

BIBLE IN A YEAR

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

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English Standard Version**

2018

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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July 2, 2018
LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN....

Readings for the day: Amos 1-5

"For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17)

Judgment always begins with God's people. The people called by God's name are held to a higher standard. Having been delivered and set free from slavery to sin and death. Having been set apart as God's treasured possession. Having been chosen as the object of God's special devotion and love. God expects His people to be a light to the nations. Salt for the earth. A nation of priests interceding constantly on behalf of an unbelieving world. He expects His people to set an example for the nations. He expects them to conduct themselves in accordance with His will and His ways so as to show the nations what life looks like in His kingdom. When they fall short. When they sin. When they follow the ways of this world and take up the tools of oppression, violence, and injustice; God steps in. God will not be mocked nor will He allow His name to be defamed.

Amos is prophesying to the northern kingdom of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II. This was the golden age for the northern kingdom. Jeroboam II was the most powerful northern king, amassing great wealth and expanding their territory as far as it had ever been. But there was something rotten at the heart of the kingdom. Injustice. Cruelty. Oppression. Violence. These were the hallmarks of his reign and God was watching. The righteous were sold for silver. The poor for a pair of sandals. Drunkenness. Sexual immorality. Idolatry all were rampant. God had given them multiple opportunities to repent. He had withheld the rain. Sent blight and mildew. Warfare on their borders. But still they didn't return to the Lord.

Their main transgression was their mistreatment of the poor. "those who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted..." (Amos 2:7)" Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy..." (Amos 4:1) "Therefore because you trample on the poor and you exact taxes of grain from him..." (Amos 5:11) Throughout the Scriptures, especially the prophets, God makes it clear that He judges nations primarily based on their treatment of the poor and afflicted. The less fortunate. Those who have the odds stacked against them. Nations that mistreat or refuse to care for the least of these will be judged harshly. Those who show compassion and care will be blessed.

America claims to be a Christian nation. We sing songs asking for God's blessing. We talk about a divine calling and how God has shown His favor on us. This can only be true insofar as we act as a light to the nations. Only insofar as we become a beacon of compassion and grace and hope for the world. This is why it is essential to solve the crisis on the border in a humane and compassionate way. It's why we must work for comprehensive immigration reform so that refugees and those seeking asylum can find refuge and safety. It's why we must not separate children from parents and parents from children. It's why we cannot simply accept the Darwinian "rich get richer and poor get poorer" economic model that currently exists. This is not a Republican or Democrat issue. There's plenty of blame to go around. This is a gospel issue. A Kingdom of God issue. And we are fooling ourselves if we think we won't have to answer to a higher justice should we fail.

The closing words from Amos 5 are sobering. God says to His people, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24) In essence, God is saying, "My people are saying all

the right things. Going through all the right motions. They worship. They praise. They give. But they do not love me with all their hearts. They are not seeking to walk in My ways. Until they do, I will not hear their prayers. I will not accept their offerings. I will not receive their worship. I will not bless their land.” May we have the courage to repent. Confess. Seek God’s face. Turn from our wicked ways. And re-commit ourselves to the Kingdom of God.

July 3, 2018
WHAT TIME IS IT?

Readings for the day: Amos 6-9

For decades, I have heard Christians talk about how we are living in the “end times.” Surely the time draws close when Jesus will appear. We look around and we see the violence and the suffering and the pain and we cannot imagine things getting much worse. We look at the immorality and the blatant idolatry and we cannot imagine Jesus tarrying much longer. We look around at the way the world is going and we just know Jesus is about to step in and put an end to all things.

I have heard other Christians talk about how we are living in times very much like the first century. Religious pluralism is the rule. Many different faiths contending in the public sphere for attention. The key passage is Paul’s speech on the Aereopogas in Acts 17. He looks around and sees shrines to every god imaginable. Even one to an “unknown god!” Much like today, the people of Athens were good at covering all their bases! They were spiritual if not religious.

For my part, I’ve always believed we were living in the time of the prophets. A time in the life of Israel when things looked pretty good on the outside. Lots of wealth. Lots of power. The storehouses were full. People were employed. Babies were being born. Worship was taking place. Yes, on the outside, things looked pretty good. But the job of the prophet was to lift the hood. Take a peek beneath the surface. Expose what many wanted to keep hidden.

Amos was a simple herdsman. A dresser of sycamore trees according to Amos 7:14. There was nothing about him that made him special. Nothing about this man that would cause you to take a second look. He had no power or authority. His lineage as obscure. No training or education. He was no prophet nor a prophet’s son. He simply was a man called by God to preach His Word to His people. A man given special insight by the Holy Spirit to see what was rotten at the heart of the nation and call it out. He performs this task faithfully. At great cost, he delivers God’s message of destruction and judgment. It didn’t make him popular. There was no national movement of repentance. Nothing that would indicate Amos won any converts over the course of his career. Quite the opposite. It put him at odds with the governing authorities. Put him at odds with the religious elite. Put him at odds with everyone who was anyone in the nation. Thus is the fate of most prophets it seems.

Why do I believe we are living in a time analogous to that of the prophets? We are living in a time of unparalleled wealth creation. We live in the most powerful nation the world has ever known. Our military could defeat any country on earth with ease. Our Constitution guarantees us great freedom and the rule of law grants us security. The peaceful transfer of power between political parties in election after election is something I no longer take for granted having been in many other countries in the world where this is not so. Businesses flourish. Educational opportunities abound. The simple ability to chart our own course is astounding when you step back to think about it. But all is not good. There are deep racial tensions built on a history of racial trauma and systematic abuse. There are deep cultural divisions built on mutual disrespect of radically different world views. We suffer from a tragic lack of national as well as personal self-awareness which cripples our ability to find solutions to our problems. The growing gap between rich and poor is simply unsustainable and the lack of opportunity for far too many in our country is a stain on our nation’s honor. Pride keeps us from recognizing our privilege and putting it into service of others. Above all, our spiritual immaturity and biblical illiteracy rob us of the resources we need to humble ourselves, repent, and seek God’s help in turning things around.

Does this mean I hate our country? No. Does this mean I’ve capitulated to politically correct thinking? Absolutely not. Does this mean I refuse to sing or cover my heart for the national anthem, turn my back on the flag, or disrespect those men and women who have given so much to secure our freedom? Far from it. I simply

choose to look at our nation honestly with eyes wide open recognizing all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory...including America. All are like sheep who have gone astray...including the United States. None are righteous, no not one...not even the country that I love. The Bible is clear. There is only one way to survive God's justice. Repent. Return to the ways of God. Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly. Place our faith and trust not in our own strength or wisdom or knowledge or understanding. Not in some political party or platform. Not in our wealth or talent or ability. Not even in democracy or freedom or capitalism. But in God alone. Only then will we be the "city on the hill" our founding fathers envisaged. Only then will we be the "light to the nations" they imagined. Only then will we be the "hope for the nations" God intends for us to be. As we place ourselves in service to Him and His ways. Spend our wealth to uplift the poor. Use our might to break the bonds of oppression. Put our power and privilege in service to those who lack opportunity. Uproot the systems of injustice in our own midst. We surrender our own "kingdom" for one much greater!

July 4, 2018
SPIRITUAL ADULTERY

Readings for the day: Hosea 1-5

As a pastor, I have spent countless hours in marriage counseling. More often than not, they are in my office because one or both have been unfaithful. They have stepped out on their spouse with a friend. A co-worker. Perhaps even a prostitute. The pain is unspeakable. The betrayal beyond words. It is almost impossible to recover. Why? Because even in our sex-saturated culture there is a sense that sexual intimacy is the greatest gift one can give to another person. It is the gift of oneself. The gift of the deepest, most profound parts of oneself. It is an act that transcends simple physical pleasure, joining hearts and entangling souls in a deeply spiritual way. This is why God has always reserved it for the marriage covenant. Sex was something to be enjoyed within the bounds of an unconditional commitment to one other person for as long as you both shall live.

However, we have made a mockery of this gift. Our culture debases sexuality by promoting a hookup, swipe right culture. We called it sexual freedom and yet suffer from an epidemic of STD's, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual abuse. We thought it would lead to greater relational intimacy but the quality of our relationships continues to decline. Marriages fail at ever higher rates as individuals pursue their own pleasure and fulfillment at the expense of the other. The sexual revolution continues to gain steam through social media, television, movies, etc. which are univocal in their declaration that we are at the mercy of our hormonal urges. Whatever feels good is right and true regardless of the collateral damage it leaves in our wake.

This is the central message of Hosea. God takes up the very real issue of adultery and employs it as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He even calls His prophet Hosea to embody this relationship by marrying a prostitute. Hosea's pain is a reflection of God's pain. Hosea's heartbreak at Gomer's continual betrayals is a reflection of God's heartbreak over Israel's worship of the pagan gods. The names of Hosea's children reflect not only his suffering but the divine pathos of God Himself as He wrestles with the unconditional love He pledged to Israel. When Hosea purchases his bride back from the slave traders in Hosea 3, one is reminded of the incredible grace of God which relentlessly pursues us to the day we die.

It is abundantly clear, throughout the book of Hosea, that our only hope is the great faithfulness of God. The steadfast loyal love of God for His people. No matter what they may do or where they may go or how many times they play the "whore" and chase after other gods, Yahweh will not let go. He will redeem. He will save.

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel." (Hosea 1:10-11)

""Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord." (Hosea 2:14-18, 20)

"Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days." (Hosea 3:5)

This is the heart of the gospel. No matter how bad things get. No matter how many times we sin and fall short of the glory of God. No matter how far we run into the far country and play the prodigal. God is faithful. God is loyal. Steadfast. True. He will never stop pursuing. Never stop watching. Never stop waiting for us to repent and return. There is nothing that can separate us from His love. Nothing that can snatch us out of His hand. Nothing that can break the eternal covenant He first made with us. This is good news! Even great news for those who love God and are called according to His purpose!

July 5, 2018
SIN HAS CONSEQUENCES

Readings for the day: Hosea 6-9

"For they sow the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." (Hosea 8:7)

We do not take sin seriously enough. We do not know how deep the corruption runs. We do not understand how ruined we are. We are utterly broken. Our desires jumbled up and disordered. Our loves completely out of alignment. We tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We tend to think we are pretty good. Graded on a curve against those around us, we measure up. We're better than most. We're more thoughtful. More moral. More loving. We care. We're compassionate when the mood strikes us. Our hearts are tender in the face of tragedy. Our eyes fill with tears when we hear about a soccer team trapped in a cave or a school shooting or we see images of children being separated from their parents on the border. These emotions make us feel righteous. Morally good. So when we read the words of the prophets confronting God's people on their sin, we have a hard time believing he's really speaking to us.

"But they do not consider that I remember all their evil. Now their deeds surround them; they are before my face." (Hosea 7:2) God remembers everything we've done. Every word we've said. Every thought we've had. Every emotion we've ever felt. He has seen it. He remembers it. Nothing is hidden from His sight. For Him, these things are continually before His face in living color. God knows what happens in the deepest recesses of our hearts. He knows those things we try our best to keep secret. He sees what happens on business trips. He knows our browser history. He hears those illicit conversations over phone, text, or through that email we like to think is private.

There are consequences for sin. God's justice must be satisfied. Who may come into His presence? Who may ascend to His holy hill? "He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart..." (Psalms 15:2) But this does not describe us. We are all weak. Like sheep we have wandered astray. We have turned aside, each to our own way. We do what is right in our own eyes without giving God a second thought. We do not intentionally seek to align ourselves with His will. Frankly, we don't even know how to do that because we can barely muster up the effort to worship Him on a weekly basis much less spend daily time in His Word and in prayer. We have not surrendered to Him. We do not want to bow the knee before Him. We want to live our lives the way we want to live them and we expect, even demand, God to bless us along the way. This is why Hosea says, "They have deeply corrupted themselves as in the days of Gibeah: he will remember their iniquity; he will punish their sins." (Hosea 9:9)

We do not take sin seriously enough because we do not take God seriously enough. And because we do not take our sin seriously enough nor take God seriously enough, we do not truly grasp the depth and the breadth of His amazing grace. God looks at us honestly. He is fully aware of how deep the evil runs in each and every human heart. He knows we are broken beyond repair. Sick beyond healing. Dead in our trespasses. Completely unable to save ourselves. This is why He sent His only beloved Son. He gave Him as a gift. Offered Him up freely on our behalf. He did what we could not. He took our place. Died the death we deserved. Satisfied the justice of God. Took all our unrighteousness on Himself. He carried the sins of the world on His shoulders. He who was blameless and did only what was right actually became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God. It's the most astounding, shocking, radical turn of events imaginable! Those on death row receive pardon while the most innocent man in history is executed in their place! This is the good news of the gospel, friends! And available for all who will surrender their lives to Christ!

July 6, 2018
THE TENDER LOVE OF GOD

Readings for the day: Hosea 10-14

In the midst of all the judgment, hope springs eternal. God loves His people with an everlasting love. He cannot abandon them to their fate. He cannot relinquish them or give them up. He cannot walk out on them. His love is steadfast. True. Loyal. Even in the face of betrayal and adultery and sin. I love how Hosea 11 describes God's love...

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them." (Hosea 11:1, 3-4) One thing we must always remember when reading the Scriptures is that God has revealed Himself to us as Father. Abba. Daddy. This description is a precious one every parent can understand. We teach our children to walk. We watch them take those first steps. We hold them in our arms. Comfort them when they fall. Bandage up their nicks and cuts and "owies." We lead them throughout the course of their lives, always desiring what is good for them. We provide for them. Train them. Discipline them. Teach them. This is our calling as a parent and it is notable that God chooses this particular metaphor to describe His relationship with His people.

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the Lord; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord." (Hosea 11:8-11) How many of us as parents have watched our children go astray? Watch them wander off the path? Watch them choose self-destruction? How many times have I sat in my office across from parents trying to give them hope for their addicted son or estranged daughter? How many times have I prayed these very words myself over my own children? No matter what they do, I cannot give them up. I cannot hand them over. I cannot let go. I will always love them. I will always cherish them. I will always pursue them. I imagine the same is true for every parent reading these words today. Isn't a great comfort to know God feels this same way?

All those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God. God becomes our father. We His children. Like Israel, we too have sinned. We too have gone astray. We too have chased after other gods. Idols in our lives. Whatever we wrap our lives around that is NOT God. Thankfully, our Father is merciful and gracious. He disciplines us in His love. And when we feel His discipline, what should our response be? Hosea 10:12, "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you." When we repent and turn back to God, we will find Him waiting with open arms. Ready to welcome us back home.

July 7, 2018
FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for the day: Isaiah 1-4

"The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. We know their stories. We've just read through their histories in the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation's ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced the miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendants up for disaster when he shows off his riches to the envoys of Babylon.

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged." (Isaiah 1:4) "Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!" (Isaiah 1:10) "For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence." (Isaiah 3:8)

At the same time, he offers hope. He calls them to repentance. He begs them to return to the Lord to find grace and healing and mercy. "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (Isaiah 1:16-18) He directs their attention to the glorious day of the Lord when all flesh shall witness the appearance of our God. "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." (Isaiah 2:2-3) He calls them back to faithfulness. Back to loyalty. Back to a right relationship with God. "In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain." (Isaiah 4:2-6)

Once can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. How many of us lament the state of our nation? How many of us lament the moral drift of our culture? How many of us lament the pain and suffering and sin and degradation we see all around us? We lament the lack of prayer in our schools. The absence of the Ten Commandments in public spaces. The encroaching secularism that threatens to push our faith to the margins. And yet, are we willing to confront the deeper questions of why prayer doesn't seem to fill our homes? Why the Ten Commandments aren't posted and followed in our churches? How we have marginalized our faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and return and re-commit ourselves to God's ways?

July 9, 2018
DOUBLE-MEANING

Readings for the day: Isaiah 5-8

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

The prophetic books are difficult to interpret. Mainly because they often have a double-meaning. They speak the truth to current events happening in their own day and time but they also often predict what will take place in the future as well. Such is certainly the case in Isaiah 7:14. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." This is one of the great Messianic texts Matthew picks up in his gospel but it also has immediate implications for King Ahaz. Ahaz is staring down the barrel of a great invasion. His worst enemies, Syrian and Ephraim, have joined forces to conquer his kingdom. Ahaz and his people are rightly afraid. Isaiah 7:2 even says their hearts "shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." In the midst of their fear, God sends Isaiah with a Word of comfort. A Word of hope. A Word of victory. "And say to him, 'Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, at the fierce anger of Rezin and Syria and the son of Remaliah...thus says the Lord God: "'It shall not stand, and it shall not come to pass. For the head of Syria is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is Rezin. And within sixty-five years Ephraim will be shattered from being a people. And the head of Ephraim is Samaria, and the head of Samaria is the son of Remaliah. If you are not firm in faith, you will not be firm at all.'" (Isaiah 7:4, 7-9) But Ahaz does not accept the Word of the Lord. He cannot believe it. Ahaz has spent his entire life worshiping other gods so it shouldn't surprise us when he doesn't recognize Yahweh's voice. So God takes it one step further. Not only does He give Ahaz a Word of promise but also a tangible sign to hold onto so he knows these things will come to pass. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring upon you and upon your people and upon your father's house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria!" (Isaiah 7:14-17) Some scholars suggest this is Isaiah's son who appears in the next chapter. Others suggest it is the name given to a baby born in the king's household, an event unrecorded in the Bible. Whichever it is, the point is that God will bring to pass His will for both Syria and Samaria as the Assyrian Empire rises up, spills its banks, and floods through both regions. This is the immediate meaning of the prophecy.

There is an eschatological meaning as well. As mentioned above, Matthew picks up this text and applies it to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The ultimate sign of comfort. The ultimate sign of hope. The ultimate sign of God's victory on behalf of His people. Jesus is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin and enters this world to bring eternal life through His death and resurrection. Because of Christ, we do not need to be afraid. We will not fall before our enemies. We are not left to the mercy of our circumstances. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We are set free. By His great love and mercy and grace. Like Ahaz, we hear these words, "Be careful, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint..." (Isaiah 7:4) And we are reminded again to place our trust in God.

I've been reading through the Scriptures for about two decades now. I read through the Bible every year. I study it in-depth both personally and for my profession. I have spent countless hours meditating and praying over these texts and here is what I've discovered. Not only does Scripture have an immediate meaning for those like Ahaz who are hearing it for the first time. And not only does it often have a secondary meaning as it relates to Jesus Christ or future world events. But it also takes on a third meaning. A personal application in my own life. When I read these stories and place myself in Ahaz's shoes and try to imagine his fear and trepidation; I realize

God is speaking to my life as well. My circumstances. My struggles. My fears. How often have I stood face to face with my own enemies? My heart shaking like a tree before the wind? How often has God brought me a Word of comfort, hope, and promise in those moments? How many times have I graciously been given a sign? How many times as I have waited on the Lord have I seen Him come through? Deliver the victory? My job is simply to wait. To hold onto faith. To trust. To surrender. To let Him do the work. When I do, I can look back and see the hand of God as He sovereignly directs all things according to His will in my life for my good and for His glory.

July 10, 2018
THE SALVATION OF GOD

Readings for the day: Isaiah 9-12

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:1-9)

“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Imagine living in the southern kingdom of Judah and watching in fear as the empire of Assyria rolls through Israel, destroying everything in its path. The people are scattered. The land is plundered. The leaders are killed. Nothing is left. All hope is lost. And you know you're next. It must have been a scary time. A time of national crisis. A time when the people cried out to God.

And God answers. Through the prophet Isaiah, He points His people to a glorious future. Though they walk in darkness, they will see a great light. Though they've been scattered to the four winds, they will be gathered back home. Though they have suffered and struggled, God will redeem them just as He once did when they were in Egypt. In short, God will bring salvation! Deliverance! He will usher in a new age under the reign of His Messiah.

A child shall be born. A son given. Though the House of David has been cut down to a stump, a tender shoot shall emerge. The root of Jesse will stand as a signal for all people. The Messiah will be given all authority. His rule and reign shall be marked by peace and justice and righteousness. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, giving Him wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might. He will lift up the poor and comfort the meek. His faithfulness shall know no end. He will put an end to all crying and suffering and pain. All wars and conflict will cease. Wolf and lamb. Leopard and goat. Calf and lion. Cow and bear. Toddler and cobra. All shall dwell together in peace in the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord of Hosts will do this! He will make this happen! He will bring about salvation!

What a glorious promise! I love how the people respond in Isaiah 12. “You will say in that day: “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. “Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song,

and he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 12:1-6)

Here's the thing...God has fulfilled His promise! Jesus Christ is the Messiah! The child was born! The Son was given! All authority in heaven and on earth entrusted to His hands! He gathered a people to Himself! Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Male and female. He tore down the dividing walls of hostility that existed between us and made peace with us and between us by the blood of the cross. You and I no longer have to walk in darkness. We have seen the great light! We no longer have to go thirsty for we draw our water from the wells of salvation! We can live and walk in light of God's Kingdom! As we submit our lives to His Lordship, He brings peace. He brings justice. He brings reconciliation. He covers us with His righteousness. He is faithful to forgive. He is mighty to save. He grants us wisdom and knowledge and understanding. This is the promise of God fulfilled in our lives today!

So...do you sing? Do you praise? Do you look to God for your salvation? Do you give thanks to the Lord? Do you shout His name? Tell others what He has done for you?

July 11, 2018
MACRO-PARENTING

Readings for the day: Micah 1-4

Many of us are parents. We have children we love dearly. We remember when we first held them in our arms. Fed them their first bottle. Changed their first diaper. We watched them learn to roll over, crawl, and walk. We listened with joy to those first words. As they grew, parenting became more challenging. As they developed their little personalities and their will started to clash with ours, they learned discipline. They took "time-outs." They were sent to their rooms. They were punished from time to time. They didn't like it. They cried. Screamed. Yelled. Threw their toys. It was hard to watch but we knew it was for their good. They continued to grow. Sometimes the conflict deepened. Their choices became more dangerous. More consequential. Skipping school. Getting involved in drugs. Running with the wrong crowd. Having violent altercations. Things got scary. We were forced to face our worst fears. It felt like we were losing our children. Sometimes things got so bad we had to ask them to leave the home. It was too dangerous for them to stay. They were kicked out of the nest. Forced to make their own way on their own. They went to the streets. Got involved with an even rougher crowd. Sometimes ended up in prison or jail. Our grief only deepened. Our prayers for their salvation never ceased. We begged God to help them hit rock bottom so they could turn back to Him. Back to us. Find the help they needed and begin to recover. Sometimes that happened. We watched with utter joy as the prodigal returned home. Entered treatment. Got a good job. Left their old life behind.

Now imagine you aren't talking about just one child but millions. Imagine you are God and your children – the nations of Israel and Judah - have walked away from you. They are greedy. Spoiled. Unjust. Violent. Oppressive. They are barely recognizable as Your people. They even worship other gods. You've sent them prophets to warn them. You've taken them through difficult experiences to discipline them. You've tried to draw them back only to have them walk out the door and slam it in your face over and over again. So you send them into exile. You use the nations of Assyria and Babylon to carry them off. Out of Jerusalem. Out of the Promised Land. With the hopes that they will hit rock bottom and one day return. You weep over them. You grieve over their choices. Your eyes fill with tears as you watch those you love suffer. But you know it is for their good. You know it is the only way they will ever turn back to You. You know you cannot protect them from themselves. They must learn the hard way. Their faces have to hit the pavement. They must come to the end of themselves. Recognize what they've done. Come to grips with all they've lost. Take responsibility for rejecting their Heavenly Father. Only when they hit rock bottom will they be ready for deliverance and salvation.

And that's exactly what you will do! For you will never abandon or forsake them. You will never leave them on their own. Like any parent, you long for their return. You wait expectantly at the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the prodigal. You run to them. You embrace them. You shower them with kisses. You put the signet ring on their finger. The robe on their back. And you throw the biggest party you can imagine to welcome them back home. Listen to how Micah describes it... "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." (Micah 4:1-4) It's a beautiful thing, is it not?

Now imagine you aren't talking about millions of people but billions. God has declared His love and adopted into His family children from every tribe, tongue and nation. No longer focused on national Israel, God has created a new Israel. A spiritual Israel. Having raised up children for Himself from the stones as John the Baptist once said. This new Israel is made up of Jew and Gentile alike. Founded on the Twelve Apostles. Governed by the Sermon on the Mount. Guided by the Great Commission that expands the Promised Land to the ends of the earth. Jesus is Her Lord. Her Messiah. Her King. And God is still at work disciplining His children. Confronting us. Convicting us. Challenging us. All to make us more and more into His image and likeness.

July 12, 2018
LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS

Readings for the day: Micah 5-7

I grew up going to church every Sunday. I said the creeds. Prayed the prayers. Sang the songs. My mom was a music teacher and she instilled in all of us a great love for music, especially the music of the church. My brothers and I all participated in choir and we learned the great hymns. One of my favorites growing up was a hymn titled, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." More upbeat than most, the chorus goes like this. "Leaning, leaning; Safe and secure from all alarms! Leaning, leaning; Leaning on the everlasting arms." Though I did not come to faith until college, I've always experienced God as a comforting presence. Mainly because of songs like this one that declare His nature and character. Even though I was not a believer, God was instilling in me through the music, prayers, creeds, and sermons I heard a deep understanding of who He is. Building a bridge to my heart that I would later walk across at CU.

I love how Micah concludes his prophetic work. "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." (Micah 7:18-19) In this passage we hear echoes of the great epiphany of Moses from Exodus 34 where God literally appears and reveals His divine nature and character to His people. "The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) Throughout their history. Thousands upon thousands of years. Israel leaned on the everlasting arms of their God. They trusted in His forgiveness and grace. They experienced His deep, loyal, steadfast love. They rejoiced in His great compassion. Every week when they would gather for worship, they sang. They prayed. They declared the glory of God. And they passed on their faith to each successive generation.

Why is worship so important? Why is reading Scripture every day so important? Why is coming before Christ on a regular basis crucial for our life and faith? Because we need to be reminded of God's great faithfulness. We need to be reminded of His great love and compassion. His mercy and grace. His forgiveness. We need to be reminded in the midst of judgment that while "weeping may tarry for a night, joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5b) We need to be reminded that while God will not be mocked and will by no means clear those who are guilty of sin, He will not remain angry with us forever. "For His anger is fleeting but His favor lasts a lifetime." (Psalm 30:5a) We need to be reminded that God knows our weakness and has provided a way for us to salvation. "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days...And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth." (Micah 5:2, 4)

I don't know what you might be facing today. The challenges. The crises. The difficulties. Maybe it's a health issue. Maybe it's a family issue. Maybe it's a job issue. Maybe you're staring at an uncertain future. Maybe you've made a huge mistake and you're paying the price. Let me encourage you to lean on the everlasting arms of Jesus! Trust Him. Believe in Him. Place your faith in Him today to carry you through! Maybe things are going well for you. Life is blessed. Success seems to follow you wherever you go. Your kids are doing great. Your career is on the upward swing. You're surrounded by people who love you. Praise Jesus! Thank Him for His great faithfulness! Rejoice in His favor! Share it with others.

God is the same yesterday, today and forever, friends. (Hebrews 13:8) There is no shadow or turning with Him. (James 1:17) "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Numbers 23:19) Believe Him for your life today!

July 13, 2018
ONE FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

When I reflect on my journey of faith, I see two very distinct seasons. Because I was raised in the church, God has always been a part of my life. As far back as I can remember, I would pray to Him. Talk to Him. Cry out to Him when I was in trouble. I went to church. I got involved in youth group. I sang in the choir. I went on mission trips. However, during this season of my life, God was more of an accessory. He was someone I could turn to in a time of need. He was there in case of an emergency. I treated worship as just another activity on the long list of things I was already doing in my life. Playing sports. Studying for school. Working at my job. Going out with friends. Boy Scouts. I loved my life and was glad God had a small role to play in it.

But then I went to college. I was on my own. Trying to keep one foot firmly planted in my own world and one foot planted in the Kingdom of God began to tear me apart. I couldn't hold these worlds together. There was too much temptation. Too many distractions. And I pretty quickly found myself planting both feet in my own world. Gratifying my own desires. Pursuing my own dreams. Chasing after the wind. My face hit the pavement. I crashed and burned. After a year of heavy drinking, skipping class, partying, and sexual promiscuity; I discovered my world was pretty dark. Pretty lonely. Pretty depressing. Full of failure and pain and regret. So I went back to school determined to rekindle my relationship with God. He was what was missing in my life! If I could just get a little "god" back in my life, then maybe things would return to normal. Things would right themselves and I would be back on the fast track to success.

I put one foot back in God's world. I went to church. I attended a Christian fellowship group on campus. I joined a small group Bible study. For about three to four months, I tried everything I could to right my own ship. To no avail. I was still drinking heavily. Still skipping class. Still partying. Still failing. Then I read these words during Bible study one evening, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6) "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Slowly it dawned on me that there was no way for me to get to God by my own effort. No way for me to take my feet and place them in His Kingdom. No way for me to keep God as just an accessory in my life. It was an all or nothing deal! I still remember the spot where the living Christ confronted me with this truth the following morning as I walked through campus. In that moment, He took both my feet and placed them in His world. And though I am still prone to wander, He is always faithful to lead me back home.

I share all of this to illustrate what I believe is happening in our reading today. King Ahaz is evil because his heart is divided. He's trying to keep a foot in both worlds. On the one hand, he wants to worship Yahweh. He wants to maintain the traditions of his fathers. He doesn't end Temple worship or get rid of the priesthood or anything like that. On the other hand, he sees the success of the Assyrian king. He sees the power and wealth and authority and influence the Assyrians wield. He craves that for himself. So he copies their altar. He adopts their worship practices. He believes if he can just join the "winning team", life will return to normal. He will find success. Sadly, the opposite was true. "For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel." (2 Chronicles 28:23) Ahaz's attempts to syncretize his faith led to his destruction and the destruction of all he held dear. Ahaz's attempts to satisfy all parties. Worship all gods. Serve multiple masters earn him an evil reputation. He is called evil. Faithless. And the eventual exile of his people is laid in no small part at his feet.

Is your heart divided? Are you trying to serve two masters? Trying to keep a foot in two worlds? Have you fallen into the trap of believing you can achieve both God's dream for your life and the American Dream? Fallen into the lie that you can truly "have it all?" Is God at the center of your life or is He relegated to the margins? Have you truly embraced Him or do you keep Him at arm's length? Honestly reflecting on these questions could potentially change your life.

July 14, 2018
HONOR/SHAME

Readings for the day: Isaiah 13-17

I've been reading through the Bible for over twenty years now and there's always more to learn. There's always room to grow in my understanding. When I first read through the prophetic literature of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, etc. I really struggled. I couldn't get my mind around a God who would bring such fierce judgment. Babylon. Assyria. Moab. Philistia. Syria. All face the wrath of God in our reading today. Cities are laid waste. Infants killed. Women raped. Temples desecrated. Fields burned. All that's left is emptiness. A wasteland where wild goats, hyenas, and jackals roam. Where there was once communities teeming with life. The hustle and bustle of markets. Men working out in the fields. Women cooking and cleaning. Children running and playing. Now there is nothing. The sound of silence. The great empire of Babylon has fallen. The great empire of Assyria has fallen. The great nation of Moab is no more. The ports of the Philistines left desolate.

Why did all this happen? It's a very Western, very American question. Anytime tragedy strikes, we want to know why. We want to understand. We want there to be a logic to it all. We read about such destruction and we think, "How can this be right?" "What did the people do to deserve such a fate?" "Do the crimes they commit justify the punishment?" It's because we live in what cultural anthropologists call a "guilt/innocence" culture. We view things in terms of right or wrong. Black or white. One is either guilty or innocent. Everyone is responsible for their own behavior. Everyone is judged according to their own merits. We follow the rules. We are governed by laws. You either obey or disobey and then face the consequences. It is a highly individualized way to look at the world. So when we approach a text like today, we want to know what the Babylonians – each individual Babylonian for that matter - did to deserve their fate. We want to know what the Assyrians - every Assyrian man, woman, or child - did to earn judgment. And we struggle to understand how God could kill the innocent along with the guilty.

The authors of Scripture live in an "honor/shame" culture. The highest goal in this paradigm is to preserve the honor of the community. The honor of the tribe. The honor of the family. Men are "successful" insofar as they advance their family's honor in the public sphere. Women are "successful" insofar as they maintain the family honor through their modesty and purity. There is significant emphasis placed on the externals. "What do others think?" And maintaining social status as part of the group is paramount so you will have no problem surrendering your own wants and desires in favor of what benefits the larger community.

What does all this have to do with Isaiah? Consider the following passage... "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' But you are brought down to Sheol, to the far reaches of the pit." (Isaiah 14:12-15) Often interpreted allegorically as a reference to Satan's initial sin way back in eternity, it refers more specifically to the sin of Babylon. Not content to serve simply as God's instrument of judgment on the nations that surrounded them, including the southern kingdom of Judah, they grew prideful. Arrogant. They sought to ascend to God's throne and in this way "shamed" and "dishonored" Him. It's the same with Assyria. "I will break the Assyrian in my land, and on my mountains trample him underfoot; and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder." (Isaiah 14:25) Philistia. "Wail, O gate; cry out, O city; melt in fear, O Philistia, all of you! For smoke comes out of the north, and there is no straggler in his ranks." (Isaiah 14:31) Moab. "We have heard of the pride of Moab— how proud he is!— of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; in his idle boasting he is not right." (Isaiah 16:6) All of them "shame" God by refusing to acknowledge Him. And because "shame" is viewed collectively rather than individually, the entire nation suffers judgment as God "reclaims" the honor of His name. "In that day man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not

look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the Asherim or the altars of incense." (Isaiah 17:7-8)

Understanding the "honor/shame" cultural dynamic changes the way we read Scripture. It helps us to understand God's primary goal is NOT to get us to do the right thing so much as deal with our shame. To recover the honor that was lost when Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden, realized they were naked, and hid from God's presence because they were ashamed. God demands our obedience not because he's after outward compliance with all the rules and regulations but because it is through our faithful obedience that we bring honor to His name. Honor to His family. Honor to our "tribe" as it were. Abraham honored God by his faith and was blessed. Moses honored God through his obedience and was blessed. David honored God through his repentance and heartfelt devotion and was blessed. Over and over again, we see this dynamic play itself out. Honor God – even amidst your sin and mistakes - and God will honor you. Shame God - even if you maintain outward purity and perfection - and you will bring shame upon yourself. Consider your own life. Do you seek to honor God in all you say and do? Do you seek to lift up His reputation? The reputation of His family? His tribe? His people?

July 16, 2018
A T5IME FOR EVERYTHING UNDER HEAVEN

Readings for the day: Isaiah 18-22

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

I think of this verse every time I read through the prophets. On the one hand, God is bringing His righteous judgment against a people who have forgotten Him. A people who have earned their fate by bringing shame upon themselves and their communities and their nations through their actions. Cush shall be cut off. Egypt shall fall. Babylon will be destroyed. The desert tribes of the Kedar scattered. Not even God’s chosen people will be spared as Jerusalem is laid low. At the same time, there are signs of future hope. In a stunning display of grace and mercy, God reaches out to the enemies of His people and draws them close. “And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them...In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.” (Isaiah 19:21, 23-25) There truly is a time for everything under heaven!

One of the keys to understanding and interpreting a passage like this is to try to place yourself in Isaiah’s shoes. He is the court prophet. A godly politician. A man who is familiar with world events. He speaks to kings and princes and the rulers of his day. He knows the intricate plans they’ve laid. He knows the complex challenges they face. He knows the struggles and hardships and burdens that come along with leading a nation at a time when one is surrounded by far more powerful neighbors to the north (Assyria), to the east (Babylon), and to the south (Egypt). Israel has always sat at the crossroads of the Middle East. They have served as a highway for invading armies for centuries. And yet, as Isaiah prayerfully ponders all these things, the Holy Spirit opens His eyes. He takes a step back and surveys the ever-shifting political landscape from God’s perspective. He begins to see how God is at work orchestrating the course of human events. Sovereignly directing the rise and fall of empires. Bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan.

Now think about our own context. The rise of social media makes us all “court prophets” of a sort. All of us are given total access (seemingly) to the best laid plans of our political leaders. As we watch certain events unfold, we are confronted with the complex challenges of a globally connected world. If Twitter is to be believed, the world is either coming to an end or its best days are ahead. Depending on one’s political affiliations, we are in for the best of times or the worst of times. Depending on one’s personal convictions and religious/social leanings, our politicians represent the anti-Christ or are being used by God to righteously bring about His will. Would that we would follow Isaiah’s example! Take a step back! Prayerfully ponder what over what we are seeing and ask the Holy Spirit for divine wisdom to interpret the signs. God is at work, friends! He is still on His throne! Still reigning from on high! He is orchestrating the course of human events. He is sovereignly directing the rise and fall of human empires. He is bringing all things together in order to accomplish His divine plan. As Christians we should know better than to place our trust in kings or princes or presidents or prime ministers! We should know better than to place our trust in the uncertainty of a free market economy! We should know better than to believe our nation is somehow exempt from the volatility of human history! Our hope should place our hopes in the next worldwide summit or peace treaty or trade agreement! Instead, we should place our confidence in God alone. Under God, every challenge becomes an opportunity to grow in faith. Every crushing disappointment an opportunity to learn more about the sufficiency of God’s amazing grace. Every victory and success an opportunity to praise God and to give thanks.

July 17, 2018
WHY ARE WE HERE?

Readings for the day: Isaiah 23-26

I've been reading a lot about honor/shame cultures lately. Trying to learn as much as I can since I spend a great deal of time in Africa each year. It's not only helped me understand the cross-cultural ministry context better, it's also helping me understand God better. Consider this passage I ran across yesterday in a book titled, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*, by Jayson Georges. "The world equates humility with shame and pride with honor. But God inverts this social matrix. Pride ultimately produces shame, and humility is the counter-intuitive path to genuine honor." It resonates, does it not? All of us have probably experienced this on a personal level at some point in our lives.

What's true for us as individuals is also true for our families, communities, tribes, even nations. What was the great sin of Tyre and Sidon? Two of the great commercial trading centers in the ancient near east? Pride. Tyre saw itself as "the bestower of crowns, whose merchants were princes, whose traders were the honored of the earth..." (Isaiah 23:8) Sidon enjoyed tremendous wealth and privilege. "And on many waters your revenue was the grain of Shihor, the harvest of the Nile; you were the merchant of the nations." (Isaiah 23:3) In their pursuit of worldly honor and riches and power, they forgot the Lord. They dishonored God. And they paid the price. "Wail, O ships of Tarshish, for Tyre is laid waste, without house or harbor! Be ashamed, O Sidon, for the sea has spoken..." (Isaiah 23:1, 4)

But it's not just Tyre and Sidon who make this mistake. The whole earth has forgotten God. The whole earth pursues wealth and power and honor and glory apart from God. The whole earth seeks to exalt itself rather than humble themselves before their creator. Therefore, the Lord will bring His righteous judgment. No one shall escape. "Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word." (Isaiah 24:1-3) And why does the Lord speak such a harsh word? Why does the Lord render such a harsh judgment? Because the Lord is jealous for the glory of His Name. He is jealous for His own honor. He will not rest until the whole earth sings His praises. "They lift up their voices, they sing for joy; over the majesty of the Lord they shout from the west. Therefore in the east give glory to the Lord; in the coastlands of the sea, give glory to the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One." (Isaiah 24:14-16)

Human beings were made for one glorious purpose...to bring honor to their Creator. To enjoy God and to worship Him alone forever. To praise God for all eternity. This is the great work we were designed for. This is the great work we were made for. And it is to our abiding shame that we neglect this great task and forget our God. It is to our great shame that we "exchange the truth of God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." (Romans 1:25) We pursue worldly honor and worldly wealth and worldly power to our own destruction. Because we have turned away from God and gone our own way, He has "given us up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. We become filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. We are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." (Romans 1:28-31) And God simply will not allow such evil to stand. So He brings judgment. He lays low the proud. He shames the arrogant. He dishonors the honored among all the earth. "The Lord of hosts has purposed it, to defile the pompous pride of all glory, to dishonor all the honored of the earth." (Isaiah 23:9)

This is why we must consider carefully the priorities of our lives. Why do we do the things we do? What drives us? What gives us purpose and fulfillment? Are we truly seeking to honor God in all we say and do? Or are we trying to steal a bit of that honor for ourselves? Are we truly seeking to glorify God in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, and places of work? Or these just means we are using to justify our own ends? Prayerfully consider these things, friends! Be honest with yourself! Get real! And then humble yourself before God lest you fall under His judgment.

July 18, 2018
CONSECRATION

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalm 48

"The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him." - Dwight L. Moody

Hezekiah is a remarkable man. The polar opposite of his father. Where his father was unfaithful, Hezekiah was faithful. Where his father was morally compromised, Hezekiah was pure. Where his father was evil, Hezekiah was good. One wonders where Hezekiah learned such faithfulness. What made him turn from his father's ways? Who taught him the ways of the Lord? How did he know to cleanse the Temple, re-institute the Levites, and celebrate the Passover? These things had been absent for decades. The Temple had been desecrated. The priests and Levites forgotten. And yet somehow Hezekiah's heart was not only stirred to seek the Lord in this pagan environment but God provided faithful teachers along the way to instruct and guide him. They remain nameless. Their identities known only to God. But what an impact they make through this great man!

Hezekiah is a great example of what can happen when key leaders seek the heart of God. God doesn't need our wealth. He doesn't need our power. He doesn't need our influence or position or authority. He simply needs our hearts. If we seek to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; His promise is He will use us to make Kingdom-sized impact on those around us. Hezekiah "trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him." (2 Kings 18:5) He dedicated his life to the destruction of idolatry. He tore down the pagan shrines that dotted the hillsides. He destroyed the bronze serpent Moses had made in the wilderness to save the people from poisonous snakes. He cleansed the Temple. He restored true worship. He sent messengers throughout the length and breadth of the nation to invite people to celebrate the Passover meal. And even though the people had forgotten how to cleanse themselves in preparation, Hezekiah interceded on their behalf, calling on God to honor the intent of their hearts. The impact of this time of celebration was so profound, the people asked to stay an additional seven days to keep worshiping! "And the people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness, and the Levites and the priests praised the Lord day by day, singing with all their might to the Lord. And Hezekiah spoke encouragingly to all the Levites who showed good skill in the service of the Lord. So they ate the food of the festival for seven days, sacrificing peace offerings and giving thanks to the Lord, the God of their fathers. Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast for another seven days. So they kept it for another seven days with gladness." (2 Chronicles 30:21-23) Once the feast was complete, the people – inspired by the worship of the True and Living God and Hezekiah's example - returned to their homes to continue to purge the nation of its idolatry. "Now when all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah and broke in pieces the pillars and cut down the Asherim and broke down the high places and the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, and in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all. Then all the people of Israel returned to their cities, every man to his possession." (2 Chronicles 31:1) This is nothing short of revival!

I know a lot of Christians who pray for revival. They pray regularly for a fresh movement of God's Spirit through their lives, churches, communities, and their nation. If that describes you...and I hope it does!!!...I want to encourage you to follow Hezekiah's example. Don't wait! Don't delay! Simple begin to seek God's face right where you are! If you are a mother or father, seek God's heart for your home and children. If you are a student or employee, seek God's heart for your school or place of work. If you are a business, community, or church leader, seek God's heart for the people you serve. If you are a national leader, seek God's heart for your country. The secret to Hezekiah's success had very little to do with his authority as king. It had everything to do with his heart for God. "Thus Hezekiah did throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with

the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.” (2 Chronicles 31:20-21)

I want to challenge you to pray 2 Chronicles 31:20-21 for yourself. For example, “Father, I want to do what is good and right and faithful before You. Every work I undertake at my job, in my home, with my friends, at my church I do in accordance with Your commands. I am seeking You, Father. I want to serve you with all my heart. May everything I do prosper in order to bring glory to Your great name.” Now you try. Insert your name. Insert your situation. Insert your circumstances and seek God with all your heart. Put Him to the test. Call on His faithfulness. I trust you will be amazed at what takes place.

The world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to Him. Your spouse has yet to see what God will do with a husband or wife fully consecrated to Him. You children have yet to see what God will do with a mother or father fully consecrated to Him. Your boss or teacher has yet to see what God will do with an employee or student fully consecrated to Him. Your church or community has yet to see what God will do with a woman or man fully consecrated to Him. Consecrate yourselves, friends, to the Lord! Let Him use you for His purposes and His glory in the world!

July 19, 2018
IN THAT DAY...

Readings for the day: Isaiah 27-30

"In that day..."

The Lord will punish and slay Leviathan

The Lord will plant His vineyard

Israel will blossom and bear fruit

The Lord will gather all His people from where they have been exiled back home to Jerusalem

The Lord will be a crown of glory to His people

The Lord will restore justice to the land

The Lord will give strength to those who defend the gates

These are just a few of the promises gleaned from the reading today. God acting on behalf of His people. God bringing mercy out of judgment. Peace out of conflict. Honor out of shame. God not passing over the iniquity of His people or allowing sin and shame to pass but instead purifying His people through righteous judgment and holy discipline that He might restore them once again.

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. Here God confronts His people with a powerful Word. "Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter..." I think about our own culture. The covenant we too have made with death. Abortion on demand. Suicide. Euthanasia. I think about the lies we believe. Our seeming inability to sift through what's true and false. Our tendency to naively accept whatever fits our worldview rather than pursue honesty and transparency. I grieve our propensity towards violence. School shootings. Racist-motivated hate crimes. Sexual abuse. I grieve our morbid fascination with self-destruction. Legalization of marijuana and other harmful substances. Addiction to opioids and other pain-killers. All in an attempt to numb our pain. I grieve the fact that we continue to seek refuge in the lies we tell ourselves and in the falsehoods we cling to at all costs. If I were not a Christian, I would despair.

But then I read these words, "Therefore thus says the Lord God, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.' And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter." Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand..." Once again, I am overwhelmed. God does what I cannot do. God does what we cannot do. God does what no government or business or church or non-profit agency – no matter how pure and righteous their motives - can do! He annuls the covenant we made with death! He sets aside our agreement with Sheol! He lays a foundation in Zion. A sure foundation built on tested and precious stone on which we can build our lives! He doesn't ask us to rescue ourselves. He doesn't ask us to clean up our act. He doesn't expect us to find a way out of the mess we've made. He simply steps in. He restores justice. He restores righteousness. He sweeps away all the lies and falsehoods. He destroys death. He robs the grave. And He grants His people new life...abundant life...in Him!

Will we still sin? Yes. Are we still a rebellious people? Absolutely. Will we still run from God? Crawl off the altar? Try to build our lives on shifting sand? All that and more. But thankfully God is patient with us. "Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him." (Isaiah 30:18) And because God is faithful, we can be sure a day is coming when...

We will weep no more
We will see Him face to face
We will know His ways and walk in them
We will tear down every idol in our lives
Our brokenness will be bound and our wounds healed
We will sing a new song in the night
We will keep the holy feast

We will witness the victory of the Lord our God

Friends, that day is coming and is already here! In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the new day has dawned! God has laid His cornerstone! God has set His foundation in Zion! God has annulled our covenant with death! God has set aside our agreement with the grave! God has given us the victory! All we have to do is trust. Believe. Have faith. Place our lives in His hands. He will never let us down.

July 20, 2018
GOD IS OUR STABILITY

Readings for the day: Isaiah 31-35

I get seasick. Not just a little queasy but over the top, barfing multiple times over the side, green-faced seasick. The first time I realized this I was in Maine and had signed up to go deep sea fishing off the coast. It was a stormy day. We were in a small boat. The wave action was fierce once we moved beyond the breakers. I paid quite a bit of money – for a college student – to go out on this half day trip. I was hoping to catch something big. Have a great story to tell. Alas, all I did for five hours was throw up over the side. It was honestly one of the most miserable experiences of my life. Motion sickness is caused by the disconnect between what we see with our eyes and what we feel in our inner ear. If the two don't match, you're in trouble and the symptoms won't resolve until you find stability. Make it back to shore. Put your feet on solid ground.

Today, Isaiah describes a form of spiritual motion sickness. There is a spiritual disconnect between what God's people say and what they do. They worship God with their lips but not from their hearts. The result is judgment. The result is pain. The result is suffering. They are in danger of being exiled from the Promised Land. And it's not just them. Because Israel abandoned her calling to be the light to the nations, the world has been left in darkness. No one to show the pagan nations how to worship the True and Living God. So they too come under judgment. They too experience the righteous wrath of God. There is no place that is safe. Not Egypt. Not Assyria. Not Zion. All have sinned greatly. All have abandoned true worship. All have brought shame and dishonor to God and treated Him with utter contempt. The result is chaos. Instability. The earth reels and quakes beneath their feet at the sound of God's voice.

But all hope is not lost! God Himself provides a way where there is no way. A highway for the redeemed called the Way of Holiness. (Is. 35:8-10) It's a safe way. A secure way. A road for those who love the Lord with all their hearts, souls, and minds. It's a stable way for those who walk on it honor God for who He is. "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure." (Is. 33:5-6) It's a peaceful way because those who walk on it hunger and thirst after righteousness. "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." (Is. 32:17) It's a noble way. A way of honor and glory and respect and privilege. "He who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." (Is. 32:8) And because it is all these things and more, the redeemed rejoice when they find it. "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Is. 35:10)

It's a beautiful vision, is it not? Don't you find yourself longing to walk there? To experience the abundance of peace, stability, justice, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, nobility and salvation that walking such a road promises? Doesn't your heart long to sing and rejoice and burst with everlasting joy? Believe it or not, the way is open to you even now! Jesus Christ says "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) All the promises of God are hid in Christ. All the riches of God are available to those who trust Christ. All the honor and glory of God is revealed in Christ and is available to those who would place their faith in Him. Those who profess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts God raised Him from the dead are saved. And walking in salvation means you are already walking this road! So don't be afraid to claim that which is already yours in Christ Jesus! To open your hands and heart to receive from Christ all He has promised! All He has won for you through His life, death, and resurrection!

July 21, 2018
ONLY ONE GOD

Readings for the day: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalm 76

A few years ago, I was having a conversation with one of my children who was asking me about a friend of hers who was struggling. She was depressed. Anxious. Afraid. Lonely. Being bullied at school. I asked about her faith. Was she a Christian? Did she believe in Jesus Christ? No, came the answer. But she does pray. She is a spiritual person. She believes in a personal spirit animal. I asked if she'd prayed to the spirit animal about her struggles? Yes. All the time. But nothing happens? That's right. Could it be that nothing happens because there is no such thing as a spirit animal? That she's worshiping something that doesn't exist and is therefore completely unable to help? Might the answer she's looking for be found in Jesus Christ? And are you willing to talk to her about Him? It was a great conversation. Hard but good. Heartbreaking to hear all this young woman was going through but hopeful because my child now had the opportunity to share Christ with her.

Today's reading highlights an important truth. We live in a religiously pluralistic world. A world full of all sorts of gods and goddesses. A world that is growing more religious by most measures. A world full of competing ideologies and worldviews. A world full of idols. Such has always been the case. In Hezekiah's time, every tribe had their own god. They worshiped their gods. Sacrificed to their gods. Served their gods. In return, their gods were supposed to provide for them. Protect them. Give them victory over enemies. So when a nation like Assyria invaded, the battle wasn't just between kings and armies but between the gods they served. If Assyria won, their god was more powerful. If they lost, their god was weak. "Beware lest Hezekiah mislead you by saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (Isaiah 36:18-20)

Assyria has established their dominance. Their god has thus far proved more powerful than the tribal gods of the other nations. But the Assyrians have misplaced their trust. They believe in idols. Gods who are not gods. Further, their victories are hollow because the nations they have conquered also worship false gods. Now things are different. Now they have come up against the one true and living God of the universe. The One who reigns in glory high above the heavens. The One who directs the affairs of all men. Hezekiah doesn't need his army. He doesn't need chariots and horses. The Lord is on his side and it is enough. "O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth. Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear; open your eyes, O Lord, and see; and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations and their lands, and have cast their gods into the fire. For they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord." (Isaiah 37:16-20)

We often fall into the trap of believing as long as someone is spiritual, it's enough. As long as someone worships something – call it whatever - it is enough. As long as they acknowledge the existence of a deity on some level it is enough. It's different names for the same reality. Like the "COEXIST" bumper stickers you see on the back of cars. But that's simply not true. Allah and Yahweh are not the same. Muhammed and Jesus are not the same. Christians worship a different God than our Muslim, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Hindu, and Buddhist friends. Biblically speaking, they worship false gods and their false worship has consequences. Their gods cannot answer them when they cry out. Their gods cannot heal. Cannot comfort. Cannot provide. Cannot protect because they do not exist. As Hezekiah points out in his prayer, "They were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone." We might put it this way in our time, "They are no gods but the work of men's imaginations, crafted and created to serve our own purposes."

This was the point I was making to my own children. Our faith is not a matter of opinion. It doesn't rest on sincerity or how strongly we hold to our convictions. Our faith is real because it trusts in a God who is real. Who is alive. Who reigns and rules from heaven even now. Who is with us. Who's Spirit dwells in the heart of every believer. Who hears our prayers. Who breaks through time and space to work miracles on our behalf. Who actually came to earth. Walked among us. Taught us the ways of His Kingdom. Who suffered and died on our behalf. Who rose again. These aren't just philosophical truths we believe but historical facts that undergird our faith in a way that sets us apart from all others.

I don't know what you are dealing with today. The challenges you face. The burdens you carry. I don't know what your friends and loved ones are struggling with but I encourage you to pray the prayer Hezekiah prayed. "O Lord our God, save us that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord."

July 23, 2018
TESTING

Readings for the day: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33

I am supposed to be on a plane somewhere over the Atlantic. On my way to a ministry called Hope Haven outside of Kigali, Rwanda. Kristi and I were given this trip by a dear friend and it's something we've been looking forward to for some time now. Last evening, we arrived at the airport as scheduled. Got all checked in. Went to the gate. That's when we started noticing the delays. Scheduled to leave at midnight, the flight was pushed back to 3AM. Then 4AM. Then 5AM. Then 6AM. Our five hour layover in New York was shot. We would miss our connecting flight to Doha, Qatar. Then came the really bad news. After waiting for hours, we were told around three in the morning that the flight had been canceled. Brutal. People rushed to the desk. They were angry. Frustrated. Plans were disrupted. Carefully coordinated schedules came apart. One man would miss seeing his son who was planning on leaving the country for a month. Another woman would miss her chemo appointment. Others would not be able to make work the next day. It wasn't the airlines' fault. The weather was just too bad to fly.

Strangely enough, I feel at peace. Though disappointed that we will lose a day and a half in country, I found myself giving thanks for small blessings along the way. An airline attendant who worked for hours to rebook our entire itinerary. Switching airlines. Coordinating connections. Shawn made it possible for us to get to Hope Haven this week. (Provided the weather doesn't intervene again...) An Uber driver came to pick us up at 4AM. Matt is a young Christian who's struggling in his faith. We were able to spend an hour on the way home encouraging him, sharing with him, and when we arrived we prayed over him before he left. His tears of joy in our driveway at almost 5AM were precious. After getting a few hours of sleep, Kristi and I now have an unplanned, unscheduled day to spend together. (Something with four kids that never...ever...happens!) Yes, there are still things to do but we will go to dinner and a movie later. Just the two of us.

How do you respond to tests when they come? 2 Chronicles 32:31 makes it clear God often sends tests our way. "And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left Hezekiah to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart." Do you respond with pride? Anger? Frustration? A sense of entitlement? Before we left for our trip, our family went to Subway to eat. One of our girls ended up with the wrong sandwich. She wept. It was a teachable moment to help her understand mistakes get made. Sandwiches get messed up. Plans go awry. Flights get canceled. Do we respond to such tests with faith or with fear? Do we trust or do we get resentful? Do we really believe God is sovereign over all things and thereby see tests as opportunities to see Him work in a fresh way or do we only see the obstacles such tests place in the path of our own plans? How do you respond to tests when they come?

Hezekiah experiences an unbelievable miracle. God heals him from a terminal disease. Furthermore, God confirms the healing by giving him the miraculous sign of the shadow cast by the sun move backwards ten steps. Hezekiah's response? He grew prideful. Took God's blessings in his life for granted. He failed to maintain a godly perspective on all his success and wealth and privilege. So God sent envoys from a foreign land to test his heart. To see whether or not Hezekiah would honor God in the presence of these pagan witnesses. Sadly, Hezekiah failed.

Sadly, I too often fail as well. I too often see interruptions, disruptions, changes, etc. as obstacles in my way. Barriers thrown up that prevent me from getting where I feel like I need to go. Thankfully, last evening, in the presence of many people who may or may not believe in Christ, I was able to maintain a godly perspective. I was able to bless amidst all the cursing. Be a source of encouragement in the midst of all the anger and frustration. Show kindness rather than be rude. I was able to honor God and the result is peace. Peace about our plans. Peace about the immediate future. Peace about our trip. May God grant you His perspective in whatever trial or testing comes your way!

July 24, 2018
I WILL HOLD YOUR HAND

Readings for the day: Isaiah 40-42, Psalm 46

One of my favorite memories is of the first time we took our son Josiah to the beach. We were living in Mobile, AL and we took a short day trip to Dauphin Island. Josiah had just turned two and we were excited to introduce him to the Gulf of Mexico. We parked. Grabbed all our stuff. Chloe ran on ahead. Kristi and I were walking with Josiah. When we got to the beach, he started to run towards the water. I was pumped for him, thinking this was shaping up to be a great day. After getting about halfway, his little legs suddenly dug in. He stopped so fast he almost left skid marks in the sand! He stretched out his little arms and started shouting at the waves. "You stop! You stop!" They didn't obey. He got more frustrated, kept yelling, started crying, and finally sat down. His little two year old brain just couldn't make sense of the movement of the waves and he was scared. Watching all this go by, I quickly dumped all our stuff and went to Josiah's side. He looked up at me, his dad, with big eyes full of tears. Pointed to the waves and said, "Don't stop, daddy. Don't stop." I picked him up in my arms to calm him down. Then I set him back down on the beach, grabbed his hand, and we walked to the water together.

Today's reading is awesome. The picture of God taking us by the hand and leading us, guiding us, showing us the way is tender and special. Isaiah speaks of a God who comforts. A God who forgives. A God who gathers His people in His arms like a shepherd gathers little lambs. Let the power of these words wash over you as you reflect and pray today...

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord 's hand double for all her sins. (Is. 40:1-2)

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. (Is. 40:11)

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. (Is. 40:28-29)

Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Is. 41:10)

For I, the Lord your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, Fear not, I am the one who helps you...I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. (Is. 41:13-14)

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. (Is. 41:17)

I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations... (Is. 42:6)

And I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them. (Is. 42:16)

There is a lot in life that makes us afraid. Crisis. Uncertainty. Unexpected experiences. Illness. Disease. Job loss. Aging. Growing up. These things are like waves crashing on the shores of our lives. We cannot stop them anymore than Josiah could stop the wave action in the gulf. What we can do is let God take us by the hand. Lead us to the water's edge. And help us find safety, security, and peace in His presence. When we do, we discover the very things we fear become opportunities for significant spiritual growth. Our greatest trials become the source of our greatest victories. Our greatest struggles become our greatest strengths. Playing in the surf of life is where the action is and with God at our side, we have nothing to fear. Whatever you may be facing today, know God is with you! He is at your side! If you reach out, He will take you by the hand!

July 25, 2018
CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.

Readings for the day: Isaiah 43-45, Psalm 80

I've been staring at a map for hours. Watching as we make our way from Istanbul to Kigali. We pass over Cairo, Khartoum, Juba, and Entebbe. Out the window to the east, I see names like Bahir Dar, Asmera, Djibouti, Jeddah, and Mogadishu. (There's not much to the west...just a whole lot of desert.) We've flown over Turkey, Egypt, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. I've fallen love with this part of the world. God has given me a heart for the people here. I have friends in some of these places. In others, they are still strangers though I hope one day to visit and get to know them. There is much darkness in this part of the world. A lot of idolatry. The worship of false gods. Isaiah's words are not so strange when you've seen some of the things I've seen. "The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it." (Isaiah 44:13-15) You see, I've met these carpenters. I've seen the craftsmen hard at work fashioning their idols. I've watched them bow down before them and it shatters my heart. I've wept over the lost. I've held those who are sick. I've prayed with those who are dying. I've seen the desperately poor. And I've dedicated my life to bringing them the hope of the gospel.

"But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) God created me for such a time as this. God has fashioned me for this purpose. He redeemed me so many years on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder so that I might fulfill His great plan to bring the gospel to the nations. This is why He called me by name. To set me apart. To serve His purposes. To take all that I am and all that I have and use me for His glory. I have no identity of my own. I have nothing to call my own. This is not just something I do in my spare time or support with the leftovers of my life. This is literally the reason I exist. "Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant...I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Isaiah 44:21-22)

Now you may be tempted to believe dismiss this as my calling. As something that is unique to Doug Resler but nothing could be further from the truth. Every single person who has called on the name of the Lord has been saved and set apart for this glorious purpose. To bring the gospel to the nations! Starting at home and extending to the ends of the earth. Every resource you have been given. Every gift you have received. Every talent you have developed. Every life experience you have gone through, God has carefully orchestrated that you might serve His divine purposes. (This is true whether you acknowledge Him or not. Just consider the example of Cyrus the Persian!!!) The reality is you don't have to go to Africa to see idolatry. You don't have to go to the Middle East to see the worship of false gods. Our nation and our neighborhoods are just as dark as places like Juba and Khartoum and Entebbe. The people we live among need the gospel just as desperately as the people I will have the opportunity to serve this week in Kigali. When it comes to the Kingdom of God. When it comes to eternal life. We hold no advantage. We have no privilege of position. We will not be "boarding" first or get any special treatment. God has given us a truly great commission. To share the good news of the gospel. To go and tell the nations of all He has done! To sing a new song! To lift up praise to our King! To place our lives in His hands for Him to use as He sees fit according to His divine plan.

"Let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! Restore us, O Lord God of hosts! Let your face shine, that we may be saved!" (Psalms 80:17-19)

July 26, 2018
LET GOD CARRY YOU

Readings for the day: Isaiah 46-49, Psalm 135

You have a choice. Either carry your god or let God carry you. Either you load yourself down with the idols of your lives. Idols that are false. Dead. Cannot save. Or you let God bear you up on eagle's wings. I love how Isaiah 46 puts it, "Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:1-4) The picture Isaiah paints here is of the foreign nations carrying their gods around from place to place. They put their gods on carts borne by beasts of burden. They are heavy loads. The oxen have to strain to keep going. And all for naught as they are dead and empty. So the result is defeat. Exile. Captivity. Contrast this with the Living God of Israel. No idol can depict him. No statue or totem to carry. So strange was Israel's faith that many of their neighbors considered them atheist! Because they didn't appear to even have a god! And yet their God is real. Alive. Active. Bears them up from birth even to their old age. They didn't make him, He made them. They didn't bear him, He bore them. They didn't carry him, He carries them. They didn't save him, He saves them.

You and I are faced with this same choice everyday. Sure, our idols are not as obvious. At least that's what we tell ourselves. We don't have statues or totems or anything like that. Instead, we have bank accounts. Homes. Careers. Relationships. These are the things we place our trust in rather than the Living God. We place our faith in ourselves. We worship ourselves. All our energy and resources are directed towards making sure our needs, our wants, our desires are fulfilled. We are told we deserve this. We are told we've earned this. We're told we want this. That we would be nothing without it. Life is not worth living unless you have it all. Such lies place burdens on our shoulders too heavy to carry. They wear us down. They sap us of our strength. All of us know the rat race we're on is killing us. We cannot maintain the pace. So what's the answer?

Turn to God. Let Him bear the burden of your life. Trust the One who shaped and formed you in your mother's womb. Trust the One who gave you breath and life at your birth. Trust the One who endowed you with all gifts and talents and abilities you have. Trust the One who knows every hair on your head. If you'll let Him, He will lift you up. If you'll lean on Him, He will give you strength. If you trust Him, He will never let you down. He has made you. He has borne you. He has carried you. He will save you. This is his promise.

This week I met a new friend. His name is Nankpak. He is from Nigeria. He is a young man around 24 years of age. He exemplifies what Isaiah is talking about. He has suffered unimaginable tragedy in his life. Boko Haram killed his parents and siblings and tried to take his life. He still bears the scars from the machete wounds on his back. He has a bullet in his side. But God saved him. God protected him. God delivered him. One would think such a man would be bitter and angry. One would think such a man might seek vengeance against those who killed his family. Not Nakpak. The gospel has set him free. And he believes God has a special plan for his life. He believes he's been called to fight the rise of infectious disease in his country. He has already achieved a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He will serve the next few years as a teacher in his country as part of a compulsory service program run by the government for those who graduate college. Then he plans on going back to school for a master's degree. Because his father was a pastor, Nakpak is also considering ministry or perhaps combining the two in some way in the future. His is one story among many that inspires because he shows me what it means to place my trust in God.

July 27, 2018
SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for the day: Isaiah 50-53

Perhaps it is providential I am reading about the Suffering Servant on the very day I am to meet and have dinner with Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda. Bishop John writes and speaks powerfully on the subject of the genocide that horrified a watching world in 1994. He wrestles deeply with the question, "Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?" And he comes out the other side with this answer, "Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I'll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery." (The Bishop of Rwanda)

I cannot fathom the journey so many in this country have endured. The horror. The pain. The suffering. It's immense. Indescribable. Beyond words. And yet, I would argue the forgiveness and reconciliation they have found is equally, if not more, profound. The other day I asked a woman if she was ethnic Tutsi or Hutu.

"Neither" was her reply. "Here we are all Rwandan." She went on to describe some of the hell she and her family had been through and the freedom they had found through forgiveness. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection.

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed...He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand...Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:3-5, 7, 10, 12)

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for the transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in Rwanda. Bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He is stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and grace. It's truly incredible and it is available to all who would place their trust in Him. Friends, if God can bring about reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda can He not accomplish the same in our lives as well? Can He not bring together husband and wife on the verge of divorce? Can He not bring back together children and parents who've been estranged? Can He not help Democrats and Republicans find common ground? Or heal the racial tensions in our own country? These are just a few of the problems we face that only the gospel can solve.

What is required? Repentance. Confession. Truth-telling. Courage. Faith. Humility. Most of all, a deep and abiding and enduring trust in the power of the gospel.

July 28, 2018
CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

Readings for the day: Isaiah 54-58

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, taught that we learn to hear God's voice in three primary ways. Oratio – Prayer. Meditatio - Meditation. En Tentatio - Within the “tensions” of real life. It is this last one I find impacting me this morning.

I am in Rwanda. A nation still recovering from a horrific genocide that resulted in the death of over 1.1 million people. Spurred on by a racist national government with a history of systematic abuse and oppression, many ordinary, everyday people turned into rabid killers. They murdered and raped friends. Family members. Neighbors. Co-workers. Things turned so evil that some pastors turned on their congregations. Turning church buildings into charnel houses. Luring their parishioners into traps with the promise of safety. One pastor even bulldozed his own church down on the heads of those he served. These events provide a dark backdrop to these words from Isaiah this morning...

“Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it? Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." (Isaiah 58:3-8)

Rwanda has been known for many years as a Christian nation. Some 90% of the population claimed to know Christ prior to the genocide. So how does one adequately explain how these same people ended carrying out one of the most gruesome pogroms in human history? Bishop John Rucyahana, a key figure in the forgiveness and reconciliation movement in the wake of the genocide, suggests it is because their Christianity only went skin deep. It hadn't penetrated to the heart. Though they worshiped. Though they fasted and prayed. Though they had the appearance of godliness, they did not love God with their hearts. Isaiah was facing a similar situation in his own time. The people of God worshiped, fasted, sang, made sacrifices. They appeared to follow God's commands but all the while they were seeking their own pleasure. Their own power. The results were obvious to anyone who could see. Oppression of the weak. Violence. Dissent. Pride.

In the face of evil, God calls His people back to Himself. He calls them to lay aside their own comfort and protection. Their own safety and security. Their own wants and desires to serve a higher calling. A greater purpose. To humble themselves before the Lord and lay their lives and their future in His hands. Prior to returning to Rwanda, Bishop John was leading a flourishing ministry in Uganda. He was doing God's work and many people were being saved. But God wanted Bishop John to leave his comfortable life and return to his own country. Bishop John reports hearing God telling him, “If you do not go there and present the healing gospel, then the fate of Rwanda will be in the hands of those who carry guns. If God is the remedy and the solution, whom shall He use, if you don't allow Him to use you?” This powerful message from the Holy Spirit convicted Bishop John and he laid everything aside to return home. Isaiah calls his people to a similar return. To return back to God in faithfulness and service. To “loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless

poor into your house..." God promises that when His people commit their ways to Him, their light shall breakforth like the dawn and the glory of the Lord will be their rearguard.

So...here's the challenge for us...do we believe these words are as much for us as they were for the people of God in Isaiah's time? For the Hutus and Tutsis of Rwanda in the 1990's? Do we believe God has called us to place our lives in His service? To give all that we have and all that we are to a higher calling? A greater purpose? To set aside our own agendas and let God guide and direct our steps? This is what it means to follow Christ. There are no other options. There is no other way. Only full and undivided devotion will do. How will you live your life for Christ today?

July 30, 2018
REBUILDING

Readings for the day: Isaiah 59-63

"They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations." (Isaiah 61:4)

This is a powerful verse to read in Rwanda. A nation with a tragic history of ethnic violence that resulted in the deaths of over 1.1 million people. Not a single person was left untouched by the genocide. Every single person suffered the trauma of either watching their family and friends die or participating in the killing themselves. If you ever wanted to know what national PTSD looks like, Rwanda would be a good case study.

Bishop John Rucyahana is a key figure in the unity and reconciliation movement. God has used him specifically to rebuild ancient ruins. Raise up former devastations. Repair ruined cities and recover from the devastation of the last generation. He has dedicated his life – in the spirit of Isaiah 61 – to proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor even in the face of great evil. Though retired from the Anglican priesthood, he is committed to continuing his work until his dying breath. Listen to what he shares in his book, *The Bishop of Rwanda...*

"There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery."

"We are talking about shedding miles of tears before one is able to forgive. And to repent of such cruelty requires divine motivation and the divine presence just to attempt it. It cannot be done without God. As a human being, to be able to repent of such demonic cruelty requires the cross of Jesus right in the middle of it."

"No one can convince me that there was not demonic influence in all of this. And that convinces me even more to bring in the gospel, the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, to come against this demonic presence."

"When I began announcing programs for healing and forgiveness, some people criticized me for not moving on. But this is not something you can simply move on from without divine help. You don't forget the brutal murders of your loved ones. It is not even our mission to tell people to forget, but only to forgive with God's help. And you certainly can't forgive yourself for killing innocent people. God has to be a part of that."

"The hope for Rwanda does not lie in the hands of the international community. The hope for Rwanda lies in the hands of a God who is capable of changing human hearts."

"There cannot be any cruelty greater than the cruelty that was in Rwanda, and therefore there is no grace greater than the grace that is in Rwanda. It is a grace that frees people from great cruelty and allows them to share life. And that grace comes from the cross of Jesus Christ. There is no magic here. It's the power of the divine grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's the hand of God."

The genocide of Rwanda is simply an outward manifestation of the genocide we all carry in our hearts. Anger. Rage. Hate. These are emotions we experience everyday. Social media only exacerbates the problem. Providing pure oxygen to keep the inferno burning as hot as possible. According to Gregory Stanton, president of Genocide Watch, genocides occur in well-defined stages. "Classification" occurs when we divide people up into groups, usually with an "us vs. them" mentality. "Dehumanization" takes place as we seek to make those who are different less human on some level. "Polarization" creates a national atmosphere where groups no longer associate, respect, or even talk to each other. They simply are enemies. "Identification" begins happening as

certain influential individuals are targeted for hate and abuse. I see such things taking place all the time in our culture and it is truly horrifying to consider the consequences of our attitudes and actions.

Just as the gospel is the only hope for the reconciliation of Rwanda, it is the only hope we have to cure the evil in our own hearts. Only Christ can heal our wounds. Only Christ can save us from our hate. Only Christ can transform our anger into love. Only Christ can give us the strength to love and forgive our enemies. In America, we stand in desperate need of such grace. We stand in desperate need of Christ. Though 80% of Americans claim to believe in God, a huge percentage deny Him by their actions every single day. Christianity is more than a religion. More than a philosophy. More than self-help or moral therapeutic deism. It is about the transformation of the heart. The reorientation of all our thoughts and desires. It's more than "accepting Jesus into our hearts" by raising a hand and praying a prayer. It is about living our lives under His Lordship, empowered by His Spirit, with our eyes firmly fixed on His Kingdom.

Lest you think I'm overreacting, let me offer this sobering warning from Bishop John, "Rwanda had often been called Africa's most Christian country, with 90 percent of the people identifying themselves as Christians (65 percent Roman Catholic and 25 percent other Christian faiths). Essentially that means people who dutifully attended church on Sunday were slaughtering their neighbors by the end of the week."

July 31, 2018
POTTER'S HAND

Readings for the day: Isaiah 64-66

Last night we had dinner at a rooftop restaurant overlooking all of Kigali. It was a beautiful evening spent eating great food and sharing with new friends. Jason and Kimberly Peters have been incredible hosts this week in Rwanda. Jason serves as the CEO of Hope Haven and has been living here all summer with his wife and family. We've become very fast friends. Pastor Jimmy and his wife Sharol lead Potter's Hand Church here in Kigali and Pastor Jimmy was instrumental in helping build Hope Haven due to his civil engineering background and experience in construction.

During the course of the meal, Pastor Jimmy shared his story with us. He is a trained civil engineer who has worked all over Rwanda. He has advanced degrees from more than one university. He has not only led many projects but consulted on many more and is very well-respected. In fact, prior to getting involved in ministry, he had an opportunity to go to work for some large construction firms in overseeing some of the key infrastructure work in his country. However, God had a different plan for Jimmy's life. At the same time his professional career was taking off, he was serving part-time as an assistant pastor in his church. They had a crisis of leadership. It was extremely painful and resulted in many people leaving, including several of their key leaders. Jimmy was asked to fill the gap. He had a decision to make. Should he take the exciting, lucrative job offer from the government or take the difficult, low-paying job of helping his church recover? As he prayed, God led him to verses like this one from Isaiah 64:8, "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Jimmy knew the call had come. He was to serve the church. He gave up his position and power and wealth and political influence to serve a church broken by conflict. A church struggling to make ends meet. A church that was coming apart at the seams. He gathered the elders and leaders together and shared the verse God had given him. They renamed the church "Potter's Hand." I wish I could tell you some great story of success. Some great story about how God has honored Pastor Jimmy's choice by bringing prosperity and rapid growth to the congregation. What I can tell you is the story Jimmy shared with me. The story of God's abiding faithfulness to a small group of people hungry for the gospel with a passion to serve God's Kingdom. Pastor Jimmy has led his congregation well. Much healing has taken place. The church is growing. God is moving. But it is long, hard work. There are leadership challenges. Financial challenges. Ministry challenges. And yet, the verse God gave Pastor Jimmy before he stepped into this ministry continues to guide them. He is the Potter. We are the clay. The clay doesn't ask the Potter, "Why have you made me like this?" The clay doesn't question the Potter's plans for it's life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

It's an ancient insight that still holds true today. What was true for the prophet Isaiah has held true for Pastor Jimmy. CEO Jason. Pastor Doug. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God is the master potter. We are his clay. He has us right where He wants us...on His wheel...and He is shaping us to serve His purposes in this world. We have no need to ask Him, "Why?" No need to question His plans. We simply are called to trust and obey. To let the Potter do what the Potter does best. What is the Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.