

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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STUDY AND COMMENTARY

BY

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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August 1, 2018

EVERYTHING RISES AND FALLS ON LEADERSHIP

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

I am wrapping up my time in Rwanda but one final stop was the National Genocide Museum. Spending time at the mass graves of over 250,000 people was sobering to say the least. In all, the genocide claimed the lives of over 1.1 million people. Most of whom were killed by friends, neighbors, even family members. A national trauma survey by UNICEF estimates that 80% of Rwandan children experienced a death in their family in 1994. 70% witnessed someone being killed or injured and 90% believed they would die. How can such a thing happen?

Leadership. An unholy alliance between the racist government of Juvenal Habyarimana and the “Hutu Power” promoting media run by Hassan Ngeze combined to create the conditions whereby such a horror was possible. Aided and abetted by the French government who supplied them arms and training, the government worked hard to gain control over the country as they prepared to implement their own version of Hitler’s “Final Solution.” As the international community turned their backs on Rwanda, evil was allowed to flourish and the results were beyond tragic.

Such leaders are not unknown in the Scriptures. Manasseh reigned for over fifty years and in that time, “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” (2 Kings 21:2) He re-instituted pagan idol worship, rebuilding the high places his father had torn down. He defiled the Temple by setting up altars to foreign gods. “He burned his sons as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, and used fortune-telling and omens and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger.” (2 Chronicles 33:6) In short, he did more evil in reign than all the kings who had come before him and after he died, his son Ammon continued in his ways. It was the darkest period in the southern kingdom’s history and the people were led astray. Everything rises and falls on leadership.

All of us are leaders. Leadership begins with self. Learning to control our thoughts and desire and channel them to godly action. Leadership continues in the family. We lead our families as fathers and mothers and teach our children to walk in God’s ways. We lead at work as we use our influence – whether supervisor or employee - to impact the health and well-being of others and our organization’s future. We lead at church by the way we worship and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ. We lead in every sphere of life so here’s the critical question...what kind of leader are you? When the final analysis is in and the impact of your life is measured, will it be for good or for evil in the eyes of the Lord?

Everything rises and falls on leadership. President Paul Kagame could see what was happening in his country. He saw the signs and he began to organize a resistance. He led a rebellion against the racist government and national media and, as a result, saved tens of thousands of lives. He is rightfully called a hero. But his leadership didn’t stop there. He has worked hard to reintegrate the country. Establishing Unity and Reconciliation commissions where wrongs can be redressed, crimes confessed, forgiveness offered, and entire communities restored. This is his greatest accomplishment. Like Nelson Mandela before him, he refuses to allow hate to drive his leadership and his nation is reaping the benefits.

Everything rises and falls on leadership. How are you doing?

August 2, 2018
JEALOUS GOD

Readings for the day: Nahum 1-3

"Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle." (Nahum 3:5-6)

Some things you can't unsee. Like the time I ran my first Bolder Boulder several years ago and saw the male belly dancers around mile four!:-) On a more serious note, now that I've become aware of the "honor/shame" dynamic running through all of Scripture, it seems like it's everywhere. Why does God judge Nineveh with such harshness? Why is He not just content to have the victory but goes further, grinding them into dust? Why does He put their nation to open shame? Lifting their skirts. Exposing their nakedness. Demonstrating before the whole world their powerlessness? Why does He go as far as to throw excrement at them and make them a spectacle? Because God is a jealous God. Jealous for His honor. Jealous for His glory. Jealous for His name.

The nation of Assyria has enjoyed their time in the sun. Their chariots have rolled all over the Middle East like an ancient blitzkrieg. Their empire is great. Their power limitless. Their military without equal. But they've grown proud. They've exceeded the limits God set for them. They've become drunk with their success. Though they served as the rod of God's anger against the northern kingdom of Israel, He must now bring them to heel. He must again demonstrate His sovereignty over ALL the nations. Remember the words of the Assyrian commander to King Hezekiah when they besieged Jerusalem? How they dared to compare Almighty God with the small tribal gods of the pagan nations? It's worth going back and re-reading the story from 2 Kings 18 again. Such disdain and disrespect draws God's ire. Not because it hurts His ego but because it offends His sacred and holy honor. God will not be mocked! The Creator will not allow His creatures to treat Him this way. They will learn to honor God. They will learn to respect God. They will learn to submit to God. He will bring them to their knees one way or the other because there is one thing God cares about more than the creatures He made in His own image and that is Himself. His glory. His honor. His fame. His name WILL be great upon the earth!

"The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him." (Nahum 1:2-6) Assyria will learn this lesson in spades. As will the other nations who dare defy the Living God.

But what about God's people? What is our response to this God? How should we approach this God? With fear and trembling? On some level, yes. With humility and submission? Certainly. With terror and dread? Absolutely not! Why? Because our God is also good. And He loves His people. He is faithful to His people. "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Nahum 1:7)

So...are you living a life of humble submission before the Lord? Or prideful rebellion? Is God an ever-present reality in your life or does He seem distant? Someone to call on in case of emergency? Do you seek to love God with all your heart or are you apathetic towards His commandments? What about His honor and glory? Do these things cross your mind when you work? When you parent? When you're among friends? When you relate to your husband or wife? Is your worship focused on praising God and pleasing God or are you more concerned with your personal preferences? These are critical questions, friends, in light of what Nahum shares with us today. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God!

August 3, 2018
HUMILITY

Readings for the day: Zephaniah 1-3

I met a man recently who gave up a six figure income here in the US to return to his native country of Rwanda where he did not draw a salary for three straight years. He went from being in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest people to the bottom 1% of the world's poor. He gave up security and safety to live in danger and place his family at risk. He gave up power and influence and privilege in one of the world's most significant NGO's to work among those who have been forgotten. When I expressed my admiration for such a sacrifice, his response was confusion. "What sacrifice?" he said. "My life is not my own. My life has never been my own. My life is in the hands of God to do with as He wills." This, friends, is true humility.

"But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord..." (Zephaniah 3:12) It is hard to overstate the importance of humility to the Christian faith. Humility is what keeps us grounded before the Lord. Humility is what keeps us dependent on Him. Humility is what opens our hands and our hearts, allowing us to release those things in which we too often place our trust. Wealth. Health. Power. Privilege. Status. Authority. Pride. We are fools to place our trust in these things and yet it is so hard to resist temptation. We who have so much actually fall prey to our own desires. Our ability to gratify those desires instantaneously only serves to tighten our bonds. Thinking we are free, we choose to become slaves and there's nothing more pitiful than a free man or woman choosing to remain in bondage. Nothing more heartbreaking than sitting in a cell with the door wide open, refusing to leave. This is the state we find ourselves in today. Our culture has made Self a "god" and the result is entitlement. Narcissism. Selfishness. Greed. Self-protection. And far too many of us worship at this altar.

So how do we resist this temptation? How can we uproot Self out of the center of our lives and re-focus our devotion around God? Humility. The fundamental recognition that my life is not my own. My future is not mine to determine. My hopes are not set on the limited horizons of this world. My happiness does not come from chasing temporal pleasures. Humility honors God as sovereign over all of life, including my own. Humility submits. Humility surrenders. Humility bows before the God of the universe and willingly entrusts Him with all that we are and all that we have. This is the secret that my friend understood. He owned nothing. Not his house. Not his salary. Not his job. Not his family. Not his lifestyle. Not his degrees. Not his professional success. Not his future. None of it was his to hold onto. All of it came from God and all of it was used by God as He wills for His good pleasure. So when God called him to leave Colorado Springs and move to Kigali to help his people recover from the genocide, he went. No questions asked. The Master called. My friend answered. The King issued a command. My friend obeyed. The Father made an appeal. My friend responded in faith. Though life has been much harder. Much more difficult. Much more painful and heartbreaking. He has no regrets.

Humility. Not just an attitude of the heart. Not just a thought process in the mind. But a way of life. It means holding onto the things of this world loosely, knowing the Lord may require them at any time. It means holding onto our hopes and dreams loosely, knowing the Lord may change course at any time. It means holding onto even our pain and heartbreaks and suffering loosely, knowing the Lord often leads His people through such experiences to teach them of His sufficiency. It means holding onto our strength and safety and security loosely, knowing the Lord may demand even our lives at any time.

Now all this may sound very scary. Very frightening if this has not been your path. Here's the good news. God doesn't ask for blind obedience. He doesn't require us to step into the great unknown. He gives this promise to all who walk humbly before Him..."The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I

will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord." (Zephaniah 3:17-20) God can be trusted. God is true to His Word. His faithfulness never ends. His love never fails. Simply believe and let God take you by the hand today.

August 4, 2018
LIFE ISN'T FAIR

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

"Whoever said life was fair?" If I only had a nickel for every time I heard that phrase growing up! As the oldest of three boys, I often complained that I had to do more work than my brothers. I had to be more responsible than my brothers. More was expected of me than my brothers. In reality, I don't actually think this was true but that's how it appeared to me when I was young. Then I had my own kids. Four of them. As they grew up, we started assigning them chores around the house. They too would complain from time to time. Guess what words came out of my mouth? "Whoever said life was fair?" :-)

One of the more difficult things about reading and reflecting on Scripture from a Western perspective is this principle of "fairness." We live in a democracy which – at least in theory - is built on the assumption that everyone has equal. Everyone has equal opportunity. Everyone gets the same chances in life. We all know this is a myth but that doesn't stop us from believing it and it becomes a "lens" through which we read Scripture. Fundamentally, we believe deep down in our hearts that God's law, God's grace, God's justice, God's mercy must apply equally to all people at all times. In essence, everyone gets a chance or God is unfair.

But then we read about King Josiah. A man so faithful to God that he's described as the greatest king since David. His heart was pure. He did not turn aside to the right or to the left. He walked in the ways of the Lord. He tore down the altars his father had built. He purged Israel of their idolatry. He re-instituted the Passover to such a degree that nothing like it had happened since the days of Samuel the prophet. Josiah rebuilt the Temple. He fulfilled the prophecy given to Jeroboam, destroying the shrines he had built that had ensnared the northern kingdom of Israel, leading to her destruction. One would think Josiah's faithfulness would stem the coming disaster. One would think God would judge him on his merits alone. One would think his faithfulness would be rewarded with long life and happiness and peace. Such was not the case.

Judah had reached the point of no return. God's judgment was on its way. There was no turning back. The sins of the fathers and grandfathers going back generations would now be visited on their descendants. Josiah's faithfulness didn't matter. It wasn't enough to turn back the tide. So Josiah goes to war and rather than rewarding his faithfulness with a great victory – as God had done in ages past - Josiah is mortally wounded and dies. His reign of faithfulness comes to a tragic end. The people wail. Their grief is real. The great prophet Jeremiah himself appears in our text, lifting up a lament. And to our eyes it appears God moved the goalposts. God is unfair. After all, did not Josiah do all God had asked? Did not Josiah stay true to God's commands? Did not Josiah walk in God's ways? Why did revival not come? Why didn't God give him a chance? Why didn't God restore Israel like he had done before?

Sin has consequences. Not just for our lives but for the lives of our children and children's children as well. There is a cumulative effect to sin. It builds over time. With each passing generation, injustices are heaped upon injustice. Death doesn't reset the deck. The passing of a generation doesn't restart the clock. The debt is passed on. The weight of sin only gets more heavy and eventually becomes a burden too great to bear. God is just. God is righteous. He will not let sin go unchecked. He will not let evil go unpunished. So by the time we get to Josiah, the die has been cast. God's wrath is already engaged. His judgment is on its way in the form of the Babylonian Empire. The line of David will be cut off. The city of David destroyed. The Temple raised to the ground. God's people will go into exile where they will suffer. This is God's will and though it might not seem fair to our Western eyes, it is good.

At this point you may be thinking, "What hope do I have?" When will I feel the weight of God's righteous wrath and judgment? Should I be living in fear of the day when God's punishment will come and I will lose all that I

have? Hear the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ bore the full weight of human sin! All the sin that had piled up generation after generation – not just from our past but also from our future - was laid on his shoulders. On the cross, the Father poured out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son. Jesus truly paid it all. His blood satisfied the just demands of God's Law. Jesus was cut off. Jesus' body was destroyed. His soul went into exile in hell. But the Righteous One would not stay in the grave! On the third day, He rose again! And through His death and resurrection we have been set free. This was God's plan from eternity. To balance the scales of justice. To right every wrong. To level the playing field by sending His Only Beloved Son to die in our place. Rejoice, friends, God has done for you what you could not do for yourself! He has paid the penalty for your sin and granted you salvation!

August 6, 2018
GOD IS ENOUGH

Readings for the day: Habakkuk 1-3

"Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places." (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

When I was in college, I attended a Bible study one summer where the leader challenged us all to think about why we loved God. Drawing in material from across the Old Testament, he forced us to ask the fundamental question, "Is God worthy of our love simply because He's God? Or does God need to earn our love and devotion on some level?" That may seem like an easy question to answer on the face of it but consider the implications. Consider the words of Habakkuk above. What if God withheld His blessings from your life? What if your work didn't prosper? You never got married? Your children suffered? What if your health failed? You were discriminated against? Or falsely accused and imprisoned? What if your friends walked away from you? Your family turned against you? And you were left alone? What if your body turned against you and you contracted a disease like ALS? Or schizophrenia emerged when you were in your early 20's? Or early dementia set in robbing you of your faculties? Would you still love God? Would He still be worthy of your devotion? Taking it one step further, would you rejoice? Praise the God of your salvation?

These are the issues the leader of our group forced us to confront as we wrestled with the fundamental question, "Is God Enough?" From a ministry perspective, consider the call God placed on Habakkuk's life. He is called to preach judgment. Suffering. Pain. The coming retribution for cumulative sins of the people of God. This is not your best life now. Or seven steps to a better you. Or God has a wonderful plan for your life. This is hard stuff and I am sure it didn't make him very popular. He probably didn't pastor a mega-church. Probably didn't fill an auditorium. Probably would not have appeared on the cover of OutReach Magazine. He fails the seeker-sensitive test. Fails to make faith attractive. He puts a stumbling block to faith in the path of every single person who would give him a listen. And yet, everything he says is true. God's truth.

Passages like this force us to grapple with why we believe. Why we love God. Why we worship Him and serve Him. Is it for the eschatological goodies? Eternal salvation? An eternal home where the streets are paved with gold? A place where there is no more suffering, crying, or pain? Is that why we love God? Because He provides a safe and secure retirement plan? Or is it for the temporal blessings? Health. Wealth. Success. Take these things away and we often find our faith on the chopping block. I can't tell you the number of Christians I've counseled over the years who've walked away from their faith simply because they felt God had let them down.

Is God enough? It's a question every Christian has to wrestle with at some point in their lives. It's fundamentally the question the great heroes of our faith wrestled with in their lives. Noah believed God was enough even as he watched the world be destroyed. Abraham and Sarah believed God was enough even though they were barren and had no children. Moses believed God was enough even as he was being sent back to what I'm sure he assumed would be certain death in Egypt. David believed God was enough even when he sinned with Bathsheba. Jesus believed His Father was enough which is why He embraced the cross. Paul believed God was enough which is how he learned to be content in all circumstances. And on and on it goes. Down through the ages. The question is posed to every generation in all times and places. Until it comes to us. Do we believe God is enough? Or do we need more? What if God took away our American Dream? What if God took away our health? Our wealth? Our success? What if it served God's purposes to strip these things out of our lives? Would He still be enough for us? Or would we find ourselves needing more?

August 7, 2018
THE WAY TO REVIVAL

Readings for the day: Joel 1-3

Joel is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament mainly because of how clearly it teaches spiritual renewal and revival. There is a lot of talk in churches today about revival. A lot of prayers ascend asking God to bring revival. To pour out His Spirit. To bless our nation. To awaken the slumbering hearts of God's people across our great land. Why then does revival not come? Why does our culture continue it's rapid descent into chaos? Why is there such a rise in hate and anger and rage? Why is God not answering our prayers?

According to Joel, the answer is quite clear. Repentance always precedes revival. We have not yet come to the end of ourselves. We have not yet exhausted our strength. We still believe on some level that it is up to us and our programs and our resources to bring this revival about. If we could just elect the right person. Just put the right programs in place. Just attend church more often. We will seemingly do anything and everything to avoid falling on our faces, helpless before the Lord. We will do all we can to avoid acknowledging our failures, putting on sackcloth and ashes. We simply refuse to bow the knee, confess our sins both personal and corporate, and cry out to the Lord. And this is why revival has not and will not come to the American church. We are too puffed up. Too prideful. Too divided. Too rich. Too comfortable. To consumer-driven. We spend more time complaining and arguing about worship styles like music than we do in heartfelt prayer. We spend far too much time guarding our hearts because we've been wounded than forgiving those who hurt us. We have such little faith and are not willing to put the time and effort into deepening our spiritual lives. I know these are generalizations but study after study confirms they are true.

Joel speaks prophetically to the American church. To our church. To my church. To my own heart.

"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." (Joel 1:13-14)

"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?" (Joel 2:12-14)

"Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?'" (Joel 2:15-17)

These are challenging words. Joel is unafraid to get in our face. They leave us no room for equivocation. We either accept them or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. Reject them to our own peril. Accept them and receive the promise.

"Be glad, O children of Zion, and rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given the early rain for your vindication; he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the latter rain, as before. "The threshing floors shall be full of grain; the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." (Joel 2:23-25)

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions." (Joel 2:28)

The answer we keep avoiding is simply this...surrender. Relinquishment. Submission. To God's will and God's ways and most importantly, God's love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. Repentance is the precondition to revival. Surrender is the precondition to the pouring out of God's Spirit. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It's not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord. Bow the knee. Believe Him for who He is and what He has to say. Obey His commands.

August 8, 2018

THE PATHOS OF GOD AND HIS PROPHET

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 1-4

Jeremiah is a hard book to read. Especially if one gets in touch with the pain present throughout. Not only Jeremiah's pain as he watches his people and his nation struggle and suffer and eventually be destroyed. But God's pain as well as His people betray Him by chasing after other gods. So intertwined is the pain of God with His prophet that it is often hard to know who's speaking. For example, Jeremiah 4:19 says, "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." (Jeremiah 4:19) Traditionally, these words have been ascribed to Jeremiah himself because we simply cannot fathom God saying such things. However, when one looks closely at the text, it is clear God is speaking in verse 18 ("Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart.") and in verse 22 ("For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not.") Is it possible that we are so uncomfortable with the idea that God might feel pain that we automatically bracket this reading out of the text?

We're going to see this dynamic pop up over and over again throughout this book and it forces us to come to grips with how we see and understand God. Classically, the question goes to the "impassibility" of God. The idea that God doesn't have "passions" or "pathos" which has to do with suffering. Some have interpreted this to mean God doesn't have emotions but that's clearly not true. God expresses a whole range of emotions all throughout the Scriptures. More specifically this idea has to do with the suffering of God. Can God suffer? Does such suffering suggest a change in God? Does it threaten the immutability of His nature and character? Historically, the answer has been "yes" which then forces us to find other explanations for what we read in texts like the one before us today. But what if God suffers? What if God chooses – in His freedom - to be the kind of God who moves towards suffering? Who embraces suffering? Who welcomes suffering without it changing who He is? Is this not the heart of the gospel? Is this not part of the mystery of the Incarnation? Eternal God choosing to take on human flesh? With all its weaknesses and struggles and hardships? Is this not the heart of the passion of our Christ? God suffering with us and for us even to the point of death?

It seems to me that we lose nothing by embracing the pathos of God if we understand God has embraced such pathos according to His own will and good pleasure. Certainly, such suffering is not forced on God. It doesn't take God by surprise. It doesn't enact a change on God's experience. God is beyond all these things. He truly is immutable or unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no shadow or turning in Him. But at the same time, God has revealed Himself in a particular, one might even argue, peculiar kind of way. He is a God who embraces a broken creation. A God who covenants with a broken people. A God who is steadfast and faithful and loyal and true even in the face of evil. He is a God who likens His relationship with His people to a marriage and the faithlessness of His people to adultery. He frequently uses the language of betrayal and heartache and pain to express His dismay over the sinful choices His people make. No one forces God to remain faithful. No one makes God forgive. No outside force can drive God to do anything He Himself has not already chosen to do in complete freedom. Which makes passages like the one we read today and others like it throughout the book of Jeremiah so intriguing.

What if God is in anguish over us? What if being in relationship with us breaks God's heart? What if God's choice to love us from before the foundations of the earth involved Him choosing unimaginable suffering? Would this change how you relate to Him? Change how you see Him? Change how you experience Him? Change how you love Him?

August 9, 2018
THE GRIEF OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 5–8

"My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me. Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 8:18-22, 9:1-3)

Admittedly, I am pushing into tomorrow's reading with today's devotional but this passage from the end of Jeremiah 8 is one of the most poignant in all of Scripture and it bleeds into the beginning of chapter 9. Most English translations put these words in Jeremiah's mouth. Primarily because of how uncomfortable we are with God experiencing deep, heartbreakin g grief. As Western Christians we are heavily influenced by Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

But what if we were willing to embrace a different understanding of emotions? A deeper understanding? Again, it is without question that God experiences emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration. Joy. We read about them over and over again and they are not simply anthropomorphisms. (A way for God to express Himself in human terms we can understand. Ex. "The arm of the Lord...") What if our understanding of God could be expanded to include the full range of emotions? What if us having emotions is part of being made in God's image? What if our "emotionalism", which breeds the feelings of instability and unpredictability, is actually a result of sin and brokenness? What if God, because He remains untouched by sin, is able to experience all emotions without being driven by them?

This brings us back to the passage cited above. God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreakin g grief possible." My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me." God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. And then they have turned around and blamed Him. "Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" They refuse to bow the knee. Refuse to repent and return to Him. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. Quite the opposite. They brazenly continue in sin. "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" This is a stiff-necked people. A foolish people. A rebellious people. They take their relationship with God for granted. They are entitled. They are spoiled. They assume God will come to their rescue despite their unwillingness to walk in His ways. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The perspective shifts back to God. "For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Again, one

pictures deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. To the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. "Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert God can run to. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains true.

Really, God is being faithful to Himself here. Faithful to the promise He has made. To be our God, come hell or high water. This was the message He communicated through the covenant He first made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and sealed through the death and resurrection of His Beloved Son Jesus Christ. His steadfast love establishes the fundamental reality of our lives. The bedrock on which we can build our lives. Without fear. Without shame. Without worry that somehow, someway there will come a day when God will finally lose patience and abandon us. God will not leave us or forsake us for in doing so He would be unfaithful to Himself. Let this truth be your firm foundation today, friends!

August 10, 2018
THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 9-12

Truth is a rare commodity in our day and age. Fake news. Outright lies. Conspiracy theories. Ideologically-driven news cycles. It's hard to discern what is True and what is false in our world. Add to that the commercially driven lies our culture sells about beauty, identity, happiness, fulfillment, etc. and we find ourselves swimming in a cesspool of deceit. Social media has only thrown gas on this fire. Exacerbating a phenomena that threatens the very fabric of our society. Sadly, the church has fallen prey to these same forces. Trading in the Truth of the gospel for a more palatable, therapeutic gospel that fills the seats, sells books, and makes rockstars out of megapastors. But it's not just the megachurches who fallen for these lies. I cannot tell you the number of small churches who've allowed themselves to be defined more by the culture wars raging around us than the Truth of the gospel. I cannot tell you the number of churches who care more about one's political affiliation, one's musical preference, one's theological camp, or one's denominational label than the Truth God's lays out for us in Scripture. I cannot tell you the number of individuals I meet who claim to be Christian but whose lives exhibit little, if any, evidence of a commitment to the Way, the Truth, and the Life of Jesus. Left without a champion, Truth is lost and our world descends into chaos.

Jeremiah faced a similar situation, living as he did in the final days of the kingdom of Israel. "Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity...Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully; with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him." (Jeremiah 9:4-5, 8) It sounds strikingly familiar, does it not? Those who disagree are not just wrong, they are evil. Those who are different are corrupt. Those who will not toe the line when it comes to ideological purity cannot be trusted. Their motives are suspect. They must have a hidden agenda. Surely there is a conspiracy afoot! And, in fact, there is!

"Again the Lord said to me, "A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem..." AHA! There it is! Confirmation of the deep state! Confirmation that those who don't agree with us are plotting to take over! Confirmation of the most nefarious intentions of our enemies! SEE! It's all right there in the Bible! But then Jeremiah confronts us with the hard truth. The "conspiracy", as it were, exists not "out there" but "in here." Inside every human heart. Deceit. Fake news. Blatant falsehoods. Hidden agendas. Guess what? They're all right here. In my heart. I fight them every single day. My entire life is a battle against such evil. Listen to Jeremiah's own words, "They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers." (Jeremiah 11:9-10)

The reality, friends, is much more complex than we want to acknowledge. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none who is righteous. Not a single one. All of us are like sheep who have gone astray and it is only the love of the Good Shepherd that keeps us from destroying ourselves. Left to our own wisdom, we will become confused. Left to our own strength, we will fail. Left to our own riches and resources, we eventually will run out. And this is why God says to Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 9:23-24) Truth can only be found in God. The only way to discover Truth is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only after our dead hearts have been revived by the Holy Spirit can we discern what is True and False about our world and about ourselves. Only as we continue to surrender our own agendas, our own ideas, our own thoughts, our own opinions, our own truth to our Lord will we come to see His Truth for what it is and rejoice. Only as we fix our eyes on Jesus will we be able to see through all the lies and deceit this world has to offer. And it is only as we cling to the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way that we will find the Jesus Life!

August 11, 2018
DISCOURAGEMENT

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 13-16

There is a myth many Christians believe. If we are walking faithfully with the Lord. If we are obeying His commands and living according to His Word. If we are praying and worshiping and serving Him then we will not face hardship. We will not struggle or suffer or endure any pain. Life will be good and blessed and we will be happy. Fundamentally, we believe if we do our part, God is bound to do His and our lives should reflect His favor.

But then we read a passage like this one from Jeremiah today... "Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me...Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts. I did not sit in the company of revelers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone, because your hand was upon me, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Will you be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" (Jeremiah 15:10, 16-18) Jeremiah is angry with God. He's bitter and frustrated. He's fulfilled the call of God. He's been faithful. He took God's Word and proclaimed it to the people at great personal cost. They beat and persecute him. They spit on him and mock him. He has no friends. No family. He sits alone. Who knows how long he has suffered? We only know he's finally reached a breaking point. He is in anguish. He is in pain. He is depressed. He is discouraged. He accuses of God of being deceitful. Lying to him. Pulling a bait and switch.

It's real. It's raw. It's honest. I've been there. I remember well the 19 months we spent in Wisconsin. We were fully convinced God called us to go there to plant a church. We were excited. We were passionate. We couldn't wait to get started. God had given us a vision. He had given us plenty of resources. We were confident we would do great things for Jesus. Within a few months, our dream became a nightmare. For the first time in my life, I became a man of "strife and contention" to those I worked for. I felt cursed. Afflicted. Unjustly accused. I didn't handle it well. I complained. I grew frustrated. I got angry with God. I felt like He had let me down. I felt like He had broken faith with me. After all, I had given up a thriving ministry and uprooted my family and poured my heart and soul into this new work. All to no avail. I ended up broken. Battered. Bruised and contemplated throwing in the towel on ministry altogether. My wife was in an even darker place. It was the most painful time of our lives.

In the midst of our heartache, I cried out to God and this is what He said. In essence, "Should you accept good from me and not hardship? Did you think this life I called you to was only going to be up and to the right? One success after another? What if it is my will to crush you? To break your pride? To make you suffer so you learn to depend on Me? Am I not enough for you?" It was sobering and convicting and strangely...comforting. Even in our darkest moments, God was there. Though His presence was a refiner's fire, it felt good. The kind of good one feels after a hard workout or when one has overcome something incredibly difficult. You may still bear the scars but they become badges of honor along the way.

Such was true for Jeremiah as well. Listen to the Lord's response to him in the midst of his pain. "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth. They shall turn to you, but you shall not turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the Lord. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless." (Jeremiah 15:19-21) The call on Jeremiah's life would be a hard one. God is relentless. And He would use Jeremiah as a hammer to break his people's pride. He would be ostracized.

Isolated. Hated. Persecuted. He would suffer and struggle and endure tremendous pain. But through it all, God would be with him. God would give him the strength he needed to bear up under the burden.

Only you know the burdens you carry in life. Only you know the source of those burdens. Sometime we suffer because of our sin. The choices we make lead us down dark paths. We have to own those choices. Take responsibility. Repent and turn back to the Lord. Sometimes the Lord leads us into suffering. To refine us. Test us. Break sinful patterns of pride and self-sufficiency in our lives. In those times, we must submit. Accept. Surrender to His sovereign will and trust even the hard times serve His purposes in our lives.

August 13, 2018
FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 17-20

"Just follow your heart." It makes for a great Disney tune but it's not a great philosophy for life. Unfortunately, our culture promotes this lie relentlessly. Everyone from Silicon Valley icons like Steve Jobs to Hollywood entertainers like Rihanna to academic luminaries/political activists like Robert Kennedy Jr. to sports stars like Mia Hamm all share the same advice. "Follow your heart." "Trust your gut." "Believe in yourself." "Do what your heart tells you and your mind will follow." It sounds really good, doesn't it? Almost biblical. It taps into our innermost longings. It affirms our secret desires. It seems like the only path to true happiness and joy.

Sadly, the opposite seems to be true. Steve Jobs followed his heart and became an international celebrity and Silicon Valley legend but lost his family in the process. Rihanna followed her heart and became an international pop star/businesswoman but suffered tremendously in an abusive relationship with fellow singer Chris Brown. Robert Kennedy Jr. followed his heart and found great success in law and academics but has been married three times along the way. Mia Hamm put US Women's Soccer on the map but it also cost her a marriage along the way. None of these folks are necessarily bad people. (Well, maybe Steve Jobs...) They are human just like the rest of us. We all make mistakes. We are all prone to failure. Shoot, I could give you several examples from my own life as well where "following my heart" has led me into a ditch.

Why? Because "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) These ancient words still ring true today. We simply cannot trust our hearts. We cannot trust our feelings. We cannot trust our emotions. They change with the wind. They are influenced far too easily. The endorphin rush they create overrides our rationality. Eats away at our commitments. We find ourselves doing the very things we hate and not doing the things we love. We find ourselves wrapped up in all kinds of "wrong" when we know there's a better, truer path to "right." It's craziness. Literal insanity to trust in an organ that is so fickle and yet we seem to fall into this same trap over and over again.

So what's the answer? We must turn to the Lord. The One who made us and shaped us and formed us and fashioned us. The One who called us and claimed us as His own from eternity. The One who first established us and gave our lives purpose and meaning and showed us the way to true fulfillment. The One who would not abandon us in our sin but came to us. Suffered for us. Died for us. All to set us free so that we might live again. "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17:10)

Here is the fundamental question we have to answer on a daily, even hourly basis. Do we trust the One who created us and loved us? Or do we trust ourselves? Do we trust in the One whose love is always steadfast, loyal and true? Or do we trust our fickle, human hearts? Do we trust the One who never makes mistakes? Never falls down on the job? Never fails to deliver on His promises? Or do we trust the guy or gal in the mirror with the incredible spotty track record? The great news of the gospel is that we have a Good Father in heaven who delights in giving good gifts to His children. We have a gracious Savior who gave His own life to deliver us from slavery to sin. We have the Holy Spirit living inside us who promises to guide and direct and show us the way to true joy and everlasting peace.

Follow your heart? I'd rather follow the Lord.

August 14, 2018
AT WAR WITH GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24

Today's reading makes me so thankful for Jesus. Jesus died in my place. He took the full wrath and fury my sin had earned on Himself. He endured the suffering. The pain. The horrors of hell that I may live. Without Christ, I would be lost. Rightfully condemned. At the mercy of God's judgment. Just like the people of Israel.

"I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath." (Jeremiah 21:5) These might be some of the scariest words in all the Bible. Can you imagine what it must be like to be at war with God? To be in complete rebellion against your Creator? Not just ignoring His will but consciously, intentionally, even eagerly seeking to disobey? The sons of Josiah knew full well what they were doing. The priests and prophets of Jeremiah's time were fully aware of their actions. The people of God who lived in the cities and villages were not ignorant of the commandments of God. They simply chose to ignore them. They simply chose to reject them. And the consequences of their actions are devastating.

Israel will go into exile in Babylon. They will lose their land. They will lose their homes. Their Temple will be raised to the ground. Their glory pounded into dust. Even worse, their God was now fighting on the side of the Chaldeans! No longer their Protector. No longer their Warrior. He was for them is now against them. Who can resist His might? "I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls...I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence...I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion." (Jeremiah 21:4, 6-7) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a Holy God!

And yet, even amidst this national catastrophe, Jeremiah sounds a note of hope. There will come a day when the sins of Israel have been paid and the Lord will visit His people once more. "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" (Jeremiah 23:3-6) As is so often the case in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament; it is always darkest before the dawn. The promise of a Messiah rises out of the ashes of their sin like a phoenix spreading its wings. David will not be abandoned. A righteous Branch shall come from his line. A king who will reign with justice and righteousness and wisdom. One who will restore the fortunes of God's people. One who will defeat their great enemy once and for all so they may finally dwell secure. He will even have a name...*צִדְקָתָנוּ יְהוָה*... "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. By His wounds, I am healed. By His brokenness, I am made whole. By His chains, I am set free. By His death, I am given new life.

The reality is my flesh is at war with God. The desires of my heart are bent towards evil. My thoughts and attitudes and actions are corrupt. And God is at war with me. His Spirit waging a battle for my heart. He has

invaded my life. Invaded the innermost depths of my being in order to cleanse me. Purify me. Refine me. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until my life reflects His glory. And the more I surrender. The more I submit. The more I cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more I will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to “save to the uttermost.” We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

August 15, 2018
FALSE PROPHETS

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 25-28

My heart is heavy today. Yesterday the news broke of a systematic coverup in the Roman Catholic Church in Pennsylvania. Over 300 priests abused more than 1,000 child victims over a span of 70 years. This news came on the heels of new allegations against what many consider to be the flagship church of evangelicalism. Bill Hybels, their founder and former senior pastor, has been accused by several women of inappropriate sexual advances, harassment, and abuse. The most damning allegations coming from his former executive assistant. Sadly, the church leadership refused to heed the cries of the victims and closed ranks around their leader, refusing to allow an independent investigation. This past week, both of Hybel's successors as well as the entire elder board of the church resigned in disgrace. Frankly, it all makes me want to vomit.

I wish I could say such incidents are rare but they are not. There are far too many false prophets running around these days. They masquerade as end times prophets, health and wealth preachers, and sexual predators who prey on their congregations. They are cult leaders. Religious charlatans. People who claim to speak for God but in reality are purveyors of hate. They defend the indefensible. They justify their abuses. They claim special anointing and protections from the Lord himself. And they lead many astray with their lies. Unfortunately, the religious life seems to attract such shady characters. Men – and it is almost exclusively men - whose character is utterly corrupt and who see the church as an easy mark. A soft target because of the grace she proclaims.

Sadly, it seems like such has always been the case. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we have encountered many a false prophet. People claiming to speak for the Lord who are, in reality, seeking to hold onto their power. The man we meet in today's reading – Hananiah - is simply the latest in a long line of court prophets who seek to advance their position by flattering the king. Hananiah's message to Zedekiah is that he will defeat the Babylonians. God will break the yoke from their necks and set them free. It is clear pandering to maintain political privilege and power and it bears a striking resemblance to the many pastors of our day who sell out the gospel for a place at the political table. Both progressives and conservatives are guilty. Think Al Sharpton and Robert Jeffress and many others we could name. These are the kind of men of whom God speaks when He says, "I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied." (Jeremiah 23:21)

Friends, God will not be mocked. When Hananiah falsely prophesied a great victory over Babylon, Jeremiah foretold his doom. "And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died." (Jeremiah 28:15-17) Over the course of my short life, I have seen this pattern repeated over and over again. Those who speak falsely in the Lord's name are eventually exposed for the religious hucksters they have become. They fall into disgrace and the examples are legion. God will not allow His name to be spoken in vain. God will not be manipulated for our purposes or bent to our will. He will not share His glory with another and woe to any man or woman who declares falsely a Word from the Lord! Woe to any man or woman who calls evil "good" and good "evil!" Woe to any man or woman who would subvert the Word of God and twist it to serve some other purpose! God is watching! He sits on His throne even now! He will expose what is done in secret! He will bring to light the sinful agendas of every human heart! Nothing is hidden from His sight!

August 16, 2018
FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU...

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 29-32

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

If only I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard this verse quoted at a graduation, wedding, seen it on a t-shirt or coffee mug. It has become cliche. A platitude we like to use to support the fulfillment of our dreams and desires. It’s why proof-texting is a dangerous business.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a verse embedded in a story. A tragic story. The story of Israel’s exile. They have lost their home. They have been forcibly removed. (Think Trail of Tears or something like it...) Their leaders have been tortured and put to death. All of their cultural icons – including the Temple of God itself - have been raised to the ground. In short, their collective identity as the people of God has suffered a massive hit, leaving behind an emotional and spiritual crater that will not be easily filled. Especially not as they rebuild in a foreign land.

Think about the collective shock we all felt on 9/11 when the planes hit both towers and the Pentagon. Think about the grief we all felt. The rage. The anger. Now multiply that many times over. Imagine terrorists taking over our country. Capturing our leaders. Torturing them on national television and executing them. Imagine them systematically destroying every monument we’ve ever built. Washington. Lincoln. Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington. Mount Vernon. Monticello. All burned to the ground. Imagine them trying to erase “America” from the face of the earth. This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity. Into slavery. Into their new lives as strangers and foreigners in a new land and then they receive this letter from Jeremiah.

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In essence, live your lives. Do what you’ve always done. Don’t spend your days looking back at where you’ve been but forward to the future.

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7) Pray for your enemies. For those who destroyed your way of life. For those who killed your loved ones. Conquered your land. Burned your cities. Destroyed your nation. And don’t just pray. Actively seek to bless them. Bless their city. Bless their communities. Be salt and light in this new place.

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul. This is not going to quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children’s children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.

It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Friends, the hard truth we don’t like to think about very much is that God’s plans for us often include exile. Suffering. Hardship. Pain. God uses things as tools to knock off the rough edges of our lives. To refine out all the impurity. To strain out all the sin. His “good” plans for us that give us a future and a hope include taking us

through the fire so that we can be made pure and holy as He is pure and holy. Seeking God with all our hearts means trusting Him with the direction of our lives...even when that direction doesn't appear to be comfortable or safe. It means letting Him lead and guide us into dark valleys where all we have is His presence. It means trusting the Good Shepherd to eventually find us green pastures and still waters though the journey may be long and arduous to get from here to there. This is what Jeremiah is trying to communicate to his people as they start their heartbreakin, gut-wrenching exile in Babylon. God is with them. He has not forgotten them. He will eventually redeem them. This is their hope! This is their future! And though they themselves may not actually get there, they can trust God will bring their descendants home.

August 17, 2018
REJECTING THE WORD OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 33-37

God's grace is truly amazing. No matter how bad things get. No matter how far we fall. No matter how fast we run. God is always quick to forgive. Quick to relent of the judgment our sin rightfully deserves. Jehoiakim is another in a long line of evil kings. Kings who reject the will of God. Kings who worship idols. Kings who seek their own glory and power instead of humbly serving God. Judgment is coming. Jeremiah has been sent to proclaim the impending doom. The sins of Israel are many and have piled up over the years, creating a mess God intends to use Babylon to clean up. It's going to be ugly. It's going to be tragic. It's going to be painful. Many will suffer. Many will die. All they hold dear will be destroyed as God's justice rolls down on the earth.

But even now at the eleventh hour, there is hope. God's mercy makes one last appearance. God commands Jeremiah to speak a word of grace to the nation. To speak words of life instead of death. He gives them one last chance to repent and turn from their wicked ways. "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." (Jeremiah 36:2-3) Jeremiah obeys. He writes everything down on a scroll and gives it to his servant, Baruch, to proclaim. Baruch goes to the Lord's House and reads it in the presence of all who've gathered. Officials from the king's household hear the news and they ask Baruch to come and read the scroll to them. Eventually, the scroll makes its way into the king's presence for one final hearing. The tension builds. How will the king respond? Will he repent? Will he turn back to the Lord? Will he humble himself and bow the knee? Sadly, the answer is no. He takes out a knife and cuts the scroll to pieces as each line is read and then proceeds to burn it in his fire pit. His rejection of the Word of God is complete and final. So is his doom.

One cannot so easily dispose of God's Word. It has a power all its own. Coming from the Holy Spirit, it is eternal. Unquenchable. Inflammable. Unbreakable. The grass may wither and the flower may fade but the Word of God endures forever. (Isaiah 40:8) So again the Word comes to Jeremiah. Only this time, judgment has replaced grace. Justice has replaced mercy. God's wrath is about to be fully unveiled. "Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?" Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear." (Jeremiah 36:29-31)

It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself. You will receive all the judgment and righteous anger of God. It will be eternal and unending because the depth of your sin and rebellion is eternal and unending.

I know this sounds harsh. I know this doesn't feel good. What about God's love? It is there! In Christ! One cannot separate Christ from the love of God for Christ Himself is the love of God! "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10) God has provided a way for you to escape the coming judgment just as He provided a way for Jehoiakim to escape his coming judgment! Repentance! Faith! Accepting the perfect sacrifice God Himself has offered on your behalf! Do not reject the Word of God, friends! Receive Christ and live!

August 18, 2018
DISAPPOINTED WITH GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

Have you ever been disappointed with God? Ever feel like He let you down? Ever wonder how His plans for you could be good when so many bad things are taking place? I imagine that's how King Zedekiah felt in today's reading. He hoped against all hope for an 11th hour rescue. He simply could not believe God would abandon His people. Abandon His city. Abandon His Temple. He fundamentally could not bring himself to believe things had gotten that bad. He knew his history. He could look back and tell you story after story about God relenting from disaster as the last possible moment. But then he watches in horror as the Babylonians storm a breach in the wall. He tries to escape only to be captured and endure unbelievable heartache as his sons are executed in front of him. It is the last thing he will ever see as his eyes are the next things to go. He is then shackled in chains and carried off to exile. It's a tragic ending to a tragic story.

But we've seen this before, have we not? After Adam's fall, God raises up Seth only to watch as humanity descends into chaos. He raises up Noah and rescues him from the flood only to watch Noah's descendants rebel and build a tower to the heavens. He scatters them and then raises up Abraham only to watch his descendants end up in slavery in Egypt. God raises up Moses and delivers them from bondage. Brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey only to watch them forget Him and do what is right in their own eyes. So he raises up David. The man after God's own heart and sets him on the throne. But now David's descendants have followed the same path and ended up in the same place as those who've come before. In each case, I am confident the people of God believed God would never leave them or forsake them. I am confident they believed God would remain steadfast, loyal, and true. And I imagine they were incredibly disappointed when judgment came.

The reality is our disappointment with God is often grounded in entitlement. We make the mistake of taking God's grace for granted. We treat His commandments with disdain. We presume on the unconditional nature of His love. We fail to acknowledge the seriousness of our sin and refuse to take responsibility for the selfish choices we make. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." Grace without cost. Love without sacrifice. Relationship without rules. Unfettered freedom which isn't really freedom at all. This is what Zedekiah believed that led to his destruction. This is what Israel believed that led to their destruction. And this is what far too many of us believe if we're honest.

Friends, we cannot blame God for the consequences of our sinful choices. We cannot blame God for our rebellion. He has warned us over and over again what will happen should we choose to reject His ways. We cannot claim to love God and not follow His commands. The two always go together. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, Jesus loves us with an everlasting, unconditional love. Yes, God's forgiveness is always within reach. But only for those who repent. Only for those who confess. Only for those who acknowledge their sin and who actively seek to turn from their self-centered ways. This is the truth of the gospel! Grace and demand hang together. Only those who believe obey and only those who obey believe. Or as the old hymn puts it, "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus."

August 20, 2018
BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

Those words ran through my head this morning as we read about the final days of the Kingdom of Judah and the end of Zedekiah. It's a pretty gory picture. The King of Babylon captures him as he tries to escape. Makes him watch while he slaughters his sons and then puts out his eyes. It's that last detail that I found myself pondering. Why does it appear so many times in these readings? Jeremiah mentions it twice in chapters 39 and 52. The historians mention it as well in 2 Kings 25. Perhaps it's just a painful reminder of how utterly broken Zedekiah had become before the judgment of the Lord.

As I pondered this little detail, I began to wonder if there wasn't something more symbolic at work as well. After all, Zedekiah had been spiritually blind for years. He reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem but did evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not honor God. He did not walk in God's ways or according to God's commands. He disdained the Word of the Lord and rejected the worship of the Lord. So perhaps his physical blindness is simply the logical consequence for his spiritual blindness and that's why it's mentioned so many times. Or maybe I'm reading too much into it...:-)

I remember my own spiritual blindness. I was raised in the church. My parents were faithful to take me to worship every Sunday. I sang in the choir. I hung out at youth group. By all outward appearances, I was incredibly engaged. However, my heart was hard. Selfish. Locked in sin. I was blinded by my own desires. My own fears. My own doubts. I could not see God. Could not hear God. Did not want to follow God. This was all exposed my freshman year of college. Once outside of the protective rhythms and accountability my parents set, I floundered. I was lost. I wandered aimlessly. I drank heavily. Skipped class. Avoided God. When confronted, I blamed others. I blamed my professors. I blamed my friends. I was so blind I could not see the wretch I'd become.

That's when I met Jesus. He confronted me on a sidewalk right outside the UMC up on the campus of the University of Colorado. He opened my eyes and it was like I was seeing the world for the very first time. The light was blinding. The exposure painful. All my sins were laid bare before Him. There was no escape. I was overwhelmed by sorrow. Overwhelmed by grief. Overwhelmed by the depth of my sin. The road back to health was not easy. It was one tentative step after another. It required facing the consequences of my actions. The brokenness of my relationships. The anxiety of my failures. But Jesus was faithful. He was the light for my feet. The lamp for my path. Because my eyes had been opened, I could actually see the way He laid out for me.

I have no idea where you find yourself this morning. If you are blind or if you can see. Perhaps you are like Zedekiah or like I was prior to receiving Christ. Groping in the dark. Stumbling around in the shadows. Blinded by your desires. Fears. Doubts. Failures. I pray you come to Jesus! The One who specializes in restoring sight to the blind! Let Him open your eyes! Let Him show you His glory!

August 21, 2018
FEAR OR FAITH?

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 41-44

One of the things I get to do in my line of work is help churches that find themselves in crisis. Leadership failings. Trust issues. Organizational chaos. There are lots of reasons churches struggle and when it gets to a certain point, they cry out for help. That's often when I am called to go in. We begin working with the pastors. Working with the elders. Working with the leaders. And the biggest challenge we face in these situations is to help people who are often hurting, angry, fearful, and afraid walk by faith.

Jeremiah faced the same challenge. The national crisis of God's people deepens with the murder of the Babylonian governor. The people of God come to Jeremiah and ask him to pray on their behalf. What should they do? How should they respond? They are naturally afraid of the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar. Will he return and utterly destroy them? Will he seek retribution for the murder of his official? What's going to happen? How should they respond? Jeremiah seeks the Lord on their behalf and the Lord graciously answers. "If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land." (Jeremiah 42:10-12) What an amazing promise! Even now, after all their sin and rebellion, God is willing to forgive and show mercy and establish them in the Promised Land. Even now, God is willing to bless them and help them and come to their aid. Yes, it will require a step of faith. It will require them to be humble. Submit to Nebuchadnezzar once again. It will require faith as they wait to see how the Babylonians will respond. But if they will do these things, God will be with them.

Sadly, their fear gets the best of them. "Azariah the son of Hoshaiah and Johanan the son of Kareah and all the insolent men said to Jeremiah, 'You are telling a lie. The Lord our God did not send you to say, 'Do not go to Egypt to live there,' but Baruch the son of Neriah has set you against us, to deliver us into the hand of the Chaldeans, that they may kill us or take us into exile in Babylon.'" (Jeremiah 43:2-3) They flee to Egypt. Back to the place where they were once enslaved. They begin to worship Egyptian gods. They leave the land of promise for a foreign land to serve foreign masters hoping they will protect them and keep them safe.

We walk by faith and not by sight. It's not easy. It often seems illogical to our human minds. Azariah and Johanan were doing what made sense. It makes sense to run for cover when you are afraid. It makes sense to run to Egypt, the world's only other superpower, to escape the wrath of the Babylonians. It makes sense to flee when you've just been conquered. Seen your way of life destroyed. All that you hold dear carried off to a foreign land. Watched the local governor that empire left behind to rule get murdered. It is natural to be afraid in such situations. But it is PRECISELY in these moments. When things are at their darkest and most bleak that we turn to God in faith.

Many churches I've worked with over the years simply have not been able to make this turn. They keep trying to handle things on their own. They keep turning to their own wisdom. They keep trying to operate according to their own strength. They falsely believe if they can just get another pastor. If they can just get rid of a certain leader. If they can just hit on the right program. Or attract the right kind of people then they will find success. They turn to business principles. They talk vision and values and policies and procedures. They try so hard and all the while God is in heaven reaching out to them. Calling them to slow down. Simplify. Sit with Him in prayer. Rebuild trust by spending time together in the Word and just sharing life.

Thankfully, I've seen some wonderful successes along the way as well. Churches who finally come to the end of themselves and are ready to submit to God. Ready to walk by faith not by sight. Ready to look past the attendance and budget and building issues and community reputation and let God restore them. They are ready to put aside all the talk about vision and values and leadership and let the Spirit show them the way. They are ready to stop looking to organizational solutions for spiritual problems and instead rely on God. It's a beautiful thing to watch as God builds them back up. Replants the fields and brings in a harvest. Friends, if we trust God, He will come through!

August 22, 2018
FAMILY FEUD

Readings for the day: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

There's nothing worse than a family feud. Especially one that lasts generations. Two brothers grow up together. Polar opposites in personality, they never get along. One is favored by his father, the other by his mother. One loves hunting, camping, fishing, and the outdoors. The other prefers staying at home, reading, studying, enjoying the finer things of life. One is big and strong. A mountain of a man. The other is small and thin. He's the intellectual. One day, the big, strong older brother comes in from hunting and is famished. The younger brother has been cooking all day. The older brother asks for some food but the younger brother refuses him unless he gives up his birthright. The stage is set for the younger brother to usurp the older brother's place in the family. Many years pass. Their father is failing. It's time to divide up the inheritance. The younger brother steals the favored place in the family. The older brother is enraged. He seeks revenge. The younger brother leaves home. He's gone for years. When he finally comes home, he's prospered. In his absence, so has the older brother. They meet. They forgive. But their families remain separate. Their clans do not mingle. There is no indication they even see each other again.

Fast forward generations. Hundreds of years. Edom and Israel are now mortal enemies. Locked in perpetual conflict. What began with a bowl of porridge has become a tribal war. Seems crazy, doesn't it? And yet, it's not an uncommon story. Especially in "honor/shame" cultures where defending one's family reputation is taken very seriously. Through it all, God has been watching. Watching these two "brothers" fight. Watching their descendants go back and forth. Now judgment has come for Esau has gone too far. "Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever." (Obadiah 1:10) It's painful to read.

Family feuds are the worst. There's nothing worse than going to war with the people you love. Husbands. Wives. Mothers. Fathers. Children. Grandchildren. Brothers. Sisters. It's heartbreaking. It doesn't matter if the conflict is large or small, it is always painful. And working through it requires great courage and humility as we forgive. Reconcile. Restore relationships. It's some of them hardest work we will ever do.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a very famous story. Two brothers and a father. The younger brother comes and shames his father by asking him to give him his inheritance early. For some reason, he doesn't want to be part of the family anymore. The father graciously agrees. The older brother is horrified. His anger begins to smolder. The younger brother heads off on his own. He wastes everything he has on sinful living. Gossip and rumors filter back to the family of his experiences bringing more shame and more dishonor on the family's reputation. The older brother is enraged. He secretly begins wishing his younger brother would die. Meanwhile, the younger brother loses everything. Things are so bad, he takes on the most shameful profession there is for a Jew. Feeding pigs. He's starving. He's destitute. He has nothing left. Coming to the end of himself, he finally decides to return home. To face the family he once left. To ask for mercy and perhaps be taken on as a hired servant. On his way home, he rehearses what he will say when he finally sees his father. But while is far off...the Bible says...the father sees him! He's been waiting! Hoping! Praying for the day when his younger son would appear on the horizon! He runs to him. He embraces him. He gives him the family robe and signet ring. He welcomes him home with a feast. Meanwhile, the older brother's rage now erupts. He refuses to embrace his brother. Refuses to forgive. Refuses to reconcile. Refuses to welcome him back into the family. And what does the father do? Runs to him as well. Embraces him. Assures him of his great love.

The parable ends with a cliffhanger. What will the older brother do? How will he respond? Will he follow his father's example and embrace his brother once again? Think about your own family. What relationships need reconciliation? Where does forgiveness need to be offered and received? What does restoration look like? Think about your own position in your family. Are you the prodigal son whose left home and damaged relationships? Are you the older brother whose anger and rage threaten the possibility of reconciliation? Are you the father who embraces both his sons with grace and love?

August 23, 2018
THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 45-48

"Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

I wonder if we truly grasp the implications of what we pray in the Lord's Prayer. Do we really mean what we say when we ask our Father to accomplish "His will on earth as it is in heaven." It reminds me of the famous quote from Annie Dillard, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." Or the great quote from CS Lewis, "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased." We simply cannot see beyond the horizons of this world. We refuse to look past the immediate gratification of our desires. We are all materialists at heart, believing this world is all there is and refusing to acknowledge the reality of a bigger, larger, more glorious kingdom. We hold onto the power and privilege of this world and refuse to surrender our hearts to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We give Him part of our lives - as if we have that option - and believe He will somehow give us a pass on the rest. We believe He's returning one day but we forget that with that return comes the final judgment when all of our thoughts, attitudes, and actions will be laid bare.

I am not sure why God's actions take us by surprise. He tells us quite clearly and frequently in not so many words that the kingdoms of this world WILL become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. He tells us every knee will bow. Every tongue will confess. In heaven. On earth. Under the earth that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. He tells us He will punish sin and iniquity to the third and fourth generations. He tells us He will protect and defend and discipline His people. He tells us idolatry is a capital offense that deserves the death penalty so it shouldn't surprise us when He executes such judgment on the pagan nations. I know it is scary. It is a picture of God we are not used to seeing. We don't like this view of God. We don't want to acknowledge holiness as a part of His eternal character. We would much rather settle for an indulgent god who loves us as we are and never challenges us or judges us but always accepts and affirms everything we say and do. But such a god bears no resemblance to the God of the Bible.

It is hard to read these words from Jeremiah. It is hard to think about the millions of people who will suffer as a result of the judgment God brings on their nation. It is easy to think of them as innocent bystanders who simply are collateral damage in this war God is waging against the false gods. However, innocence is a lie. There is no such thing as an innocent human being. We are all guilty of idolatry. All guilty of betraying our first love. All guilty of sin and have gone astray and the wages of our sin is death. The just consequence for our behavior is death. God is not losing control here. He is not lashing out. God is not suffering from "road-rage." He is acting in accordance with divine justice.

You may not buy this idea. You may think I'm making excuses for God. After reading this, you may want to throw out your Old Testament. But before you do, please understand you will also be throwing out the cross. The cross makes no sense without the Old Testament. The suffering and death of Jesus makes no sense without all

that has gone before it. Christ comes embedded in a story that is already in progress. In fact, the crucifixion is the apex of this story! It is the climax to this grand narrative! It is the place where God throws down ALL His judgment. ALL His wrath. ALL His righteous anger at human sin. Jesus hangs in our place. Jesus stands in the gap. Jesus becomes our substitute. Taking it ALL on Himself and fully satisfying the Father. And this is why the Father gives Him all authority in heaven and on earth. Jesus bought the throne at the price of His own blood and He shall reign forever and ever!

In fact, He is reigning even now from on high. The world ignores Him at their own peril. He is preparing to come again. This time with glory and power from on high. So hear in Jeremiah's words a warning. Bow the knee. Surrender your will. Submit to Christ. For He is your King!

August 24, 2018
THE POWER OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 49-50

Exile from the Garden. Death in the Great Flood. Confusion at the Tower of Babel. Plagues in Egypt. Conquest of Canaan. What do all these biblical events have in common? God's perpetual war against evil. God has made it clear from the beginning of time that He will not allow humanity to persist in sin. Just as He did not allow Adam and Eve to stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden after their sin, so He will not allow us to go on living in idolatry. God hates sin. He hates the idolatry of our hearts. He hates unrighteousness. He hates evil.

Now I want to be very clear here. Just because God hates sin DOES NOT mean He hates sinners. Just because God hates idolatry DOES NOT mean He hates those who make the idols. God loves the world. God loves His creation. God loves those made in His image. And because His love is fierce and loyal and steadfast and true, He hates what sin does to us. He hates how it corrupts us. He hates how it breaks us. He hates how dehumanizes us. In this way, God's "hatred" is strangely comforting. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would die on a cross for me. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would send His Spirit to indwell me and sanctify me from within. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He gives me the opportunity to repent and return to Him an almost infinite number of times. And what is true for me is also true for entire communities. Cities. Nations.

God sets out to destroy the Ammonites. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But the section ends with a strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites. God sets out to destroy Elam. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But again, there is this strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of Elam.

God set out to destroy His own people. The nation of Israel in both its northern and southern kingdoms. "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones." (Jeremiah 50:17) He punished them for their sin. The discipline of God was harsh and brutal and terrifying. But now the tables turn. The very instruments God used to bring about His discipline now come under His judgment. Where is the might of Assyria? What happened to her? Her meteoric rise in human history was matched by her sudden fall. The same is true for Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the mightiest ruler of his time but his empire would not last. Why? Because he did not just battle with Israel. He went to war with God Himself.

Psalm 2:1-6 says, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." No one can resist God's power. No one can match His might. It is God who holds the fate of the nations in His hands. God who directs their paths. God who sets their courses. It is God who causes them to rise and fall according to His will and His plan. No one escapes God's judgment. No one can hide from His sight. No one can run from His presence. God is on the march! He will not rest until the whole earth is cleansed. He will not relent until the whole earth repents and turns to Him. He will not let up until sin and evil is utterly defeated and destroyed.

What is our response? Fear? Trembling? On some level, the answer is yes. Even better, it should humility. Confession. Repentance. Joy. For this same God has promised to make all things new. Including you. Including me. He has promised one day to wipe away all our tears. Eliminate all pain and suffering. Gather His children to Himself in glory to live forever safe and secure in His loving arms. Turn to God, friends. Suffer under His discipline no longer. Let His Spirit cleanse you and sanctify you and give you a heart that beats for Jesus alone.

August 25, 2018
RAW EMOTION

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 51, Psalm 137

One of the most important things to keep in mind as you read the Bible is the different genres of Scripture. It's not all directions and commands. There is history. There is poetry. There are wisdom sayings. There is storytelling. There are parables. And all of it is God's Word. All of it is useful for teaching and correction and encouragement.

Today's reading from Psalm 137 is a gut-wrenching one. It is a song sung from the perspective of those recently exiled to Babylon. Force-marched over 900 miles, they arrive. Captives. Enslaved. They had just witnessed the destruction of their entire way of life. They come to the waters of Babylon and they sit and weep. Their cries fill the air. They shared their memories of better days when they walked the streets of Zion. They were so heartbroken, they longed to hang up their instruments and sing no more but their captors forced them. Adding insult to injury, they mocked them saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." Sing us one of the songs of deliverance. Tell us stories about the God who abandoned you in your hour of greatest need. It is an incredibly heartbreak scene.

It reminds me of a book I once read titled, *Conversations with God: Two Centuries of Prayers by African Americans*. Scholars have uncovered a treasure trove of prayers going all the way back to the days of slavery and it is powerful to read them. To place oneself in their shoes and imagine their pain and suffering. To hear their hearts as they cry out to God for deliverance and healing and freedom. It is not a book you can read dispassionately. It brings tears to your eyes at times. The raw emotion is moving. It's also what informs so many of negro spirituals. Songs like Go Down Moses, Give Me Jesus, and Wade in the Water. Their music and prayers rose out of their pain and gives them an unmatched gravitas.

The Psalm ends with a terrible request. "O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalms 137:8-9) This is horrifying and yet it is as honest and real as it gets. By including it in the canon of Scripture, God is not promising to answer such prayers as much as letting us know He listens to them. No matter how dark our prayers become. No matter how angry we get. Even if we lace our prayers with profanity and frustration. God hears them. God welcomes them. God is a big boy and can handle all we might throw at Him. He is not afraid to get down into the muck and mire. Not afraid to dig through the manure pile that our lives can become. He is with us in the midst of the deepest heartaches and terrible tragedies. It doesn't matter whether we find ourselves in Jerusalem or Babylon. At home or in exile. Feeling blessed or cursed. God is there. We can talk to Him. We can share our deepest thoughts and emotions with Him. We don't need to be ashamed. We don't need to hide. He is our Father and He understands our fears.

August 27, 2018
LAMENT

Readings for the day: Lamentations 1-3:1-36

As a general rule, we do not like grief. We try to avoid the experience of loss. We are afraid of embracing our pain. Lament does not come naturally to us. As a pastor, I see it all the time. Someone we love passes away but we tell people we're fine. Someone we care about breaks up with us and we tell people we've moved on. A relationship breaks down and we tell people we're better off. It's all a lie, of course. We are hurting. Heartbroken. Suffering in silence. We go home at night to an empty house or climb into an empty bed and the tears start to flow. Memories get triggered sometimes quite unexpectedly and the grief hits us yet again like a ton of bricks. Special days like birthdays or anniversaries come and go and our hearts ache for the one we loved and lost.

This is true for communities as well. I think about the collective grief of our nation in the wake of 9/11. Or the collective grief of our community in the wake of a police officer being killed in the line of duty. Or the collective grief of a school when a student commits suicide. Life is hard. Pain is real. And the mature believer in Jesus Christ is not afraid to embrace lament as a regular spiritual discipline. Crying out to God is a good thing. Expressing to God our deepest emotions is a good thing. Telling God our fears and failures and heartaches is a good thing.

Traditionally, Jeremiah is considered to be the author of Lamentations. The angst he feels as he watches the destruction of his city cannot be overstated. The grief must have been overwhelming. Furthermore, Jeremiah clearly considers the destruction of Jerusalem to be at the hand of God. His righteous act of judgment on His people for their sin. The words he uses to describe what God has done are terrifying. The Lord has "cast down from heaven to earth", "swallowed up without mercy", "cut down in fierce anger", "poured out His fury like fire", "laid waste", "scorned", "disowned", and "determined to lay in ruins." God is relentless. He will not rest until there's nothing left. His judgment is complete and final. And what is Jeremiah's response? Lament. And what does lament look and feel and sound like? "My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city...Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street." (Lamentations 2:11, 19) It is almost too painful to read. In fact, I bet most American Christians have never read Lamentations for this very reason.

But pain is the reality of our existence. There is no escaping it. The more we try, the worse things get. The more we avoid, the worse we feel. We are so wrapped up in always "feeling good" that we lose touch with reality. We believe it is our inalienable right to be happy. All the time. But perpetual happiness is a fantasy. An illusion. Life is full of discomfort and pain. Life is full of heartache and heartbreak. Life is full of disappointment and failure. One cannot truly live and love without experiencing these things. This is why a healthy theology or system of belief must include lament. Your faith in God must be big enough to handle disappointment and failure and existential pain. This is the lesson God wants us to take away from Lamentations. From the prophet Jeremiah's example. In the midst of all he suffers. In the midst of all he sees his people suffer. He still holds onto faith...

"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:21-26)

August 28, 2018
ROCK BOTTOM

Readings for the day: Lamentations 3:37-66, 4-5

I remember hitting rock bottom. It was August 1992. I had just finished my first summer after my first year of college. Things were not good. I had bombed my first year of school. Too much drinking. Skipped too much class. I had been in Maine all summer coaching lacrosse and through myself into the “camp counselor” lifestyle which involved a lot of drinking and casual sex. Several nights, I woke up passed out at the bar where we partied. I was about as far from God as can be. I came back in a dark place. Depressed. Empty inside. Ashamed of the person I was becoming. My whole life was in a tailspin and I could feel every rotation.

There is only one place to go when you hit rock bottom. You turn to God. Within the first week or so of being on campus again at college, a friend of mine invited me to a student ministry. I figured I had nothing to lose. I didn’t realize it at the time but my life changed the moment I walked in those doors. God met me there in a powerful way. Drew me in. Gave me new life. New hope. A sense of joy. I looked around and saw so many students who seemed to have something I did not. I joined a small group Bible study to find out how to get it. Those men loved me. Blessed me. Put up with my foolishness. I remember asking them to hold me accountable to only drinking one beer an hour at the parties I attended. I failed almost every week but they stuck with me. My life was still not going well. I was still drinking far too much. Still missing too much class. But there was something about this group of guys. Spending time with them became my lifeline. The highlight of my week. Going to Late Nite – our student ministry fellowship - was something I looked forward to. It was a bright spot in an otherwise dark time for me.

A few months went by. I found myself walking alone on the way to the Dal Ward Student Center. Right by the parking garage. I can still picture exactly where I stopped and looked up. A realization hit me that day. Looking back, I can see how it had been growing all semester. This sense that God was very real. The young men I studied the Bible with believed Jesus wasn’t just some old dusty historical figure they admired. They actually believed He was alive and suddenly I realized I did too. And if that were true then everything in my life needed to change.

Lamentations is an account of what happens when we hit rock bottom. It’s ugly. Especially when we’re watching the fall of a nation. I’ve seen what happens when governments fall. When political unrest and instability reigns. I’ve seen the effects of famine, drought, and starvation. I’ve witnessed what happens when people lose all hope of ever escaping poverty. I’ve been approached by women selling their babies in the streets. I’ve seen disease ravage bodies because they had no access to healthcare. I’ve held the hands of the dying and prayed over them as they pass from this brutal world. When I read Lamentations and the accounts of the ash heaps, women boiling their children for food, people wandering listless in the streets, and those wishing for a swift end at the edge of the sword; I think of some of the places I’ve been. This is actually happening today in places like Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Myanmar. The people in these places suffer tremendously and in their suffering, they look to God. They beg for help. They ask Him to intervene.

The good news is God often does through efforts of His people. Through organizations like World Relief, World Vision, and International Justice Mission who intentionally go to the front lines of these conflict zones to offer what they can. From the opening pages of Genesis, God had determined to bring blessing to this world through the creatures He made in His image. To them He gave dominion and authority over all He had made. To them He gave power and responsibility to care for all He had made. To them He gave the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And now that call comes to us. What will we do with it? How will we come alongside the suffering? Will we be the ones God uses to lift them up? This is the truth we are forced to confront over and over again. Whenever the question is raised, “Why does God allow such suffering?” We have to look in the

mirror and own the fact that we are the ones who created these conditions. We are the ones who tolerate the inequalities that exist in our world. We are the ones who spend our lives building up riches and resources while so many around the world go without. The real question. The honest question. The question we don't want to face is not..."Why does God allow such suffering?" That's passing the buck. Playing the same blame game Adam and Eve began way back in the Garden. No, the real question is "Why do WE allow such suffering?" We who have the means and the technology and the resources. Why do we continue to withhold these things from those who need them most?

August 29, 2018
VISIONS

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 1-4

Welcome to Ezekiel and some of the strangest writings of the Old Testament! The next several weeks will be confusing if it's your first time through so let me give you a few tools to help you navigate this book. Let's begin with some history on Ezekiel himself. Ezekiel was born into a priestly family, most likely during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. You will remember King Josiah was one of the faithful kings of Judah and dedicated his reign to cleansing the land of idols and restoring the true worship of Yahweh. He was married but his wife died just prior to the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He was taken into exile along with many of the leaders and influential people of Judah and resettled in Babylon. There it appears he held an important leadership position among the exiles even before receiving his call to be a prophet.

What sets apart the leadership of Ezekiel are the strange visions he received from the Lord. Like Daniel and the Apostle John, he is given the gift of being able to see beyond the veil of this world into the next. But what he sees is overwhelming. Confusing. It doesn't make a lot of sense to us 21st century readers. This is a style of writing known as "apocalyptic." Not unique to the Bible, it has parallels in a lot of ancient near east literature. It has several features you will need to keep in mind as you read.

Revelation – The very word, "apokalypsis" in the Greek means "revelation" or "disclosure." Apocalyptic literature is marked by a direct revelation from God to a seer or prophet, usually in visions or dreams, who then writes down what he sees.

Mystery – The meaning of the visions are often shrouded in mystery. They might refer to past, current, or future events. They may include strange images from the world beyond. While the seer or prophet may write them down in great detail, deciphering them is a significant challenge.

Symbolism – The visions are rife with symbols drawn from nature, ancient near east mythology, astral phenomena, etc. These symbols are used by the seer or prophet to make sense of what he sees and could represent coded language in order to pass imperial censors who may be screening their correspondence.

Resistance Literature – Because the prophet is typically writing from an "exilic" perspective where he and his people live under oppression, his focus is on the future rather than the present. The visions are meant to provide hope to a people who are suffering.

God is sovereign – The overarching message of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is that God reigns. He is supreme. He will judge the nations. He will have the final victory. Despite their present conditions, God's people are to place their trust in Him.

Ezekiel sees a vision. God appears to him in all His glory and splendor. Living creatures with strange faces. Wheels heading in every direction. High winds. Burning coals of fire. And above it all a throne where a majestic figure sits. It's so overwhelming that Ezekiel sits speechless for seven straight days.

What is the content of the revelation Ezekiel receives? His calling to be a prophet. Ezekiel is called to be a "watchman" for Israel. He will speak God's Word to His people. He will embody God's messages through his actions. He will become the vessel through which God will make known His will. This will not be an easy call. Serving God as His prophet never is! There is always a cost! The people will resist him. The people will reject his message. The people may even beat and attack him. But Ezekiel's job is simply to be faithful. To sound the trumpet. To give fair warning. To confront God's people on their sin.

And what will the confrontation look like? This strange scene where Ezekiel lays on his side for 390 days and 40 days respectively to atone for the sins of each kingdom. The 390 days represents the 390 years between the apostasy of Jeroboam of the northern kingdom of Israel when he set up idols for his people to worship and the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel is now experiencing. (975-c. 583 BC) The forty days represents the final years

of apostasy in the southern kingdom of Judah. Taken together, the 430 years represented matches the number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt before the Exodus, meaning the key to their future hope lies in the faithfulness God has shown them in the past. God will repeat what He has done and deliver them again from slavery but only after they have returned to Him with all their hearts.

What does any of this have to do with us? Wise and discerning Christians will see the similarities between the apostasy/exile of Israel and the reality of our own apostasy/exile in the church. We too have a need for God to raise up faithful “watchmen and women” who will proclaim the Word of God with boldness. Prophets who will speak God’s truth regardless of how it is received. Men and women who understand their first call is to please Christ rather than people. This is just as hard for us today as it was for Ezekiel back then. And it is the job of every Christian. The call of every single person who claims to follow Jesus. We are the ones whom God has sent! We are the vessels He has chosen to use for His purposes!

August 30, 2018
THEY WILL KNOW I AM THE LORD

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 5-8

Today's reading is as brutal as they come. Violence. Disease. Famine. Destruction. Pain. Suffering. God delivering His people over to judgment. It is hard to read. Harder still to try and picture. But the hardest part is to accept is that this is all from God. All a part of His plan. It raises some extremely difficult questions. How can this be the same God who promised compassion and steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him? How can this be the same God who will later reveal Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? How can this God of wrath be the same God of love? Is this God bipolar? Manic? Schizophrenic? Does He have rage issues? Can He be trusted? Is such a God even worthy of our love?

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He has held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is that we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. Do things as we choose. And we forget Whom it is we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please. We forget God is God and we are not.

We cannot say we haven't been warned. God is more patient with us than we deserve. He forbears for generations as the sin piles up. He continues to reach out in love only to have the door slammed in His face. He continues to show us grace though we deserve judgment. He continues to be faithful though we ignore Him and walk away. There are consequences to such actions. The apostle Paul talks about them in Romans 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." And how does that wrath manifest itself according to Paul? God simply withdraws His hand. He "gives us over" to the lusts of our hearts. The lust of our eyes. The pride and arrogance of our lives. And the results are ugly. Harsh. Tragic. Horrifying. Human beings, left unchecked, are brutal creatures. It was Robert Burns who first coined the phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man" in a poem he wrote in 1787 and the events of the last few hundred years only serve to confirm his analysis of the human condition. We are capable of unfathomable evil. We are capable of the most brutal violence. We are capable of the most horrifying, dehumanizing behavior. And if we're totally honest, we all know this to be true. Given the right conditions, all of us are capable of just about anything. (See the infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment" of 1971.)

How should a just and holy God respond? Righteous judgment. Our sin offends God on a level we simply cannot understand. Listen to how Ezekiel describes how God feels, "Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols." (Ezekiel 6:9) God takes our sin seriously. Our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. We gloss it over. We make excuses. We rationalize our behavior. We justify our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We foolishly believe we are somehow special and will escape judgment. We presume upon our relationship with God. We are just like Israel who believed they were "immune" because they were God's chosen people.

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord —that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them." (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren't careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong

things. God's judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

"That they may know I am the Lord." Over and over again we read this refrain. God using judgment to cleanse His people. To refine them. To separate the gold from the dross. The wheat from the chaff. He disciplines them in His love. He confronts the evil of their hearts. He forces them to come face to face with the depth of their sin and degradation. The utter futility of their idolatry. The full measure of their rebellion. Yes, it is harsh but it is also true. It is just. It is fair. It is right. It is good. And it is ultimately so they may return in humility to the Lord. They must be broken. Their hardened hearts must be crushed. Their stiff necks bent. Their locked knees bent. God will indeed force them to their knees through judgment so they may again experience the joy of being in right relationship with Him. This is the point of their exile. This is the point of their suffering. God wants His people back. And He will not relent until they return.

It's a sobering reality. Especially for us Christians. To think of all that Christ endured as the Father poured His wrath out on His Son. To consider all Christ went through as he experienced the depths of hell and God-forsakenness. He took on the full weight of human sin. As terrifying as the judgment is in Ezekiel, it pales in comparison to the judgment Christ suffered on the Cross. Reading these words through the prism of the Cross should make us appreciate more and more the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. We should find ourselves marveling at the great love of God who would take our place. Bring judgment on Himself. Freely lay down His life in order to save us from our sin. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God wouldst die for me?

August 31, 2018
THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 9-12

It is hard for us to fathom the national catastrophe that befell Israel. Harder still for us to understand the depth of their pain and suffering. Living as we do in the world's most powerful nation, we cannot begin to grasp what it would be like to watch your entire way of life destroyed. However, all of that pales in comparison to the tragedy Ezekiel sees in his vision today. All the destruction. All the loss of life. All the famine and disease. None of that would have compared to the grief he felt watching the Lord leave His Temple.

From the moment God had indwelled the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Israel had never been alone. They enjoyed His protection. They had enjoyed His provision. He had given them victory after victory. Established them in the Promised Land. Taken up residence in Jerusalem once they built the Temple. Over time, the Israelites began to take Him for granted. In fact, there was a sense in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's time that the Lord was somehow "trapped" in the Temple. They believed they had the Lord caged. He had ceased to be their god and had now become a totem. A magic talisman that kept them from evil. This is why they stubbornly refused to leave Jerusalem when Jeremiah called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. They falsely believed as long as they had the Lord locked down in His Temple that they could never be fully defeated.

Imagine their shock when Ezekiel relates his vision of the Lord leaving the Temple. Departing from the east gate. Rising above the cherubim where He normally sat. Heading out of the city that bore His name. Imagine their fear as their one hope departs, leaving them alone for the first time since their days in Egypt. It's difficult for us to wrap our minds around simply because we believe God is everywhere all the time. We hold onto the promise that God is always with us. We trust He will never leave us or forsake us.

But what if the Lord is leading us into exile? What if the Lord is leading us into a season of suffering? What if the Lord is seeking to refine us and sanctify us? Are we willing to go where He leads? The reality is we too often take the Lord for granted. We too act as if He's "trapped" in a relationship with us. As if God is "bound" by His unconditional love for us. We falsely believe our thoughts, attitudes, and actions don't matter. We false believe we can reject holiness as a way of life. We falsely believe God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God does love us with an everlasting love. God does love us unconditionally. Nothing can snatch us out of His hand. Yes. Yes. Yes. But make no mistake, God is not "bound" to us. He is not "trapped" in this relationship. He is not co-dependent on us nor does He allow our whims, our feelings, our desires to shape His will for our lives. We sin at our own risk. We run ahead of God at our own peril. We stubbornly refuse to follow Him to our own detriment.

Perhaps the best example of how God relates to us comes from the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The younger son comes to his father in the tale and asks for his inheritance. He wants nothing to do with his family any longer. He wants to be on his own. Live according to his own rules. Follow his own path. Find his own happiness. So he takes his money and leaves. The father lets him go. Many years pass. The son has spent all he has on sinful pursuits. He has abandoned all his father taught him. Now he's desperate. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed. One day he plucks up the courage to go home. He has no hope his father will accept back into the family but he thinks he might be able to catch on as a hired servant. But while he is far off, the father sees him. The father's been waiting by the door. Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the

father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God.

At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them so they never would be alone.

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple. A house made with human hands. A sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us! And this is why we do not take Him for granted or presume upon His grace. Rather we should be deeply humbled by God's willingness to dwell with us and in us and work through us.