

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

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FROM “THE INTERSECTION”©

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December 1, 2018
POLITICS OF PERSONAL ATTACK

Readings for the day: 2 Corinthians 10-13

George Herbert Walker Bush died yesterday. His passing signals the end of a political era where one could disagree vehemently with the opposition and yet still grab a beer together after work. President Bush was well-known for his friendships across the aisle and, in particular, for the handwritten notes he would send to all sorts of people he had met throughout the course of his life. Though often lampooned when he was in office, he never seemed to let it get to him. Never retaliated in kind. Never lashed back. He clearly felt it beneath the dignity of his office. He was confident in who he was as a person and his record as a public servant.

Perhaps it is providential to read these words from the Apostle Paul today. As we do, it is important to discern his tone. In our current political climate of manufactured outrage, it would be easy to assume Paul feels as we do. It would be easy to read anger and rage into his words as he defends his apostleship. That would be a mistake. Paul says right up front that he is coming to them in meekness and gentleness. Though confident in his authority as an apostle of Christ, he will not “boast beyond limits” nor will he “overextend” himself to make his point. He calls himself a fool numerous times throughout the reading and mocks his former “credentials.” Over and over again, he reminds them of his love for them. Reminds them of his great desire to see them restored in their faith. I love how he ends his letter, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11) This is Paul’s heart on display.

So what is causing the rift between he and his Corinthian friends? Self-proclaimed “super-apostles” who seem to follow Paul around to correct his theology. They take it on themselves to serve as the theological police of the fledgling early church. They often preach that everyone must be circumcised. They attack Paul’s methods and speaking skills. They attack his character and reliability. They accuse him of being a conflict avoider. They claim to have the same mission credentials as Paul and a better spiritual pedigree. Their CV’s are filled, so they say, with church plants and signs and wonders and visions. This forces Paul’s hand. He has to do what he hates. He has to defend his apostleship by citing his own hard-won credentials.

Originally, Paul came to them in humility. He placed no financial burden on them, preaching the gospel free of charge. Living off the support of other churches, like the one in Macedonia which was extremely poor and yet very generous, he was able to live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ. He didn’t lord his authority over them. He didn’t pass out his resume. He refused to promote his past success. Instead, he came to them in weakness. He shared in their sufferings. He intentionally relinquished his rights in order to build them up as a church. I love how he describes his love for them. “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 11:2) “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls...” (2 Corinthians 12:15) “For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.” (2 Corinthians 13:9)

Perhaps the most famous part of this set of readings has to do with the “thorn in Paul’s flesh.” Commentators throughout history have argued over what exactly Paul is referring to here. Is it an illness? An addiction? A persistent temptation? I believe Paul clearly identifies the thorn when he calls it a “messenger from Satan.” Earlier in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul writes “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.” The Greek word for “angel” can also mean “messenger” and it is the same word in both cases. Essentially, Paul believes that these false apostles are being used by God to keep him humble and utterly reliant on grace. God is using these evil men and their lies to protect Paul from pride and arrogance. He is using them

to remind Paul of his weakness and dependence on Christ. He wants Paul to understand that the power he possesses does not come from him but from Jesus Himself.

I remember several years ago having a member of my congregation turn on me. For months she would write hate-filled notes and put them in the offering plate for me. When the deacons started to throw them away, she placed them in an envelope with my name on it. Soon that wasn't enough. She began writing in our pew Bibles, calling for me to be fired. Attacking my character. Her anger and hate festered to the point that she even wrote a message on our Communion table cloth! It was brutal. We tried to talk to her. We tried to confront her. Even told her she would not be welcome if she persisted in her behavior. None of it deterred this woman. Eventually, she passed away. She certainly didn't want me anywhere near her funeral. I remember the morning of her memorial service sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my next meeting. As I prayed for this woman and her family, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart. "I have used this woman to keep you humble. To remind you of your need to depend on Me. To teach you the truth about grace and unconditional love. You will miss her. You need people like her in your life to keep you trusting in the sufficiency of Christ." It was a powerful lesson and one I will never forget.

How do you handle hate? How do you handle unfair criticism? Remember God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Rather than lash out, take a step back. What is God trying to show you? What is God trying to teach you? Is His grace truly sufficient for you? Is His power made perfect even in your weakness?

December 3, 2018
THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for the day: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

You may have seen the news out of Europe about the Dutch man who tried to change his legal age. Biologically, he is in his sixties but he “feels” like he’s in his forties and his life is diminished because of the discrimination that happens the older one gets. You may have caught the news out of England about the man who believes passionately in “ethical veganism” and wants it to become legally protected as a religion so he can potentially force his former employer to give him his job back as well as change their investment practices so as not to violate his religious beliefs. You may have seen the opinion piece in the New York Times from the transgender woman who argues the medical ethical guideline of “Do no harm” no longer should apply because no doctor should ever have the authority to determine what actually “harms” another person. “I also believe that surgery’s only prerequisite should be a simple demonstration of want. Beyond this, no amount of pain, anticipated or continuing, justifies its withholding.” (Andrea Long Chu, NYT, 11/24/2018) These may seem like isolated cases to you. Outliers we should dismiss. I disagree.

I believe they are the prime examples of God giving us over to the “lusts of our hearts...dishonorable passions...debased minds.” Now please hear me. I am not being mean. I am not being judgmental. I am simply pointing out the reality of what happens when we turn away from God. We dis-integrate. Body, mind, heart, and soul are set in opposition to one another, resulting in skyrocketing rates of depression and suicide ideation. Dysphoria, once considered a mental illness, is now being celebrated and embraced. The Apostle Paul knew the tragic consequences of such thinking. It was celebrated in his own context as well. Human beings, created and designed to bring God glory and honor, turned from their sacred vocation and pursued their own pleasure. They did what was right in their own eyes. They forged their own path only to find it leading them over a cliff. The most heartbreak part of reading the New York Times story mentioned above was Andrea’s willingness, even desire, to embrace depression and suicide. She admits taking hormones and having surgery will actually take her deeper into depression but she sees no alternative. She has no hope.

This is why Paul’s stirring words in Romans 1:16 are so important! “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Make no mistake, Paul doesn’t believe the gospel is simply a good idea. One philosophy among many. One path among many to get to God. No, he truly believes the gospel provides the only ANSWER to the problem of pain and suffering of this world. He truly believes the gospel provides the only HOPE we can possibly have for a better, richer, more integrated life. He truly believes the gospel alone has the power to save humanity from itself.

Now I know this idea is very unpopular in our culture today. To suggest Christianity is somehow superior in any way to any other religious or philosophical idea is considered arrogant and condescending. Exclusive and intolerant. But let me put it another way. Imagine you develop a successful treatment for cancer. Imagine your success rate is 100% at curing the disease. Sure, there are a lot of other treatments out there. Some more successful than others but yours is guaranteed. Would it not be right to promote it as the better, more superior option? Paul believes the gospel is the power of God for salvation. He believes it actually delivers on what it promises. Is he not right then to promote it as the superior cure to what ails humanity? Namely, sin? Is he not right to promote it above the Torah? Are we not right to promote it above Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? If we truly believe Jesus is God then how can we not declare Him as superior in every way to Mohammed, Krishna, Buddha, even Moses? Friends, this is exactly the truth that changed Paul’s life on the road outside Damascus. When he realized Jesus had been raised from the dead, he knew He could be no ordinary prophet. Jesus must be God and therefore everything Jesus said or did must be true. And if everything Jesus said or did must be true then we must believe Him. And if we believe Him then we will surrender our lives to Him. And if we surrender our lives to Him then we will be submit all our thoughts, feelings, and actions to His Lordship. And if we submit to His Lordship, we will find ourselves a regenerated and re-integrated people living not for ourselves but for the honor and glory of God. This is the power of the gospel.

December 4, 2018

WHAT IS FAITH?

Readings for the day: Romans 5-8

"No unbelief made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:20-22)

What is faith? A feeling? An emotion? Something you experience deep down in your gut? Is it an intellectual belief? Something you hold to be true? Something you know to be true? What is faith? For Abraham, faith was "being fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised." And what had God promised Abraham? A son. A son to be conceived and born through Sarah, his wife who was well past menopause. A son to carry on his line. A son who would be the first among many. A son whose descendants would eventually outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. This was the dream of every Ancient Near East patriarch and it had been denied Abraham up to this point in his life. He despaired of it ever coming to pass. But now God entered the equation. God made a promise. God declared that he would have a son. With this promise, God guaranteed Abraham's family legacy. It would have to be a miracle. Abraham was in his seventies when God made the promise. Sarah in her sixties. They would have to wait at least two decades for it to come to pass. But come to pass it did and Abraham never wavered in his confidence that God would be true to His Word. This is what faith is and why it was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Now does this mean Abraham never had a moment of weakness? Never had any doubts? Never had any fears? Of course not! These emotions are all very real. At times, they drive us to take matters into our own hands. It's not that we doubt God's ability so much as we struggle to trust His timing. Struggle to see His purposes.

Struggle to submit to His will. Abraham wrestled with these things as well and the result was Ishmael! But through it all, one thing remained true for Abraham. He remained fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. Abraham may not have fully understood. May not have known how God would bring this miracle to pass. Maybe he even believed God would use ordinary means like having sex with Hagar to bring His plan to completion. Whatever Abraham may have thought or felt, we know for sure he believed. And it is this unwavering belief in the promise of God that is counted to Abraham as righteousness.

What about us? In our reading for today, Paul contends it is faith that justifies us before God. It is faith that grants us access to God's grace. It is faith that helps us persevere through suffering. Faith that sets us free from the bondage of sin. Faith allows us to set our minds on the Spirit which brings life and peace. Faith makes us fellow heirs with Christ. Most of all, faith gives us the confidence of knowing nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do you have such faith? Are you fully convinced God is able to bring – and is bringing - these promises to pass in your life? Do you believe God when He tells you there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus? Or do you live a life - like so many do - of self-condemnation and fear? Do you believe God when He says there is nothing that can separate you from His love? Or do you find yourself feeling so depressed and ashamed that you think no one could or would ever love you? Do you believe God when He says the sufferings of this world are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in you? Or is the pain and heartache you've experienced simply too much even for God to handle? Do you believe God when He says He will save you from this body of death? Or do you feel trapped by sin? Enslaved by the lusts of your heart? You do the things you don't want to do and don't do the things you do want to do? These are just a few of the important questions posed by the Apostle Paul throughout this section. He wants us to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt - as Abraham did - that God is able to do what He has promised!

This, friends, is the true message of Christmas. God delivering once and for all on all His promises! God breaking the power of sin. God defeating the power of death. God destroying all the works of the enemy. In Christ, God comes into this world to face down evil and suffering. In Christ, God literally takes our place, absorbs the righteous punishment we deserved, and atones for all our sin. In Christ, God makes peace. Offers reconciliation. Tears down the dividing wall of hostility and makes all things new. This is what God did and is still doing in our world. Thanks be to God for His great faithfulness!

December 5, 2018
MYSTERY OF ELECTION

Readings for the day: Romans 9-12

Today's reading is a challenging one. Paul is asking deep questions about the promises and purposes of God. So much of which is shrouded in mystery. So much of which we will never know this side of heaven. Has the Word of God failed? Is God unjust? How can God fault those whom He has not chosen? These questions are important. It is vital to wrestle with them honestly and vulnerably. True faith welcomes such challenges and doesn't settle for easy answers.

To begin, we must check our assumptions at the door. There are no standards of justice outside of God. God is not answerable to any human legal code nor does He subject Himself to human notions of universal fairness. God is the Potter. We are the clay. This fundamental principle undergirds everything Paul will say in these few chapters. The baseline for this discussion begins with God being God and human beings being human beings. The Creator is not the same as His creation. The creation is not the same as its Creator. There is a massive, ontological distinction between the two that must be maintained if we are to find our way through this quandary.

Secondly, because God is God, He has every right to exercise His sovereign choice over all He has made. He chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the families on the face of the earth. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were born. He chose Israel over Egypt. Moses over Pharaoh. The full witness of Scripture makes it clear that God freely chooses some vessels for honor and some for dishonor. Scripture makes clear that God endures with patience the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" so that He might "make known the riches of glory for His vessels of mercy." Over and over again, we see this played out in the Old Testament. There is simply no other way to honestly interpret it.

Thirdly, what are we then to make of what's happening with Israel? God's elect? God's chosen? "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all..." (Romans 9:4-5) Furthermore, what are we to make of the Gentiles? God's non-elect? The pagans who've rejected God all their lives? Though they have not pursued righteousness somehow they attained it by faith! Does this mean God's elect have been rejected? By no means! "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (Romans 9:6-7) Ethnicity no longer matters! What matters is faith and God has maintained a remnant – of which the Apostle Paul is one - who have been saved by grace.

Fourthly, God isn't done! God's plan for Israel is not yet complete! So the Gentiles who have been grafted into God's family should not become prideful or take God's grace for granted. "Remember it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." (Romans 11:18) Instead, they should wait and pray for the day when the partial hardening on Israel is softened because the full number of Gentiles have finally come in and God saves all of Israel.

How will that happen? Paul has no idea. He simply knows God is faithful. He will never abandon His people. His love is steadfast, loyal, and true. So at the end of all this deep wrestling there can only be an exclamation of praise. God is God. We are not. Thanks be to God! Or as Paul puts it, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33)

December 6, 2018
MIXING RELIGION AND POLITICS

Readings for the day: Romans 13:1-16

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his farce of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground! Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values! Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain!

Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. ALL of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi – though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything – including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

December 7, 2018
TOTAL SURRENDER

Readings for the day: Acts 20:4-38, 21-23:1-35

What does total surrender to Christ look like? It looks like the Apostle Paul. Paul leaves his home. His friendships. His business. His ministry all behind in order to suffer for Christ. He was compelled by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem where he knew he would be put in chains. Prophecy after prophecy had been made. Warning after warning had been given. There was no more dangerous place for Paul to go and yet he went. Not out of pride or arrogance but out of obedience to His Lord. It was Jesus who sent him to testify in Jerusalem and it would be Jesus who would send him to testify in Rome. From the heart of Judaism to the heart of the empire. Paul was Jesus' chosen instrument to declare the good news of the gospel in front of kings and rulers and authorities. Though it would eventually cost him his life, Paul considered it a privilege to serve.

I have met many "Apostle Paul's" in my life. Men and women who sacrifice everything for the sake of the gospel. They leave their homes. Their families. Their friendships. Their businesses. And they go to faraway places. Towns and villages who have never heard the name of Jesus. They place themselves in danger. They endure persecution. Many of them will bear the scars for the rest of their lives. Some of them even lose their lives. Why do they do it? They feel compelled by the Holy Spirit. Constrained by His will to go to the places He shows them in order to share Christ with those who are lost. They do not act of pride or arrogance. They do not trust in their own resources or strength. They are not naive or ignorant. They go with the understanding that they may not return. But they cannot help themselves. It is Jesus who commands them. It is Jesus who sends them. It is Jesus who calls them into the harvest field. They are Jesus' chosen instruments to make His gospel known among a people who have never heard. They preach in places that do not show up on any map. They cross borders into places where the gospel has never gone. They confront principalities and powers we cannot fathom, armed only with the gospel. And though it costs them their health. Their wealth. Their family. Sometimes their lives. They consider it a privilege and honor to serve.

All of us are called by Jesus. All of us are sent by Jesus. All of us have a field to harvest for our Lord. Sadly, too many of us never show up for work. Our fields are wild and overgrown. They have gone untended for far too many years. Sure, we mean well. We think we'll get to it one day. Once we're financially secure. Once our kids are grown. Once we get married and settle down. Or we work the edges of the field. Close to the gate. In the places where it's safest. After all, we wouldn't want to place ourselves at risk, right? God wants us to be safe, right? He would never call us to sacrifice our comfort or lifestyle or livelihood or family or friendships for the sake of His mission, right? Isn't the dangerous work reserved for the truly holy? The super Christians? Surely that's not me. Surely that's not what Jesus wants me to do.

The Word of God is clear. It leaves us very little wiggle room. All that we have been given. All that we've earned over the course of our lives. All our success. All our wealth. All our possessions. All our relationships. All our friendships. Everything in our lives must be surrendered and laid at the feet of our Lord. It has come from His hands and must be returned to Him. This is the price of following Jesus. We relinquish it all. We surrender it all. We let go of it all and walk with open hands and open hearts before Him. Our first call is to serve Jesus. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else is allowed to get in the way. Not our families. Not our careers. Not our friendships. Not our possessions. Not our retirement. Not our fears. Not our failures. Not our anxieties. Not our worries. Not our doubts. Not our questions. Nothing. Jesus is Lord. When He calls me, I will answer. Where He sends me, I will go. I am Jesus' chosen instrument to make His will known in my community and to the ends of the earth. And it is a privilege and honor to serve.

December 8, 2018
RESURRECTION LIFE

Readings for the day: Acts 24-26

Everything for Paul hinges on the resurrection. When he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus, a door opened in his heart that could never be closed. He changed. Suddenly all his zeal and passion for the Law was re-focused as he realized everything the prophets foretold had come true in Christ. His hope as a Pharisee for the eventual resurrection of the dead had actually taken place in his lifetime. Jesus was the firstfruits. He was the forerunner. He was the Messiah whom God had sent. And with this knowledge, all the tumblers fall into place. Jesus is the key that makes sense of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the filter now through which all of Scripture should be read and understood. The Risen Christ brings new life and new meaning to everything Paul had learned over the course of his lifetime. And with this knowledge Paul is transformed from a violent, raging Pharisee intent on destroying Christianity to its foremost evangelist, pastor, and theologian.

Of course, wrapping your life around the resurrection will not make you popular. Paul found himself at odds with the Romans who believed he was barking mad. Paul found himself at odds with his former friends and colleagues in Judaism who tried to have him killed. Paul even found himself at odds – as we have already seen – with his fellow Christians at times who could not grasp the depths of his message of unconditional love and grace. Living the resurrection life will certainly make you strange. Weird. Odd. Because your values and priorities and thoughts and attitudes and actions are shaped by another Kingdom. A Kingdom not of this world. Ruled by a King who is not of this world. Submitting your life to Him means living an “other-worldly” life. A life not ruled by fear. A life not centered around self. A life untangled and unencumbered by the cares and worries of this world.

Can you imagine living a life without fear? That’s the life Jesus offers. The resurrection life. Resurrection places us beyond the fears of this world. No longer do we fear death. No longer do we fear danger. No longer do we fear hunger or nakedness or prison or sickness. No longer do we fear the loss of possessions, reputation, position and privilege. No longer do we fear failure or pain or suffering. These “fears” are what the world uses to keep us in line. To squeeze us into its mold. To shape us into its corrupt image. But the resurrection sets us free from all of that! Now are transformed as our hearts and minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead now lives in us and is at work through us! This is what Paul understood. This is what Peter understood. This is what millions of Christians have understood throughout history and it is why the Kingdom of God continues to move with power on the earth.

December 10, 2018
MARTYRDOM

Readings for the day: Acts 27-28

The recent death of John Chau has kicked over a hornet's nest. Some see him as yet another martyr to the cause of Christ on par with the Jim Elliott's of our past. Others see him as yet another example of colonial Christianity seeking to impose his views on a tribe who clearly didn't want him on their island. The inhabitants of North Sentinel killed John Chau as he attempted to befriend them, bring them gifts, and, most of all, share Christ. Why the controversy? First and foremost, we live in a world where evangelism is cast in a negative light. The idea that one person's views are superior in any way to another's is anathema in our culture. The Sentinelese have a right to be left alone. Their religious views are no one else's business. Christian missionaries should leave well enough alone. Second, we live in a world where Christian missions has too often been used as a cover for Western European colonial expansion. The evidence is legion in Africa, Latin America, and other places around the world. Western powers not only tried to bring the gospel but they used it as a pretext to overthrow governments, manipulate economies, and enslave entire people groups. Third, too many missionaries are naive in their approach. They don't take seriously the potential of introducing life-threatening disease to the local population. They don't take the time to understand the language or learn the culture or use intermediaries who are culturally closer to the unreached group to help make first contact.

By all accounts, John Chau truly made an effort to overcome these barriers and address these concerns. He spent a great deal of time in training. He trained his body. Trained his mind. Trained his spirit to endure the isolation he would experience should he make successful contact. He got the proper immunizations and quarantined himself to protect the Sentinelese from any potential disease. He studied their culture. Studied what was known of their language. He made multiple trips to the region to familiarize himself with the area. He made enough local contacts to provide transport. He clearly was not an agent of some foreign government seeking to extend their influence. Now that the dust has settled, the picture that has emerged is that of an earnest, sincere believer in Christ who clearly felt called to reach one of the most isolated tribes left in the world with the gospel. Time will tell if his death will bear any fruit.

What does this have to do with today's Bible reading? I imagine Paul faced similar challenges in his own journey to Rome. I think about his encounter with the indigenous people on Malta. Having been shipwrecked in a storm, Paul escapes with his life along with the other sailors and soldiers who were aboard. They make their way to the beach where they were greeted with kindness by the locals. A fire was kindled. Food was probably brought. Paul even gets bit by a poisonous snake and survives! Eventually, they are taken to the leader whose father was dying of disease. Paul heals him. Word gets out. The people bring all their sick to Paul to be cured and this gave Paul an opportunity – though the passage doesn't make this explicit - to preach the gospel.

I imagine the same people who criticize John Chau would have criticized Paul as well. The only difference between the two is Paul succeeded where John failed. History is written by the victors and thus Paul is remembered warmly as the one who "Christianized" an empire because he survived where so many others, like John Chau, died. But now Paul's come to the end. The race has been run. The cup emptied. He will be executed in Rome. The latest in a long line of first century martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

What can we learn from the example of Paul? Or the modern day example of John Chau? First, we must have a passion to reach the lost at all costs. There is an urgency to our mission because eternity is literally on the line. Christ Himself commanded us to make disciples of all nations. He told us we would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This commission has never been revoked so we must be obey. Second, we must be willing to sacrifice comfort, safety, reputation, and resources if we are to accomplish this mission. Evangelism will not make us popular. Many will reject what we have to say. They will criticize us

and call us names. They may accuse us of promoting white supremacy, neo-colonialism, etc. But we must fear God more than man. Finally, we have to be wise. We cannot confuse the mission with the methods. We cannot be so wed to a certain way of doing things that we make it more important than the mission itself. We must be culturally sensitive and aware. We must be willing to relinquish power and authority to indigenous leadership. We must be humble in our approach and not pretend we have all the answers. We must study the culture we are trying to reach diligently and honor as much as we can. We must openly acknowledge when we make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

What if the 29th chapter of Acts is being written even as we speak? What stories will be told about your mission work?

December 11, 2018
THE MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for the day: Philippians 1-4

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus..." (Phil. 2:5) This is what's missing from the church today. The mind of Christ. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is ours already through faith in Jesus?

Sadly, we do not take God at His Word. If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in "authenticity" do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humiliation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul's life. He's in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probably execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

"To live is Christ and to die is gain."

"Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ."

"I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ."

Even my sufferings are nothing compared to what I have gained in Christ.

"I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ."

All my strivings cease as I "press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

I want to know nothing else but "Christ and the power of His resurrection."

Does this mean we should abandon everything we have and go live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer, friends, is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The Mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. To get from here to there requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

December 12, 2018
THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Readings for the day: Philemon, Colossians 1-4

Last evening I had the pleasure of spending time with leaders from an Ethiopian congregation discussing the character and nature of God. Specifically, we talked about the doctrine of the Trinity which declares that the One True God exists eternally as Three Persons. Distinct yet undivided. Different but not separate. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God. But the Father is not the Son. The Son is not the Spirit. And the Spirit is not the Father. Though they are diverse in their personalities and roles, they all share in the same essence or being. It's a paradox to be sure and a stumbling block to faith for many.

The term "Trinity" was coined by a 2nd century African theologian named Tertullian. Considered by many to be the "Father of Western Theology", Tertullian attempted to put into human words what is ultimately a divine mystery. From the opening pages of Scripture, the One God reveals Himself as a plurality. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and the Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters...then God said..." The Apostle John affirms this central truth in the opening verses of his Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." And then comes these words today from the Apostle Paul, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." (Colossians 1:15-23)

Why is all this important and what does it have to do with Christmas? In all the commercialism and materialism of the season, what is lost is our sheer awe at what God has done in Jesus Christ. The magnitude of the miracle of God becoming one of us is something that should bring us to our knees. It should cause our stomachs to flop and our hearts to skip a beat. We should all fall face down on the floor in worship and adoration of the Christ child. And yet, we can barely get to church on Christmas Eve. Most of our Advent is spent preparing for Santa Claus, decorating the house, and going on spending sprees we cannot afford. The Christmas rush is real and our lives reflect a franticness that makes it impossible to pause and appreciate and stare in wonder at the baby in the manger.

Jesus is the very image of the invisible God. He is the perfect representation of God's being. In Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is preeminent over all creation. Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate. The God of the universe taking on human flesh and entering into our world. Jesus is before all things. He created all things. He sustains all things. He reconciles all things. And He will one day glorify all things, whether on earth or in heaven. It is utterly amazing and beyond words that this God...this Jesus...would bend the heavens to come down and become one of us. Be born of a virgin for us. Suffer hardship and pain for us. Shed His own blood for us. Die a humiliating death on the cross for us. Spend three days in the grave for us. Descend into hell itself for us. And rise again from the grave for us. But this is what our God did. All the while remaining God.

This is what we celebrate on Christmas and every year I find myself asking...why is this not enough? Why do I need to add more? Why do I feel the pressure to spend so much time and energy on things that do not carry eternal weight? Why do I not spend more time at the manger? More time marveling at the birth of my Savior? More time in silent awe and wonder at what God has done? Does this mean I should give up our annual Christmas tree cutting? Decorating? Partying? Gift-giving? I don't think so. However, I do need to engage in self-reflection and ask myself if there's anything I am allowing to come between me and my worship of Jesus. My worship of the Triune God as reveals Himself in human flesh.

December 13, 2018
TROPHIES OF GRACE

Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of God. The gift of God coming into the world. The Word of God becoming flesh and blood. The Son of God becoming one of us. I often wonder why God did it. Why did God come? Why did He send His Son? What was He hoping to accomplish? What did He hope to gain by humiliating Himself to the point of becoming a human being? Then I read these beautiful words from the Apostle Paul...

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

When I was young, I had a bookshelf on which I displayed all my trophies. I had a letter jacket on which I displayed all my high school athletic accomplishments. I framed academic certificates for making the honor roll. I wore my Boy Scout uniform with pride because of the many patches and badges it displayed, each representing some kind of achievement including my Eagle. Now I am older but my tendency to put my achievements on display has not diminished. I sit in my office and to my right on the wall are all the degrees I've earned as well as my certificate of ordination and the senior preaching award I won at Princeton. All of us have a tendency to glory in our achievements and there's nothing wrong with being proud of the hard work you've put in or the accolades you've received along the way.

At the same time, we must also recognize success is fleeting. My old trophies are gathering dust in my parent's basement somewhere. My letter jacket and Boy Scout uniform hang in a dark corner of my closet. I can't for the life of me find a single honor roll certificate and I barely glance at the degrees on my wall. These things come and go. They are like the grass that withers or the flower that fades. Even if I were to spend my whole life conquering one mountain after another, eventually my strength will fail. Eventually there will be no more mountains to climb. No more prizes to win. What then?

Thankfully, life is more than what I achieve. Life is more than what I earn. Life is more than what I accomplish. Life. True life. Eternal life is a gift from God. It is unearned. It is unmerited. It is undeserved. While we were dead in sin, God made us alive. How? By His great mercy. Why? Because of the great love with which He loved us. For what purpose? To put us on display as a trophy of grace. Do you realize God's intent is to show you off for all eternity? Do you realize His greatest joy. His greatest delight comes in saving you? Do you understand that God has raised you up and seated you at His right hand so that in the ages to come all will see the immeasurable riches of Christ in you? Forget the plastic trophies we grasp so tightly! Forget the moth-eaten letter jackets and Boy Scout uniforms! Forget the degrees that fade! My life is a trophy of grace! My life is exhibit one of God's mercy! My salvation is God's achievement that will go on display for all eternity...for all to see...all for His glory!

December 14, 2018
CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

“I wish it could be Christmas every day.” How many of us have expressed that sentiment over the years? When we were young, it probably had to do with getting more presents.:-) But as we get older, the sentiment expresses some of the deepest longings of our hearts. We wish there was more kindness in the world. More gentleness. More compassion. We wish we could spend more time with friends and family and those we love. We wish we could experience more of the beauty that makes up the magic of this particular season. Perhaps most of all, we wish we could connect with God every day like we do when we sing “Silent Night” while holding candles with hundreds, perhaps thousands of other voices at the foot of the manger. In that moment - and perhaps only for that moment - the cares and worries and struggles and heartaches of this world are forgotten as we focus in on the Christ child.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...” Paul’s talking about the miracle of Christmas. He’s talking about not only what happened by why it happened and how we can experience a bit of Christmas every single day of our lives. Jesus has appeared to bring salvation to all people. And part of His great salvation plan – the plan that was unveiled for all to see that first Christmas night in Bethlehem - is to train us to live godly lives in this ungodly world. Train us to be little lights in the darkness of our world. Train us to cling to hope amidst the hopelessness and despair of our world as we wait for the day of Jesus’ Second Coming. The Second Advent. The Day the promise of Christmas will be finally and completely fulfilled.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14)

What does it mean for us to experience Christmas every day? It means living a godly life. And what is a godly life according to Paul? It is self-controlled. Good and upright. Pure and holy. Notice he does not say “perfect.” We are never perfect this side of heaven but Christmas stirs in us the hope that one day Jesus Himself will come. He will redeem us and our world from all lawlessness and sin and evil and death. He will purify us once and for all as He ushers us into His Kingdom. The Kingdom He’s been preparing for us from before the foundations of the world.

The reality is we can be kind in this world. We can be gentle. We can be compassionate. We can make more time for friends and family and those we love. We can experience the beauty of God’s creation every day in a sunrise or hiking up a 14’er or fishing a mountain stream. We can give gifts year round and seek to bless those around us. We can gather for worship every single Sunday with God’s people and sing songs of deliverance and praise to our God. These are things we can do. Nothing stops us. Nothing keeps us from intentionally living with the “Christmas spirit” year round.

Think of the witness it would be if Christians were truly “zealous for good works.” If we were truly passionate about the works of God. Think of how it would change our neighborhoods if we started gathering people together on a regular basis for food and friendship? Think about how it would change our work environments if we got there just a little early to make the coffee or bring a few treats to share? Think about how it would change the social fabric of our schools if Christian students made the intentional decision to live with kindness and gentleness and love? Stood up to bullies on behalf of others? Think of how our churches would change if we extended grace to those who hurt us rather than judgment? If we forgave those who sinned against us

rather than leave and head to the church down the street? Think of how the world would change if we saw our wealth and resources as tools in the hands of God to bring life and light and health and hope in the name of Jesus? All this is possible for those who know and follow Christ.

If you've ever wished it could be Christmas every day, I have good news for you! It can be! Simply love and obey Christ. Live a life of praise and worship and joy before your Redeemer. Renounce your ungodly and worldly passions. Those things only get in the way. Instead, live your life for Jesus. Invite others to join you. Serve those whom Jesus' loves – the lost and the least in your community - and you will discover the peace the angels proclaimed at Jesus' birth.

December 15, 2018
LIFE TOGETHER

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man (think teenager) who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They came to worship. They came to trade. They came to make deposits at the Temple which served as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. Your mentor Paul started a riot here when he preached the gospel and the church he left behind was facing some significant challenges.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up almost immediately is syncretism. The merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith. Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Some of it is brought by the new believers as they struggle to leave the old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul is warning Timothy about as he begins his letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7)

Why is this so important? First and foremost, eternity is on the line. The primary message of the gospel is "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15) Nothing should be allowed to get in the way of Jesus and those He came to save. Not the myths of the Ephesians nor the Law of the Jews. Second, what we believe shapes how we live. Throughout this letter, Paul will offer Timothy advice on a variety of subjects. Prayer. Leadership. Spiritual discipline. Teaching. Mentoring. Money. All of these are very practical, down to earth realities in the church Timothy serves. All of these probably caused Timothy a rash of headaches from time to time. Most of the conflict in the church even today revolves around many of these issues. And Timothy is young, as Paul points out. He is green. He probably doesn't have a ton of experience to fall back on as he looks to lead his congregation. So Paul encourages him to fall back on his faith. On his call to be a pastor. One that was confirmed by the council of elders when they laid hands on him. Timothy is not to let himself get bogged down but instead is to pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is just as easy for us to get bogged down. We read a letter like this and we focus on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century culture. We get so hung up on making sure the finer points of our theology align that we forget the major point Paul is making. "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." (1 Timothy 1:5) Get this part right and the rest has a way of taking care of itself.

December 17, 2018
REFUGEES

Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

It is good for my soul to spend time with refugees. Men and women from other countries who flee violence and persecution. Forced out of their homes for political, social, and religious reasons. They live as aliens and strangers in a new land. Sojourners and exiles in a foreign culture. No matter how long they may live in a place, they never truly adjust. A large part of their heart remains broken by the loss of their homeland. I remember talking with an Anglican Archbishop in Rwanda. His family was forced out of their home when he was very young due to tribal conflict. Through a miraculous series of events, he was able to make his way to America and get an education. He joined a large Christian non-profit and worked his way up to vice-presidential level of the organization. He was successful in every way one could imagine and yet, when the opportunity came to return, he immediately sold all he had and went home. Willingly re-entered poverty. Willingly gave up his comfortable and safe life here in the States to help his country recover the violence of their recent past. I have another good friend who fled his country after being imprisoned for his faith. He was a teenager when the Communists put in him prison. He made his way across the border into a neighboring country to a refugee camp. He applied for refugee status and came to the US. He has been here for thirty years pastoring a church in Aurora, CO. But his heart longs for his home. He and I go back now twice a year to the region of the country where he was born and he is welcomed like a national hero. It's amazing.

In our reading today, Peter addresses his fellow Christians as “elect exiles” living in dispersion throughout the Roman Empire. He addresses them as aliens and sojourners in a foreign land. He calls them to live in radically faithful ways. Rejecting the ways of this world in order to live as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. They are a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) They are in the world but they are not of the world. The nature of their exile is not easy. They face trials of various kinds. Harsh persecutions. Their faith is under constant assault. Their way of living is strange. The holiness of their conduct sets them continually apart. The core values of their life together - “unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” (1 Peter 3:8) - make them easy targets. One would think this movement doomed to destruction. How in the world can they survive with no political access or power? No wealthy patronage to protect them? No military might at their disposal to keep them safe? They are scattered across the Roman Empire. They have no Temple. No earthly city to call home. They have no cultural center. Not even a common language. And yet they persevere. They hold fast to their faith. This ragtag group of exiles overcomes the world.

There is no more unlikely story in history than the church of Jesus Christ. And that history continues to be written. This past week, Pastor Wang Yi of Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, China was detained with 100 of his parishioners. He faces up to fifteen years in prison for attempting to subvert the state. Like the Apostle Paul, he wrote a letter from jail which has been published in its entirety online. I commend it to you. However, here is an excerpt that I believe sums up what it means to embrace an “exilic identity” in this world...

“If I am imprisoned for a long or short period of time, if I can help reduce the authorities’ fear of my faith and of my Savior, I am very joyfully willing to help them in this way. But I know that only when I renounce all the wickedness of this persecution against the church and use peaceful means to disobey, will I truly be able to help the souls of the authorities and law enforcement. I hope God uses me, by means of first losing my personal freedom, to tell those who have deprived me of my personal freedom that there is an authority higher than their authority, and that there is a freedom they cannot restrain, a freedom that fills the church of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Regardless of what crime the government charges me with, whatever filth they fling at me, as long as this charge is related to my faith, my writings, my comments, and my teachings, it is merely a lie

and temptation of demons. I categorically deny it. I will serve my sentence, but I will not serve the law. I will be executed, but I will not plead guilty. Pray that the Lord would use me, that I might take the gospel to them. Moreover, I must point out that persecution against the Lord's church and against all Chinese people who believe in Jesus Christ is the most wicked and the most horrendous evil of Chinese society. This is not only a sin against Christians. It is also a sin against all non-Christians. For the government is brutally and ruthlessly threatening them and hindering them from coming to Jesus. There is no greater wickedness in the world than this. If this regime is one day overthrown by God, it will be for no other reason than God's righteous punishment and revenge for this evil. For on earth, there has only ever been a thousand-year church. There has never been a thousand-year government. There is only eternal faith. There is no eternal power. Those who lock me up will one day be locked up by angels. Those who interrogate me will finally be questioned and judged by Christ. When I think of this, the Lord fills me with a natural compassion and grief toward those who are attempting to and actively imprisoning me. Pray that the Lord would use me, that he would grant me patience and wisdom, that I might take the gospel to them. Separate me from my wife and children, ruin my reputation, destroy my life and my family — the authorities are capable of doing all of these things. However, no one in this world can force me to renounce my faith; no one can make me change my life; and no one can raise me from the dead." ~ Pastor Wang Yi

Friends, if you believe and receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you are no longer your own. You have a new identity. A new citizenship in a Kingdom that never ends. Your life is hid with Christ on high. This world ceases to have any power over you. You are truly free to live and to love and to serve the lost, the least, even your enemies in the name of Christ. Set your mind and heart on things above and let your conduct be salt and light to those who walk in darkness.

December 18, 2018
JESUS IS GREATER

Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

"Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:3)

These words are some of the most beautiful and profound in all of Scripture and they point to the fundamental reality the author of Hebrews will present over and over again throughout his book. Jesus is greater. He is greater than the angels. Beings of immense power and glory who serve at God's right hand. He is greater than Moses. The greatest of the Old Testament prophets who saw God and spoke with Him face to face. He is greater than any high priest, having passed through the heavens to stand in the presence of the Father, living to make intercession for us.

Jesus is greater. He has been given the throne by His Heavenly Father. All authority in heaven and earth and under the earth is His by right as God's only Begotten Son. He was appointed heir of all things from eternity and through Him all things were made. He was made perfect through suffering. He was crowned with all glory and honor on the Cross. He took on a broken human nature so that by dying He might destroy the one who wields the power of death – the devil himself – and deliver all those he enslaved. He was made like us in every way so he might save to the uttermost those who believe in Him. And because Christ was faithful in every way, He is able to offer eternal rest to those who would follow Him.

Jesus is greater. He is living and active. His Word sharper than any two-edged sword. He pierces the heart. Divides the soul. Separates joints and marrow. He discerns all the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. There is no place we can run. No place we can hide. We are all exposed and naked before Him. He knows our inmost thoughts. He judges the attitudes of our hearts. When we appear before Him on the last day, all of us will have to give an account for our lives. Thankfully, the One who sits in judgment on the throne is our faithful high priest. One who is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. One who has been tempted in every way as we have been tempted and yet remains without sin.

It is this Jesus whom we celebrate at Christmas. It is this Jesus who is conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. It is this Jesus who lies in such mean estate in the manger while ox and ass are feeding. It is this Jesus around whom shepherds and wise men and angels gather to gaze at in wonder and awe. Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the Eternal Son. Jesus is greater because Jesus is God. O come let us adore Him!

December 19, 2018
ANCHOR OF OUR SOULS

Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

God is eternally consistent. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, a single story unfolds. God creates the universe and all that is in it. It is good. It is beautiful. It is right and true. He makes a man. Made in His own image. Places him in creation as a “priest” of sorts. One who exercises dominion over all God has made. One who keeps the Garden and makes it flourish. One who lives for God and His glory. But Adam fell into sin. The original high priest unfaithful. The impact is devastating. All of creation falls into ruin for lack of a faithful high priest who will present her to God holy and without spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Time moves on. Another priest is called. Noah. Set apart by God to exercise dominion over a new creation. The new world that emerges from the flood. But again, the high priestly line fails. Rather than be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth; they stick together. They build a tower. A temple to their own name. God looks down. Confuses their languages. Scatters them across the earth.

More time passes. Another priest. Abram. Called out of Ur, he will be the father of a new nation. They will become a holy priesthood. A people for God’s own possession set apart to exercise dominion over the earth. They are to walk in the light of God and teach the other nations to do the same. Once again, the high priestly line fails. They turn inward. They hoard the blessings of God. They become entitled. Prideful. They scorn the Gentiles they are called to serve. God punishes them and sends them into exile.

God goes silent. Four hundred years. God raises up yet another high priest. His only begotten Son. Jesus becomes one of us. Takes on human flesh. Assumes a broken human nature. He lives among us. Walks among us. Teaches us. Heals us. Suffers for us. Dies for us. He experiences all that human life has to offer. The good. The bad. The ugly. All so He can fully and rightfully represent us before the Father. At the same time, He remains God. His divine nature is never relinquished. So He can fully and rightfully take on the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest. His divine and human natures satisfying every aspect of the covenant God first made back in the Garden.

This is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. He lives to make intercession for you. His sacrifice on your behalf has been accepted. You are set free. Receive this free gift from your high priest and place your trust and confidence in Him!

December 20, 2018
AN UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM

Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

Whoever the author of Hebrews is, he is intimately familiar with the Old Testament. He is also skilled at Jewish midrash which is an interpretive method that infused fresh meaning into the biblical texts. Jesus is his interpretive lens. He looks back on the ceremonial religious laws of the Torah and reinterprets them in light of Christ. The priesthood, sacrifices, and Temple are all reimagined. The high points of Israel's history are revisited as are the great heroes and heroines of the faith. It's like a fog has lifted for the author and they are seeing things clearly for the very first time.

Many years ago, I had LASIK surgery on my eyes. I have worn glasses since the fourth grade. My vision was terrible. I was as near-sighted as they come. Then I had the procedure. I remember walking out of the office and it was literally like scales had been lifted from my eyes. I could actually see things like the alarm clock in the morning or the individual leaves on the tree in my front yard. It was an incredible feeling.

I imagine the author of Hebrews felt the same way. You can almost feel the energy coming off the page. If you listen closely, you can sense his excitement and joy as he shares what he's discovered. Now it all makes sense! Now it all has become clear! This is why God instituted the sacrificial system and this is how God brings that system to completion! His own Son serves both as High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice. He bears His own Body into the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple and satisfies the just demands of God's Law once and for all. This is the mystery of salvation all of our forefathers and mothers in the faith looked forward to and now it is ours to see and to touch and to taste! The promised new covenant has been given. The new age inaugurated. The gates of heavenly Jerusalem thrown open. The angels gathered, along with the saints who have gone before us, to join the party. A gift is being offered. An unshakable kingdom that will never fall for its foundation is Christ Himself!

Can you feel him? Can you sense the passion behind his words? You can almost hear him crescendo as he brings his sermon to a close. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking!...Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:22-29) I know I'd be shouting for sure!:-)

Friends, the gift God offers us in Christ is nothing short of heaven itself. This is what makes Christmas so meaningful. Yes, we get time with dear friends and family. Yes, work slows down and school lets out. Yes, we give and receive gifts with glad and generous hearts. But the most important thing – the one thing we simply cannot miss - is the gift of Jesus! Through Him we receive eternal life in an eternal relationship with an eternal God who reserves a place for us in His eternal Kingdom. To Him be all the praise, honor and glory forever!

December 21, 2018
GOD-BREATHED

Readings for the day: 2 Timothy 1-4

There are two things that are “God-breathed” according to the Bible. Scripture itself and human beings. In the beginning, God creates humanity. Male and female made in His image. Fashioned from the dust of the earth, God brings them to life by breathing His spirit into them. They are given the mandate to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and exercise dominion over all He has made.

In a similar fashion, God brings the Scriptures to life. Without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Without God breathing out these very words, the Bible is just another book. Just another ancient text that may or may not have much relevance for our lives. There would be no difference between it and the Koran or the Book of Mormon or any other sacred text. The sentiment expressed by Paul to his protege, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16 is what sets it apart. “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” Paul has been following this guidance in his own correspondence with the churches he’s planted. A careful examination shows hundreds of quotes and allusions to the Old Testament. Paul is a first-rate rabbinical scholar who has been taking the text and applying it to the specific situation each church faces. His brilliance at applying the Scriptures in an authoritative way is what sets his letters apart from that of the other church leaders at the time. Even the Apostle Peter recognizes the unique authority Paul’s been given when he writes, “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.” (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Throughout history, Christians have believed God reveals Himself in two “books.” The book of nature whereby God reveals Himself as Creator and the book of Scripture whereby God reveals Himself as Savior. The Holy Spirit is the key that unlocks our understanding not only of the world around us but also of the Word of God. He illuminates our hearts and minds. He gives us insight into who God is and what God is about. He speaks to us in ways we can grasp and understand. All so that we will come to a deeper relationship with the One who loves us more than we can ever hope or dream.

If you’ve been tracking with us this year, I am sure you have had moments where God has spoken to you from His Word. Verses that stuck out to you for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps it was a difficult time you were going through. A difficult decision you had to make. Or a difficult situation you needed to resolve. Maybe it was a Word of affirmation that came just at the right time. Or a Word of comfort. Perhaps it was a fresh insight or flash of understanding as you learned something new. These are all signs of the Holy Spirit breathing new life in and through the text. And it never gets old. Never grows stale. There’s always more to learn.

Postscript: Many of you have asked if we are going to do this again in 2019. Absolutely! Whether you stayed on track. Got ahead. Fell behind. No worries! No guilt! No shame! We are in this together and we will start afresh on January 1. If you want in, email me at doug@pepc.org and I will make sure you get the instructions when they go out between Christmas and New Year’s. Invite your friends and family to join us. It will be another great year!

December 22, 2018
THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude

I am often asked what it means to be a Christian. Is it raising a hand and praying a prayer? Is it participating in confirmation as a young person? Does it have to do with church attendance? Is it an intellectual assent to an idea? Living a particularly moral life? What does it mean to actually be a Christian? I think Peter's words sum it up quite well...

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (2 Peter 1:3-8)

First and foremost, being a Christian involves faith. Faith is having complete confidence that God is able to deliver on His promises. And God has promised that every Christian will be filled with His divine power, be a partaker of His divine nature, and given everything that pertains to life and godliness. In short, we will lack nothing when it comes to living for God. Our hearts will burn with a desire to know Him more. We will love being in worship. Love spending time in prayer. Love studying God's Word. We will love serving those whom God loves. The least and the lost in our world.

Secondly, being a Christian means actively seeking to align your life with Christ. Submit all you say and do to His Lordship. It means walking in faithful obedience to His Law not because you have to but because you long to. Once we've been saved by grace, we walk in grace. Peter says it clearly. The true Christian will seek to supplement their saving faith with virtue and knowledge and self-control and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection. As these things increase in your life, you will bear much fruit for the Kingdom. This requires a diligence and intentionality that often escapes us. The temptations of this world are strong and distract us. We find our hearts pulled in a lot of different directions and too many of us settle for the lowest bar rather than push ourselves to greater heights for the glory of Christ.

Third, Peter offers a sobering warning as well. Refusing to follow Christ is serious business. "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell...if God did not spare the ancient world...when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; if God by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes condemned them to extinction...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment..." Therefore, we need to take heed lest we, in our pride and arrogance and willful ignorance, refuse to tremble before the glorious ones. We do not want to be counted as "irrational animals", "unsteady souls", "accursed children", "waterless springs", or "mists driven by the storm." (Assorted verses from 2 Peter 2)

Friends, what we celebrate on Christmas is eternally significant. Nothing less than our salvation is at stake in what God has done in Jesus Christ. Devoting our lives to Him is essential if we are to escape the righteous wrath and judgment of God and gain entrance into God's Kingdom. I love how Peter puts it, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:10-11)

December 24, 2018
JESUS CHRIST IS BORN!

Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

I love the opening to John's first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life — the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

John saw Jesus with His own eyes. Touched Him with his own hands. Heard Him speak with his own ears. He saw the Word of Life manifest itself in the Person of Jesus. He experienced Him. He knew Him. He testifies to Him. He dedicates his entire life to proclaiming Him to the world. Jesus was not a mystery to John. His life, death, and resurrection were real. Tangible. Concrete. His was no blind faith.

John understood why Jesus was sent into the world. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, goes to great lengths to convince those to whom he's writing to believe. To place their faith in Christ. To trust in His saving death. This is what makes John's joy complete. The idea that anyone and everyone who reads his letters would enter into deep, intimate fellowship with the Father through the Son.

Christmas, according to John, is not overly sentimental. It is not so much about the birth of a baby as it is about the mission that baby was sent to complete. Jesus was sent to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) Jesus was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Jesus was sent to cast out fear by laying down His life in perfect love. (1 John 4:18) So yes, celebrate the birth of the Savior! Worship Christ the newborn King! But never forget what our King was sent to do. He was sent to bring life out of death. Light out of darkness. Love out of hate. In order to do that, He had to suffer and die. Become sin itself and descend into the eternal darkness of hell. He had to become the object of hate and rejection and humiliation. All of this, Jesus did for us. Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus did to save us. This is the true meaning of Christmas!

December 25, 2018
2ND ADVENT

Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

Perhaps it is appropriate that our reading finds us in Revelation on Christmas Day. After celebrating the first advent of Christ on Christmas Eve, our hearts naturally turn towards His second advent. The day when He comes again. The living and the dead are raised. Heaven and earth come together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure in the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend liberty and charity to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses... "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

These are important words to reflect on as we begin as are the Spirit's warnings to the seven churches. They provide a good spiritual barometer to help us discern how ready we truly are for Christ's return. Have we abandoned our first love? Are we facing persecution for our faith? What idols do we cling to? What sexual immorality do we engage in? Do we tolerate sin? Are we ambivalent towards the gospel? Is our faith lukewarm at best?

These are important matters for prayer as we close out one year and head into another. What spiritual resolutions will you make for 2019 to help nurture your relationship with Christ?

December 26, 2018
SEALED AS GOD'S SERVANTS

Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

One of the more common questions I get from the book of Revelation has to do with the identity of the 144,000 listed in Revelation 7. Those who take a “dispensational premillennialist” view of Revelation will argue that after the rapture of the church, the Holy Spirit will set apart 144,000 Jewish believers who evangelize the earth. Others will argue – like the Jehovah’s Witnesses - that this is a special group of believers set apart by God. My belief is that this number is symbolic, representing the full number of those who have been redeemed.

Again, this is muddy water we’re swimming in. Interpreting Revelation is difficult at best and there are godly men and women who take different positions on these issues. So it’s important to hold loosely here to our eschatological positions while we hold tightly to one another in fellowship.

Why do I believe the 144,000 is symbolic? Several reasons. First and foremost, is the fact that the number itself is highly stylized. Numbers are often used symbolically throughout Scripture to communicate a deeper truth. We have already seen from much of the writings of the New Testament that one of the biggest challenges facing the early church was the inclusion of the Gentile believers into largely Jewish fellowships. Remember, John is writing to actual churches who are facing severe persecution and he is seeking to encourage them. So it makes perfect sense to me that in John’s vision from God, an angel of the Lord seals 144,000. A number combining the 12 tribes of Israel with the 12 apostles of Jesus multiplied by 1000 – a number which the Bible often uses to describe a multitude too large to count. Indeed, the very next section talks about “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

Second, the list of the tribes of Israel is unique and highly stylized as well. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus is descended from this particular tribe thus giving him primacy over his older brother Reuben. Joseph is listed which is unusual as his place was taken by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi is listed which is also somewhat unusual in that he is left out of some Old Testament lists since he didn’t inherit any land. Also, because room needs to be made for both of Joseph’s sons to be listed. Dan is left out, perhaps because his territory was the center of idolatry in ancient Israel. The point here is that this list is unique and actually not in alignment with Old Testament history which means a more symbolic, theological point is being made.

Third, this number reappears in Revelation 14. The 144,000 is described as the “redeemed from the earth” or “redeemed/purchased from humanity” which is universal language. Furthermore, if one is going to take a more literal view then one has to conclude that the 144,000 represent a special group of celibate, Jewish evangelists sent out to the earth. I tend to believe the language continues to be symbolic here with sexual purity representing the holiness attributed to those who believe – both Jew and Gentile alike - by the blood of the Lamb.

So what’s the point? Are we just arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? I think the larger issue at stake here is this...in this world we will suffer tribulation. In this world we will suffer persecution for our faith. Perhaps we’ve escaped for a time in America but those days are rapidly coming to a close. Christian hegemony has come to an end in the West and we will soon find ourselves faced with the challenges our brothers and sisters face around the world. John’s Revelation will become even more significant in the years ahead not as an intellectual exercise as we try to “crack the code” but as an encouragement in our suffering for Jesus. Just as John wanted to encourage the early Christians to hold fast to our faith even under great trial, so he encourages us to do the same. We have been sealed as God’s own people. We have been set apart to proclaim the excellencies of His grace. We have been saved from a crooked and perverse generation and now are sent out to be His lights in the world.

December 27, 2018

666

Readings for today: Revelation 11-13

"This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666." (Revelation 13:18)

Like a lot of the numbers in the book of Revelation (24 elders, 7 seals, 144,000, 7 heads, 10 horns, etc.), the number 666 has been the subject of quite a bit of controversy. Many attempts have been made through the centuries to identify the person associated with this number. Using the ancient system of gematria where numbers are substituted for letters in the alphabet, interpreters have suggested Nero, Kaiser Wilhelm and Hitler as possibilities. More than 100 names were proposed between 1560 and 1830 in Britain. Popes. Emperors. Other despotic rulers. All of them fall short. None of them fits exactly. So maybe the person is yet to be revealed? Those who take a futurist look at Revelation argue as much.

As someone who takes an "Amillennial" perspective on Revelation, I believe the number to be symbolic. It is actually the number of "sinful incompleteness." A parody of the perfect number - "777" - which is often used to refer to the Trinity. Satan is not very creative. At best, he seeks to mimic everything God is or does in our world. But his ways are always corrupt and therefore always fall short. John is pointing this out by identifying Satan's work in this world with the number 666. 666 falls short in literally every digit of 777 just as Satan falls short in every possibly way of the glory of God.

One of the reasons so many Christians have found the book of Revelation so compelling over the centuries is because of its transcultural relevance. Rather than identifying the Beast with one particular person in history, John uses him as an "archetype" to identify the Satanic systems of our world. Governments. Economies. Military powers. Social systems. All of them are corrupted by sin. All of them are influenced by Satan. All of them fall short of the perfection of God's Kingdom. All of them bear the "mark of the beast" in this respect and must be rejected in favor of holding fast to Christ. John is encouraging these seven churches who are suffering under the "principalities and powers" of this world to place their hope in the world to come. To place their hope in the One who will rescue them from this present darkness when He comes again to make all things new. At that time, all systems marked by the beast will be destroyed and God will inaugurate His reign and rule over all the earth. 666 will give way to 777 as "The kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

We still live in a world influenced by Satan. All one has to do is turn on the news to see his corruption on display. Backbreaking poverty. Unjust systems that oppress. Terminal disease. Tragic death. Natural disasters. Violence manifesting itself all over the globe. We live in a scary, sinful world and part of our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. Thankfully, God does. And there will come a day when every tear will be wiped away. Grief and pain will be no more. The former things of this "666" world will pass away as the "777" world comes.

December 28, 2018
REPENT FOR THE END IS NEAR

Readings for today: Revelation 14-18

How many of us have been to events with street preachers holding up signs with the message, “Repent for the end is near!” As much as I disagree with their approach, their message is more true than they know. The end is drawing near. Each day brings us one step closer to the final judgment of God on the earth. Each day brings us one step closer to the final coming of the Kingdom. The day when Jesus will appear on the clouds and descend to earth to establish His reign forever. Until that day comes, God is patient. Not wishing that any should perish. God is compassionate. Constantly pursuing us. God is gracious. Always willing to forgive. But we should not presume upon His grace. The current state of affairs will not last forever. God’s patience eventually will come to an end and He will make one final attempt to save His people from everlasting death.

This is the message behind all the plagues in Revelation. Behind all the judgment and wrath being poured out on the earth, there is this desire of God’s to save. To deliver. To bring His rebellious people to repentance. Those who have been reading with us all year probably are reminded of the plagues in Egypt when God acted to deliver His people from Pharaoh. Boils. Water turning to blood. Darkness. Fire. Hailstones from heaven. These things have happened before. The purpose behind them was to bring Pharaoh and his people to repentance. To humble them so they would set God’s people free from slavery. In a similar way, God commands His angels to pour out His wrath with the hope that it will bring the people of the earth to repentance. Humble them that they might be saved. Sadly, they refused to repent and give God the glory.

They chose to love the Great Harlot instead. The earthly city arrayed in all her splendor. Wealthy. Powerful. Exerting her influence over all the earth. Full of all kinds of abominations and sexual immoralities, she represents the worst kind of rebellion. Her name is Egypt. Rome. Babylon. Constantinople. Berlin. London. Mexico City. Rio de Janeiro. Beijing. Jakarta. Tehran. Washington DC. Basically, any governmental system that refuses to acknowledge and submit to God. They are all iterations of “Babylon the Great.” They all participate in her abominations and impurities. They all fall under God’s righteous judgment. Those who love their wealth. Their political power. Their cultural influence more than they love God will be exposed and judged along with the nations of the earth. They make war on the Lamb and His followers, falsely believing they can somehow dethrone Him. But God will cause them to turn on themselves. To destroy themselves from within. He will bring judgment through the very people who worship and adore her. They will turn against her. Strip her naked. Expose her. Cast her down. Her fall will be great.

Sin and evil always turn in on themselves. Like a snake eating its own tail. They are ultimately self-destructive. Remember how the Apostle Paul described the judgment of God in Romans 1. God simply “gives them over” to the lusts and desires of their hearts. A similar dynamic is in play here in Revelation as well. God simply withdraws His protective hand. He simply says to the rebellious peoples of the earth, “Thy will be done” and the results are terrifying.

The response of God’s people is never fear, however, but faith. In the face of God’s judgment, we humble ourselves. We submit. We bow before His will and we bend the knee to His way. We worship Him. We give Him the glory He deserves. We repent of our pride and arrogance and false belief that we know best and we give Him Lordship over our lives. This is the essence of repentance. Not just a general feeling of remorse but an active, intentional decision to live for God.

December 29, 2018
MARANATHA

Readings for today: Revelation 19-22

“Come, Lord Jesus!” Echoing Paul’s famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - “Maranatha” - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heart cry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John has received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in the midst of her. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on His promise. The Alpha has issued the final “Omega.” What was once broken is now whole. What was ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things made new.

The delay of the “parousia” or 2nd coming of Jesus has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of their advice to the local churches they were writing to. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn’t Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it’s because God doesn’t exist. The “Father” Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it’s because the work of the church isn’t finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven’t preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so everyone hasn’t yet had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it’s because the events of Revelation haven’t yet come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much, much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn’t returned and can only assume it’s because His plans for this world have yet to reach their fulfillment. Time doesn’t pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in “chronological” time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in “Kairos” time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock.

What we can know is that Jesus promised He would come. No less than three separate times, He affirms this to John in the last chapter of Revelation.

“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.” (Rev. 22:7)

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” (Rev. 22:12-13)

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” (Rev. 22:20)

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. “The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.” (Revelation 22:17) Don’t miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God’s great desire. It is the primary message He’s been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!

December 31, 2018
NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

2018 is almost in the books and 2019 is just around the corner. Many of us will be celebrating with friends and loved ones this evening as we ring in the new year. In the midst of all the fun and celebration, it is important to take time to reflect on all that happened this past year. The successes and failures. The joys and concerns. The pleasure and pain. How did we grow? What milestones did we achieve? What trauma and tragedy were we able to survive? How are we different now than a year ago? What's changed? What's remained the same? What are we looking forward to? What fears do we need to face?

If you are like me, you will make some resolutions. You will resolve to live a healthier life. You will exercise more. Eat better. Rest well. Those are good resolutions. You will resolve to be emotionally healthy. You will practice forgiveness. Set boundaries. Extend more grace. You will resolve to grow intellectually. Read more books. Listen to more podcasts. Educate yourself in the ways of the world. What about your spiritual life? What resolutions will you make to grow in your relationship with God?

Many surveys have been done through the years by groups like Barna and Lifeway Research and they yield the same results. The number one thing you can do to grow spiritually is to read and reflect on God's Word every single day. Reading the Bible will challenge you. Frustrate you. Upset you. Confront you. Comfort you. And bless you. It will elicit all kinds of questions. It will raise all kinds of doubts. It may even bring to light all kinds of fears. At the same time, it will offer you peace and hope and fill your life with an unspeakable joy that cannot be quenched. It will inspire you and draw you close to God in ways nothing else can.

This past year, a couple of hundred folks read through the Bible in a year together. Some of us were able to finish, others are still on the journey. Still others dropped out along the way. Building a discipline of daily reading and reflection is not easy but it is worth every effort! Let me encourage you to join us in 2019 as we re-engage the Bible. It doesn't matter if it's your first time through or your fiftieth. It doesn't matter if you are able to finish the year or not. It doesn't matter if you get ahead or fall behind. What matters is you building the spiritual discipline of listening for God's voice as He speaks to you through His Word. God blesses ANY amount of time we spend with Him so do all you can to make 2019 a great year of spiritual growth in your life.