but in heartbreak. He has compassion even amidst His deep sadness. He knows what's coming. He knows the Cross is beginning to loom large on the horizon. But the people still have desperate needs. And the disciples still argue over who's going to be greatest. And they worry someone else might try to steal their thunder. Sound familiar at all?

We are not much different. So many come to Jesus not to follow but to get their needs met. They want a contract with God. You meet my needs and I will give you the worship you deserve. You heal my disease and then I will believe in you. You take care of the demons of my life and then I will follow you. Thankfully, Jesus is still gracious even in the face of our entitlement and privilege. Even after we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we get caught up in our pride. We jockey for position in the Kingdom. We want a share in His glory. We want to make our name great alongside His. We want – if not equal billing – at least a spot on the marquee. Thankfully, Jesus is still gracious even in the face of our pride and arrogance. He is not threatened by our posturing but instead continues His sanctifying work within us to make us humble.

I am sure all of us have had the mountaintop experience. Perhaps it was during corporate worship or on a retreat. Perhaps it was as you hiked in the woods one day or served God on mission. Perhaps it was a powerful movement of the Spirit that caught you unawares or a growing sense of God's abiding love that touched your heart. We've all had these experiences and we also know the euphoria doesn't last. We do eventually have to go back down into the valley. Back to real life. Back to the mundane. Back to the everyday. We have to return to work. Return home to the kids. Return back to the church which is filled with all kinds of sinners and saints. What was true for Jesus is true for us. The key is to keep our eyes focused on Him. To walk as He walked. Love as He loved. Serve as He served.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 21-22, Luke 9:51-10:12, Psalms 74, Proverbs 12:11

April 2, 2019
THE PLENTIFUL HARVEST

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 21-22, Luke 9:51-10:12, Psalms 74, Proverbs 12:11

“The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road.” (Luke 10:2-4)

This is one of my favorite passages to teach on in Ethiopia. In just over fifteen years, we have preached the gospel to 3.5 million people. We have seen almost 600,000 come to Christ. We have planted well over 4000 churches and baptized almost 100,000 new believers. And still the harvest remains plentiful! What God is doing in Ethiopia has spilled out into South Sudan and Uganda. We already have our first church plant in Djibouti and just planted 25 more in Myanmar. I fully expect this revival to reach Somalia and Eritrea in a few years and then jump the Gulf into Saudi Arabia and Yemen. By the time I die, I am praying God gives us a chance to plant churches in Mecca.

The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. We are asking God to raise up more church planters from our indigenous partner denominations. We are asking God to raise up more churches in America to join this work. We are asking God to bring His resources to bear so we don't become the limiting factor in who God is seeking to reach. We need laborers who will pray. Laborers who will give. Laborers who will go. Laborers who will lead. There is an urgency to this mission! We cannot delay! We cannot let our fears get the best of us! God is sending us out as lambs amidst wolves. The work will be hard. There will be pain and suffering and persecution. Joining God on His mission always costs us dearly. But the price is worth it!

How are you engaged in God's mission? Jesus tells His disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to raise up laborers and then in the same breadth sends them forth. They are part of the solution! They are part of the answer to their own prayers! They have been called by God to go into the harvest field to reap what God has sowed. The same is true for us. You cannot be a Christian without being a laborer! You cannot be a follower of Jesus without being sent! You cannot be a disciple without being a missionary! Get engaged, friends! Join your brothers and sisters around the world and start reaping the glories of serving Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 23-25, Luke 10:13-37, Psalms 75, Proverbs 12:12-14

April 3, 2019
MERCY NOT SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 23-25, Luke 10:13-37, Psalms 75, Proverbs 12:12-14

“But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13)

The Old Testament is full of passages illustrating God’s concern for justice and holiness and purity. His judgment often seems harsh and unforgiving. And yet there is great mercy as well. Imagine a society where people truly cared for the poor? Intentionally harvested in such a way that it left gleanings for those who did not own fields? Protected slaves and women and children? Imagine a society where profit was not the goal but care for our neighbor? Imagine a society where justice was defined by how we treated the immigrant, refugee, orphan or widow? You actually don’t have to imagine it because this is the society God ordained for Israel. This was the heart of the Law. To create heaven on earth. To set Israel up as a light unto the nations. An example for all humanity to follow. Listen to just a smattering of verses from our reading today.

“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.”

“You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.”

“If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.”

“And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord your God.”

“You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.”

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow’s garment in pledge...”

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.”

Any nation that proclaims to be rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition must take these commands seriously. Any nation seeking the blessing of God must do things His way. Follow His commands. Push beyond their fear and place their faith in God’s provision and protection. Any nation that claims to serve God must do all it can to protect life from the womb to the tomb. The protection of life must form the foundation of it’s entire legal and social system. The welfare of all her people must be her passion and aim. Any nation that prays for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven must stand ready to actually live according to the heavenly code. It must exchange earthly expediency for heavenly authority. It must be willing to risk it all for the sake of her faithfulness to God.

I know we pray for God to bless America. We sing songs about the blessing of God. Our politicians end every speech with this sentiment. Friends, we will never receive God’s blessing until we walk in His ways. One cannot expect God to bless what He has already said He will not bless. One cannot expect to define justice apart from God and then claim His divine sanction. We must surrender as a nation. Bow our knee before the Lord. Trust Him. Believe Him. Place our faith in Him. Only then will we truly be “one nation under God.”

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 26-27, Luke 10:38-11:13, Psalms 76, Proverbs 12:15-17

April 4, 2019
OFFERINGS

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 26-27, Luke 10:38-11:13, Psalms 76, Proverbs 12:15-17

“A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.” (Deuteronomy 26:5-11)

Why do you give? Why do you put money in an offering plate? Why do you support the church or any other ministry? For the people of Israel, the offering gave them a chance to rehearse their salvation story. They reminded themselves that their provision rested ultimately on God. Not by the work of their hands. Not by the sweat of their brow. Not by their own might and power and wisdom and strength. God alone had saved them. God alone had delivered them. God alone had brought them to a land flowing with milk and honey. God alone was the source of all the blessings they had received. This is why they gave their tithes. At its best, the practice of tithing was a way of practicing faith. We give back unto the Lord that which He has given to us and we trust Him to provide yet again in the coming year. We give back unto the Lord and we trust Him to use our gifts to further His purposes in the world.

I wonder what it would look like for us to rehearse a similar story when we gave? How could we put the great story of faith in our own words in a way that would connect and remind us on a regular basis that God is our provider and protector? For me, it might look something like this...

”I was blessed to be raised by Christian parents. Worshiping God every week as I grew up. Learning to pray. To read the Bible. To serve. But then I went to Boulder where my life fell apart. I walked away from God. I walked away from Christians. I walked away from the church. I became enslaved to my own desires. I became a drunk. I was depressed. I treated others shamefully. Eventually, my humiliation caught up with me. I lost friends. I flunked out of school. I hit rock bottom. Then I cried out to the Lord. He heard my cry. He brought people into my life who preached the gospel to me. He delivered me from darkness. Set my soul free to love and to serve Him. He blessed the work of my hands. He made my life fruitful. I am blessed beyond measure. And so, behold, I offer to my God the firstfruits of my labor. I offer to God the firstfruits of my resources. I offer to God my time and my talent to be used for His purposes. For He has given me far more than I deserve and provided for my every desire. This is my worship and I give it freely in faith.”

What’s your story? What story can you rehearse to remind yourself of why you give? God doesn’t need your money, of course, but the generous giving of our resources to God reveals the truth of where we place our trust. Are we storing up treasures in heaven or do we cling to the treasures of this earth? Are we giving cheerfully? Joyfully? With expectation? Or do we give out of obligation and guilt? Do we rest in the reality of God’s abundant provision or do we strive endlessly to provide for ourselves?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28, Luke 11:14-36, Psalms 77, Proverbs 12:18

April 5, 2019
BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28, Luke 11:14-36, Psalms 77, Proverbs 12:18

Two things are required if you truly want to understand the Bible. First, you must read it as a cohesive whole. The sum is greater than the parts. It tells an integrated story that you cannot understand if you try to read one section apart from the others. Second, you must understand your self. You are not a blank slate. You introduce bias into the equation every time you open up the book to read. You are a product of your environment. Your worldview is shaped by your circumstances. As such, you have a filter that you run all that you are reading through and it can often lead to misunderstanding.

Today's reading is a classic example. If you try to read Deuteronomy 28 apart from the larger story God has been telling up to this point time, you will completely miss the point. The point is NOT to obey God in order to gain the blessings. Our obedience is NOT a form of manipulation to get God to give us what we want. This is not a step by step process to health and wealth in this world. This is not a guarantee that life will always be easy or a way to avoid suffering. Unfortunately, far too many people read it that way. They flatten out the Scriptures. Disintegrate this text from the larger context. Atomize the Bible into bits and pieces in order to support their own selfish desires. Most of us come to the text as Americans. Raised on the premise that if one works hard, one can succeed. We define success in terms of money made, possessions acquired, health maintained, etc. We view suffering as the ultimate evil. Something to be avoided at all costs. So when we come to Deuteronomy, we see a text that naturally fits our worldview quite well. It endorses the American Dream. It fits the American way of life like a glove. But then life happens. We experience failure. We get hurt. Our hearts get broken. We struggle through trials and temptation. And this leads us to doubt God. What happened to His promises? Why doesn't He deliver? Is He not faithful?

We would do better to examine our own false assumptions. God is faithful. He has declared Himself to be good. He loves us with an everlasting love. His great desire expressed in the first and greatest commandment is that we would love Him in return. With all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. If we make love and devotion for God the great end of our lives, then we will follow His commands. We will find ourselves naturally seeking His ways. We will define our lives according to His terms. And the result will be blessing. Not in every single instance because that is not how life works but on balance. On the whole. When a person who loves God in the way He deserves and demands looks back over the course of their entire lives, they will see the life Deuteronomy 28 describes. Does that mean you will live in a large house? Drive a fancy car? Live off a flush 401k? Does it mean your marriage will never struggle? Your kids never suffer? Your relationships never break? Of course not. In this world you will face trials. In this world you will suffer temptation. In this world you will experience brokenness. But those who love God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength overcome the world. They see the trials in light of the eternal glory God is revealing in and through them. And it is more than enough.

There is no greater freedom than living wholly for God. There is no greater joy in life than giving all you have to God. There is no greater peace than trusting God to meet every need according to His wisdom and the riches of His grace. There is no greater love than laying down our lives for the cause of Christ. All that you desire is within your grasp. All you need to do is deny yourself. Pick up your cross. And follow Jesus. The way to true fulfillment in this life is the way of relinquishment. Surrender. Submission. Give yourself to Jesus today and watch the blessings flow!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 29-30, Luke 11:37-12:7, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 12:19-20

April 6, 2019
HYPOCRISY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 29-30, Luke 11:37-12:7, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 12:19-20

“Beware the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy.” - Jesus

No one wants to be a hypocrite. No one but a truly evil person enjoys saying one thing and then doing another. Believing one thing and then saying another. We are sticklers for moral consistency. We demand it from our political leaders. We demand it from our employers. We demand it from our pastors. And we especially demand it from God. This is why so many people struggle when they read the Bible because they cannot fathom the kind of consistency it would take to be all the Bible reveals God to be. Just and merciful. Righteous and forgiving. Holy and gracious. All at the same time. No wonder so many believe the Old Testament God and the New Testament God are not the same!

Jesus hates hypocrisy as well. He confronts the religious leaders on their sin. They used ritual purity laws to line their own pockets. They tithed down to the smallest of spices but neglected the more important matters of justice and love. They loved to be seen in public and leading worship but it was all a sham. The way of self-promotion. The experts in the law were no better. They created more and more laws to govern and regulate the smallest of behaviors with the result being a burden no person could ever bear. They did all this in the name of honoring the prophets and the spiritual leaders from Israel's past but failed to see how it was their attitudes and actions that got these men and women killed as martyrs in the first place. They guarded the key to saving faith and only gave it out to those they deemed worthy thus depriving the Kingdom of Heaven of the very people God was trying to save. One can easily see why this would anger Jesus.

Nothing is hidden in God's Kingdom. That which we try to keep secret. Our private sin. Our selfish ambition and vain conceit. Our corrupt motivations. All of it will be revealed in the end as Jesus puts an end to hypocrisy once and for all. The reality is we are all hypocrites on some level. We claim to love God but hate our neighbor. We withhold forgiveness and refuse to reconcile. We rush to judgment and assume the worst. We are so negative and critical. We expect – even demand – that everyone around us extend us grace but refuse to do the same in return. We expect – even demand – that everyone put up with our failings but we are so quick to jump others when they let us down. We expect – even demand – that everyone meets our needs but refuse to help out when others are in need. We are a mess of logical inconsistencies and moral relativism. We ignore the tension this creates in our lives because it serves our narcissistic tendencies. The result is a rising tide of anxiety, depression, and despair.

Why else do you think Jesus would warn us about hypocrisy? It is poison to our souls. It leads us to all kinds of addictive and compulsive behavior as we seek to medicate the gap between the person we are and the person we know God has called us to be. Rather than accept hypocrisy as some kind of permanent condition, we must rebuke it in the name of Christ. As believers filled with the Holy Spirit, we actually do have the power to live fully integrated lives of honesty and transparency before God and one another. Because we acknowledge and confess our sin, we receive forgiveness and grace. There is no pressure to perform. Pressure to appear to be something we are not. Pressure to live dis-integrated from self. We are free. Free to be who God created and called and redeemed us to be.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 31-32:27, Luke 12:8-34, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 12:21-23

April 7, 2019
BLASPHEMY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-32:27, Luke 12:8-34, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 12:21-23

Jesus is the most influential and confounding person in human history. His moral teachings form the backdrop of entire legal and social systems. His example of radical grace and love sets the standard for interpersonal relationships. His rejection of the sexism and racism and greed of His day confronts the perpetual systems of oppression we human beings seem so prone towards creating. Money had no hold on Him. He was not interested in temporal power and authority. When the people tried to make give Him a throne, He chose a cross. No wonder the religious elite couldn't make heads or tails of Him. No wonder the pagan authorities tried to wash their hands of Him. No wonder the powers and principalities of this world did their best to get rid of Him.

Jesus turned the world upside down and we've been struggling to come to grips with it ever since. A new norm has been established. A new Kingdom has come on earth. Founded on an alien value system. The poor are now rich and the rich poor. The weak are now strong and the strong weak. The powerless are now the powerful and the mighty are cast down. Those who are great are the servants. Those who are wise are the foolish. And those who seem to be cursed – poor in spirit, grief-stricken, meek, persecuted, etc. - are actually the blessed. Obviously, this man is either insane or He's God. You don't really have any other choices. There is no middle way. No neutral territory. No spiritual Switzerland to appeal to. Jesus stands in front of you, forcing a decision. Will you believe He is who He says He is or will you reject Him?

It's okay to ask questions. It's okay to have your doubts. It's okay to express your fears. "Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven." This is new territory and Jesus understands it will take some getting used to. It's like someone turned off the gravity and we are all floating around in a new space. It will take some getting used to. However, if we persist in closing our eyes. If we persist in sticking our fingers in our ears. If we keep trying to stubbornly plant our feet on the ground when the earth itself has shifted then we will not be forgiven. This is blasphemy. It is the persistent denial of the reality of the Kingdom of God and the Lordship of Christ. It is the rebellious denial of the work of the Holy Spirit which is the only means of salvation. To deny Him is to deny the Savior. It would be like continually ripping out the IV's when all the doctor wants to do is take you into surgery and save your life. Do that for very long and you'll lose your life altogether.

So what do you believe about Jesus? Do you believe He is the Way? The Truth? The Life? Do you believe He is the Door? The Gate? The Narrow Road? Do you believe He is the Bread of Life? The Living Water? The Resurrection itself? Do you believe He has the power to offer you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life? What you believe about Jesus is the most important thing about you. Do not blaspheme! Believe in Jesus and be saved!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 32:28-52, Luke 12:35-59, Psalms 78:56-64, Proverbs 12:24

April 8, 2019
GODLY RESPONSIBILITY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 32:28-52, Luke 12:35-59, Psalms 78:56-64, Proverbs 12:24

“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.” (Luke 12:48)

We live in a narcissistic age. We live in a “selfie” culture. All the attention must be on me. All the focus on my rights. It is rare to hear anyone talk about responsibility anymore other than to cast blame. I see it all the time on social media. I hear it all the time on cable news. I experience it all the time in interpersonal relationships.

Jesus is crystal clear. To whom much is given, much is expected. We have a responsibility to God and to our neighbor. To shirk one or the other is to invite judgment. God designed this world to work in harmony. God designed humanity to care for His creation. But His design is dependent on each one taking responsibility to carefully steward the gifts God has given them. This is why the world is so broken. This is why humanity is so fractured. Sin keeps us focused on Self to the detriment of those around us.

I see it here in Africa. I have been in southern Ethiopia for the last week where there has been a terrible drought. Climate change enacts a terrible price especially on the global poor. Someone asked me yesterday why God withholds the rain. I challenged that notion. According to a recent report by the World Bank, it would cost 150 billion a year to provide universal access to clean water. Perhaps instead of blaming God we should look in the mirror. God made us in His image and gave us dominion over all He has made. Our failure to be good stewards. Our failure to care for the most vulnerable. Our failure to fulfill the creation mandate is not on God. Imagine what could happen if the nations of the earth – and the people who live in those nations - directed their energy and attention to taking care of their God-given and God-ordained responsibilities rather than taking care of themselves? 150 billion is a drop in the global GDP bucket and yet, it would literally transform millions of lives. We don't lack the resources. We lack the political and social and spiritual will to make it happen.

The church is called to be different. To model for the world what it would look like to fulfill our responsibilities before God and one another. The communities where our churches are planted should be blessed. The people who attend our churches and belong to our churches should be loved and cared for. The church's ministry and mission should be directed at equipping God's people to die to self and live for one another. Sadly, the opposite is too often true. Especially in the American church where the average church-goer believes they are a consumer. They evaluate the local church based on how well it “meets their needs.” When they grow bored or tired or frustrated or upset, rather than obey Jesus and fulfill their responsibility to dig in and forgive, they bail. They go to the new church down the road. The results are devastating to the body of Christ. We become weak. Frail. Superficial. A mile wide and an inch deep. Meanwhile, the world around us continues to “wait with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God.” (Romans 8:19)

I'm tired of all the blame-shifting. Tired of our refusal to own our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps. Our sin and selfishness. It's time to grow up, church! Time to grow up, humanity! Time to grow up and accept the responsibility God has given us as His image-bearers. Time to grow up and live into the calling God has placed on our lives as His children. Time to put aside the excuses. Roll up our sleeves and get to work. Through Christ we have access to all the power we need to do the work He has called us to in this world. All for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 33, Luke 13:1-21, Psalms 78:65-72, Proverbs 12:25

April 9, 2019
NONE LIKE GOD

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 33, Luke 13:1-21, Psalms 78:65-72, Proverbs 12:25

"There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you and said, 'Destroy.' So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine, whose heavens drop down dew. Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! Your enemies shall come fawning to you, and you shall tread upon their backs." (Deuteronomy 33:26-29)

Think about the life of Moses. Saved miraculously at birth when his mother put him in a basket and floated him down the Nile. Raised as a prince in Pharaoh's palace. Exiled for murdering an Egyptian as a young man. Worked as a shepherd in Midian for his father-in-law. Called by God to deliver Israel. Challenged the greatest empire in the world. Instrument of God's signs and wonders. Led Israel through the Red Sea to Sinai. Lawgiver. Witness to God's glory. Faithful, if imperfect, leader who continued to point Israel to God in the midst of their wilderness wanderings. Angry sinner who forfeited the Promised Land. Great prophet who blesses Israel at the end of his life. Humble man who submits to God's will and passes the leadership mantle to Joshua.

Imagine you are Moses and you are at the end of your life. You have one last chance to speak to the people you've been leading for a generation. One last chance to speak a final blessing over them. After all you've gone through. After all you've seen. After all you've done. After all the headaches and heartaches this people have caused you. You might find it easier to curse rather than bless! But Moses is faithful to the end. He keeps his eyes on Jesus till the end. And with his dying breath he proclaims the glory of God.

There is none like God. He rides the heavens to bring aid to His people. The skies above proclaim His majesty. There is none like God. He is your eternal dwelling place. He carries you in His everlasting arms. There is none like God. He gives victory to His people. He drives out the enemy. He keeps Israel safe and secure. There is none like God. He provides grain and wine in abundance. The land produces as the heavens open and the rain falls. There is none like God. He saves His people. He is the shield of their help. The sword of their triumph. There is none like God.

How do you see God? Can anyone compare to Him? Is He your shield? Your strength? Your help? Do you declare His majesty like the heavens above? Do you bow before His greatness? Do you lean on His everlasting arms and find your dwelling place in Him? Do you look to Him for safety and security? For provision in times of need? Has He saved you? Adopted you into His family? Made you His own? Do you give Him the worship and adoration and praise He deserves?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 34-Joshua 2, Luke 13:22-14:6, Psalm 79, Proverbs 12:26

April 10, 2019
EAT THIS BOOK

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 34-Joshua 2, Luke 13:22-14:6, Psalms 79, Proverbs 12:26

“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” (Joshua 1:8)

When I became a Christian in college, I began a mentoring relationship with a man named Don Bachman. Don was a retired IBM executive who had cut short his career to pursue a calling to mentor young college men. The impact this man has made on my life and the lives of so many I know is truly extraordinary. Despite growing up in church, I really didn’t know much about the Christian faith. I rarely paid attention in worship and the youth group I attended focused more on how to be a good person than building a personal relationship with Christ. Don changed all of that for me. He relentlessly pointed me to Jesus, constantly challenging me to stay in the Word and in prayer. He held me accountable and wasn’t afraid to get in my face when I failed. He encouraged me regularly and faithfully and I grew in my faith as a result.

Growing in Christ isn’t rocket science. It simply requires faithfulness. Don taught me how to do three things. “Do these three things for the rest of your life and you will grow in your faith,” he said. First, spend time daily with God. The verse above was one of the first I memorized because it emphasizes meditation on God’s Word every day. It teaches us to immerse ourselves in the Bible. To listen for God’s voice. To hear and obey His commands. Prayerfully reading and reflecting on Scripture daily is an essential practice for everyone who would follow Christ.

Second, attend corporate worship every week. I know many Christians who believe they don’t need the church. They believe they can practice their faith on their own. This is a borderline heresy that is completely foreign to Scripture. God calls us into community. One cannot claim to love Jesus without also loving His Bride. Yes, church can be hard. Yes, the church is full of sinners. Yes, the church can be hurtful and painful. Such has always been the case. This is why God commands us to practice forgiveness and extend grace to one another. One cannot forgive in the abstract. One cannot extend grace in the abstract. One cannot love in the abstract. These things must be done face to face and that is why we must worship together.

Third, find a small group to follow Jesus with. Invite a small group of believers into your life with whom you can share your deepest, darkest secrets. As human beings, we have a great desire to be known. Building deep relationships with a few other believers who will pray for you, love you, confront you, encourage you, and hold you accountable is another essential practice if you want to grow in Christ.

Finally, I would add we all need a place to serve. A mission to give our lives to. A ministry where we can put our gifts and talents and abilities to work for God’s Kingdom. Do these three (four) things and you will grow in Christ. That’s what Don taught me and he was absolutely correct.

I have been a Christian for over twenty-five years. For more than a quarter century I have devoted my life to prayer and meditating on the Scriptures. I have endeavored to attend worship every week with my brothers and sisters in Christ in all sorts of contexts. I have always had a small group of other believers to lean on as I went through the ups and downs of life. And I have given my life in service to my Lord and Savior. God has been faithful. The intimacy I enjoy with Him is profound. It dwarfs all other relationships in my life. And I am thankful. It’s never too late to start, friends! Believe me when I say God loves to make up for lost time! If you feel disconnected or distant from God, let me encourage you to take the advice Don gave me all those years ago. Put these spiritual disciplines into practice and watch your faith begin to deepen and grow.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 3-4, Luke 14:7-35, Psalms 80, Proverbs 12:27-28

April 11, 2019
SHARING THE STORY

Readings for today: Joshua 3-4, Luke 14:7-35, Psalms 80, Proverbs 12:27-28

“And Joshua said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.” (Joshua 4:21-24)

When you read through the history of Israel, it feels like you stumble over all kinds of altars. Memorials set up by the people of God to mark special occasions. Miracles. Signs. Wonders. Great victories won in the name of the Lord. These altars served as signposts that pointed to the steadfast faithfulness of God. The hope was that every time they passed by one of these altars, it would remind them to share the story once again. In this way, their faith was passed from generation to generation.

It has been my experience that those living in oral cultures – cultures where communication is primarily done through the spoken word rather than the written word – love to tell stories. They have no problem repeating them over and over again. They experience all the “feels” with each re-telling. It is exciting to listen to them share and keep alive the significant events that have shaped them as a people. The same was true for ancient Israel. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s mighty acts of deliverance are recounted in song, prayer, prophecy, as well as history. In this way, the faith of God’s people was preserved and strengthened in each generation.

It has been pointed out that Christianity is always one generation away from extinction. The most important thing we can do is tell the story of God to our children. Recount for them all the good things God has done for us. We need to remind them of His blessings in seasons of fruitfulness. His comfort in seasons of hardship and pain. His provision when resources are lacking. His joy when we experience great success. God is with us and the most important job of a parent is to make Him known to their children.

So what altars have you set up in your life? What stories do you find yourself returning to over and over again? What testimonies has God given you over the years? Do your children know how you came to faith? If you don’t have children of your own, have you sought out ways to share your stories of God’s faithfulness with the next generation?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 5:1-7:15, Luke 15, Psalms 81, Proverbs 13:1

April 12, 2019
THE LORD'S SIDE

Readings for today: Joshua 5:1-7:15, Luke 15, Psalms 81, Proverbs 13:1

“When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, “What does my lord say to his servant?” And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, “Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.” (Joshua 5:13-15)

Whose side is God on? A college football team wins the national championship. Music is playing. Students rush the field. Confetti flies. A reporter catches up with the star of the game and asks, “How'd you do it?” “God was with us...” he replies. Truth? Does God really pick sides in football games?

Whose side is God on? A piece of legislation is proposed. A scandal hits the administration. The next election is on the line. Both political parties claim the sanction of God. Both claim to better represent His will. Both claim the moral high ground and argue their platform is more pleasing to God. After the results are in, the winner basks in the glory of victory often proclaiming, “God was with us tonight!” Truth? Does God take sides in our morally bankrupt political system? Does He go with the lesser of two evils?

Whose side is God on? Harsh words are said. Feelings get hurt. A relationship fractures. Friends rush to either side for support. Quick to justify the actions of the one they care about. Quick to dismiss the one who has hurt their friend and loved one. Surely God is on our side, right? Surely He has seen the hurt we've experienced? Truth? Does God bless our brokenness and take sides in a divorce? Or a falling out between friends?

Whose side is God on? Joshua was standing out by Jericho. Scouting the opposition. Looking up at those formidable walls. Wondering how he's going to win a victory. Suddenly, an angel appears. Not a baby wearing diapers playing a harp. Not some precious moments cherub with the rosy cheeks. A terrifyingly powerful being wearing armor and carrying a monstrous sword. “Whose side are you on?” Joshua asks. It's the most natural question in the world. Are you for us or against us? If you're for us, we'll easily win the victory. If you're against us, we will clearly suffer defeat. But the angel hasn't come to “take sides.” This isn't about God blessing the work of Joshua's hands. This is about Joshua and Israel taking the Lord's side. Joshua falls down in worship. He humbles Himself before the angel. He submits himself to the Lord. Now he's ready to take the city.

We spend so much time wondering whose side God is on when the reality is we should be trying to figure out how to get on His side. We talk about “being on the wrong side of history.” We fear being on the losing side of an argument or a game or an election. We struggle when we see relationships around us break up and we try to figure out who's wrong so we can cast blame. The reality is we are always wrong. Only God is right. Only God is faithful. Only God is true. Our cause is never pure. Never truly just. Never holy. Rather than spend so much time trying to figure out how we can get God on our side, we should be spending that time in prayer and meditation on God's Word so we can get on His side.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7:16-9:2, Luke 16:1-18, Psalms 82, Proverbs 13:2-3

April 13, 2019
THE SCANDALOUS NATURE OF GRACE

Readings for today: Joshua 7:16-9:2, Luke 16:1-18, Psalms 82, Proverbs 13:2-3

Lost sheep. Lost coins. Lost sons. Lost managers. What do all of them have in common? They are the recipients of God's amazing grace. The Good Shepherd doesn't cut His losses. He refuses to let even one of His sheep slip from His grasp. Instead, He crosses heaven and earth to find the one who is lost and bring them home. The Faithful Woman carefully stewards every coin. She refuses to let even one go missing. Instead, She turns Her home inside and out in Her search to find that which was lost. The Faithful Father refuses to lose either of His two sons. It doesn't matter how far the country or how much they squander their lives in unrighteous living. It doesn't matter if they stay close to home but are consumed by bitterness and anger. The Father runs to each son. Embraces them as His own. Showers them with grace. The Rich Man refuses to give His dishonest manager what he deserves. Instead of becoming angry at the endless manipulation and deceit, the Rich Man commends him. For though his sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more.

The unconditional nature of God's grace is a scandal to those inside and outside of the church. We simply do not understand it. We can't wrap our minds and hearts around the idea that God could love us without some kind of effort on our parts to meet some kind of standard. We read the stories from Luke 15 and 16 and we know deep down we would not make the same decisions. The lost sheep shouldn't have wandered from the fold. The woman should have been more careful with her coins. The father should punish both sons for their insolence and pride. The dishonest steward should go to prison. These are our natural responses and they only serve to illustrate the vast difference between divine and human grace.

Human grace is conditional. It is dependent on the other person meeting certain expectations. Living a particular way. Forgiveness comes only when the other party shows the appropriate level of remorse. I see it all the time. Marriages fall apart. Friendships fracture. Partnerships dissolve. Churches split. All because we define grace according to human terms. Anything else and we start to think we're getting soft. We start to believe people are getting a pass. And that just doesn't feel right.

Thankfully, God's grace bears no resemblance to our own. It places no conditions. It sets no standard. Forgiveness is extended an infinite number of times to any and all who ask. God's grace shows no favorites. It cannot be bought or earned or achieved no matter how hard we work. It is free. It is lavished on our world. Every tribe and tongue and nation. All of us have the opportunity to receive it. All we have to do is believe. Place in our trust in the Author of Grace Himself, even Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 9:3-10:43, Luke 16:19-17:10, Psalms 83, Proverbs 13:4

April 14, 2019
READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Joshua 9:3-10:43, Luke 16:19-17:10, Psalms 83, Proverbs 13:4

Readings for TOMORROW; Joshua 11-12, Luke 17:11-37, Psalms 84, Proverbs 13:5-6

April 15, 2019
JIHAD IN THE BIBLE

Readings for today: Joshua 11-12, Luke 17:11-37, Psalms 84, Proverbs 13:5-6

“For it was the Lord 's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as the Lord commanded Moses.”(Joshua 11:20)

Herem. A notoriously difficult Hebrew word to translate. Roughly it means “put something/someone under the ban” or “devote to destruction.” Less an act of war, it was more about worship. Ritual cleansing. God’s righteous and holy and terrible judgment against idolatry. Israel was His instrument. Chosen to enact this judgment against the Canaanites. And it was a brutal and terrifying as it sounds. It was jihad. Yahweh-sanctioned genocide. And we cannot – if we’re being honest - shrink back from the horror of it all.

Too many preachers attempt to justify God’s actions here. Soften them to make them seem more palatable. I will do no such thing. What I will say - and what we MUST grasp - is that Herem is fully in line with God’s eternal character. It is who God has revealed Himself to be. A God of righteousness and judgment and holiness. A God who hates evil and sin. A God who literally fights to eradicate these things from the earth. And we want God to be this kind of God. We NEED God to be this kind of God! How else will things be made right? How else will judgment come on 20th century evils like Nazism, Stalinism, or the killing fields of Pol Pot? Don’t we demand God to be a God of justice when faced with these atrocities? Didn’t we, on some level, consider ourselves to be acting on God’s behalf...in service to His righteous cause...when we stormed the beaches of Normandy? Or defeated the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union? Were not those actions a form of jihad? Holy war against an unholy enemy?

But how does this God square with the God we see revealed in the New Testament? The God of love Jesus spoke so eloquently about? Here it is essential we remember how God defines love. It is not an abstract category or warm fuzzy feeling in the heart. It is not soft and sentimental. No, God defines love as sacrifice. Specifically, the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:10) What we have to understand is the only reason we get to receive the grace of God...the mercy of God...the love of God...is because of what Jesus Christ endured on our behalf. The Father essentially put His own Son under the ban! Devoted Him to destruction so that we may live! This, friends, is the love of God! The Father pouring out His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son! The Son willingly offering Himself up as the sacrifice for all humanity’s sin! Enduring unimaginable pain. Unimaginable suffering. Separation from His Father. Death. Hell. God descending to the uttermost darkness. It was without a doubt the most horrific act of Herem in the history of the world. More terrible than genocide is decide. God allowing Himself to be murdered by His own beloved creation.

But this He did on our behalf. This He did to cleanse the earth of sin. Idolatry. Evil. Death. 1 John 2:2 says, “Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” God is the same yesterday, today and forever, friends! There is perfect congruence between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testaments. He acts in perfect concert with Himself. With His character and nature. He never deviates. As the old hymn suggests, “There is no shadow or turning with Thee! Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be!” Great indeed is God’s faithfulness!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 13-14, Luke 18:1-17, Psalms 85, Proverbs 13:7-8

April 16, 2019
PRAYER

Readings for today: Joshua 13-14, Luke 18:1-17, Psalms 85, Proverbs 13:7-8

I was recently talking to a friend about a situation they are facing in their life right now. It is hard. It is challenging. It is heartbreaking. It has to do with someone they love and the challenges they face. And my friend asked me how they should pray. You see, they are mad at God right now. Frustrated by the unjust treatment of the one they love. They want to know why God seems silent in the face of their fears. Why won't He answer the deepest cries of their hearts?

It's a common experience. As believers in Jesus Christ, we find our hearts breaking for the world around us. It is full of so much depression. So much despair. So much disease. So much injustice. Tensions are high. Divisions are many. Distrust is the rule of the day. Natural disasters like hurricanes, cyclones, drought, and famine cause terrible suffering. Violence and wars rage around the globe and often in our own backyards. Our lives are touched by tragedy. We cannot escape it. And so we pray. We come before God. We lay our burdens before Him. We cry out to Him in the midst of our grief. We beg Him to act. We rage at Him when He seems silent and distant. We wonder why He won't hear us? Why He won't answer us? Why He won't respond to ease the suffering of those we love?

In today's reading, Jesus teaches us about prayer. Three things, He says, you need when you come before God in prayer. Starting at the end of the passage and working our way back to the beginning, Jesus calls us to pray like children. Children often don't have the big picture. They often can't understand the decisions of their parents. If your kids are like my kids, they often say things like, "I don't understand why things have to be this way." But as their father, I know best. I know what they need even before they ask. I know their hearts. I know their fears. I know their struggles. I know what's good for them even if they don't know it themselves. We need to pray with the attitude and perspective of a child. Our Heavenly Father knows best. He knows what He's doing. He has a plan and it is good.

Second, we pray with humility. We are sinners. We are broken. Our view of the world is warped. Our understanding of life is corrupt. It cannot be trusted. We do not place our faith in our own understanding. We do not place our faith in our own pride and privilege. We do not place our faith in our own wisdom and strength. Instead, we come before God on our knees. We bow before His wisdom and understanding. In all our ways, we acknowledge His Lordship and we trust Him to make our paths straight. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is steadfast in His love and faithfulness.

Finally, we pray with persistence. God invites us not just to knock politely on the door to the throne room of heaven but to literally beat it down! We come before God continually. Constantly bringing our requests before Him. He never tires of hearing our needs. Never tires of listening to the desires of our hearts. Never falls asleep. Never gets bored. Never takes a break. Never slams the door in our face. He simply embraces us. Pulls us into His lap. He draws near to us when we are broken hearted and crushed in spirit. He is with us in the darkest of times to bring comfort and peace. And often in the fullness of time. According to His perfect will. An answer is waiting.

I want to encourage you in prayer today, friends. Do not relent. Do not let go. Do not let up. Stay persistent. Come before your God humbly. With the faith of a child. And trust your Heavenly Father is good and has your best in mind.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15, Luke 18:18-43, Psalms 86, Proverbs 13:9-10

April 17, 2019
THE THING WE LACK

Readings for today: Joshua 15, Luke 18:18-43, Psalms 86, Proverbs 13:9-10

"One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:22-25)

The story of the rich young ruler should come as a sobering challenge to all American Christians. We are him. He is us. We come to Jesus looking to justify ourselves. We come to Jesus looking to get our needs met. We come to Jesus looking for His blessings on our self-centered choices. "What must we do to inherit eternal life?" we ask. Where's the bar? What's the minimum standard? The lowest common denominator? Jesus responds, "Keep my commandments." We start to run through the list in our heads. Don't commit murder? Check. Don't commit adultery? Check. Don't steal? Check. Don't lie? Check. Honor mom and dad? Check. Even if we are guilty, we rationalize our way out of responsibility. "They had it coming so it can't be murder." "It's not adultery if it's love." "My company owes me so it can't be stealing." "Little white lies don't count." "I know I haven't called mom and dad in a while but they understand."

Jesus doesn't play our word games. He refuses to engage our rationalizations. Instead, He probes deeper. "Fine", he says, "Let's get real. Sell all you have and give it to the poor so you can follow Me." Whoa. Wait a minute. What do you mean, Jesus? You want me to sell my house? Sell my cars? Empty my bank accounts? Liquidate my 401k's? I thought our deal included my comfort and safety? I thought our deal included my upper class lifestyle in the suburbs? I thought our deal included my kid's travel sports teams? I thought our deal included my corporate success? I thought our deal included exotic vacations? Jesus is silent. Again, He will not dignify our selfish, greedy desires. In the face of His silence, we are left to reflect. If we have the courage to reflect, we will find our hearts filled with sadness because we know the depths of our sin. We know the choices we make. We know the ways we fall short. This is why Jesus says it's harder for a rich person to get into heaven than a camel through the eye of a needle. It's not because Jesus has it out for rich people. His love is not based on economics! He simply recognizes the more we have the more temptations we will face to keep everything for ourselves.

Recently, some of our presidential candidates released their tax returns. One of the things that always intrigues me is how much our candidates give to charity. Generosity of heart is something I think is important in our nation's leader. Sadly, almost all of the candidates give very little in terms of a percentage of their income. They are greedy. Selfish. They spend almost all of their money on themselves. And the same is sadly true for most Christians. The average American Christian gives around 2% of their income to the Lord. The subsistence agricultural farmers of Jesus' day gave multiple tithes and freewill offerings. We live in the richest, most prosperous nation on earth and we give 2%. Camel meet needle.

Can we be saved? The disciples weren't convinced. Jesus Himself calls it an impossibility. Except for God. Only God can shift our desires from earthly riches to heavenly ones. Only God can help us see Jesus as our supreme treasure. Only God can unlock the doors of the human heart and grant us a generous spirit. Everything rests on this, friends! Eternity rests on us surrendering all that we have to God and giving Him control over our finances and possessions. So ask God to do the impossible! Ask Him to give you a generous heart today!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 16-18, Luke 19:1-27, Psalms 87, Proverbs 13:11

April 18, 2019
WHAT YOU DO WITH YOUR MINA MATTERS

Readings for today: Joshua 16-18, Luke 19:1-27, Psalms 87, Proverbs 13:11

I love the story Jesus tells today. Coming on the heels of the conversion of Zacchaeus, it reminds us that what we do with the gifts we've been given matters. We are blessed by God to be a blessing in this world. To put it in Jesus' words, what we do with our mina matters!

A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return. Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.' But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us. Jesus is using recent historical events to prove his point. King Herod went to Rome in 40 BC to receive his kingship as did his son Archelaus in 4 BC. In Herod's case, he was successful but Archelaus was banished. In both cases, delegations were sent by the Jews to Rome to argue against their appointments. The Jewish people wanted nothing to do with the Herods. Now politics were dicey in those days. You couldn't count on much because everything depended on the emperor's whim. If you backed the wrong horse, you could be killed. So you can imagine the decision each servant had to make. They were each given a mina which represented about 100 days worth of wages for the working man in that time. They were to engage in their master's business while he was gone. That means they were to publicly represent his interests. They were to stake their lives, their reputations, their future well-being on their master's success. The closest analogy in today's world might be betting on the outcome in Venezuela or Sudan right now. You have no idea if your master will succeed or not. No idea if your master will even survive. However, as Jesus tells it, the master does return. He has succeeded. He has been confirmed as king. And he calls his servants to account.

When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business. Or more literally translated, how much of the master's business had they been able to transact while he was gone. You see, this is not a parable about capitalism. It's not about the profits they earned. It's about the willingness of the servants to openly and publicly identify with the master while he's absent. Would they put themselves at risk? Would they willingly make themselves a target? Would they look out for their master's interests and represent him even though it would be costly and make them unpopular? Would they lay it all on the line, trusting in the master's return? The first came before him, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made ten minas more.' And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.' And the second came, saying, 'Lord, your mina has made five minas.' And he said to him, 'And you are to be over five cities. Notice how the master rewards both men for their faithfulness not necessarily their success. Neither one of them claim any credit for themselves. Your mina, they said, has made ten minas. Your mina has made five minas more. They recognize the fruit of their labor is wholly dependent on the original gift from the master. Without that gift, they would have nothing. And because they are faithful in small things, the master rewards them with even greater responsibility in his kingdom. They shall rule over ten cities and five cities respectively.

Then the final servant approaches. Lord, here is your mina, which I kept laid away in a handkerchief; for I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' This last servant lived in fear. Fear his master may not return. Fear he may have backed the wrong horse. Fear of what the community might say. So he didn't do anything with the mina he was given. He simply kept it safe. He hedged his bets. He put it in a place where no one could get to it. And when the master returned, he fell under judgment.

Friends, what you do with your mina matters. The mina is the priceless gift of the gospel that Jesus entrusts into our hands until He returns. You see, Jesus is the master who died and rose again and ascended into heaven to receive the Kingdom from His Heavenly Father. Before He left, Jesus called his servants. Called His disciples to Himself and entrusted them with the treasure of the gospel. That treasure has been passed down generation after generation until it was placed in our hands. And one day we will have to go before the master. One day Jesus

will return and demand an account from us...His servants. He will take a look at our lives and we will be judged on how well we represented Him. Did the gospel bear fruit in our hands? Did our friends and neighbors and loved ones hear about Jesus from our lips? In the midst of a hostile culture where publicly declaring yourself a Christian can cost you a job or a promotion or a relationship, did we remain loyal? Faithful? Bold in our witness? How many lives did we touch? How many people did we impact? Is the world around us blessed by our influence and desire to work for a more just society? This is what it means to put God's "minas" to work, friends! It means we take all that we are and all that we have and we transact as much of our Master's business as possible before we either appear before Him or He comes again. What you do with your mina matters!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 19-20, Luke 19:28-48, Psalms 88, Proverbs 13:12-14

April 19, 2019
HOLY WEEK

Readings for today: Joshua 19-20, Luke 19:28-48, Psalms 88, Proverbs 13:12-14

“And when Jesus drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.” (Luke 19:41-44)

In the midst of all the celebration and praise and palm branches waving, Jesus looks up and in his mind’s eye, sees a city in flames. He sees the Roman soldiers slaughtering His people. He sees the Temple being razed to the ground. He sees the siege engines and legions going street by street destroying everything in their path. All because the people of God refuse to choose peace. All because they refuse to follow the way of Jesus. They persist in their rebellion and the Romans will execute a terrible vengeance in 70 AD as a result. All this Jesus sees laid out before Him and He weeps. He knows they will cry out to Him. He knows they will ask Him why? Why will You not save? Why will You not deliver? Why will You not protect Your people, God?

Thankfully, God is faithful. He does not distance Himself from our pain. He is committed to join us in our suffering. He draws near the broken-hearted and those crushed in spirit. Over the centuries, He has reached out to us in so many ways, through so many people. Adam and Eve. Noah. Abraham and Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Moses. David. John. Mary and Joseph. It’s like their names are embedded in some sort of psychic or genetic memory that we cannot escape. All them called and set apart to show the world a different way. To show the world God’s way. And all of this was preamble, of course, to the greatest miracle the world has ever seen. And that brings us to the events of this Holy Week. Palm Sunday. Maundy Thursday. Good Friday. Easter Sunday. Billions the world over will gather in soaring cathedrals, beautiful sanctuaries, auditoriums like our own, or even on the dusty, drought-ridden plains of southern Ethiopia.

One of the mistakes we can make when we approach the events of this week is to think that somehow Jesus is being swept along by circumstances outside His control. Nothing could be further from the truth. Just a few chapters back in the gospel, Luke says, “Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem.” The idea there is Jesus is steeling His will for what’s to come. He’s preparing His heart and mind to suffer. He knows what will happen should He show up in Jerusalem at Passover. He knows the Father’s will is for Him to die. He knows His war with sin and death and evil and the devil is about to reach its final, dramatic conclusion on the Cross. All the fear and anxiety that will erupt from Him in Gethsemane as He cries out to the Father to let the cup pass is beginning to build. And one might think He would be tempted to turn aside. But rather than run from His fate, Jesus keeps His eyes focused on His mission. To draw near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. To save those who are afflicted and oppressed. One of my favorite authors puts it this way. “The Cross is not anyone’s failure. It is not the giving up of anything, not even of life. It is the achievement of something. Not a fate heroically endured, but a mission deliberately undertaken. A task finished. The issue of it, far from being tragic, is a shout! Christ does not sink into death. He mounts it...(like He mounted the donkey that first Palm Sunday)...and reaches His hand out for a scepter. He is not being blown about like a scrap of paper by the winds of circumstance and caught fast on a gallows; He is changing the whole face of the earth. This is no dismal route; it is an incredible conquest.” The triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem sets in motion the events of the most important week in world history. It is God’s definitive answer to humanity’s deepest question. What is God doing about all the sin and evil in our world? He is – according to Colossians 2:14-15 – wiping out the charges that were against us...He took them away and nailed them to the cross. There Christ defeated all the powers and forces arrayed against Him. He let the whole world see them being led away as prisoners when he celebrated his victory. Friends, the suffering and death of Jesus is God’s “Yes” to this world’s “No.” It is God’s declaration to the world that there are no lengths to which He will not go. There are no heights to which He will not climb. There are no depths to which He will not plunge in order to save us. And on Palm Sunday, Jesus stands on the brink. You can almost see Him rein that donkey in for just a moment. Pausing before heading up the hill to Jerusalem. Tortured by the knowledge of

what's to come. And then a deep breath. A lifting of His head. His eyes rising above the hills to the One from whom His help will come. The maker of heaven and earth. Then He kicks his heels and rides forward. As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" But some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out. And cry out the stones did! In the silence of Good Friday. As Jesus, from the Cross, gathers into His arms all the agony of a ruined creation. As He bears the full weight of humanity's sin. Past. Present. Future. Literally laid upon His shoulders. As He suffers and struggles under the weight of that eternal burden, Jesus gives up His spirit. The earth quakes. The ground shakes. The rocks split apart. Creation itself cries out for her Creator.

What thoughts run through your head as you gaze at the Cross? What do you feel in your heart as you watch your Savior suffer? It's tempting to turn away. Tempting to avoid. Tempting to do a flyover from Palm Sunday to Easter without pausing to reflect on why Jesus had to die. My encouragement for you today - on this Good Friday - is to ask the Lord for the courage to spend time at His feet. Ask Him to give you the strength to grieve at the foot of the Cross. This is not about guilt and shame but about the honest acknowledgment that it is my sin. Your sin. Our sin that put Him there. Take some time today and marvel at the great love of God!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 21:1-22:20, Luke 20:1-26, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 13:15-16

April 20, 2019
CAN I GET A WITNESS?

Readings for today: Joshua 21:1-22:20, Luke 20:1-26, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 13:15-16

"The people of Reuben and the people of Gad called the altar Witness, "For," they said, "it is a witness between us that the Lord is God." (Josh. 22:34)

I know we are bleeding a bit into tomorrow's reading here but what does it mean to you to be a witness? To give a witness? To testify? For my friends in the African-American church, when the preacher asks for a "witness" it means it's time for someone to stand and tell of all the Lord has done. In our readings for today and tomorrow, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh build an altar and name it "Witness" to remind all the tribes in the coming years that they are part of one large family. Deeply connected by their common kinship with Abraham and more importantly, their covenant with God Himself. The leaders of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh were concerned that future generations of Israelites might forget this connection and start to see the Jordan River as the boundary between God's people and the rest of the world. They didn't want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance, they built a monument of "imposing size." Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But as a witness to all of Israel that they were one people under Yahweh. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would "witness" to their shared history and deep connection.

In the Book of Acts, Jesus calls us "His witnesses." We are witnesses in our neighborhoods, cities, nations, and to the very ends of the earth. In this way, we are living memorials to all God has done. We are living monuments to a shared history. A common heritage. The deep connection we share as God's chosen people. We "witness" to the glory and goodness of God. We "witness" to the unity we share as the family of God. Anytime someone "passes us by" or interacts with us on any level, they should leave having "witnessed" the mercy and grace of God and having felt the deep love we have for one another.

The Bible itself is a "witness." I love what Joshua 21:45 says, "Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." The only reason we know this statement is true is because we have an accurate record of what took place. This is why we read the Old Testament. Within its pages, God "witnesses" to us over and over again of His great faithfulness and love.

Ultimately, of course, the resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as God's pre-eminent witness to all creation that He loves us too much to let us go. He will never stop pursuing us. Never stop chasing us. Never stop reaching out to us. He bridges the gap between heaven and earth to save us. He descends into the darkness of death and hell and God-forsakenness to deliver us. He rises once again, leading in victorious procession those who have died in faith. This is what we celebrate on Easter! God's ultimate witness to His own steadfast love and faithfulness!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 22:21-23:16, Luke 20:27-47, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 13:17-19

April 21, 2019
RESURRECTION

Readings for today: Joshua 22:21-23:16, Luke 20:27-47, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 13:17-19

There is literally only one reason to believe. It has little to do with the sermons we hear, no matter how tightly and eloquently they are argued. It has little to do with the songs we sing, no matter how amazing the musicianship and special effects. It has little to do with the grandeur of the church buildings where we attend, be they soaring cathedrals or intimate sanctuaries. The only reason to believe is because a dead guy named Jesus literally got up on Easter morning two thousand years ago and walked out of the tomb.

The resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It is an otherworldly event. It defies all human categories. It cannot be grasped or understood using human logic. It cannot be explained away. It simply stands in history as a unique, unrepeatable miracle. It is the defeat of death. It is the defeat of sin. It is the defeat of evil and the great enemy of our souls. It represents a new world. Heaven come to earth. The advent of eternal life. As such, the rules that govern this world do not apply. All the complex scenarios that create headaches in this life – like a woman being married to seven different brothers - simply do not apply in the life to come. This is Jesus' point. Resurrection changes everything.

Today is Easter Sunday. Today Christians around the world gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So what's changed for you? What difference does Jesus rising from the dead make for you? How is your life different as a result? The Bible says the same Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead actually lives inside every believer. Surely that changes things? Surely it gives us a new outlook on life? Surely it influences our desires and ambitions? Surely it shapes our thoughts, attitudes, and actions? Martin Luther once famously remarked that it's not enough to believe Jesus died and rose again. Even the demons believe this and shudder! No, you must believe He died and rose again for you. It's got to be personal. So what difference does the resurrection make for you?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 24, Luke 21:1-28, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 13:20-23

April 22, 2019
EASTER BLUES

Readings for today: Joshua 24, Luke 21:1-28, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 13:20-23

Yesterday, someone I deeply love told me they were “done with Easter.” When I asked them why, they told they feel like they’d given God enough of a chance. For years they’ve prayed with no answers. Read their Bible but the stories never seemed to connect. They’ve tried attending churches here and there but never found community. Their heart’s desires always seemed to go unfulfilled. Reminded me of what we read in Proverbs 13:12 a few days back, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick...” And their heart is sick. They are grieving. They are hurting. They feel very lost and alone.

Now I could argue with them. I could make the case that they never really did give God an honest chance. They never truly surrendered their life to Him. They never committed to walking in God’s ways. They always seemed less interested in a relationship with Jesus and far more interested in using God to serve their own ends. Get their own needs met. And while I believe these things to be true, I find this approach to be not only counter-productive but antithetical to the way of Jesus.

The central message of Easter is God’s unconditional love. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we remained ungrateful, unrepentant, ignorant and unaware, Christ willingly laid down His life for us. After we stiff-armed God in Eden and went our own way. Each of us doing our own thing. Done with God and all His demands. Christ sacrificed Himself on our behalf. By rising from the dead, Jesus lets us know His love is relentless. His grace irresistible. His faithfulness eternal. There is literally nothing in all of creation that can separate us from His love. That’s Easter. And it’s as true for my friend as it is for me.

So how did I respond to my friend? I simply listened. I told him how much I loved him. I told him how much of a blessing he was in my life. I shared with him the numerous ways God had used him in my life over the years. It reminded me a lot of what Joshua shares with Israel as he nears the end of his life. He wants this new generation to hear the story once again. To be reminded of God’s great faithfulness because of how easy it is for us to forget. The reality is my friend has forgotten God. He has forgotten all God has done for him over the years. He has forgotten the many ways God has used him over the years. But God has not forgotten him. God has not stopped loving him. God has not abandoned or walked away from him. And my role is not to judge. Not to argue. Not to twist his arm but simply to tell him the stories. Help him remember. Point him to powerful moments in his own life where God was clearly at work.

Does this take the sting out of his current disappointments? No. Does it make him feel any less hurt by the silence? I don’t think so. Does it help him feel any better about his unrequited desires? Not so much. Those struggles are real. They are painful. They are hard. It’s not easy to accept God’s “no” or “not yet.” And I don’t feel compelled to have to defend God or protect God from the anger my friend carries in his heart. I simply need to be there for him as God is there for him. I need to sit and listen and love as unconditionally as I possibly can. And I trust God is not finished with him. I trust there will be a time when Easter will once again be a source of joy in my friend’s life. It may take years for that to happen but I know God is faithful and I know God is with him wherever he may go from here.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 1:1-2:9, Luke 21:29-22:13, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 13:24-25

April 23, 2019
LIVING WITH THE END IN MIND

Readings for today: Judges 1:1-2:9, Luke 21:29-22:13, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 13:24-25

The ancient Greeks believed there was a time when every human being knew the day of their own death. But then Prometheus gave humanity the gift of fire which completely transformed the way they lived. They began to aspire for more. Fire helped them develop technology which in turn helped them achieve their aspirations. And slowly but surely, they lost sight of their mortality and began to see themselves as gods.

Not much has changed. Humanity still chases immortality. Still believes the original lie that we can be like God. In our pride and arrogance, we do what is right in our own eyes. We live largely for ourselves. Our goal is instant gratification. We've completely lost sight of our own mortality. We no longer live with our end in mind.

The Psalmist writes, "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom." (Psalms 90:12) Remind us that from dust we came and to dust we shall return. Remind us how truly brief and insignificant the span of our lives are on this earth when compared with the sweep of eternity. Remind us of our limits. Our finitude. Our fragility. Humble us that we may gain a heart of wisdom. And what is wisdom according to Scripture? The fear of the Lord.

When you look back at the end of your life, what do you hope to see? What do you hope to accomplish? What is your definition of a life "well-lived?" Does it have anything to do with Christ and His Kingdom? I engage these conversations all the time as a pastor. I cannot tell you the number of times I have sat at the bedside of someone who is dying only to have them share with me all their regrets. Too much time at the office. Too much time spent in trivial pursuits. Too much bitterness and anger towards those they love. Too much selfishness and greed. It is heartbreaking.

But what if we lived with our end in mind? What if we approached every day like it were our last? What if we approached every conversation like it was the final one we may have with that person? What if we approached every situation like it was our last opportunity to bring blessing? What if we approached every dollar like it was the final one we would ever spend? I imagine it would create some dramatic change in our lives. So let me encourage you to ask God to teach you to number your days. To know your limits. To come to grips with your morality. To live with your end in mind. This is the path to wisdom. This is the path to life well-lived.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 2:10-3:31, Luke 22:14-34, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 14:1-2

April 24, 2019
DEEPER PRAYERS

Readings for today: Judges 2:10-3:31, Luke 22:14-34, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 14:1-2

What is prayer? Communion with God. On our knees. Folded hands. Eyes closed. Forming thoughts in our minds and sending them upwards like sparks from a fire? Is it a conversation or more of a monologue? A task we have to complete each day if we want to stay on God's good side? Something we do before meals or before bed? Is it the recitation of memorized words learned as a child and carried through to adulthood? "Now I lay me down to sleep..." "Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen." "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food." "Our Father, who art in heaven..." What is prayer?

The Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible. 150 different prayers written by different people on different occasions as they wrestled with life. Readers of the Psalms are always struck by their raw honesty and transparency. The beautiful way they express the deepest emotions of the human heart. The vivid descriptions of God and His great faithfulness. They are marvelous and great teachers when it comes to prayer.

One of the biggest things I've learned in the years I've spent meditating on the Psalms is that prayer comes more from the heart than the head. Prayer is less about me forming thoughts or saying words or reciting texts and more about laying before God the deepest emotions of my heart. Deep prayer doesn't require much in the way of words. Just letting the feelings flow and trusting God is hearing what's behind them. This is what makes David such a great Psalmist. He doesn't seem to stop to think about the "appropriateness" of his feelings. He doesn't seem to "judge" his emotions. He just lets them fly up to God and trusts God is big enough and great enough to make sense out of the chaos.

It's why he can express contradictory emotions all in the same prayer. "The stupid man cannot know; the fool cannot understand this: that though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever..." (Psalms 92:6-7) And in the same breath, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night..." (Psalms 92:1-2) He feels no need to try to make sense of it all. He trusts God to sort it out.

Ultimately, the Psalms give us permission to be real and authentic before God. To truly be ourselves. To put aside all pretense and performance and let drop the masks we so often wear.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 4-5, Luke 22:35-53, Psalms 94, Proverbs 14:3-4

April 25, 2019
LIFE IS STRUGGLE

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 4-5, Luke 22:35-53, Psalms 94, Proverbs 14:3-4
“Life is pain, highness.” - Dred Pirate Roberts

I grew up in the 1980's so the Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies and the line above is one that's always stuck with me. The Dred Pirate Roberts has lived a life of incredible struggle and heartache and pain. He's persevered through hardship and suffering. He's overcome incredible obstacles. He's survived impossible odds. The princess, on the other hand, has lived a life of privilege. Growing up amidst all kinds of wealth and splendor. Servants to meet her every need. At the same time, she too has suffered loss. Heartbreak. She grieves over the one she loves whom she believes is dead. I don't want to spoil the ending for those who haven't seen it but suffice to say both characters have learned and grown and battled through life. It's not been easy.

“Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before...They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses.” (Judges 3:1-2, 4)

Israel failed. She lost her nerve. She took her eyes off of Yahweh and succumbed to fear. As a result, the Promised Land was not fully conquered. The pagan nations not fully driven out. They remained as a perpetual test to Israel's faithfulness. Would they stay true to the commandments of the Lord or would they follow the ways of the Canaanites? The Book of Judges tells the tragic tale of Israel's descent into darkness and evil. All the skeletons in Israel's closet are exposed and put on display for generations to read. The moral character of many of the judges is suspect. Their conduct immoral. Their decisions unwise. It's a story of compromise. A story that depicts what happens when we try to embrace the ways of God and the ways of the world. It's a story where the faithfulness of God is revealed in His discipline and loving correction. Over and over again, He will give the people of Israel over into the hands of their enemies. He will withdraw His protective hand from them. He will allow the nations around them to conquer and pillage and destroy; all in order to bring Israel back to repentance. Back to faith. Back to Himself.

Israel must learn to fight because life is a struggle. In the ancient near east, the struggle was literal. Real. It took place on battlefields and within cities. It was a violent, brutal, harsh world full of pain. Israel would need to know how to fight back and defend herself. In the 21st century, we still fight these battles. I think of our military men and women who go all over the world to defend the weak and oppressed. They fight against tyranny with such courage. I think of our police officers who put themselves in danger in the line of duty each and every day. Every call that comes in is a potentially violent situation they will be forced to handle. I think of our firefighters who are called to save lives, often at great cost. I think of so many in our world today who, day in and day out, see the suffering firsthand. They are well-acquainted with the pain. They know the heartache. And they fight. But even more serious and pervasive are the battles we face on the inside. The battles with depression, anxiety, and fear. Despite the incredible wealth and privilege and blessing we live with, we have never been more stressed. More discontent. More anxious and afraid.

We are being tested, friends. Day in and day out. Will we keep the commands of the Lord? Will we devote time to Him every day? Will we worship Him as He deserves and demands each week? Will we take a Sabbath? Will we give sacrificially and generously? Will we allow our hearts to be shaped by deep reflection on His Word? Will we surrender to His Spirit? Life is struggle. Life is pain. Life is not safe or easy. Anyone who says differently is selling something. (Again with the Princess Bride lines...) Does this mean things are hopeless? Should we just throw in the towel? By no means! God promises He will bear His fruit in the lives of those who walk with Him! Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. These are the gifts of God for the people of God. In the midst of all life is throwing your way, turn to Christ! Let Him be your strength and your hope! Your shield for the battles you fight!

Readings for today: Judges 6, Luke 22:54-23:12, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 14:5-6

April 26, 2019
THAT LOOK....

Readings for today: Judges 6, Luke 22:54-23:12, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 14:5-6

“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times." (Luke 22:61)

I have often wondered what went through the mind of Peter the moment he locked eyes with Jesus after his three-fold denial. Shame. Grief. Heartbreak. Immediately after this he leaves the courtyard and weeps bitterly. But how long did these emotions stay with him? Did they fade in the days ahead? Did he begin to rationalize his behavior in his own mind? Justify himself? Or did the shame cling to him? Is that why he goes back to fishing? Is he trying to escape back to his former life before he met Jesus?

I have often wondered what went through Jesus' mind the moment He locked eyes with Peter. Disappointment? Anger? Judgment? Frustration? I told you so? Jesus isn't given much time to dwell on it as He is almost immediately taken out to be beaten and tortured. His thoughts turning from Peter to the pain and suffering He's going to endure. However, as soon as He is raised, He seeks Peter out. Finds him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where everything began and restores him in a beautiful exchange about the love Peter has for his Lord.

I think about the many times I have denied Jesus. The many moments in my life where I have betrayed my Lord. The sin that so easily entangles me. I am a broken man. I am a sheep who has gone astray. I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. I am hopeless and helpless. Alone and afraid. But then I lock eyes with Jesus. I can see His love. I can see His grace. I can see His forgiveness. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Nothing to fear from His perfect love. He went to the cross for me. He laid down His life in my stead. He shoulders the burden of my shame. He took my place.

As I look back at Jesus, I find myself grateful. Thankful. Overwhelmed with gratitude for all He has done. I fall on my knees in awe. I stand in His presence amazed. I throw my arms and my heart wide open to His grace and forgiveness and mercy. I surrender all that I am to Him. When I fall – and I know I will...multiple times...everyday - I trust Him to restore me just as surely as He restored Peter. For I am His and He is mine. And He looks on me with love.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 7:1-8:17, Luke 23:13-43, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 14:7-8

April 27, 2019
THE ART OF SELF-FORGETFULNESS

Readings for today: Judges 7:8-17, Luke 23:13-43, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 14: 7-8

Admittedly, I stole the title of this blog from Tim Keller but I love that phrase, “self-forgetfulness.” It is the key to godly living. Keller argues that true humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought or less of yourself than you ought. It is thinking of your “self” less. Read that last sentence again. Thinking of your “self” less.

If you want an example of what this looks like, consider Gideon. He’s just won an amazing victory over the Midianites. His fame is growing. His star is on the rise. His enemies are having nightmares about him. And as he returns from battle, he meets the Ephraimites. And they are angry. They felt left out. They felt dismissed. Shamed for having not been included. “Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they accused him fiercely.” (Judges 8:1) Now if I were Gideon, I don’t think I’d respond well. I wouldn’t appreciate being falsely accused. My pride would get the best of me. But look at how Gideon responds. “And he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.” (Judges 8:2-3) Isn’t that amazing? Gideon is humble. He is more than willing to share the glory with his fellow Israelites. He recognizes this victory is the Lord’s alone. He doesn’t think more highly of himself than he ought. He doesn’t think less of himself than he ought. He simply thinks of himself less.

Godly men and women understand our lives are not our own. Our achievements and success is not our own. Everything we accomplish in this life comes from the Lord above. I love how the Psalmist put it today, “The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.” (Psalms 97:1-6) When you keep your mind and heart fixed on who you serve - the Lord of the universe - you cannot help but think of your “self” less.

Friends, you have been created by God. All that you are and all that you have come from Him alone. He is your Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. He gave you your gifts and talents and abilities. He provided opportunities for you to succeed. He is orchestrating things you cannot see and cannot control in order to make more into the image of His Son. This is your eternal destiny! To be conformed into the image of Christ! God is at work to get you to decrease so that He can increase in your life! So set aside your focus on “self” and train your mind and heart to focus on Christ! This is the secret to a godly life.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 8:18-9:21, Luke 23:44-23:12, Psalms 99, Proverbs 14:9-10

April 28, 2019
PEOPLE OF THE RESURRECTION

Readings for today: Judges 8:18-9:21, Luke 23:44-24:12, Psalms 99, Proverbs 14:9-10

Doubt. Fear. Astonishment. Confusion. Disbelief. This is the full range of emotions that swept the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning. No one – absolutely no one - was expecting a resurrection. They all believed it was over. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust. Some were returning home. Some were hiding out in fear. Some went to the tomb to mourn. All of them grieving in their own way.

It has been suggested over centuries that the disciples didn't know a dead body when they saw one. It has been suggested that Joseph and Nicodemus didn't realize Jesus was still alive. It has been suggested that Jesus merely swooned on the cross. Fainted. And in doing so, tricked the Roman soldiers – among the most brutal killers the world has ever known - into believing He was dead. It has been suggested that this same Jesus. Body broken. Incredibly weakened by blood loss. Was somehow able to roll the stone away from within the tomb and escape. That He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others have repeated the fake news the chief priests tried to spread about Jesus' disciples - fishermen and tax collectors - somehow stealing His body in the dead of night when the Roman guards were asleep. (Something that rarely happened by the way since the punishment for falling asleep on your watch was death.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One cannot dismiss it or ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world and a God who loves the world and judges it with righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to live and repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. Then what did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

2000 years later, we are still engaged in this same mission, friends! God is still moving! The news of the resurrection has yet to be proclaimed to every tribe, tongue and nation! Each new generation must come face to face with the Risen Christ! They must deal with the truth of His resurrection! He simply cannot and will not be denied!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 9:22-10:18, Luke 24:13-53, Psalms 100, Proverbs 14:11-12

April 29, 2019
THE WAY OF DEATH

Readings for today: Judges 9:22-10:18, Luke 24:13-53, Psalms 100, Proverbs 14:11-12

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 14:12)

I was talking to a group of teenagers yesterday about the Christian life. We were looking at Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount where He talks about anger, lust, vengeance, and loving your enemies. It seems an impossible task. The students were honest enough to ask if God grades on a curve. They could not fathom a life without anger or anxiety or lust or revenge. We talked through a whole host of scenarios where these things crop up. Surely Jesus doesn’t expect us to actually put His sermon into practice, does He?

I think a lot of Christians feel this way. They consider the Bible “aspirational” at best. A standard to aspire to rather than an actual way of life. They know their imperfections. They know how often they fall short. They know how challenging it is to follow Jesus so they settle. They lower their expectations. They reduce the horizon of their lives to something more manageable. And they hope God will cover the rest.

Why do you think there is so much death in our world? So much depression? So much suffering? When we refuse to follow Christ. When we refuse to trust Christ’s wisdom for our lives. When we refuse to lean on Christ’s strength to resist temptation. When we reject Christ’s way, there are consequences. Someone crosses us. Betrays us. Wounds us. Instead of taking our pain to Christ for healing, we feed the anger as it wells up inside. Eventually it builds to the point where we lash out. We spend time looking at pornography, fantasizing about other human beings. The porn subtly and subconsciously begins to shape our sexual expectations. Instead of letting our sexual relationships be defined by Christ and His selfless love, now we treat the men and women we meet/date/marry as objects to be used to gratify our own desires. And if they cannot or will not, we are free to discard them and move on. Stress from work or school begins to pile up. Assignments. Tests. Papers to write. Projects to finish. Tasks to complete. Our to-do list is overwhelming. Instead of grounding our work in Christ and trusting Him to give us the energy and wisdom and motivation to take care of our responsibilities, we avoid. We play video games. We hang out with friends. We scroll through social media. Time is wasted. Deadlines draw near. Anxiety builds. Do you see a pattern emerging?

There is a way that seems right to a person...but take a step back. What have we gained from the way of sexual freedom in our culture? Sexually transmitted disease. Unwanted pregnancies. Broken relationships. Sexual abuse and the #MeToo movement. What have we gained from the way of violence in our culture? School shootings. Domestic terrorism. A rise in racism and hate. What have we gained from the way of greed in our culture? A widening gap between rich and poor. Too much money centered in too few hands. Corporate welfare. A corrupt relationship between our political leaders and Wall Street. What have we gained from the way of exploitation when it comes to creation? Plastic filling our oceans. Greenhouse gases eroding our atmosphere. Climate change disproportionately impacting the global poor. These, friends, are the ways of death.

Christ shows us the way of life. But to gain the life He offers, we must let go of our life in the world. Only the one who loses their life for Jesus’ sake will find it. Only by denying oneself and taking up a cross can we follow Jesus. Only by giving ourselves away will we gain all Christ has to offer. This, friends, is what it means to live the Christian life. This is what it means to follow the way of Jesus in our world.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 11-12, John 1:1-28, Psalms 101, Proverbs 14:13-14

April 30, 2019
JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Judges 11-12, John 1:1-28, Psalms 101, Proverbs 14:13-14

When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day.

Hopefully, this places Jephthah's tragic vow in context. He fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. He feels trapped. And how does his daughter respond? Her reaction is perhaps the most surprising part of this story. She willingly lays down her life for her father! She faces her fate with courage and faith. Taking two full months to say goodbye and grieve with her friends. Two full months to weep over what could have been.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in the gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. On some level, the same held true for Israel. As they adopted the ways of the Canaanites, Yahweh ceased, on some level, to be the One True God and became just another tribal deity to be appeased. Thus, Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate. And the most important takeaway from the whole account is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision.

What about us? We claim to worship the supreme God of the universe. We claim to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. We claim to be heirs of His eternal Kingdom. But do our lives reflect this truth? How much have we accommodated to the ways of this world? Brought God down to our level? Limited Him to our tribe? Reduced Him to our personal deity?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 13-14, John 1:29-51, Psalms 102, Proverbs 14:15-16