# 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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## 2018

## STUDY AND COMMENTARY

## BY


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## FROM "THE INTERSECTION"©

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## *DRAWING CLOSE TO GOD IN 2018*

## JANUARY


**January 1, 2018 IN THE BEGINNING …..**
**Readings for today: Genesis 1 & 2**

**January 2, 2018 IN THE BEGINNING ...JESUS**
**Readings for today: John 1: 1-3, Psalm 8, Psalm 104**

**January 3, 2018 ANATOMY OF SIN**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 3, 4, 5**

**January 4, 2018 HEART OF DARKNESS**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 6, 7**

**January 5, 2018 STARTING OVER**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 8, 9, Psalm 12**

**January 6, 2018 A BRAVE NEW WORLD**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 10, 11**

**January 8, 2018 GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 12 and 13**

**January 9, 2018 FIRST FAMILY**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 14, 15, 16**

**January 10, 2018 WALK BY FAITH**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 17, 18, 19**

**January 11, 2018 FEAR OF THE LORD**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 20, 21, 22, 23**

**January 12, 2018 LET GOD BE GOD**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 24, 25, 26**

**January 13, 2018 INTER-GENERATIONAL FAITH**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 27, 28, 29**

**January 15, 2018 WRESTLING WITH GOD**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 30, 31, 32, 33**

**January 16, 2018 BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 34, 35, 36, 37**

**January 17, 2018 JUDAH AND TAMAR**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 38, 39, 40**

**January 18, 2018 NOTHING BUT A DREAMER**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 41, 42, 43**

**January 19, 2018 GOD'S PERSPECTIVE**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 44, 45, 46**

**January 20, 2018 LIFE'S CONSEQUENCES**
**Readings for the day: Genesis 47, 48, 49, 50**

**January 22, 2018 SUFFERING**
**Readings for the day: Job 1, 2, 3, 4, 5**

**January 23, 2018 DANGERS OF SPIRITUAL PLATITUDES**
**Readings for the day: Job 6, 7, 8, 9**

**January 24, 2018 DESPAIR**
**Readings for the day: Job 10, 11, 12, 13**

**January 25, 2018 RELENTLESS**
**Readings for the day: Job 14, 15, 16, 17**

**January 26, 2018 MY REDEEMER LIVES**
**Readings for the day: Job 18, 19, 20, 21**

**January 27, 2018 DOUBLING DOWN**
**Readings for the day: Job 22, 23, 24**

**January 29, 2018 INSULATION**
**Readings for the day: Job 25, 26, 27, 28**

**January 30, 2018 MORE TRUE THAN WE KNOW….**
**Readings for the day: Job 29, 30, 31, 32**

**January 31, 2018 RIGHTEOUS SUFFERING**
**Readings for the day: Job 33, 34, 35, 36**

## FEBRUARY

**February 1, 2018 GOD'S ANSWER, PART 1**
**Readings for the day: Job 37, 38, 38, 40: 1-5**

**February 2, 2018 GOD'S ANSWER, PART 2**
**Readings for the day: Job 40:6-24, 41, 42, Psalm 29**

**February 3, 2018 SPIRITUAL HEROES**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 1, 2, 3, 4**

**February 5, 2018 NO OTHER GODS**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 5, 6, 7, 8, 9**

**February 6, 2018 HARDENING OF THE HEART**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 10, 11, 12, 13**

**February 7, 2018 GROWING UP**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 14, 15, 16, 17, 18**

**February 8, 2018 MT. SINAI**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 19, 20, 21**

**February 9, 2018 GOD'S LAW**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 22, 23, 24**

**February 10, 2018 THIN SPACES**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 25, 26, 27, 28**

**February 12, 2018 DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 29, 30, 31, 32**

**February 13, 2018 THE NAME OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 33, 34, 35, 36**

**February 14, 2018 BEZALEL AND OHALIAB**
**Readings for the day: Exodus 37, 38, 39, 40**

**February 15, 2018 THE LAW**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 1, 2, 3, 4**

**February 16, 2018 IMPORTANCE OF SACRIFICE**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 5, 6, 7**

**February 17, 2018 UNAUTHORIZED FIRE**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 8, 9, 10**

**February 19, 2018 CLEAN VS. UNCLEAN**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 11, 12, 13, 14**

**February 20, 2018 SEXUAL PURITY**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 15, 16, 17, 18**

**February 21, 2018 THE GOLDEN RULE**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 19, 20, 21, 22**

**February 22, 2018 HOLY RHYTHMS**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 23, 24, 25**

**February 23, 2018 THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW**
**Readings for the day: Leviticus 26, 27...Numbers 1, 2**

**February 24, 2018 IN GOD'S HANDS**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 3, 4, 5**

**February 26, 2018 WAITING ON GOD**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 6, 7, 8, 9**

**February 27, 2018 REAL LIFE**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 10, 11, 12, 13 and Psalm 90**

**February 28, 2018 GOD'S FAITHFULNESS**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 14, 15, 16 and Psalm 95**

## MARCH

**March 1, 2018 BLAME SHIFT**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 17, 18, 19, 20**

**March 2, 2018 THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 21, 22, 23, 24**

**March 3, 2018 ZEAL FOR GOD'S GLORY**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 25, 26, 27, 28**

**March 5, 2018 HONEST QUESTIONS**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 29, 30, 31, 32**

**March 6, 2018 DEATH PENALTY**
**Readings for the day: Numbers 33, 34, 35, 36**

**March 7, 2018 MOSES' LAST WORDS**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 1, 2, 3**

**March 8, 2018 THE SHEMA**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, 7**

**March 9, 2018 SPIRITUAL ALZHEIMER'S**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 8, 9, 10, 11**

**March 10, 2018 THE END OF POVERTY**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 12, 13, 14, 15**

**March 12, 2018 THE DIVINE POWER OF GOD'S WORD**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 16, 17, 18, 19**

**March 13, 2018 CHRIST BECAME THE CURSE**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 20, 21, 22, 23**

**March 14, 2018 FIRST FRUITS**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 24, 25, 26, 27**

**March 15, 2018 BLESSINGS AND CURSES**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 28, 29, 30**

**March 16, 2018 THE SONG OF MOSES**
**Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 31, 32, 33, 34**

**March 17, 2018 HARD QUESTIONS**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 1, 2 and Psalm 105**

**March 19, 2018 STONE ALTARS**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 3, 4, 5, 6**

**March 20, 2018 JIHAD IN THE BIBLE?**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 7, 8, 9, 10**

**March 21, 2018 PERSPECTIVE**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 11, 12, 13, 14**

**March 22, 2018 STARTING VS. FINISHING**
**Readings for the day: 15, 16, 17, 18**

**March 23, 2018 WITNESS**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 19, 20, 21, 22**

**March 24, 2018 WHO'S YOUR SPIRITUAL HERO?**
**Readings for the day: Joshua 23, 24, and Judges 1**

**March 26, 2018 LIFE IS STRUGGLE**
**Readings for the day: Judges 2, 3, 4, 5**

**March 27, 2018 HUMILITY**
**Readings for the day: Judges 6, 7, 8, 9**

**March 28, 2018 JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE**
**Readings for the day: Judges 10, 11, 12, 13**

**March 29, 2018 WHEN HEROES FALL**
**Readings for the day: Judges 14, 15, 16, 17, 18**

**March 30, 2018 HEART OF DARKNESS**
**Readings for the day: Judges 19, 20, 21**

**March 31, 2018 REDEEMER**
**Readings for the day: Ruth 1, 2, 3, 4**

## APRIL

**April 2, 2018 A NEW ERA**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 1, 2, 3**

**April 3, 2018 ALL THINGS NEW**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 4, 5, 6, 7, 8**

**April 4, 2018 REJECTION**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 9, 10, 11, 12**

**April 5, 2018 WHOLE-HEARTED DEVOTION**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 13, 14, 15, 16**

**April 6, 2018 TRUSTING GOD**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 17, 18, 19, 20 and Psalm 59**

**April 7, 2018 GOD'S WILL AND GOD'S WAY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 21, 22, 23, 24, and Psalm 91**

**April 9, 2018 AUTHENTIC PRAYER**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52**

**April 10, 2018 TURN TO GOD**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142**

**April 11, 2018 LOVE YOUR ENEMIES???**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 25, 26, 27 and Psalms 17, 73**

**April 12, 2018 GOD IS MY HELPER**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18**

**April 13, 2018 EPITAPH: WHAT MESSAGE WILL BE WRITTEN ON YOUR TOMBSTONE?**
**Readings for the day: 1 Samuel 28, 29, 30, 31, and 1 Chronicles 10**

**April 14, 2018 WORSHIP**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 121, 123, 124, 125, 128, 129, 130**

**April 16, 2018 CONTRADICTIONS**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 1, 2, 3, 4**

**April 17, 2018 PRAYING THE PSALMS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21**

**April 18, 2018 FAMILY HISTORY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 1, 2, and Psalms 43, 44**

**April 19, 2018 GOD'S GOOD GIFTS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87**

**April 20, 2018 CONNECTION**
**Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 3, 4, 5**

**April 21, 2018 EVANGELISM**
**Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 6 and Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78**

**April 23, 2018 DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93**

**April 24, 2018 GENEALOGY AND RACE**
**Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 7, 8, 9**

**April 25, 2018 UNITY**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11, 12, and Psalm 133**

**April 26, 2018 TRUE WORSHIP**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 5:11-25, 6, and 1 Chronicles 13, 14, 15, 16**

**April 27, 2018 SERENITY**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 15, 23, 24, 25, 47**

**April 29, 2018 WHO IS GOD?**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107**

**April 30, 2018 WHO'S BUILDING YOUR HOUSE?**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, and Psalms 1, 2, 33, 127, 132**

## MAY

**May 1, 2018 GRACE**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 8, 9 and 1 Chronicles 18**

**May 2, 2018 THE LORD'S SIDE**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75**

**May 3, 2018 HISTORY**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 65, 66, 67, 69, 70**

**May 4, 2018 #METOO**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 11, 12, 1 Chronicles 20, and Psalms 51**

**May 5, 2018 SIN AND SALVATION**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122**

**May 7, 2018 DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 13, 14, 15**

**May 8, 2018 THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF THE BIBLE**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 3, 4, 13, 28, 55**

**May 9, 2018 CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 16, 17, 18**

**May 10, 2018 DEEPER PRAYERS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 26, 40, 41, 58, 61, 62, 64**

**May 11, 2018 DIVISIONS**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 19, 20, 21 and Psalms 5, 38, 42**

**May 12, 2018 ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 22, 23, and Psalms 57**

**May 14, 2018 THE LORD REIGNS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 97, 98, 99**

**May 15, 2018 PRIDE AND POPULARITY**
**Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21, 22, and Psalm 30**

**May 16, 2018 PEAKS AND VALLEYS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 108, 109**

**May 17, 2018 LEAVING A LEGACY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 23, 24, 25, 26**

**May 18, 2018 THE GREATNESS OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 131, 138, 139, 143, 144, 145**

**May 19, 2018 GENEROSITY**
**Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 27, 28, 29, and Psalm 68**

**May 21, 2018 PERSONAL GOD**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 111-118**

**May 22, 2018 THE GODFATHER**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 1-2 and Psalms 37, 71, 94**

**May 23, 2018 IF YOU LOVE ME...**
**Readings for the day: Psalm 119:1-88**

**May 24, 2018 WHAT WOULD YOU ASK FOR?**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72**

**May 25, 2018 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 119:89-176**

**May 26, 2018 SEX AND GOD**
**Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 1-5:1**

**May 28, 2018 LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH**
**Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 5:2-16, 6-8, and Psalms 45**

**May 29, 2018 THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 1-4**

**May 30, 2018 TEMPTATION**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 5-8**

**May 31, 2018 INTEGRITY**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 9-12**

## JUNE

**June 1, 2018 MAKING PLANS**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 13-16**

**June 2, 2018 THE POWER OF THE TONGUE**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 17-20**

**June 4, 2018 PRIDE AND HUMILITY**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 21-24**

**June 5, 2018 MOUNT MORIAH**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3**

**June 6, 2018 THE TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11**

**June 7, 2018 REVIVAL**
**Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136**

**June 9, 2018 THE GREATNESS OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Psalms 146-150**

**June 11, 2018 THE TEST OF PRAISE**
**Readings for the day: Proverbs 27-29**

**June 12, 2018 CHASING THE WIND**
**Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 1-6**

**June 13, 2018 ENJOY LIFE**
**Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 7-12**

**June 14, 2018 DANGER OF WEALTH**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Prov. 30-31**

**June 15, 2018 ENTITLEMENT**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10**

**June 16, 2018 THE DANGER OF FALSE WORSHIP**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12**

**June 18, 2018 THE FIRST STEP**
**Readings for the day; 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16**

**June 19, 2018 TOTAL DEPRAVITY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 16, and 2 Chronicles 17**

**June 20, 2018 THE WORD OF THE LORD**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 17-19**

**June 21, 2018 GOD OF THE HILLS AND THE VALLEYS**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 20-21**

**June 22, 2018 ACCOUNTABILITY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20**

**June 23, 2018 MIRACLES**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 1-4**

**June 25, 2018 OPEN OUR EYES**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 5-8:1-15**

**June 26, 2018 WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY WHEN I'M GONE?**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21-22:1-9**

**June 27, 2018 DEJA VU Missed Day**
**Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-12, 23**

**June 28, 2018 DEJA VU**
**Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24**

**June 29, 2018 COMPROMISE**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27**

**June 30, 2018 LOVE YOUR ENEMY**
**Readings for the day: Jonah 1-4**

## JULY

**July 2, 2018 LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN….**
**Readings for the day: Amos 1-5**

**July 3, 2018 WHAT TIME IS IT?**
**Readings for the day: Amos 6-9**

**July 4, 2018 SPIRITUAL ADULTERY**
**Readings for the day: Hosea 1-5**

**July 5, 2018 SIN HAS CONSEQUENCES**
**Readings for the day: Hosea 6-9**

**July 6, 2018 THE TENDER LOVE OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Hosea 10-14**

**July 7, 2018 FAITH AND POLITICS**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 1-4**

**July 9, 2018 DOUBLE-MEANING**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 5-8**

**July 10, 2018 THE SALVATION OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 9-12**

**July 11, 2018 MACRO-PARENTING**
**Readings for the day: Micah 1-4**

**July 12, 2018 LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS**
**Readings for the day: Micah 5-7**

**July 13, 2018 ONE FOOT IN TWO WORLDS**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28**

**July 14, 2018 HONOR/SHAME**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 13-17**

**July 16, 2018 A TIME FOR EVERYTHING UNDER HEAVEN**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 18-22**

**July 17, 2018 WHY ARE WE HERE?**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 23-26**

**July 18, 2018 CONSECRATION**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 18:1-8, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalm 48**

**July 19, 2018 IN THAT DAY...**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 27-30**

**July 20, 2018 GOD IS OUR STABILITY**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 31-35**

**July 21, 2018 ONLY ONE GOD**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-37, 19, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalm 76**

**July 23, 2018 TESTING**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33**

**July 24, 2018 I WILL HOLD YOUR HAND**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 40-42, Psalm 46**

**July 25, 2018 CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 43-45, Psalm 80**

**July 26, 2018 LET GOD CARRY YOU**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 46-49, Psalm 135**

**July 27, 2018 SUFFERING SERVANT**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 50-53**

**July 28, 2018 CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 5-58**

**July 30, 2018 REBUILDING**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 59-63**

**July 31, 2018 POTTER'S HAND**
**Readings for the day: Isaiah 64-66**

## AUGUST

**August 1, 2018 EVERYTHING RISES AND FALLS ON LEADERSHIP**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33**

**August 2, 2018 JEALOUS GOD**
**Readings for the day: Nahum 1-3**

**August 3, 2018 HUMILITY**
**Readings for the day: Zephaniah 1-3**

**August 4, 2018 LIFE ISN'T FAIR**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35**

**August 6, 2018 GOD IS ENOUGH**
**Readings for the day: Habkkuk 1-3**

**August 7, 2018 THE WAY TO REVIVAL**
**Readings for the day: Joel 1-3**

**August 8, 2018 THE PATHOS OF GOD AND HIS PROPHET**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 1-4**

**August 9, 2018 THE GRIEF OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 5–8**

**August 10, 2018 THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 9-12**

**August 11, 2018 DISCOURAGEMENT**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 13-16**

**August 13, 2018 FOLLOW YOUR HEART?**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 17-20**

**August 14, 2018 AT WAR WITH GOD**
**Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24**

**August 15, 2018 FALSE PROPHETS**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 25-28**

**August 16, 2018 FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU...**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 29-32**

**August 17, 2018 REJECTING THE WORD OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 33-37**

**August 18, 2018 DISAPPOINTED WITH GOD**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79**

**August 20, 2018 BLIND BUT NOW I SEE**
**Readings for the day: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52**

**August 21, 2018 FEAR OR FAITH?**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 41-44**

**August 22, 2018 FAMILY FEUD**
**Readings for the day: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83**

**August 23, 2018 THE KINGDOM OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 45-48**

**August 24, 2018 THE POWER OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 49-50**

**August 25, 2018 RAW EMOTION**
**Readings for the day: Jeremiah 51, Psalm 137**

**August 27, 2018 LAMENT**
**Readings for the day: Lamentations 1-3:1-36**

**August 28, 2018 ROCK BOTTOM**
**Readings for the day: Lamentations 3:37-66, 4-5**

**August 29, 2018 VISIONS**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 1-4**

**August 30, 2018 THEY WILL KNOW I AM THE LORD**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 5-8**

**August 31, 2018 THE GLORY OF THE LORD**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 9-12**

## SEPTEMBER

**September 1, 2018 THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 13-16**

**September 3, 2018 IS GOD NOT JUST?**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 17-20**

**September 4, 2018 INSIDE THE STORY**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 21-24**

**September 5, 2018 CELEBRATING ANOTHER'S FALL**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 25-28**

**September 6, 2018 PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 29-32**

**September 7, 2018 GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 33-36**

**September 8, 2018 DRY BONES**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 37-40**

**September 10, 2018 THE LORD'S RETURN**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 41-44**

**September 11, 2018 MEMORIAL**
**Readings for the day: Ezekiel 45-48**

**September 13, 2018 SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER**
**Readings for the day: Daniel 1-3**

**September 14, 2018 PROPHETIC VISIONS**
**Readings for the day: Daniel 7-9**

**September 15, 2018 DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE**
**Readings for the day: Daniel 10-12**

**September 17, 2018 REBUILDING**
**Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3**

**September 18, 2018 POLITICS**
**Readings for the day: Ezra 4-6**

**September 19, 2018 SELF-CENTERED VS. GOD-CENTERED**
**Readings for the day: Haggai 1-2**

**September 20, 2018 YAHWEH REMEMBERS**
**Readings for the day: Zechariah 1-7**

**September 21, 2018 MESSIANIC PROPHECIES**
**Readings for the day: Zechariah 8-14**

**September 22, 2018 PERSECUTION**
**Readings for the day: Esther 1-5**

**September 24, 2018 DIVINE REVERSAL**
**Readings for the day: Esther 6-10**

**September 25, 2018 OFFERING**
**Readings for the day: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50**

**September 26, 2018 RACISM IN THE BIBLE?**
**Readings for the day: Ezra 7-10**

**September 27, 2018 THE WORK OF PRAYER**
**Readings for the day: Nehemiah 1-4**

**September 28, 2018 RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS**
**Readings for the day: Nehemiah 5-7**

**September 29, 2018 TELL THE OLD, OLD STORY**
**Readings for the day: Nehemiah 8-10**

## OCTOBER

**October 1, 2018 A DARK ENDING**
**Readings for the day: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126**

**October 2, 2018 READING THE BIBLE WHOLISTICALLY**
**Readings for the day: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14**

**October 3, 2018 PROMISE KEEPER**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 1, Luke 1-2:38**

**October 4, 2018 FAVOR WITH GOD**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52**

**October 5, 2018 JOHN THE BAPTIST**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34**

**October 6, 2018 TEMPTATION**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-2:12**

**October 8, 2018 REFLECTING JESUS**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44**

**October 9, 2018 IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS**
**Readings for the day: John 3-5**

**October 10, 2018 LORD, HELP ME GET ONE MORE**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2, 3:1-21, Luke 5:12-39, 6:1-19**

**October 11, 2018 BUILDING A LIFE THAT WILL LAST**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13**

**October 12, 2018 A DINNER PARTY WITH JESUS**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7**

**October 13, 2018 THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54**

**October 15, 2018 THE KINGDOM OF GOD**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18**

**October 16, 2018 DESPERATION**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62**

**October 17, 2018 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6**

**October 18, 2018 FOLLOW YOUR HEART?**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10**

**October 19, 2018 REAL LIFE IN GOD' KINGDOM**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:18-27**

**October 20, 2018 GREATNESS**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56**

**October 22, 2018 ACCEPTANCE VS. AFFIRMATION**
**Readings for the day: John 7, 8, 9**

**October 23, 2018 LISTENING TO JESUS**
**Readings for the day: Luke 10, John 10, 11:1-54**

**October 24, 2018 PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL**
**Readings for the day: Luke 12-13:30**

**October 25, 2018 THE LEAST AND THE LOST**
**Readings for the day: Luke 14-15**

**October 26, 2018 THREADING THE NEEDLE**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16-18:30**

**October 27, 2018 TWO KEY PRINCIPLES**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-43, 19:1-27**

**October 29, 2018 ANSWERED PRAYER**
**Readings for the day: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36**

**October 30, 2018 LET GOD BE GOD**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50**

**October 31, 2018 PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35**

## NOVEMBER

**November 1, 2018 WAKE UP!**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 24, 25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38**

**November 2, 2018 BETRAYING JESUS**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13**

**November 3, 2018 THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF UNITY**

**Readings for the day: John 14-17**

**November 5, 2018 THE HUMANITY OF JESUS**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27**

**November 6, 2018 VIVA LA REVOLUTION!**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16**

**November 7, 2018 GOD-FORSAKEN**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalms 22**

**November 8, 2018 RESURRECTION**

**Readings for the day: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21**

**November 9, 2018 CUT TO THE HEART**

**Readings for the day: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110**

**November 10, 2018 A CHURCH OF SUPERNATURAL POWER**

**Readings for the day: Acts 5-8**

**November 12, 2018 GOD HATES RACISM**

**Readings for the day: Acts 9-11**

**November 13, 2018 FIRST MISSIONARIES**

**Readings for the day: Acts 12-14**

**November 14, 2018 REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH**

**Readings for the day: James 1-5**

**November 15, 2018 JUSTIFIED**

**Readings for the day: Galatians 1-3**

**November 16, 2018 FREEDOM AND THE SPIRIT**
**Readings for the day: Galatians 4-6**

**November 17, 2018 NAVIGATING CONFLICT**
**Readings for the day: Acts 15 -16**

**November 19, 2018 FAITH ON TRIAL**
**Readings for the day: Acts 17-18:1-18**

**November 20, 2018 TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN**
**Readings for the day: 1 Thessalonians 1-5**

**November 21, 2018 WITH GOD'S HELP**
**Readings for the day: 2 Thessalonians 1-3**

**November 22, 2018 THE SOCIAL/POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL**
**Readings for the day: Acts 18:19-28, 19:1-41**

**November 23, 2018 "REAL, REAL CHURCH"**
**Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 1-4**

**November 24, 2018 LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX**
**Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 5-8**

**November 26, 2018 WAIVING OUR RIGHTS**
**Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 9-11**

**November 27, 2018 NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CHURCH**
**Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 12-14**

**November 28, 2018 THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY**
**Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 15-16**

**November 30, 2018 RECONCILIATION**
**Readings for yesterday: 2 Corinthians 1-4**
**Readings for the day: 2 Corinthians 5-9**

## DECEMBER

**December 1, 2018 POLITICS OF PERSONAL ATTACK**
**Readings for the day: 2 Corinthians 10-13**

**December 3, 2018 THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL**
**Readings for the day: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4**

**December 4, 2018 WHAT IS FAITH?**
**Readings for the day: Romans 5-8**

**December 5, 2018 MYSTERY OF ELECTION**
**Readings for the day: Romans 9-12**

**December 6, 2018 MIXING RELIGION AND POLITICS**
**Readings for the day: Romans 13-16**

**December 7, 2018 TOTAL SURRENDER**
**Readings for the day: Acts 20:4-38, 21-23:1-35**

**December 8, 2018 RESURRECTION LIFE**
**Readings for the day: Acts 24-26**

**December 10, 2018 MARTYRDOM**
**Readings for the day: Acts 27-28**

**December 11, 2018 THE MIND OF CHRIST**
**Readings for the day: Philippians 1-4**

**December 12, 2018 THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS**
**Readings for the day: Philemon, Colossians 1-4**

**December 13, 2018 TROPHIES OF GRACE**
**Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4**

**December 14, 2018 CHRISTMAS EVERY DAY**
**Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3**

**December 15, 2018 LIFE TOGETHER**
**Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6**

**December 17, 2018 REFUGEES**
**Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5**

**December 18, 2018 JESUS IS GREATER**
**Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4**

**December 19, 2018 ANCHOR OF OUR SOULS**
**Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8**

**December 20, 2018 AN UNSHAKABLE KINGDOM**
**Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13**

**December 21, 2018 GOD-BREATHED**
**Readings for the day: 2 Timothy 1-4**

**December 22, 2018 THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**
**Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude**

**December 24, 2018 JESUS CHRIST IS BORN!**
**Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John**

**December 25, 2018 2ND ADVENT**
**Readings for today: Revelation 1-5**

**December 26, 2018 SEALED AS GOD'S SERVANTS**
**Readings for today: Revelation 6-10**

**December 27, 2018 666**
**Readings for today: Revelation 11-13**

**December 28, 2018 REPENT FOR THE END IS NEAR**
**Readings for today: Revelation 14-18**

**December 29, 2018 MARANATHA**
**Readings for today: Revelation 19-22**

**December 31, 2018 NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS**

**January 1, 2018**

## IN THE BEGINNING …..

Readings for the Day: Genesis 1 & 2

Nothing. Emptiness. Void. Before time. Before space. Before matter. There was only God. Already Trinity. Already Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Existing from eternity in Three Persons. Complete. Full. Rich. God needed nothing. God lacked nothing. God was eternally satisfied in Himself. Decision. Resolve. Commitment. God choosing to create. God choosing to bring forth life and light and beauty and order. God choosing to love and be loved.

Let there be Light!
Let there be Heaven!
Let there be Earth and Seas!
Let there be plants, trees, and flowers!
Let there stars and sun and moon!
Let there be fish and birds!
Let there be beasts on the earth!

Something. Time and space and matter now come into being. A universe filled with stars and planets and galaxies bursts into being. The first sunrise. The first sunset. Tides begin. The first buds appear on the earth. The first babies are born on the earth and in the sea. And through it all, there is God. Still lacking nothing. Still needing nothing. Still eternally satisfied but deeply in love with all He creates.

Out of love, God provides a guardian. Someone to take care of all He has made. A creature made in His own image. Male and female, they too are to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. They are given a sacred charge. To subdue the earth. To hold dominion over creation. God entrusting to them a precious gift. They are to steward life. To make sure it flourishes and God's good purposes come to pass. They are to nurture and care for it. They are to work and keep it. They are to guard and protect it.

So much gets lost in the debates over whether creation happened in six literal 24-hour days. Or whether the plural first person ("Let us make...") is an early reference to the Trinity or simply the use of the royal "we" that was common in Ancient Near East literature. Or parsing the differences between the two creation accounts, one poetry (Gen. 1) and one prose (Gen. 2), that we lose sight of the point of the text.

God creates something out of nothing. Brings order to chaos. Light to darkness. Fills the void. And then sets humanity up as His vice-regents on the earth. They are given the authority to rule over all He has made in His name. They are to walk in obedience with Him and thereby enjoy a unique relationship with their Creator. They are to work. They are to be fruitful. They are to multiply and fill the earth with the image and glory of God. This is their purpose. This is the role God designed them to play.

Think about all God has entrusted into your hands today. Think about all the responsibilities God has given you. Family. Friends. Work. Wealth. Talent. Ability. How are you stewarding these gifts for His glory? How are you living out your God-given purpose to nurture life today in all you say, think, and do? How will you contribute to the flourishing of those around you?

**January 2, 2018**

## IN THE BEGINNING...JESUS

Readings for the day: John 1:1-3, Psalm 8, Psalm 104

I am such a linear creature. As such, I too often fall into the trap of thinking there was a time when Jesus was not. Intellectually I know it's not true, of course. I can recite the creeds from memory. But in my heart...well, that's been a different story.
"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I had read these words a hundred times but had never fully grasped their meaning. I still remember where I was sitting in Stuart Hall in the second row of my theology class with Dr. Bruce McCormack. He was lecturing on the Doctrine of Election and for the first time I felt like I really heard what the Apostle John was saying. (Reminded me of the scene from White Men Can't Jump where Wesley Snipes tells Woody Harrelson, "No, no, no there's a difference between hearing and listening...You see, white people, y'all can't hear Jimi. Y'all listen.") I felt like I had been listening to John for years but hadn't really been hearing the depth of what he was trying to convey.
Before time. Before space. Before matter. Before the universe and all that is in it (including us) existed. God made a decision. He decided to be Jesus. To be God for us (though we didn't yet exist). To be God with us (though none of us were around). To define Himself as Savior from eternity (though humanity had not yet sinned).
In the beginning...don't think of it so much in terms of time but in terms of a time before time.

Was the Word...Jesus. Alpha and Omega. First and Last. Faithful and True. Comforter and Counselor. Friend of Sinners. Prince of Peace. Suffering Servant. Atoning Sacrifice. Savior and Lord. This is who Jesus is and always has been even from eternity.
And the Word was with God...Jesus has always been at His Father's side. Creating. Shaping. Forming. Dreaming. Planning. Changing. Transforming. Perfecting. In perfect concert with the Father and the Spirit.
And the Word was God...Not only has Jesus always been with the Father, He and the Father are One. Just as He and the Spirit are One. All three Persons acting in one accord. All three Person existing as One God.

I am such a linear creature. As such, I too often fall into the trap of thinking there was a time when Jesus was not. Intellectually I know it's not true, of course. I can recite the creeds from memory. But in my heart...well, that's been a different story. I've had a hard time grasping the full implications of what it means that Jesus has loved me from before the foundations of the world. So when I first "heard" the Apostle John that day in class, it felt almost like a second conversion. I was overwhelmed at the thought that I've had an advocate before the Father, a faithful high priest in the heavenly kingdom, from eternity. There has never been a time in my life when God was not for me. When God was not with me. When God did not love me because there has never been a time when Jesus – the perfect revelation of God's love and grace – was not! He has always been there and will always be there! And He remains the same yesterday, today, and forever!
This is why the Psalmist breaks out in praise! This is why God's people from Abraham on forward have praised and worshiped God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength! When the enormity of this eternal truth comes crashing in on you, it is changes you. It humbles you. And it reorients your entire life! Your attitudes. Your emotions. Your thoughts. Your work. Your relationships. Your play. Everything changes when you realize there is no part of your life where Jesus – the very Word of God - is not at work to will according to His good pleasure!
What would it mean for you to live your life from the perspective of praise? To live into the truth that God is really, truly for you and not against you? How would it change your prayer life to know that when you pray, you are not "overcoming God's reluctance but laying hold of God's willingness" as Martin Luther learned? Friends, knowing you have access to the vast, immeasurable treasuries of grace through Christ can you give you strength TODAY to face any challenge, endure any trial, face any pain!

**January 3, 2018**

# ANATOMY OF SIN

Readings for the day: Genesis 3, 4, 5

Who knows how long Adam and Eve lived and worked in the glory of Eden. What we do know is that there came a day when paradise wasn't enough. Tempted by Satan, they disobeyed God. They fell into sin. And because of their exalted position – literally God's vice-regents on earth – all of creation suffered the consequences of their tragic choice.

Why is the world so full of violence? Why is the world so full of suffering and pain? Why do human beings seem so bent on hurting themselves and one another? Why is there so much hate? So much spite? So much anger? Why are we so selfish? Greedy? Full of pride? Why are we so prone to attack? To think the worst of one another? To focus more on what divides rather than what unites? Why is it so hard for us to love God with all our hearts? Or to love our neighbor as ourselves? Sure, we might be able to do it in spots. Brief moments of time, often brought on by crisis, where the clouds seem to lift and the glory of God comes shining through. But then the fog settles back in, we go back to our routines, and the lessons from those moments are lost.

God did not intend the world to be this way. As we discovered in the first two chapters of Genesis, God created everything to be good. Perfect. Beautiful. And who knows how long the paradise lasted? Who knows how long Adam and Eve lived and worked in the glory of Eden? What we do know is that there came a day when paradise wasn't enough. Tempted by Satan, they disobeyed God. They fell into sin. And because of their exalted position – literally God's vice-regents on earth – all of creation suffered the consequences of their tragic choice. To whom much is given, much is expected and Adam was given dominion over all God had made. So now creation groans awaiting the day when God will set all things right and make all things new.

When we read Genesis 3-5, we see the anatomy of sin played out over and over again. It always takes the same course. It begins with disbelief. Distrust of who God is and what God has said. "Did God really say..." Satan's first tactic is to always get us to disbelieve God. "Surely you won't die?" Once Eve starts to doubt, Satan launches his second attack. Desire. "When you eat of it...you will be like God..." And Eve begins now to look at the fruit differently. Rather than see it as God sees it, she begins to desire it. She starts to rationalize. "It is good for food." "It is a delight to the eyes." "It will make me wise." Desire unchecked leads to action and so Eve plucks a fruit from the tree and eats. She gives some to Adam - "who was with her" so you can't pin this all on Eve – and he ate as well. And then comes Satan's final attack. After doubt has given birth to desire. And desire left unchecked has led to sin. The result is always shame. Adam and Eve suddenly feel exposed. Naked. Guilty. So they sow fig leaves together to hide from each other and God.

We see the same story played out with Cain. His offering isn't accepted and he grows angry. He refuses to believe God when He gives him a second chance, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" Instead he lets his anger grow to the point where he murders his own brother in cold blood. Then comes the shame. "My punishment is greater than I can bear..." And the implication in the second half of chapter four and the generations listed in chapter five is that this same pattern is being repeated. How do we know? By the refrain, "And he died..." Death, according to God, is the righteous punishment for sin. And all have sinned. All have fallen short of God's glory. Therefore all die.

Is there any hope at this point in the story? Genesis 5:24. "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." Even here, in the opening chapters of Genesis, there is this sense that death cannot hold those who walk with God. Death has no power over those who walk with God. And we see this preeminently in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here was a Man who walked with God! Here was a Man whom Death could not

overcome! Here was a Man who knew no Sin yet who became Sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God!

So...are you walking with God? Do you take every thought, every feeling, every emotion, every action captive to Christ? Do you trust God's promises? Do you believe God is who He says He is? Have you placed your faith in the Son of God and do you walk in faith every moment of every day? Or do you allow desire to run unchecked? Do you allow your doubts and fears and shame to overwhelm? Hear the good news of the gospel from Romans 8:1-2, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Believe this! And live today in God's grace, love and power!

**January 4, 2018**

# HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for the day: Genesis 6, 7

The corruption was so vast and so evil that God actually regrets that he made man in the first place and is deeply grieved to see what has become of the special creature He made in His own image. And because the evil is so radical and so pervasive, God performs an equally radical and pervasive form of surgery.
"What about the half-demon dudes?" I was in a small group men's Bible study in college when I first heard about the Nephilim. I had never read Genesis 6 before and was completely confused. Who were the sons of God? Who were the daughters of men? Were we simply talking about the contrast between the descendants of Seth and the descendants of Cain? Is this the first injunction against intermarriage between the godly and ungodly that we see so often repeated in the rest of the Old Testament? Or is there something more going on? Why were their offspring so special? Mighty men of old? Men of renown? The word "Nephilim" literally means "giants" so these folks were potentially a different breed than the rest of humanity. Could this perhaps be the origin of the myths and legends we see in so many cultures of half-human, half-divine heroes running around? An embellishment on stories passed down through the generations from the pre-Flood time period?

There are good, biblical reasons to believe so. First of all, the only other time the phrase "sons of God" (bene elohim) is used in the Old Testament is in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. In each case, it clearly refers to angels. Second, there are three New Testament passages that seem to suggest the same...1 Peter 3:18-22, 2 Peter 2:4-5, and Jude 6-7. For example, 1 Peter 3:18-22 says, "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water."

What did Christ proclaim to the spirits in prison? His victory over sin and death. His victory over hell and evil. His victory over Satan and all his minions. Remember, Satan was present in the Garden when he hears God lay down not only the curse on humanity but also the first prophecy of a Messiah. Genesis 3:15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." As a result, one can easily imagine Satan setting about to do all he can to prevent the prophecy from coming to pass. He would make it his aim to destroy the offspring of Eve. He gets to Cain as we saw in Genesis four, making him a murderer and destroying Abel before he can bear any children. But God's plan will not be stopped so easily. He gives Adam and Eve a third son named Seth through whom the godly line will continue. Satan, seeking to pervert this line, sends his fallen angels (sons of God) to seduce the daughters of men and therefore bring corruption on the entire human race even at this nascent stage of its existence. The corruption was so vast and so evil that God actually regrets that he made man in the first place and is deeply grieved to see what has become of the special creature He made in His own image. And because the evil is so radical and pervasive, God performs an equally radical and pervasive form of surgery. Not because He's angry or capricious or hateful but because He knows He must take this step to save the human race. Like a doctor treating a patient with stage four metastatic cancer, God gives the world "chemotherapy" in the form of a great Flood.

Whether the Flood was truly world-wide or more localized is not the point as humanity at this point in time would have only occupied a very small portion of the earth. As such, their view of the "world"would have been very limited. What we do know is that Noah, by faith, believed God and built an ark. I love how Hebrews 11:7 describes it, "By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith." So God cleanses the earth of its evil and corruption. With deep grief in His

heart, He “uncreates” all He has made even as He’s trying preserve it. It must have broken His heart to see everything die and yet die it must in order to give the world a second chance.

Anyone who has gone through cancer can identify on some level with this story. Sometimes the disease we face is so evil, we must undergo therapy that actually attacks our bodies with the hope that it will kill the corruption within us before it takes our lives. The reality is we all were born in sin. We all were born with a fallen nature. And this nature corrupts everything we do, every thought we have, every feeling or emotion we experience. There is not one part of our lives that is not touched by this disease. Thankfully, God is still performing “radical surgery!” Through the Holy Spirit, God “floods” our hearts with His grace, love, and power delivering us. Rescuing us. Lifting us above the death and destruction just as He once lifted up Noah and his family above the flood.

How has God saved you? Can you think of a time in your life when God reached down and delivered you? Where do you need saving today? God is able! Call on Him! As the floodwaters rise, threatening to overwhelm, know that God is still in the” ark-building” business! In Christ, He will deliver you!

**January 5, 2018**

## STARTING OVER

Readings for the day: Genesis 8, 9, Psalm 12
And so God begins the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding life. Piecing back together a broken world.

How many of us have experienced the death of someone we love? Or the end of a relationship that once held such promise? How many of us have felt the grief and pain that accompanies such a loss? And then, of course, comes the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding a life. Piecing back together a broken heart.
The most stunning part of the Noahic story is the insight the Holy Spirit gives us into the very heart of God. In Genesis 6-8, we come face to face with the heartbreak of God. The pain of God. The grief of God. Close readings of these chapters reveal not an angry tyrant who lashes out at His creation but a grieving parent whose heart breaks at the hostility He encounters from the creature He so dearly loves. The Hebrew word for "grieve" in Gen. 6:6 is the exact same word used for the "pain" the woman will suffer as a result of the curse of sin in Gen. 3:16. Eve is clearly not the only one who will experience an intensification of the pains of labor and bear her children in anguish! In choosing to be Immanuel – God with us - God freely enters into the pain of our existence and bears it Himself. The central message of this story is that the heart of humanity which is "only evil continually" (6:5) has not been changed by the devastating judgment of the flood. No, the intentions of the human heart remain forever bent towards evil and hostile towards God. (8:21) So God has a decision to make. Of course, it's one He's already made from eternity. "Never again will I curse the ground...Never again will I destroy all living creatures...As long as the earth endures, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." In other words, God will be faithful!
And so God begins the daunting task of starting over. The hard work of rebuilding life. Piecing back together a broken world. He calls Noah and his family forward. He renews with them the "Great Commission" He once gave Adam and Eve in the Garden. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion over all I have made. This is territory we've already trod. The difference now is the commission is accompanied by a promise. A rainbow set in the clouds so that every time it rains (one can only imagine the PTSD this family experienced every time they saw the clouds come over and the rain begin to fall), Noah and his family will remember they don't have anything to fear. "The water will never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." No matter what happens from this point forward. No matter how dark humanity's sin may get. God will be faithful. He will keep His promise.

And if you read even more carefully, you will note God's commitment to His promise is immediately put to the test. Noah begins to till the soil. He plants a vineyard and gets drunk off his own harvest. One of his sons, Ham, enters his father's tent and "sees his father naked." Many scholars have pointed out the probability of Ham's sin going far beyond voyeurism. Most likely, "seeing his father's nakedness" is Hebrew idiom for rape which in the Ancient Near East was an all too common way for younger men to establish their superiority over older men, even among family members. Ham is attempting here to take over the family clan by violently shaming his own father which is why when Noah wakes and learns "what his youngest son had done to him", he curses Ham's son Canaan by reducing him the status of a slave. That may sound harsh to our 21st century ears but often our sin has generational consequences and one has only to look at who the Canaanites become to see how the sins of Ham get passed down. And yet, even this horrific act does not annul the promise of God! He still remains faithful and true to His Word!

Do you realize this same promise is true for your life? No matter what you do or where you go or where you've been or what you've experienced, God is faithful! He will never leave you or forsake you! He will never abandon you to your fate! As long as you draw breath, He remains at work healing your wounds. Binding up your broken heart. Comforting you when you mourn. Giving you peace amidst the storm. Trust Him today with all of your trials! All of your struggles! All of your suffering! All of your pain!

**January 6, 2018**

## A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Readings for the day: Genesis 10, 11

Humanity has such a "fortress" mentality. One of our deepest needs is to feel safe.

A new beginning has been made. God has started over with Noah and his family. The salvation plan of God is renewed through them and they are commissioned to fulfill the calling once given to Adam and Eve. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. The purpose of the genealogy in chapter 10 is to show us how this took place. The children of Noah begat their own children. And their children begat their own children. Names we probably recognize begin to appear. Egypt. Assyria. Nineveh. The Canaanite tribes who will figure so prominently a little later on in the Old Testament. One gets the sense that the descendants of Noah are being fruitful. They are multiplying. However, there is a problem. They aren't filling the earth.

Put yourself in their sandals for a bit. You're fathers and grandfathers just walked out of the ark into a brave new world. A world that had drastically changed. Nothing is familiar. Nothing feels safe. You find yourself jumping every time it rains. Plants and trees are beginning to grow again. The moldy, mildewy smell that often hangs around forever after a flood is finally gone. (I experienced this personally after Hurricane Katrina when we did relief work in Mississippi.) The animals are multiplying and scattering. The entire earth is in recovery mode. You know God's plan for your life. He has commissioned you to go out into all the earth. To scatter abroad and help in this great recovery effort. To bring about the flourishing of all of creation. That's His will. But you are afraid. Afraid of what you might find. Afraid of the unknown. Afraid of losing touch with your family, your clan, your tribe. So what do you do? You stick together. You protect each other. You find safety in your own strength.

Humanity has such a "fortress" mentality. One of our deepest needs is to feel safe. The Bible clearly teaches in Genesis 11 that this has always been the case. Rather than scattering according to God's command, the people migrate from place to place together. Eventually they reach the plain of Shinar (think Babylonia or modern-day Iraq) where they decide to build a city and a tower so high it can be seen for miles. This will keep them from being dispersed. No matter where they go, they can keep the tower in sight and it will guide them back home. But God's plan will not be so easily thwarted. He comes down to look in on what they are doing. He sees their resistance to scatter. He knows their fears and insecurities. He understands that if He doesn't intervene, they will not go out on their own and creation will suffer as a result. So He confuses their languages and drives them all over the earth. Forcing them out of their comfort zone. Forcing them out of their safety net. Forcing them to abandon their "fortress" and engage the world in the way God intends. (By the way, we will see something similar take place with the early church in Acts where God uses persecution to scatter them around the Roman Empire.)

As they scatter, there is one particular family. One particular clan. One particular tribe that the Spirit zooms in on. The line of Shem. This is the line of salvation. Though all of humanity is given the same call to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and have dominion; this particular part of humanity will be given an even greater task. A higher calling. So again, the names pass before us until they get to Terah. And Terah has three sons. And these three sons will all play a significant role in God's plan moving forward. But even here there is danger. One of the boys will die young. Abram's wife is barren. They too have had to leave their home. Terah will lose his own life along the way. Death and brokenness and sin continue to pose threats to the salvation plan of God.

Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. The creation mandate remains in place for your life and mine. How's it going? When you consider your work, your family, your plans for the future...do they align with God's plan to use you for His glory? To bring about the flourishing of those you love? Your friends and neighbors and co-workers? Do you take risks to reach out or do you play it safe? Where is God calling you to leave your comfort zone today?

**January 8, 2018**

## GOD'S CHOSEN INSTRUMENT

Readings for the day: Genesis 12 and 13

Welcome to week 2! This week begins with the call to Abram. A seminal event in salvation history. God choosing one man from one family, one clan, one tribe descended from Noah's oldest son Shem to become the father of a great nation. God's nation. The nation of Israel.

And what is God's call to Abram? Essentially the same call He gave to Adam and Eve. The same call He gave to Noah and his family. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Have dominion. Only this time, God isn't going to leave it up to Abram. Because human beings remain so prone to evil, God steps in...

I will make of you a great nation! (Be fruitful)
In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed! (Multiply)
Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you! (Fill the earth)
I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing! (Have dominion)
All that sounds well and good except Abram's got issues! He is 75 years old which is not the best time in life to be starting over. His wife Sarai is barren and their childlessness is a source of incredible shame. He has to leave yet another city where he was established to go to an unknown place. When he finally arrives in the Promised Land, there is a famine. This drives him to Egypt where he fears his life will be in danger. He lies about his relationship with Sarai which puts God's promise at risk. He returns from Egypt only to experience so much conflict with his nephew, they have to separate. Life is certainly not easy for Abram!

And yet the call of God remains. After everything is said and done and Abram's finally found a good spot to settle down, God speaks to him again...

Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. (Fill the earth)
I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. (Be fruitful. Multiply)
Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. (Have dominion)
God's promise will be fulfilled. Not because Abram is faithful. Not because Abram is righteous. Not because Abram found favor with God. But because God is all these things and more! God will bring about His will on the earth! God will deliver on His promises! God will fulfill His purposes! And it doesn't really matter what humanity does or doesn't do. God will bring His plan to pass!

Does this give you hope today? To know He is at work in your life right now making you fruitful? Multiplying you in ways you cannot begin to imagine? Sending you out to fill the earth with His image and glory? Giving you dominion over all He has made? Does it take the pressure off a bit? Knowing that God will accomplish this in your life? I hope so! And like Abram, it doesn't matter what obstacles stand in your way! God is faithful! In Christ, His promises are sure! In Christ, His promises will come to pass! In Christ, He will fulfill His plan and purpose for our lives!

**January 9, 2018**

## FIRST FAMILY

Readings for the day: Genesis 14, 15, 16

Even crazier than taking 318 men and defeating four kings as they returned victorious from battle is old, childless Abram looking up into the night sky and believing God's promise. That's why God declares him righteous.

**January 10, 2018**

## WALK BY FAITH

Readings for the day: Genesis 17, 18, 19

All one has to do is look at the life of Abraham...It's not a perfect life. It's not a safe life. It's not an easy life. Abraham is given far more than he can ever handle. He is pushed further than he himself would ever choose to go. God never stops demanding, never stops commanding. And he just keeps walking by faith.

**January 11, 2018**

## FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: Genesis 20, 21, 22, 23

One of the most famous stories in all of Scripture is the sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the subject of some of the most incredible artwork throughout the centuries. It has influenced the plot lines of famous works of literature. There is just something deeply compelling about this story for believers and non-believers alike. An old man taking his son. His only son. The son whom he loves and offering him as a sacrifice.

**January 12, 2018**

## LET GOD BE GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 24, 25, 26

These are all honest, real questions that should be raised by any reflective, thoughtful, engaged readers of the Bible. And they press us to the primary question which will undergird our entire journey this year...Will we let God be God? Can we agree that His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts? Can we agree that in standing outside of time and space, He has a perspective we can never grasp? Can we agree that God is infinite in wisdom and understanding? Omniscient and omnipotent? Again, will we let God be God?

**January 13, 2018**

## INTER-GENERATIONAL FAITH

Readings for the day: Genesis 27, 28, 29

The grace of God is radical, friends. The love of God is unconditional. The mercy of God is unfathomable. It is not rational. It is not reasonable. It is not explainable. It simply is true. And we either believe it or we don't.

**January 15, 2018**

## WRESTLING WITH GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 30, 31, 32, 33

That's when God shows up and He begins to go to work on Jacob. Wrestling with him. Struggling with him. Forcing Jacob to come to grips with himself on a lot of levels. Forcing Jacob to face his past, his sin, his fear, his brokenness. But Jacob is a strong and stubborn man. He fights God all night long.

**January 16, 2018**

## BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 34, 35, 36, 37

No matter what Abraham's descendants may do. God would remain faithful. And with each successive generation, we see God renew that promise.

**January 17, 2018**

# JUDAH AND TAMAR

Readings for the day: Genesis 38, 39, 40

Today's readings include all kinds of material that can often seem confusing to our 21st century ears so we'll save Joseph's story for tomorrow.

The story of Judah and Tamar seemingly comes out of nowhere. It's almost an interruption in the much larger story of Joseph. And yet, it is critical for our understanding of the saving purposes of God. In the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Judah and Tamar are both mentioned and Matthew knows his audience will immediately call to mind this story from Genesis. Women, by the way, are almost never included in any genealogy but Matthew makes sure we know the names of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. That's prostitute, prostitute, Moabite, and adulteress for those scoring at home. The point Matthew is making is that even the family tree of Jesus is not free from scandal and sin!

All kinds of important questions are raised by this text. Why does God kill Er and Onan for seemingly minor offenses? Why is Judah engaging the services of cult prostitutes? Is this his regular practice after his wife dies? And why is the penalty for adultery so harsh for Tamar? Burning at the stake? What is God up to here?

After the incident with Joseph where Judah sells his own brother into slavery, he leaves his family. Perhaps out of guilt over what he has done. Perhaps just to get away from the family dysfunction. We aren't given a reason. He marries outside his clan and his wife bears him three sons. Er, his oldest, is so wicked that the Lord puts him to death. Again, no reason is given. It is simply something we have to accept. In the ancient near east, brothers were required to take their widowed sister-in-laws into their home with the hope they could get them pregnant and thereby continue the family line. Onan is fully aware of this custom but apparently only uses Tamar for his own personal sexual gratification while refusing to fulfill his filial responsibility. And the Lord puts him to death for his offense. This rightfully frightens Judah. He's not about to lose his third son as this will put his own family's future at risk so he sends Tamar home to her own family and asks her to wait until Shelah comes of age.

Then the subject of the passage shifts. Tamar is now the primary actor. She also is frightened for her future. She's been married twice. Her reputation is in tatters as both men have died. She's been sexually abused by at least one husband. And she knows by now that Judah has no intention of fulfilling his promise. So she dresses herself as a cult prostitute, complete with a veil so he won't recognize her. She knows his wife has died. Perhaps she even knows Judah visits prostitutes with regularity although the text doesn't indicate as such. And she places herself in prime position to meet him along the way. Judah takes the bait and Tamar is crafty enough to ask for his signet, cord, and staff, all of which clearly identify him to the community. Then she returns home. Three months later, she starts showing. And even though she's living in her father's home, she is technically Judah's responsibility. He brings her out to be burned at the stake and that's when the other shoe drops.

So what is God up to here? Over and over again, this family He has chosen puts their promised future at risk. The scheming and lies of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The barrenness of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. And now Judah's failings as a father-in-law. It always seems like the salvation plan of God is teetering on the edge of collapse. And yet God remains faithful! He continually bends the arc of human sin towards His purposes!

What about your life? Where have you sinned and fallen short? Where have you failed and lost sight of God's promises? Where have you seen God bend even your failings towards His purposes? Where have you seen God use all things for your good?

**January 18, 2018**

## NOTHING BUT A DREAMER

Readings for the day: Genesis 41, 42, 43

God often speaks to us in our dreams. If we have the ears to hear and the heart to listen. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they tell the future. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they convict us of sin. Sometimes dreams bring to light anxiety and fear that we need to bring to our Heavenly Father. Sometimes our dreams affirm us or reveal the deepest desires of our heart.

**January 19, 2018**

## GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Readings for the day: Genesis 44, 45, 46

Consider all that Joseph had gone through. Assaulted by his own brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely imprisoned. He could easily have adopted a victim mindset. He could easily have become bitter and angry. He could easily have sought revenge. But Joseph – perhaps more than anyone else save Abraham in the Book of Genesis – walks with God.

**January 20, 2018**

## LIFE'S CONSEQUENCES

Readings for the day: Genesis 47, 48, 49, 50

We live our lives before God. Whether we realize it or not, He is always there. And His grace is amazing. His love is unconditional. He mercy knows no end. He loves us for who we are in all of our imperfections. But sin still has consequences.

**January 22, 2018**

## SUFFERING

Readings for the day: Job 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

All agree Job is righteous. All resonate with Job's suffering. All feel Job's pain. He is us. We are him. Everyone who has experienced deep suffering in their lives can identify with this man. But the Book of Job makes it clear that Job's suffering is not the primary point of the story but rather how his suffering points us to the greater reality of God.

**January 23, 2018**

## DANGERS OF SPIRITUAL PLATITUDES

Readings for the day: Job 6, 7, 8, 9

I have been in the emergency rooms with parents as they said goodbye to their children. I have been in the neonatal units watching infants struggle for every breath. I have sat at the bedside of those dying from cancer and tried to bring comfort to their loved ones. I have been in the developing world and seen life-threatening poverty. I have prayed over men and women whose condition is utterly hopeless because they simply do not have access to the resources they need to survive. In EVERY single case, I feel helpless. Inadequate. Afraid. Frustration. Despair. These feelings threaten to overwhelm me and, if I am not careful, can cause me to say things more for my own benefit than for the good of others

**January 24, 2018**

## DESPAIR

Readings for the day: Job 10, 11, 12, 13

When things were at their most desperate. When life was at its most uncertain. When everything I held dear was slipping through my grasp, this one truth remained. God. And when that realization came flooding in, everything changed.

**January 25, 2018**

## RELENTLESS

Readings for the day: Job 14, 15, 16, 17

“Pain won’t kill you.” Miss Annie shared those words with me when I first visited her. She was 95 and living at home by herself. I was all of 29 years old and a freshly minted pastor just out of seminary. As I listened to her story, my heart just broke. She had been battling a host of diseases for decades. She had fought off various cancers. She could barely walk due to her COPD. She had a degenerative back condition that left her in excruciating pain. She was also one of the meanest, nastiest people you will ever meet. She treated the home health nurses that cared for her terribly. Constantly cussing them out and calling them names. She did the same to her family to the point where they hated coming around. I visited her about once a month to serve her communion since she was one of our home bound members. A lot of the time, I left without serving her the elements because she refused to confess her sins before the Lord and I refused to make a mockery of the sacrament. During those times, she would cuss me out as I headed out the door. But she always welcomed me back the next month and along the way there would be these breakthroughs. Moments of grace where a window would open into her soul. She would weep. She would confess. She would repent. Those were sacred moments where God’s Spirit rushed in.

The pain Job feels is relentless. It is ruthless. It is excruciating. With no end in sight. He longs for death. Longs for the release of the grave. (I cannot tell you how many times I prayed with Miss Annie for the Lord to take her as she slept. This was her most heartfelt prayer request.) The way Job describes his experience is almost painful in itself. “But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stones; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so you destroy the hope of man...He feels only the pain of his own body, and he mourns only for himself." (Job 14:18-19, 22)

“Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company. And he has shriveled me up, which is a witness against me, and my leanness has risen up against me; it testifies to my face. He has torn me in his wrath and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me...I was at ease, and he broke me apart; he seized me by the neck and dashed me to pieces; he set me up as his target; his archers surround me. He slashes open my kidneys and does not spare; he pours out my gall on the ground. He breaks me with breach upon breach; he runs upon me like a warrior.” (Job 16:7-9, 12-14)

“My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me.” (Job 17:1)

Job’s pain is an endless cataract, cascading down on his body, mind, and soul. There is never an end to it. It is so terrible and horrifying, I’m sure it made Eliphaz want to squeeze shut his eyes and close his ears. He simply cannot handle what he’s seeing and hearing. So he opens his mouth again and this time one can hear his frustration. “But you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering meditation before God...Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you...Why does your heart carry you away, and why do your eyes flash, that you turn your spirit against God and bring such words out of your mouth?” (Job 15:4, 6, 12-13) I cannot tell you the number of times I got frustrated listening to Miss Annie. Over and over again, I felt compelled to rebuke her. Correct her. Challenge her. Her racist rants were offensive. The way she spoke of her kids disrespectful. Even the way she talked about God made me angry. I cannot tell you the number of times I threw up my hands and walked away. And yet, God’s Spirit kept bringing me back. Forcing me to walk into her living room where she lay in her hospital bed and engage her once again.

The great C.S. Lewis once said, “Pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” The reality is God was trying to “rouse” Miss Annie. In the midst of her suffering, He reached out for her over and over again. His love never wavered. His faithfulness never failed. His grace never reached its limit. As dark as things have gotten for Job – and they will get darker still before the dawn – God is present. Always there. Hovering in the background for now but by the end of the book, manifesting Himself in all His glory. And for centuries, He has used Job’s pain as a megaphone to rouse our deaf and dying world.

**January 26, 2018**

## MY REDEEMER LIVES

Readings for the day: Job 18, 19, 20, 21

Job's suffering resists all logic. It resists any and all attempts to make sense out of it. It resists the formulaic notions we have about cause and effect. Blessing and curse. Health and wealth. It forces us to grapple with the hard truth that the righteous do suffer. The unrighteous do prosper. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to evil people. There is no rhyme or reason to these things. Time and chance happen to us all as the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote.

**January 27, 2018**

# DOUBLING DOWN

Readings for the day: Job 22, 23, 24

I remember vividly the last time I gambled at a casino. It was in the late nineties before I became a pastor. I was on a business trip to Las Vegas and a friend of mine and I decided to play craps. We had a good night. When it came time for me to roll, I hit a hot streak. Rolled for almost an hour without hitting a seven. It was crazy. People were cheering. Money was being made hand over fist. Frankly, I've never experienced anything quite like it. In the middle of all the chaos, a homeless man shuffled in. The lines in his face told the story of a hard life on the streets. He hadn't showered in days. His teeth were almost gone. His eyes were blurry and unfocused. He held a crumpled up $20 bill he'd found in the gutter somewhere. He threw it down on the table. I promptly rolled a seven. The board cleared. The run was over. Everyone turned on this man. They cursed him. They jeered him. He just turned and shuffled away, never saying a word.

I sometimes think about that man when I pray. I wonder where he is? Where life took him? If he ever got any help or if he just continued to barely survive on the streets? Doubling down each chance he got when someone gave him some money? I think about my own life. In so many ways, I am just like him. Doubling down on my own sin in my own heart rather than humbly submitting to God. As I read Eliphaz's words this morning, I can feel his frustration boiling over. The general theological principle he's held to his entire life – the righteous prosper, the unrighteous are punished - has failed him. But rather than humbly recognizing the failure and taking a step back, he doubles down. He attacks his dear friend Job. He accuses him of crimes against God. "Is not your evil abundant? There is no end to your iniquities." (Job 22:5) You have robbed your brothers. You have stripped the naked. You have withheld water from the thirsty. You have not fed the hungry. You have treated widows and orphans (the true measure of pure and undefined religious devotion according to James 1:27) with disdain. Over and over again, he verbally assaults his friend. (Someone asked earlier why Satan is not more visible in this story? We hear him very clearly here in Eliphaz's words. The word satan means "accuser.")

How does Job respond? He doubles down on God. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat! I would lay my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would know what he would answer me and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; he would pay attention to me. There an upright man could argue with him, and I would be acquitted forever by my judge." (Job 23:3-7) Job is confident in God's justice and righteousness. Confident God will hear his prayers. Confident God would pay attention to him, unlike his friends who seem so bent on contending with him.

The problem, of course, is Job can't seem to find God in the midst of his suffering and pain. Though he's assailed the heavens, they seem shut up. Though he's cried out, all he's received so far is deafening silence. Job has done his best but to no avail. "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him." However, he does not despair. Why? Because he trusts God. "He (God) knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold." (Job 23:10) Though Job can't seem to find the way to God, God knows the way to him. And at the end of all the trials and all the trauma, Job is confident God will make things right. Job is confident he will emerge better than before. Refined. Purified. Sanctified as God separates the gold from the dross in his life.

Admittedly, I am partial to these verses. When things have been at their darkest in my own life. When I've struggled with uncertainty and doubt and fear. When the trials I've faced have taken me to the end of myself. The end of my resources. The end of my plans. Job 23:10 has been my comfort and my hope. I know what it's like to double down on sin. I know what it's like to double down on self-destruction. I know what it's like to double down in my pride and arrogance. And in those moments, God has broken me utterly and completely. Humbled me in so many ways. He has laid me low to teach me about His sufficiency and grace. He has used the trials of my life to refine me. Purify me. Sanctify me. And His work is not done. Not until I reach glory.

**January 29, 2018**

# INSULATION

Readings for the day: Job 25, 26, 27, 28

Three years ago, we built a home. Got to see it take shape from the ground up. Walked through it at every stage. Spent time going over all the details with the general contractor. Among the more significant was the insulation. How much? Where would it go? What was the rating? Insulation provides a protective barrier around the home. Keeps the utility bills low. Saves energy. Keeps the home comfortable.

As a Christian living in 21st America, I am "insulated" from so much that goes on in the world. My government is stable and has a history of peaceful transfers of power. My community is protected by faithful men and women who serve on the police force and in fire departments. I have access to the best medical care in the world. My household income places me in the top.. .06% of the world's wealthiest people. As such, I can buy what I need when I need it. I live in a warm home in the winter, a cool home in the summer. My children go to great schools where they are taught by some of the best teachers around. College is not just a pipe dream but an expectation for them. Because of the color of my skin, I have never had to face racism either on a personal or systemic level. I have never been held back because of my gender. My sexual orientation places me in no danger. All these advantages create "layers of insulation" that have afforded me a pretty safe and comfortable, dare I say even idyllic, life.

They also create "cultural distance" between myself and those who have had a much different experience in life. This includes many of my African-American and Hispanic brothers and sisters. Many of my female colleagues in ministry. Many of my LGBTQ friends. It includes my brothers and sisters living in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Djibouti, and Somalia. And it most certainly includes a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz during the time of the patriarchs of the Bible. One of the more difficult challenges when it comes to interpretation is recognizing the "cultural distance" between us and the men and women of Scripture. Job lived at a time when there was no democracy. No rule of law. No peaceful transitions of power. Job lived in an age where pain and suffering was common. There were no police, no firefighters, no first responders. Healthcare was non-existent. Disease, famine, pestilence, drought happened all too often. Job lived at a time where families and clans and tribes lived in an almost constant state of war. Women and children were raped and murdered. The wealthiest were often the most envied and most targeted. And there was no guarantees beyond what you could guard and protect through your own strength. As such, when we read about the Sabeans raiding and killing all of Job's oxen and donkeys. When we read about a firestorm from heaven that kills all Job's sheep and servants. When we read about the Chaldeans raiding his camels or hurricane force winds collapsing a home on Job's children, we cannot imagine what that must feel like. Because we are largely insulated from such tragedies. But Job is not. His friends are not. They live in a world where these things happen with some degree of regularity.

And yet Job believes. He holds fast to his faith. The language he uses to describe God in chapter 26 is some of the most beautiful and stirring in all of Scripture. "Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering. He stretches out the north over the void and hangs the earth on nothing...He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness...Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways..." (Job 26:6-7, 10, 14) And I love how he describes his search for wisdom in chapter 28. "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living. The deep says, 'It is not in me,' and the sea says, 'It is not with me.' It cannot be bought for gold, and silver cannot be weighed as its price...Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold...From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?...Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.'" (Job 28: 12-15, 17, 22)

In the face of all Job has suffered, he still trusts in God. One of the great truths I have discovered as I travel and teach all over the world is that “insulation” is a faith-killer. The more layers, the more we struggle to believe. The more we have, the harder it is for us to trust in God. The more safe and comfortable we are, the less resilient our faith. The book of Job describes in vivid detail what happens when all the layers are peeled back. Everything we have is stripped away. All we hold dear is lost. In that moment, will we cling to faith? Will we walk the path of wisdom that God lays out for us? “God understands the way to wisdom, and he knows its place...And he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'” (Job 28:23, 28)

**January 30, 2018**

## MORE TRUE THAN WE KNOW….

Readings for the day: Job 29, 30, 31, 32

Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him, for you are worse than he thinks you to be." I remember running across this quote when life was at its darkest and I was struggling to understand what had happened. The people I worked for lacked integrity. They treated me poorly. They were purposefully deceitful and evasive and lacked transparency. Furthermore, one of them made it his mission in life to not only undermine the work I was doing but took every chance he could to speak ill of me. Accuse me. Spread false rumors about me. It was brutal. And then I read these words from Spurgeon and I realized that as badly as I was being treated, I deserved far worse. All of the things I was being accused of WERE actually happening in my heart. I was angry. I was frustrated. I was prideful and arrogant. I harbored resentment and bitterness. I refused to forgive and extend grace. When it hit me that I was all these things and more, I almost laughed out loud. It dawned on me that all my pent up emotions and feelings were just a cover for my own insecurity and fear. And once I confessed those insecurities and fears to God, I was set free. Free from the need to justify myself. Free from the need to be right. Free from the need to see justice done. Free from the need to please them and gain their approval. It was a life-changing experience for me.

Job's friends are an easy target in this book. Their theological purity brings little comfort to their suffering friend. Furthermore, their beliefs are far too simplistic for we all know the righteous are not always rewarded nor are the wicked always punished. Therefore, their attacks on Job are without warrant. Having said that...here's a mind-bender for you...Job actually believes the same way they do! Listen to what he says, "I put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I searched out the cause of him whom I did not know. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous and made him drop his prey from his teeth." (Job 29:14-17) The reality is Job believes his cause is 100% just. He believes he's done nothing to deserve his fate. Because he is a righteous man, he cannot imagine why God would allow these things to happen to him. "God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living." (Job 30:19-23) Essentially Job is making the same argument his friends have made throughout the book. Why does God not reward the righteous (in this case, Job himself) and punish the wicked? Job clearly believes He should. Clearly is angry with God that He doesn't. Job has held fast to his integrity. He has not committed any sin worthy of his suffering. He even goes as far as recounting all his righteous deeds in chapter 31. Making his closing argument before God.

As readers, I am sure we all find ourselves in agreement. We take Job's side. We're convinced. But then...if we're careful to listen...we hear the soft whisper of Satan's initial question. "Does Job fear God for no reason?" The honest truth is Job does expect something from God. He expects an answer. He expects a justifiable reason for his suffering. His expectations have not been met. Job believes he's kept his end of the deal so it must be God who has failed. (A notion God Himself will correct in just a few chapters...)

So let me put the question to all of us...do we fear God for no reason? Asked another way, why do we love God? Is it for the eschatological goodies? A guaranteed pass to heaven? Health? Wealth? Blessings in this life and the next? Or is God enough? Do we love God simply because He's God? If there were no eternal rewards. If there were no promises. If God never gave us a single thing, would He be worthy of our love and devotion?

**January 31, 2018**

## RIGHTEOUS SUFFERING

Readings for the day: Job 33, 34, 35, 36

"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7)

"For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it." (Hebrews 12:10-11)

"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead." (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

There is such a thing as righteous suffering. Redemptive suffering. Suffering with a purpose. We may not always see that purpose and, in fact, it is often only revealed upon reflection after the fact. But that doesn't mean all suffering is meaningless. Or all suffering is bad. Or all suffering is to be avoided. Clearly, the first century believers suffered. 10 of the 12 Apostles would be tortured and executed in excruciating ways for their faith. (Judas committed suicide and John, though he suffered, died of old age.) Throughout the first three centuries of the church's existence, Christians were burned as torches in Nero's garden. Thrown to the lions for sport in the arena. In certain regions of the Empire, they were systematically rounded up and killed. This was not only true back then but remains true in certain places around the world today. According to Christianity Today, it is estimated that over 70 million Christians have been martyred since the time of Jesus. They suffered and died in places all over the earth. Ottomon Turkey. Nazi Germany. Soviet Russia. Communist China and North Korea. Uganda. Sudan. Mexico. Columbia. And the suffering continues. I have seen it firsthand in Ethiopia and have spoken to eye witnesses in South Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia.

The introduction of Elihu to the narrative represents a turning point in Job. At first glance, Elihu just seems to be piling on. Repeating the same tired arguments of Job's friends. But a careful reading of the text reveals a significant shift. Elihu bursts on the scene declaring his anger at both Job and his three friends. (Job 32:1-5) He believes he has something new to offer that has not yet been said. So what is it that Elihu brings to the table? It is the idea that God does allow the righteous to suffer in order to purify and to save. Perhaps the key passage is Job 33:12-30...

"Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings...Remember, they had no Bible. No written records. So the Word of God would come to them in visions and dreams. Why? To punish? To judge? To wound? To destroy? No...So that God may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. This is deeply significant as it adds a new layer of meaning to the story. God does allow suffering but it's for our good. He uses suffering to purge the pride from us. The pride – as I said yesterday – Job himself suffers from. Yes, Job is a righteous man. Yes, Job is a blameless man. But Job is also a sinful man. Though he has a heart after God, he is not perfect and God will use his suffering (as we will see at the end of the book) to cleanse the depths of Job's heart.

God not only warns us in dreams and visions and through His Word, he also uses our physical pain for our good and for His glory. "Man is also rebuked with pain on his bed and with continual strife in his bones, so that his life loathes bread, and his appetite the choicest food. His flesh is so wasted away that it cannot be seen, and his bones that were not seen stick out. His soul draws near the pit, and his life to those who bring death." If we follow the logic of Job's friends – whom Elihu rebukes strongly – we would conclude that those who suffer deserve it. They should go down to death. But that's not where Elihu lands. His God is not a harsh judge but a faithful, loving Father who delivers His children ultimately from their pain and suffering. "If there be for him an angel, a mediator, one of the thousand, to declare to man what is right for him, and he is merciful to him, and says, 'Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom; let his flesh become fresh with youth; let him return to the days of his youthful vigor'; then man prays to God, and he accepts him; he sees his face with a shout of joy, and he restores to man his righteousness. He sings before men and says: 'I sinned and perverted what was right, and it was not repaid to me. He has redeemed my soul from going down into the pit, and my life shall look upon the light.' "Behold, God does all these things, twice, three times, with a man, to bring back his soul from the pit, that he may be lighted with the light of life." The key phrase being that last sentence. It is God who does all these things for man in order to bring his soul back from the pit, lighted with the light of life.

This understanding squares with what Christians have said throughout the centuries. Martyrs facing their death without fear. Those who suffer enduring for the sake of something greater. They understand God is at work even in the middle of their pain. Not only bringing about His will and His glory but also continuing to sanctify and purify even their own hearts in the midst of it all. The reality is Job needs to be humbled and indeed will be humbled before the Lord of Hosts. This is one of the most important lessons from the Book of Job for all of us.

**February 1, 2018**

## GOD'S ANSWER, PART 1

Readings for the day: Job 37, 38, 39, 40:1-5, Psalm 19

So this is the moment we've all been waiting for...God finally showing up! God finally speaking. God finally defending His actions, explaining things, letting us in on what He's been thinking. Except that's not what happens. Instead, we are given these words in Job 40:2, "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." I remember being frustrated the first time I read them. Even a bit angry with God. But over the years I have come to a deeper understanding of who God is and who I am before Him. Literally, I am nothing. I am a sinner. I live in a constant state of rebellion against God and His ways. I am corrupt. Evil. Conceived in iniquity as Psalm 51 so eloquently puts it. I am totally depraved. Even my best thoughts and actions on my best day are poisoned by pride and selfishness. That is who I am without Christ. That is my natural state of being. That is how I was born into this world. Furthermore, even now that I am in Christ. Redeemed. Beloved. Given a new heart and new spirit. I am still finite. I am still dust and ashes. I cannot fathom why the sun rises each morning or the flowers bud each spring much less probe the mysteries of God's purposes. They remain unsearchable for me. Unfathomable. Beyond my limited understanding.

This is how God answers Job. There is no reason for Job's suffering. Not that he can understand. Not in this moment. Not while he's suffering and in pain. Not while he's demanding in his pride an audience before God. Not while he's upset and angry. Job must be humbled. He must come to an understanding of who he is and who he's addressing. "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:4-5) This is what I love about Job. This is what makes Job righteous and blameless in God's sight. This is ultimately why God will affirm His servant Job and judge Job's friends. Job is repentant. Job is humble. Job is contrite. When God finally answers him out of the whirlwind, Job responds with reverence, fear, and awe. The only appropriate response when we come before the Lord. He gets on his knees. He bows his head. He closes his mouth. He covers his eyes. He is finished speaking. There are no more words to say. God is present. God is here.

God is God and we are not. That's the essence of the message of the Book of Job and it's a tough one to swallow. The reality is we all like to pretend we are gods. Masters of our own universe. Captains of our own destiny. We like to pretend that we are in control when in fact we are not. God is moving in ways we cannot see or understand. He is doing things above and beyond us. He is working all things for His glory in the world. He has His purposes. We are simply His instruments. Beloved? Yes. Cherished? Yes. Esteemed? Yes. But our relationship with God comes with responsibilities. Our adoption into God's family as His sons and daughters comes with a certain set of expectations. Though we are heirs to all things in Christ, we ourselves are not Christ. Though the Father has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, we are not to assume this makes us into gods ourselves. Humility and repentance are the key to a well-lived life before God and Job shows us the way.

**February 2, 2018**

## GOD'S ANSWER, PART 2

Readings for the day: Job 40:6-24, 41, 42, Psalm 29

One of the versions of the Bible that I love to read, especially when it comes to poetry, is the Message. The translator, Eugene Peterson, has this way of making the text come alive for me. Listen to how He translates some of these final verses of Job.

"Look at the land beast, Behemoth. I created him as well as you. Grazing on grass, docile as a cow— Just look at the strength of his back, the powerful muscles of his belly. His tail sways like a cedar in the wind; his huge legs are like beech trees. His skeleton is made of steel, every bone in his body hard as steel. Most magnificent of all my creatures, but I still lead him around like a lamb! The grass-covered hills serve him meals, while field mice frolic in his shadow...And when the river rages he doesn't budge, stolid and unperturbed even when the Jordan goes wild. But you'd never want him for a pet— you'd never be able to housebreak him!" (Job 40:15-24 MSG)

"Or can you pull in the sea beast, Leviathan, with a fly rod and stuff him in your creel? Can you lasso him with a rope, or snag him with an anchor? Will he beg you over and over for mercy, or flatter you with flowery speech? Will he apply for a job with you to run errands and serve you the rest of your life? Will you play with him as if he were a pet goldfish? Will you make him the mascot of the neighborhood children?...What hope would you have with such a creature? Why, one look at him would do you in! If you can't hold your own against his glowering visage, how, then, do you expect to stand up to me? Who could confront me and get by with it? I'm in charge of all this—I run this universe!" (Job 41:1-11 MSG)

The most important reason we read the Word of God is to be reminded of our place in this world. Because the reality is we often act at times like we CAN tame Behemoth! Or fish for Leviathan! We believe deep in our bones that nothing's impossible for us as long as we set our best minds and best resources and best efforts towards a single goal. Remember what we read in Genesis 11 about the Tower of Babel? "And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them." (Genesis 11:6 ESV) We fundamentally believe – in our pride and arrogance – that we can ascend to heaven. We don't need God. We can tame the world. Whether on a global, local, or even individual scale.

The Bible reminds us of our limits. It reminds of the boundaries of our existence. It is good. It is right. It is important. So many people read Job and are frustrated that he gets no straight answer from God. But in expecting or even demanding such an answer, we make the same mistake Job made! We put God in the wrong. We condemn Him so that we may be in the right. (Job 40:8) Would that we learn to respond to God like Job did at the end! Repenting in dust and ashes before the Lord! Only then can we expect the Lord to restore our fortunes, heal our land, revive our nation.

**February 3, 2018**

## SPIRITUAL HEROES

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

The Exodus story is one of the most powerful in human history. It is the great national narrative of the Jewish people. It brought hope to millions of African-Americans living under slavery and later, segregation in the Deep South. It inspired some of our greatest music, creating a whole new genre called “negro spirituals” that we continue to sing to this day. Artists, authors, and movie producers have all found it compelling. And it continues to galvanize those who suffer in captivity and bondage around the world.

It’s easy as we dive in to focus on Moses. His miraculous deliverance at birth. His attempt to deliver his people by murdering an Egyptian. His flight from Egypt. His encounter with God at the burning bush. And then his return back to his people as he takes up the mantle of leadership. Often overlooked is the courageous faith of the women who make all this possible.

First, the midwives. Shiphrah and Puah are two of the most underrated heroes in the Bible. Their faithfulness to God placed them in incredible danger and yet they refused to obey Pharaoh’s command. “But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.” (Ex. 1:17) Their actions saved who knows how many children in Israel and God honored their faithfulness. “So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.” (Exodus 1:20-21) As an aside, I’ve heard many Christians question how God could honor their deceit since they lied to Pharaoh. This clearly betrays a lack of understanding of what it takes to survive in such a situation. Most who question have never experienced the brutalities of slavery, bondage, and oppression. They are unfamiliar with work-gangs, hard labor, and cruel task-masters who whip and abuse. The more we seek to understand the harsh circumstances they lived in every day, the more we can appreciate their bravery.

Second, the older sister. When Moses was born, his mother hid him for three months. But eventually the time came where she had to let him go. She placed him in a little basket-boat on the Nile, probably with the hope that somehow, someway his life would be preserved. His older sister followed the boat as it floated down the river. When she saw Pharaoh’s daughter discover the basket, she immediately ran up to offer to help. Again, this is an incredible act of courage. For all she knew Pharaoh’s daughter would drown her little brother right then and there and perhaps that is exactly what would have happened except for her swift actions. “Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:7-10) Not only does she save Moses but she is able to reunite him with his mother while he is being nursed! It’s an incredible act of faith for such a young girl!

Third, Pharaoh’s daughter. I’ve always wondered why she rescued Moses from the river? What motivated her to lift him out of the little basket and adopt him as her own? Did she the same thing in Moses that his mother saw? “The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child...” (Exodus 2:2) Or did she just take pity on a helpless baby? No matter her motivations, she too was acting courageously. Defying her father’s orders to save this Hebrew child. Though she did not know God, she still was used by God to play a specific role in His salvation plan for His people.

It’s amazing to think about, isn’t it? The string of events that led to Moses appearing before God at the burning bush? It makes me think about my own life. What simple, yet courageous acts of faith am I being called to engage in that will further the Kingdom of God in this world?

**February 5, 2018**

## NO OTHER GODS

Readings for the day: Exodus 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

Too often we make the mistake of reading Scripture through 21st century eyes. We subconsciously assume the people we read about think like we do. But there is a massive cultural gap between 21st century America with our ideals of freedom and liberty and justice for all and ancient Egypt where Pharaoh was worshiped as a god. Pharaoh did not consider himself to be a man like any other man. He ruled the greatest empire at the time. His domain stretched for thousands of miles in every direction. He was wealthy beyond belief. His armies were feared. His power unquestioned. He truly believed he was divine. He truly believed his people existed to serve his needs and his purposes. So it comes as no surprise when Moses approaches him with a demand from Yahweh to let the Hebrews go that Pharaoh would have laughed. "Who is the Lord, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:2) For all Pharaoh knew, this Yahweh was just another small-time, tribal god who had no power. After all, Yahweh had allowed His people to become slaves for hundreds of years. He was not a god to be respected, much less feared.

The Exodus story has so many layers and we make much of the drama between Pharaoh and Moses. But the real story is the conflict between Pharaoh and Yahweh. Yahweh is using Pharaoh as an instrument to reveal His true glory to the world. He says as much in Exodus 9:13-16, “Then the Lord said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.” The Apostle Paul underscores this same idea in Romans 9:14-18, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.” The reality is God is not going to relent with Pharaoh until he reaches a place of complete and total submission. God will not stop with the plagues until Pharaoh is completely broken and grasps the difference between himself and Yahweh, the Lord of the Universe. So plague after plague after plague rains down. The people of Egypt suffer. Their lands and livestock are largely destroyed. Fear begins to permeate the land as the Egyptians realize that the god they’ve come face to face with is no tribal deity! He is Yahweh! He is the Lord! He is God!

And God isn’t just revealing Himself to the Egyptians, He is re-introducing Himself to His people. “Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.” (Exodus 6:6-8) After four hundred years of silence, God is once again on the move. He is fulfilling His promises in His time. Now some may ask why God waited so long? What about the people who don’t get to experience the miracle of the Exodus? What about those who had lived and died under the lash of the Egyptians? Here WE come face to face with the fact that our God is no tribal god. His primary purpose is NOT to meet our needs. It’s NOT to make sure we remain safe and happy and live a blessed life. No, God has a greater plan in mind and that is to reveal His glory to the world. This is why God delivered His people. To show forth His power and glory to the world. To leave no doubt as to who is God and who is not.

So the question then comes to us...will we believe this God? Will we trust this God? Will we worship this God? Will we harden our hearts like Pharaoh? Will we cling to our pride and continue to act like “little gods?” Or perhaps our spirits are broken by the pain we’ve suffered in this world. Perhaps belief is beyond us because of how beaten down we feel. Will we pray the prayer Thomas prayed, “Lord, help my unbelief?” Will we trust Christ above even our own thoughts, feelings, and fears?

**February 6, 2018**

# HARDENING OF THE HEART

Readings for the day: Exodus 10, 11, 12, 13

Today we have to grapple with one the deepest mysteries in all of Scripture. God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Before we even get started, let's acknowledge the obvious. We hate this truth. It runs counter to everything we've been raised to believe about free will, everyone getting a choice, God loving everyone, etc. It calls into question God's justice. God's righteousness. How could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith? And yet, if we are courageous enough to take the text at face value, we are left with no other conclusion.

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants..." (Ex. 10:1)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go." (Ex. 10:20)

"But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go." (Ex. 10:27)

"Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh, and the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land." (Ex. 11:10)

God is relentless with this man. He will not let him repent. He will not let him escape judgment. He will not let him give in until his nation lies in ruins. God will not let up until there is no doubt who is God and who is not. Now this is hard for us. This is a different side to God that we aren't used to. A God who reigns over the affairs of humanity. A God who rules over the universe with a firm hand. A God who is to be feared as much as loved. So again, the question is pressed...how could a righteous God harden someone's heart to the point where they are kept from saving faith?

The key is how we define righteousness. Do we define it from a human perspective? Or a Biblical one? According to Scripture, God's highest aim is NOT the salvation of His people. As important as this is, it is merely the means God chooses to achieve a higher end. What is that "higher end?" The full display of God's power and glory and majesty and sovereignty over all creation. God's greatest aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His grand design calls for all creation to honor His great name. This is the purpose for which we were created and it is clearly revealed in the Exodus narrative.

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them." (Ex. 7:3-5)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:1-2)

"Then the Lord said to Moses, "Pharaoh will not listen to you, that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 11:9)

And the Apostle Paul affirms God's purposes when he looked back on the Exodus story. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." (Rom. 9:17)

The point is clear. God will make His name known. And He chooses to make His name known through "vessels of mercy" (His people) and "vessels of wrath" (not His people). And lest we think this somehow compromises God's justice or righteousness or goodness or it just isn't fair; we have to remember our condition before God. All of us are dead in our trespasses. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us deserve death and the torments of hell forever. We are in NO position – broken, sinful, and rebellious as we are – to pass judgment on God. God is free to choose to use whom He wills in whatever way He wills and this in no way compromises His integrity.

So what does this mean for us? Does it mean we should be scared of God? Does it mean we are at the mercy of a God who is arbitrary and capricious? Not at all. In Jesus Christ, God has provided the perfect Passover Lamb! He Himself has become the sacrifice that saves! He blood delivers us from the angel of death! And because we have no idea whom God has chosen, we should go forth and gladly, even boldly, share this good news with the world!

**February 7, 2018**

## GROWING UP

Readings for the day: Exodus 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

I am not a big fan of whining. Ask my children and they will tell you that one of the things that really spins me up as a dad is when they whine. I am not sure why it is such a hot button for me. Perhaps it was how I was raised. Perhaps it's because of how hard I've had to work my whole life. Perhaps it's because whining and complaining is just not something I tend to do. It's such a tender spot for me that every time I read Exodus, I find myself getting a little frustrated, even angry, with God's people. They complain ALL THE TIME!

"They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Ex. 14:11-12)

"And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" (Ex. 15:24)

"And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, and the people of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." (Ex. 16:2-3)

"Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" (Ex. 17:2-3)

These are the same people who have literally watched God part the Red Sea! Literally watched God fight for them against the Egyptians! Literally watched God rain manna and quail down from heaven! Literally watched God bring water from a rock! How can they not believe?

This year, God has given me a new insight. As I'm reading, I find myself paying particular attention to how God responds. I am definitely more like Moses. I get frustrated. Angry. Upset. The whining and complaining gets on my nerves. But then I look at how God responds.

"The Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen...Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses." (Ex. 14:15-18, 30-31)

"And Moses cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the Lord made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord, your healer." (Ex. 15:25-26)

“Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not...And the Lord said to Moses, "I have heard the grumbling of the people of Israel. Say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread. Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'" (Ex. 16:4, 11-12)

“And the Lord said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink...” (Ex. 17:5-6)

It really is remarkable when you stop to think about it. God meeting the needs of His people over and over again. And while it’s extremely difficult to discern the tone of God’s voice as He speaks, I imagine it is sometimes tender. Sometimes stern. Sometimes there’s probably an edge to it and other times God is deeply compassionate. The point of it all is that these are the actions of a loving Father who is raising up His children to know Him and love Him and serve Him in this world. God is forming a family. He is teaching them to trust Him. To lean on Him. To believe in Him. He gives them tests along the way so they can learn about the great faithfulness of God for themselves. Deliverance through the Red Sea. Egyptians and Amalekites destroyed. Manna every day. Quail every night. Water from rocks. Purified water from a bitter spring. This is how God is raises His children. Even to this day.

So back to whining. If I’m honest, I’m a whiner as well. I do complain a lot. Deep down in my heart, I struggle all the time with frustrations and fears. Failures and uncertainty. I have these longings that go unfulfilled. I have these needs that go unmet. I often feel like I deserve more. Like I’m entitled because of all the hard work I’ve put in. All these emotions lie below the surface if I am totally transparent and how does God respond? He puts me to the test. He places me in situations where I have no choice but to cry out to Him. Why? Because He’s teaching me every single day what it means to be His child. To grow into His likeness and image. To become the man He’s created and called me to be.

**February 8, 2018**

## MT. SINAI

Readings for the day: Exodus 19, 20, 21

Today's reading represents a hinge point in the Book of Exodus. We move from sweeping epic to Israelite case law and it's easy to start to skip over this part. I remember my eyes glazing over during this section the first several times I read through the Bible in a year. However, if we slow down and read carefully, some wonderful truths are revealed.

First, a look at the big picture. Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai as a rag-tag group of folks with no national identity or charter. The only reason they've made it this far is due to the miraculous intervention of God. He saved them. He defeated the Egyptians. He fed them. He watered them. He has met every need. His goal is to get them to Sinai in one piece where He will begin to teach them what it means to be His people. Once they are at Mt. Sinai, God comes down to meet them face to face. The revelation of God is so intense, the mountain shakes and burns. The people's hearts melt and they tremble in fear. God's holiness is so fierce that the people must be protected from it lest they die. Then God speaks. He writes the Ten Commandments with His own finger on tablets of stone. He dictates His laws to Moses and in doing so, he shapes a nation.

The laws God issues are revelatory in nature. They are similar and yet critically different than the laws of the nations around them. Almost all societies, even ancient ones, have laws prohibiting murder, stealing, etc. Old Testament law is unique, however, in that it protects women, children, and families. It restricts revenge by instituting the principle of lex talionis – otherwise known as "an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth" - thus making justice proportional. Furthermore, it makes slavery a voluntary arrangement. Available for those who cannot pay their debts. Freedom was a guarantee unless the slave himself chose otherwise. Protections were built in to prevent abuse and slave trading was punishable by death. "Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death." (Ex. 21:16) These are massive advances in human rights and set the nation of Israel apart from the other nations around them.

This is exactly God's point, by the way. Remember, in "Abraham" all the nations of the earth would be blessed. It will be through Abraham and his descendants (now starting to "outnumber" the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore) that the world will come to know Yahweh is God. Pharaoh's already learned this lesson the hard way. Other nations now have the opportunity to learn from Israel. To model their own national life and laws after the Law of God. In giving Israel His Law, God is setting them up to serve as a light to the nations. An example to the Gentiles. He wants the nations of the earth to see what life looks like in His Kingdom. When Israel is faithful to the Law, the nations will flock to her. She will experience blessing and peace and prosperity. When she disobeys the Law, she will be judged and punished thereby continuing to serve God's purposes as He makes an example of them in His wrath. The point of it all is that God is now in relationship with Israel and Israel with God. She is bound to Him through His saving grace and He will never let her go.

**February 9, 2018**

## GOD'S LAW

Readings for the day: Exodus 22, 23, 24

Someone recently asked a great question, "If God were to come down and speak to us today, would his laws be the same or changed for the current day?" The laws we read about in Exodus, or later in Leviticus, definitely seem foreign and strange to us. They have to do with the customs of the ancient near east and while they represent in many cases significant advances in human rights for the time, we don't often see them as such because of how far human civilization has advanced.

One key to answering this question can be found in the difference between Exodus 20:1 and 20:22. In Exodus 20:1, God gives the Ten Commandments. They are written on stone tablets by his very finger. They are words directly from the mouth of God. However, in Exodus 20:22, a shift takes place. Now Moses will become the lawgiver. He will be the one to flesh out the details of the laws that will govern the daily life of Israel. It's one of the main reasons the people of God historically have kept the Ten Commandments but not necessarily kept all the laws of Moses as they are written.

A second key to answering this question is pushing beyond the letter of the laws themselves to the principles they represent. This is where our study of these laws becomes very fruitful even for our own 21st century American context. For example, it's worth considering the dignity the Hebrews assigned to slaves, women, children, and families. Again, for their day, these were utterly unique among ancient law codes and represent a trajectory towards modern human rights laws. Or consider the laws of proportional justice which limit revenge by making the punishment fit the crime. This principle still undergirds much of our modern legal system today. The principle of restitution is another one we understand and practice. As does God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor.

Let's take one example that is a political hot button today. Immigration. Refugees. I know these are somewhat separate issues – certainly legally – but what does the Bible have to say about the principles that should shape our policies in these areas? Consider the following verses, "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21) "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9) "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed." (Ex. 23:12) God makes it very clear to His people that they should treat the immigrants within their midst with compassion and mercy and kindness and care. Why? Because this is how God treated them when they were immigrants in Egypt.

Fundamentally, the most important truth that undergirds the entire law of God is this idea that we should treat one another as we have been treated by God Himself. We should extend to others the same kindness, compassion, mercy, and forgiveness that God has shown us. We should deal with one another righteously not just because "God said so" but because God DID so with us! This is what it means to keep and follow God's law and it's something Jesus Himself will affirm in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) which, by the way, is simply a restatement of the Ten Commandments.

**February 10, 2018**

# THIN SPACES

Readings for the day: Exodus 25, 26, 27, 28

The ancient Celts believed there were actual physical locations here on earth where the veil between this world and the next grew very thin. In these "thin spaces", one would often encounter God or angels or have some kind of visitation from the spirit world. "Heaven and earth are only three feet apart but in the thin spaces that distance gets even shorter." So the old Celtic saying goes. It's the first thing that came to mind when I read Exodus 24:9-11 yesterday. "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." Can you imagine? Sitting down on the top of Mt. Sinai and dining with God? Entering a "thin space" between this world and the next where the ground beneath your feet changes shape and you catch a glimpse of the glory of heaven? It's amazing.

Today we read about the construction of the Tabernacle. It's easy to get lost in all the talk of cubits and curtain loops. It's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture when we're reading about the construction of lamp stands and the ark of the covenant. But if we take a step back and survey the scene, what we realize is that God is literally giving Israel a portable "thin space!" Wherever they go, He will be with them! Wherever they find themselves, God will be there. They will have the opportunity to meet with Him. Hear His voice. Worship at His feet. "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst...There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." (Ex. 25:8, 22)

One of the great things I love about Christianity is that it's not bound to any particular time or place. Our God is no simple tribal god. He rules the universe. He reigns over all He has made. The earth is His and the fullness thereof. We don't have to "go anywhere" to meet with God because He makes sure to "tabernacle" with us. This is what the Apostle John means when he writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) The Greek word for "dwelt" means "tabernacled" which means Jesus Himself is now the tabernacle of God! Jesus Himself is the "thin space" between this world and the next! Jesus is Immanuel – God with us - no matter where we go or where we find ourselves.

**February 12, 2018**

# DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

Readings for the day: Exodus 29, 30, 31, 32

Exodus 32 is an incredibly important chapter in the Bible. It speaks to humanity's rebellious nature. The holiness of God. The power of prayer. The consequences of sin. It is deep and profound and a careful reader will absolutely marvel at what she reads.

First, humanity's rebellious nature. We are so impatient. We have such a hard time delaying gratification. When Moses is delayed on top of the mountain – remember there is still fire and smoke coming from the summit – the people decide to take matters into their own hands. They decide to worship God as they please rather than stay true to what God demands. Aaron, in an incredible display of weak leadership, plays to the crowd's desires. He fashions a calf. Builds an altar. Declares a feast unto the Lord. This is not what God wants. Now we do need to remember that this scene is playing out in two different locations. Moses is hearing from God on top of Mt. Sinai. He has yet to return and give the people the law. Aaron is in charge down below, trying to keep the peace. The people honestly have no idea what's happened to Moses. Perhaps they even fear he is dead. So let's assume the best. They want to worship God. They want to show their devotion. They want to let God know how much they love Him and are thankful for His deliverance. But their failure to wait. Their failure to worship God as He deserves and as He demands is a critical mistake. (One we still too often unfortunately repeat...)

So the camera zooms up to the top of the mountain where God and Moses are still deep in conversation. The Lord spoke to Moses: "Go down at once! For your people you brought up from the land of Egypt have acted corruptly..." (Ex. 32:7) God is angry. His righteous wrath is now aroused. The sin of the people has encroached on His holiness. It offends Him deeply. Viscerally. Their sin is a stench to Him. So He tells Moses – this is important - "your" people whom "you" brought up from the land of Egypt have committed a great sin. God is disowning them as he prepares to destroy them and start all over with Moses. "The Lord also said to Moses: "I have seen this people, and they are indeed a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone, so that My anger can burn against them and I can destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." (Ex. 32:9-10) Essentially, God is saying to Moses, I will wipe them out and make you a new Abraham. I will reset the deck yet again and start over with the one faithful man I can find.

Moses is quick to respond. And he prays one of the most important prayers in human history. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." (Ex. 32:11-14) Moses is quick to remind God whose people He's really talking about. These are God's people. They are the people God delivered by His own hand. If God were to destroy them, God's reputation would suffer. The Egyptians – before whom God has made Himself known – would begin to doubt and question Him. The promise God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would become null and void. This is an incredible prayer of faith. Praying not for mercy but trusting God to be true to Himself. Trusting God to stay true to His character. Trusting God to stay faithful to His promises. There is no question in Moses' mind that God will remain true to Himself and so Moses prays his prayer in faith.

What are we to make of such a prayer? Is Moses talking God down? Is he talking God off the ledge? Does Moses prayer enact some kind of change in God? Is God the kind of God would could lose control in anger and lash out at His people? These are really important questions to wrestle with as we read. What I believe is

happening here is something similar to what took place between Abraham and God when they discussed the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God is specifically inviting us into a deep relationship with Himself. A relationship where our prayers are real. Where the thoughts and desires and emotions of our hearts are taken seriously by God. God is still free to act as He sees fit. He still destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah after all. But He did rescue Lot and his family so perhaps Abraham's prayer was answered? Here Moses intercedes on behalf of the people. He steps into the gap God provides and prays in great faith. His prayer thus creates a new situation to which God responds. No longer are we just talking about God's holiness and the people's sin. Now we have a man of faith stepping into the gap. A mediator who intercedes. And God honors the intercessor by relenting from the disaster He had prepared. (By the way, the Book of Hebrews picks up this imagery and assigns Jesus the role of eternal intercessor before the Father.)

Moses' intercession doesn't mean there aren't consequences for sin. Moses comes down the mountain. He shatters the tablets at the foot of the mountain. Grounds the calf to dust and makes the people drink it. There is death as the Levites have to kill almost three thousand people before the sinful revelry settles down. And the chapter closes with a plague sent from the Lord as well as this promise, "Nevertheless, in the day when I visit, I will visit their sin upon them."

What do we learn from all this? God takes worship seriously. We are to worship Him in the way He demands and the way He deserves. God takes prayer seriously. Intercessory prayer is powerful and effective when it comes from the lips of a righteous man or woman. God takes sin seriously. He will not let us escape the consequences of our actions though He does provide a way – through Jesus – for us to be forgiven and reconciled to Him.

**February 13, 2018**

# THE NAME OF GOD

Readings for the day: Exodus 33, 34, 35, 36

The importance of these readings from the Book of Exodus cannot be overstated. God is renewing His commitment to Israel. Despite their sin. Despite their rebellious ways. He has determined to be their God. He has determined to do something miraculous in and through them that will stun the nations of the earth. He will drive out their enemies. He will secure for them a homeland. He will do for them what has not been done for any other people. For they are set apart. They are His chosen ones.

The conversation between Moses and God which begins at the end of chapter 33 and finishes in chapter 34 is of particular importance. God begins chapter 33 by telling Moses He will not be going with them. His holiness would consume them along the way for the people are stiff-necked and stubborn in their sin. Instead, He will send an angel to accomplish the mission He's started. This isn't enough for Moses. Jump down to 33:12ff and Moses again intercedes on behalf of the people. He asks God to remain faithful. To be present among them. To teach them His ways and show them the right paths to walk. God responds favorably to Moses' prayer. But then Moses gets even more bold. He asks to personally witness the glory of God. Perhaps he needs assurance from God? The text doesn't tell us. But God indeed passes before Moses and in one of the most important passages in all of Scripture reveals His character and nature.

"The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped." (Ex. 34:5-8)

From this point forward, whenever Israel is in trouble. Whenever Israel has fallen into sin. Whenever Israel suffers. Whenever they are oppressed and in need. They call on the "name of the Lord" and are delivered. They call on the "name of the Lord" knowing with full assurance that the Lord's name is mercy. Grace. Steadfast love. Faithfulness. They call on Him knowing He is slow to anger and keeps his steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him in return. They call on Him knowing He is just and will be no means give the guilty a pass. They call on Him trusting Him to be true to Himself. True to how He revealed Himself to Moses. True to what He has declared about Himself. Over and over again, we will see these verses referenced throughout the Old Testament. Every time the people of God call on the "name of the Lord" to be saved, they are looking back to this particular meeting where God showed Himself to Moses.

Fast forward several centuries to the Apostle Paul. Writing to the church in Rome. A church that is struggling. A church that is suffering. A church that is being persecuted. Torn apart by division from within over the Jew/Gentile question. In the midst of his letter to them, Paul writes these words, "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." He's quoting from the Old Testament prophet Joel who himself is looking back to this encounter between God and Moses in the Exodus. The difference, of course, is Paul is referring to Jesus. "The radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature..." according to Hebrews 1:3. In Jesus, we have seen God's glory in all its fullness! In Jesus, God has revealed Himself truly to be merciful and gracious and steadfast in love and faithfulness! In Jesus, God has promised to be with us even to the end of the age! Thanks be to God!

**February 14, 2018**

# BEZALEL AND OHALIAB

Readings for the day: Exodus 37, 38, 39, 40

You just finished Exodus! Well done, friends! You've already knocked out three of the longest books of the Bible and are well on your way to meeting your goal of reading the Bible this year! If you've fallen a little behind...no worries! Keep plugging away! Remember, reading the Bible in a year is somewhat arbitrary. It's just as good to read the Bible in six months or a year and a half! God honors all the time we spend in His Word.

Before we leave Exodus, I do want to give a shout out to two guys who are often overlooked. Bezalel and Oholiab are just as critical to this story as Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and all the rest. Without their God-given talent and ability and passion for craftsmanship, we wouldn't know much about how the early Israelites worshiped. Without their attention to detail and ability to shape gold and wood and cloth, we wouldn't have the Tabernacle and all its furnishings. No ark. No altar. No golden lamp stand. You may recall back in Exodus 31, God saying these words, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft. And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of the testimony, and the mercy seat that is on it, and all the furnishings of the tent, the table and its utensils, and the pure lamp stand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt offering with all its utensils, and the basin and its stand, and the finely worked garments, the holy garments for Aaron the priest and the garments of his sons, for their service as priests, and the anointing oil and the fragrant incense for the Holy Place. According to all that I have commanded you, they shall do."

It's so easy to get focused on Moses or Aaron or Joshua or some other great leader in Israel's history. It's so easy to assume they are the focus of the story. They are the ones gifted by God. They are the ones called by God. They are the ones whom God uses to accomplish His great work. But Bezalel and Oholiab are quick to remind us that ALL of us have been gifted by God in some way and ALL of us are called to use our gifts for His glory. It's not just the pastors or the missionaries who are the heroes. It is the people of God exercising the gifts God has given each of them for the up building of the Body of Christ and the glory of God's Kingdom. When we fail to exercise our gifts or diminish our gifts in any way, we lose out on at least part of what God has planned for us. Think about how impoverished we would be if there had never been a Bezalel or Oholiab? Think about the impact on the worshiping life of Israel if there were no craftsmen around to make all God had ordained?

Now think about our life together. Think about our worship together. What gifts do you bring? Is it the gift of music? The gift of prayer? The gift of friendship? The gift of production? The gift of preaching? The gift of teaching? The gift of serving? If you are a Christian, you have the same Spirit of God filling you that filled Bezalel. This same Spirit imparts all the gifts and talents we need to worship and serve God as He demands. So how are you exercising your gift? How are you seeking to use your gift to build up others in your church family? In your home? In your neighborhood? At work or at school? May God fill you with the same passion that He once gave to Bezalel and Oholiab and may you then put your gifts and talents in service to God's mission in the world!

**February 15, 2018**

## THE LAW

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

Today is our first day in Leviticus. One of the hardest books for Christians to read and stay engaged with in the Bible. And yet, if we are willing to put in the work, we'll learn some amazing things about God's relationship with His people.

The first thing we need to understand as we approach this book is that it clearly delineates what we call the "ceremonial" law of Israel. Laws governing sacrifice. Laws governing worship. Laws governing what is holy and unholy, clean and unclean. Most of these laws were fulfilled once and for all by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. (In fact, all of the sacrifices we'll read about in Leviticus foreshadow the sacrifice of the Messiah.) Because the ceremonial laws were fulfilled, Christians no longer are required to keep them. However, this doesn't mean we can dismiss Leviticus as some antiquated piece of history not worth our time. Embedded in this book are important tenets of what we call "moral" law which still is instructive and binding on us today. The key is know which is which and how to separate out the two.

A second thing we need to remember as we approach this book is where it falls in the narrative. The people have just been saved from Egypt. They are standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai. God is still speaking to Moses. And the burning question that is on everyone's minds is this...How can a holy God dwell with an unholy people? If God is literally going to live among them, how will they survive? The answer is sacrifice. The first seven chapters of this book describe in great detail the sacrifices that were necessary to purify the people. Animal sacrifices. Bulls. Sheep. Goats. Birds. Grain offerings. Always with oil and salt. Peace offerings. Sin offerings. Blood being thrown against the altar. Animals dissected into little pieces. It must have been hard and fairly gruesome work. The fires must have burned continually. The smoke from the sacrifices rising into the heavens in a continual stream. (It must have smelled like Greeley...all the time! How that's pleasing to the Lord, I'll never know!)

What's the point of it all? To remind us every hour of every day that the penalty for our sin is death. To remind us that as bad as the stench of sacrifice may be, the stench of our sin is much, much worse. The reality is we don't take our sin seriously enough. We don't take God's holiness seriously enough. We like to think we aren't all that bad. The baseline for many of us is that we're pretty good people. Flawed? Yes. Imperfect? Sure. Sinner? Okay. Antiquated term but we'll go with it. God sees us – absent Christ – much differently. He sees creatures utterly deformed by their sin. Barely resembling the glory He initially created in them. He sees creatures living in complete and total rebellion against His perfect will. Creatures who are so full of selfish, prideful ambition and deceit. He sees creatures who are enslaved. Under bondage. Creatures with a terminal illness. Weak and emancipated by their sin. When He looks down from heaven on the earth, all He sees is death. Decay. Destruction. Our lives are a shell of what He intended. And for Him to enter into this world. Dwell with His people. In the perfection of His holiness and glory is to risk destroying them utterly. For God is a consuming fire. (Deut. 4:24) So God institutes the sacrificial system in order to give God's people an opportunity to purify themselves so they may live their lives before the Lord without fear. And because the sacrifices are animals, they have to be repeated with regularity in order to maintain the people's purity before God.

All this changes with the coming of Jesus. All this changes when Jesus – the perfect sacrifice – goes to the cross. Once and for all, He satisfies God's holy justice. Once and for all, He purifies God's people. Once and for all, He pays the penalty for the people's sin. I love how the Book of Hebrews puts it, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant." (Heb. 9:11-15)

**February 16, 2018**

# IMPORTANCE OF SACRIFICE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 5, 6, 7

One of the biggest challenges in reading the Bible is keeping in mind the larger story. It is so easy to get down in the weeds whether we're talking about the laws of Leviticus or the statistics/genealogies in Numbers or the tragic stories in Judges. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture and how each of the books of the Bible ties together to illustrate a seamless whole.

The basic story the Bible tells happens in four acts. Act 1: Creation. God creating the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Everything is good. Everything is right. Everything is beautiful. Humanity reigns and rules with God over all He has made. Act 2: Fall. Humanity rebels and decides to go it's own way. Sin enters the world. Creation falls into ruin. Death. Disease. Pain. Suffering. All become commonplace. Act 3: Redemption. God doesn't abandon His creation. Out of love He reaches out in rescue. Deliverance. Salvation. The culmination of His plan is Christ who defeats Sin and Death once and for all on the cross. Act 4: Glorification. The reunion of the heavens and the earth. The joining back together of the two spheres of life that were separated by the Fall. Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of this reality and His promise is that He will return one day to make all things new.

It's important to note that Acts 2 and 3 are running simultaneously throughout the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, we see humanity rebel over and over against her God. We also see God's grace on display as He relentlessly pursues those He loves. The sacrificial system instituted by Moses in Leviticus is one movement, if you will, within Act 3. It is not the final movement. Rather, it points beyond itself to the climax to come when Jesus will become the Perfect, Spotless Lamb. This entire system with it's different offerings and different requirements and specific instructions is given as a means to prepare God's people for Christ. To get them ready so they will recognize Him when He appears. It's a system designed to prepare the heart and soul for the culmination of God's redemptive purposes.

By reading and reflecting on Leviticus, we are reminded over and over again of the extreme penalty our sin deserves. Death seems to reign throughout this book. You almost can't turn around without stumbling over the carcasses of bulls, rams, sheep, goats, and turtledoves. The sacrificial fires would have been kept burning day and night as the people of Israel – now numbering in the hundreds of thousands – came to make their offerings. The priests must have been exhausted from all the hard work of gutting and dressing and cleaning each animal. The smell would have permeated the camp. Again, all to remind God's people of the monumental effort it took to keep them holy before God.

This should only deepen our appreciation for Christ. Fully God. Fully Man. As God, He is fully able to satisfy the justice of God for all sin for all time. As Man, He is able to truly represent us. Take our place. Become our substitute. In Christ, Act 3 comes to its glorious close! The Father making Him who knew no sin (Christ) to become sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God! (2 Cor. 5:21) Because of what He has done, no more sacrifices are required. No more blood needs to be shed. We ARE made holy just as He is holy! This is the glory of the gospel which the Levitical sacrifices foreshadow.

**February 17, 2018**

# UNAUTHORIZED FIRE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 8, 9, 10

I love this quote from Annie Dillard. “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.” I tend to agree. We are far too often unaware of the sheer and utter holiness of the One we approach Sunday after Sunday. We treat Him far too casually.

Worship for the Israelites was a dangerous proposition. Not because God is capricious or reckless or mentally unstable. But because God is holy. Pure. Dwelling eternally in unapproachable light and glory. His presence is a consuming, purifying fire. It separates gold from dross, wheat from chaff, clean from unclean by its very nature. It’s a double-edged sword. Piercing to the deepest recesses of our souls and joints and marrow. Cutting away all that is rotten and septic within us. Every time we invoke His name. Every time we enter His presence. Every time we come before Him in worship, we are literally entering the Most Holy Place. And this is why Dillard challenges us to become more aware of our surroundings. More aware of gulf that exists between an unholy people and a Holy God. More aware of the nature of the One we approach and to take the necessary precautions when we come to worship.

The Israelites knew all this, of course. And yet even they could become far too casual about worship. “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said: 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.'" And Aaron held his peace.” (Lev. 10:1-3) I cannot imagine watching my children die in worship. I cannot imagine watching them burn to death before the Lord. I cannot imagine the fear and anger and frustration I would feel. But then again, I have not seen God face to face. I’ve not had to endure His fiery presence. I’ve not felt the fear the Israelites experienced when they approached God in His sanctuary. Christ, thankfully, saves me from His righteous wrath. Christ, thankfully, turns aside the Father’s burning anger and takes it on Himself. Christ, thankfully, satisfies all the demands of God’s justice and because of His shed blood, I am made pure. I am made clean. I am made holy. Aaron and his sons had none of these benefits. They had to tread very carefully in the presence of God. They had to perform their duties with devotion and carefully do all God commanded.

We do not understand the nature of sin. We tend to think of sin in rational terms. Errors in judgment. Honest mistakes. Poor choices. Leviticus uses completely different categories. Sin is impure. Unclean. Unholy. It is rotten. Decaying. Festering. Decomposing. Corruption. In order to really grasp the nature of sin, we have to leave the rational behind and think in Biblical terms. The other day, my children took our dog on a walk. Along the way, he found the corpse of a rabbit that had been dead a while. He naturally grabbed it and my kids were disgusted. How many of us have been hiking in the mountains and have come upon the worm-filled, decomposing corpse of some animal and been similarly repulsed? I think of the clean up work we did in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the smell of rot and decay we had to put up with as we gutted homes and cleaned out refrigerators. It was nasty work that made us routinely gag. That’s the stench of sin and it’s why sacrifices had to be burned continually before the Lord.

How seriously do you take your sin? How seriously do you take your thoughts, attitudes, and actions before the Lord? How seriously do you take your worship? Do you take Christ's sacrifice for granted? Are you, as the Book of Hebrews warns, "sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth?" If so, hear very clearly these sobering words, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume..." (Heb. 10:26-27) We will never be perfect, of course. But to continue to sin deliberately. To continue to pursue a lifestyle that offends God. To continue to refuse to give God the glory and honor He deserves is to wallow in filth. It's to "trample underfoot the Son of God and profane the blood of the covenant by which He was sanctified and outrage the Spirit of grace." (Heb. 10:29) And this, my friends, is a dangerous thing. Just ask Nadab and Abihu.

**February 19, 2018**

## CLEAN VS. UNCLEAN

Readings for the day: Leviticus 11, 12, 13, 14

First of all, it needs to be said that Leviticus 13:40 brings great comfort. “"If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald; he is clean.” Ha!

On a more serious note, this is where Leviticus starts to get really challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. Lots of words that we don’t think much about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation. Scholar Gordon Wenham does a great job describing the distinctions in his commentary.

“Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean…. cleanness is a state intermediate between holiness and uncleanness. Cleanness is the normal condition of most things and persons. Sanctification can elevate the clean into the holy, while pollution degrades the clean into the unclean. The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other.” (pp. 19-20)

Why does all this matter? Because God’s stated goal for His people is for them to be holy as He is holy. “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."(Lev. 11:44-45) Yes, in Christ the ceremonial laws of Leviticus have been fulfilled. We no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. (See Peter’s vision in Acts 10 as an example.) We no longer need to fear being made unclean by touching lepers or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean (in the Levitical sense) but also sanctified us permanently! This is incredible to think about as we read about the rituals the Israelites had to perform!

At the same time, the call to personal holiness has not been set aside. God still calls His people to be set apart. By thought. Word. Deed. We are called to “be holy as He is holy” and to offer our lives as “living sacrifices” according to Romans 12. The moral law is still in effect. God still has expectations for His people. Sin is still serious and should not be treated casually. This is why Jesus spends a great deal of time talking about the heart in the Sermon on the Mount and Paul spends a great deal of time on the ethical obligations of Christians in most of his letters. As Christians, we no longer need to undergo elaborate rituals to maintain a state of cleanliness or sanctification before the Lord but we should undergo regular examination and confession of our sin in light of the Word of God.

A great practical exercise is what’s known as the “Daily Examen.” Pioneered by Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, it is an intentional way to prayerfully reflect on our day, asking God to reveal what drew us closer to Him and what drew us away from Him. We think back on the actions, thoughts, and feelings we experienced during the day and we consciously “examen” them in light of the Word of God. We confess where our actions/thoughts/feelings fell short and we rejoice where our actions/thoughts/feelings reflected Christ. This is just one example of learning how to bring every thought captive to Christ and live for Him.

**February 20, 2018**

## SEXUAL PURITY

Readings for the day: Leviticus 15, 16, 17, 18

Today's reading includes a very important section on sexual purity. These regulations will sound somewhat foreign and somewhat familiar to our ears as they have provided the foundation for the Western legal system for centuries. Incest, bestiality, adultery, and homosexuality are all considered "abominations" before the Lord. Engaging in such activity comes with a heavy price. One would be cut off from his or her people. "Vomited" out of the Promised Land.

We struggle to understand this section of Scripture. Some dismiss it as ceremonial law much like the restrictions on what we can eat or wear. The problem with that approach is that we do affirm such things as bestiality and incest as abhorrent practices even in our time. Some argue these passages are culturally bound. Their argument is that such regulations were designed just for ancient Israel and therefore have no bearing on how we regulate our sexual activity today. Proponents of this argument believe in the primacy of love. As long as two people love one another, to deny them sexual fulfillment is cruel and harsh. Therefore, even adultery is justifiable in most cases as are same-sex relationships. The problem with this approach is that it misunderstands the nature of love. It trades on the erotic almost exclusively and dismisses any notion that sexuality and holiness are inextricably linked. A final argument is made – particularly from our LGBTQ Christian friends - that the authors of Leviticus didn't understand the nature of same-sex attraction and had no experience with loving, committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Same-sex relationships in the ancient world were always exploitative, oppressive, violent, etc. and therefore the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 do not apply to a 21st century context. The problem with this approach is it is simply not true. Pioneers in Queer Studies like Louis Crompton and New Testament scholars like William Loader (neither of whom are Evangelical Christians and both of whom affirm same-sex relationships) are among many who have demonstrated that loving, non-exploitative, same-sex relationships have existed since antiquity. The Bible is univocal in its condemnation of any sexual expression outside of marriage between a man and a woman to claim otherwise is not being honest. Admittedly, their arguments are more focused on the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 1 but the roots of Paul's sexual ethic come from Leviticus 18.

So what's the big deal about sex? Is God a prude? Is He simply trying to squash our natural desires and affections? We can't help how we feel, right? The key is to remember the context. You and I are born in sin. Our bodies. Our minds. Our hearts are warped and broken. This includes our sexual desires. We are "naturally" going to want to rebel against God's will. We are "naturally" going to want to pursue unholiness. Our hearts are bent towards evil and corruption and this prevents us from being able to enter into God's presence. And God wants to dwell with us! God wants to be with us! So God commands us to "be holy as He is holy" and this call covers every area of our lives, including our sexuality. Sexuality is not an end in itself. It is a powerful drive created by God for the main purpose of the procreation of our species as well as to give physical expression to the kind of "oneness" God desires men and women to have in this life. The joining together of man and woman in sexual intimacy within the context of the covenant of marriage is literally designed to give us a foretaste of the joy and freedom and transparency we will enjoy with one another in the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why sex is such a powerful drive within us. And it is why God has placed such strong boundaries around it's expression. To keep us safe sexually. To keep our sexual lives pure and free from corruption so we can experience all God has for us.

All one has to do is look around our culture today to see the consequences of unfettered sexual desire. Sexually transmitted disease. Sexual abuse and assault. The objectification of the female and male bodies. Rampant divorce and infidelity. The breakdown of families. Depression and anxiety and fear surrounding every potential sexual encounter and/or its aftermath. It's heartbreaking. God's desire is for us to repent and commit ourselves

to holiness. Holy sexuality is expressed in celibacy in singleness and intimacy in marriage between a man and a woman. I realize taking a traditional, Biblical position on sexuality in our world today will draw scorn and even accusations of bigotry. However, I believe when one takes a step back and looks objectively at the empirical data surrounding the consequences of pursuing a sexual ethic divorced from the Bible, one can easily conclude God probably knows better. We would do well to trust Him in this area of our lives and submit our sexuality to His Will as revealed in His Word.

**February 21, 2018**

## THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for the day: Leviticus 19, 20, 21, 22

Raise your hand if you knew the Golden Rule came from Leviticus? Now repent because you broke the 8th Commandment!:-) Most associate the Golden Rule with Jesus and rightfully so. After all, Jesus repeats it as part of His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 7:12) However, very few people realize that God first enshrined this rule in law in Leviticus. Lost in all the conversation about sacrifices and priestly garments and what one should eat or wear is this beautiful picture of community life in Leviticus 19:9-18.

We see God's heart for the poor and less fortunate..."When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God."

We see God's concern for honesty and transparency..."You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's compassion, especially for the less abled in our midst..."You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord."

We see God's desire for justice and righteousness and truth..."You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord."

And finally, we see God's admonition against hate, anger, rage, contempt, and most of all, vengeance..."You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

This are massively applicable in our world today! Could you imagine a community of people who sought to put these into practice? On a daily basis? Who gave generously? Dealt honestly? Showed compassion? Fought for truth? Laid aside anger and rage and malice and hate in the name of love? Hopefully you can! It's called the Church! Now I know no church is perfect. After all, it's full of imperfect sinners like me who struggle to keep God's law faithfully. However, as we seek God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we can expect to see some of these same behaviors break loose in our lives! We can expect to bear this kind of fruit for the Kingdom! And as brothers and sisters called into community together, we can make a HUGE difference in the world today! That's the call! That's the challenge! That was God's plan for Israel and it's still God's plan for His people today!

**February 22, 2018**

# HOLY RHYTHMS

Readings for the day: Leviticus 23, 24, 25

Sabbath. It is a core, foundational principle in Scripture. Hardwired into our system at creation so that we could find rest. One day out of every seven. One year out of every seven. One year out of every fifty set aside for rest. Set aside to honor God. Set aside for not only our rest but that of the land. Animals. Basically, all of creation. A pattern God Himself followed at creation. Six days God labored to make the universe and all that is in it and on the seventh day He rested.

We ignore this command at our peril. Not just because God commands it. This is no arbitrary rule God puts in place to test us. It's not divine busy work just to make sure we are listening. No. God has hardwired the human body for rest. Our best medical professionals will tell you the source of so much of the depression, anxiety, fear, and pain we suffer from is due to the stress of feeling like we have to work 24/7. We are being crushed under the weight of the burdens we carry. The responsibilities. The obligations we've taken on as a family and as individuals in our world. Social media only exacerbates this problem with it's never-ending stream of connection. The reality is we were not built to be "on" all the time. 100% productivity is a goal that will kill us if we achieve it.

I remember seeing this play out when I worked as the Manager of Patient Access Sevices at Boulder Community Hospital. The stated goal of the Human Resources department was to get maximum productivity from each employee. They actually had an equation they followed to determine how much each employee was expected to produce. They kept our available workforce as lean as possible in order to achieve this goal. The result was a much higher number of sick days, lower quality of life in the workplace, and therefore, lower productivity. In their effort to achieve maximum efficiency, they lost sight of the very real human cost.

That was twenty years ago. Things have not gotten better. As a pastor, I watch as people try to squeeze 28 hours worth of work into a 24 hour time period. I see them running from dawn to dark, giving themselves barely any space to breathe. The result is broken marriages. Broken families. Broken lives.

The Sabbath is designed to create a "speed bump" in our lives. To get us to slow down. To rest. To let God be God. It is perhaps the most tangible expression of our faith because it forces us to relinquish control over our lives. When I Sabbath, I am letting God back onto the throne of my life because I am specifically choosing NOT to produce anything. And that's a good thing. Even a godly thing.

A major reason Israel lost the blessing of God was their failure to keep the Sabbath. We actually don't have any evidence they let the land rest every seven years. We certainly have no evidence they honored the Year of Jubilee. When you read the passages from today, it's important to sit back and ponder what life would look like if we really lived according to God's divine rhythm.

**February 23, 2018**

## THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Readings for the day: Leviticus 26, 27...Numbers 1, 2

You've just finished Leviticus! Congratulations! Huge props! It's one of the hardest books in all the Bible to get through! But you persevered! You pushed through! Even if you are a little behind, you're going to make it! Well done!

One big question a lot of folks are afraid to ask is this...what is the purpose behind all these laws? Or big picture, what is the purpose behind God's Law? The late, great R.C. Sproul described it this way...

"The first purpose of the law is to be a mirror. On the one hand, the law of God reflects and mirrors the perfect righteousness of God. The law tells us much about who God is. Perhaps more important, the law illumines human sinfulness. Augustine wrote, "The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace." The law highlights our weakness so that we might seek the strength found in Christ. Here the law acts as a severe schoolmaster who drives us to Christ.

A second purpose for the law is the restraint of evil. The law, in and of itself, cannot change human hearts. It can, however, serve to protect the righteous from the unjust. Calvin says this purpose is "by means of its fearful denunciations and the consequent dread of punishment, to curb those who, unless forced, have no regard for rectitude and justice." The law allows for a limited measure of justice on this earth, until the last judgment is realized.

The third purpose of the law is to reveal what is pleasing to God. As born-again children of God, the law enlightens us as to what is pleasing to our Father, whom we seek to serve. The Christian delights in the law as God Himself delights in it. Jesus said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). This is the highest function of the law, to serve as an instrument for the people of God to give Him honor and glory."

We see these three purposes at work in Leviticus 26. In verses 1-13, God clearly lays out the blessings of obedience. If God's people will live in a way that is pleasing to God, they will bring Him honor and glory. God will dwell with them and walk with them. And they will be blessed. This is the third purpose of the Law. Then, in verses 14-39, God clearly lays out what will happen if God's people don't follow His Law. God Himself will become their adversary. He will fight against them. He will walk contrary to them in wrath and fury. He will punish them. They will suffer. This is the second purpose of the Law which is to restrain evil. Finally, in verses 40-46, we see the first purpose of the law come into play. Repentance. The reality is God's people will not be able to fulfill God's Holy Law and this is by design. It's to teach us that righteousness and holiness are beyond us. It's to bring us to our knees in what I call "holy despair." It's to drive us to the end of ourselves. Our strength. Our ability. Our self-sufficiency. So we get to a place where we cry out to God for mercy and grace! We look to Christ to take our place! We glorify Christ for doing what we could not! We surrender to Christ and exchange His righteousness for our own. It's a beautiful exchange!

So here's the most important question as you finish Leviticus...do you find yourself resenting the Law of God? Dismissing the Law of God? Or do you find yourself overwhelmed by a deep sense of inadequacy before the Lord? If it's the former, I would encourage you to go to prayer and ask God to soften your heart towards Him. If it's the latter, be encouraged that you are drawing ever closer to Christ and He stands ready to take your place!

**February 24, 2018**

# IN GOD'S HANDS

Readings for the day: Numbers 3, 4, 5

The title for this particular book of the Bible could not be more appropriate. The Book of Numbers is all about the numbers! The number of warriors in Israel. The layout of the camp of Israel. The duties of the Levites. Even more specifically, the duties of Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. And then some more regulations regarding ritual purity, confession and repentance, and then this strange test for adultery. As was the case in Leviticus, we have to take a step back and look at the big picture.

"Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the Lord." (Num. 3:12-13)

Israel belonged to God. They were His chosen possession out of all the nations of the earth. He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and thereby laid claim to their very lives. They were not their own. They were not "free" to choose or not choose God. He had chosen them. He had saved them. He had rescued them. He had made His covenant with them. No matter where they went or what they did or how they acted, they remained His children forever. In order to remind them of this great and awesome truth, God told Moses to set aside one entire tribe...the Levites. They would not be counted in the census. They would not be considered "part" of Israel. They would have no inheritance in the Promised Land. Their "inheritance" would be God Himself. They would be set aside to serve Him in His Tabernacle and, later, His Temple. They would play specific roles within the worshiping life of Israel. They would guard the sanctuary. They would set it up, tear it down, and transport it day after day. From birth they were set apart, consecrated to the Lord's service. It was not a vocation they chose but a calling God had placed on their lives.

Fast forward a few thousand years. One greater than Moses is born. A high priest greater than Aaron has come. The Old Covenant is fulfilled. The New Covenant is established. "In speaking of a new covenant, Jesus makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) The reality is the Old Covenant was always temporal. Always bound to a particular cultural situation. Always designed to point us to a new and better covenant which Jesus Himself would die and rise to guarantee. "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant." (Hebrews 7:22) The ceremonial laws of Israel were culturally bound to a particular time and place. To a particular situation in history. Even the moral law which remains binding only serves to show us our weakness and imperfections. Therefore, it is useless to save. "For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God." (Hebrews 7:18-19) Jesus is that better hope! And through His life, death, and resurrection, God once again lays claim to our lives. He chooses us. He redeems us. He purchases us with His own blood. And because He Himself is the eternal high priest, interceding for us continually in the heavens. And because He Himself is the eternal sacrifice, fully atoning for the full weight of all our sin. "He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him..." (Hebrews 7:25)

In Christ, we belong to God. We are His treasured possession. His chosen people. As such, we are not our own. Our lives are not our own. Our future is not our own. All that we have and all that we are and all that we achieve is not ours to hold onto but rather ours to offer in service to God. How different would life be if we understood this great truth? How different would life be if we understood every minute of our day...every dollar we make...every interaction we have is in God's hands?

**February 26, 2018**

# WAITING ON GOD

Readings for the day: Numbers 6, 7, 8, 9

One of the hardest things to learn as a follower of Christ is how to wait. We are always in such a hurry. We rush around in the morning to get off to work and school. We rush around all day at work trying to get things done. We rush around in the evenings to different activities and events. Then we wake up the next day to do it all over again. Furthermore, we live in a world of instant gratification. We get what we want when we want it and woe to anyone who cannot deliver on our timeline! Patience is no longer a virtue in our world. Waiting is considered a waste of time.

The Bible is clear that "waiting" is a key skill for any disciple. Patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives. Long-suffering is something God's people know intimately. Consider what we read from Numbers today. "On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day and the appearance of fire by night. And whenever the cloud lifted from over the tent, after that the people of Israel set out, and in the place where the cloud settled down, there the people of Israel camped...At the command of the Lord they camped, and at the command of the Lord they set out. They kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by Moses." (Num. 9:15-17, 23) The passage tells us that sometimes they camped for days in one location. Sometimes for hours. The point is Israel didn't move until God moved. Israel didn't break camp until God broke camp. Israel was learning how to wait on God.

I've been in ministry now for almost twenty years. Over that time, I've spent hundreds if not thousands of hours in my office counseling people through all sorts of different seasons in their lives. One of the most common issues I have to address is impatience. It makes total sense. People in crisis want out of crisis as soon as possible! So I get it. However, in their rush to get out of crisis they often jump from the frying pan into the fire. Refusing to wait on God, they prematurely end their marriage. Prematurely cut off a relationship. Prematurely make a professional decision. Prematurely rush into what they think is a solution only to find their supposed "cure" worse than their disease.

God wants us to wait on Him. His time is not our time. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. So often when we wait on God, we don't understand. I am sure there were moments when Israel looked around and said, "Really God? This is where you want us to camp? This is where you want us to settle down for a few days?" I'm sure there were other times when they found wonderful pasture and plentiful water only to have the pillar of cloud rise the next morning, taking them onward. They had never seen the Promised Land. They had no idea where they were headed or what it would look like when they got there. They simply had to trust God. They had to wait on God. They had to look to God.

Where is God calling you to trust Him in your life today? Is it with a professional decision? Is it with your children's future? Your marriage? Is it with you finances? Or perhaps your aging parent's health? Maybe it's your college choice? Or a career decision after you graduate? What does that look like for you and how are you learning to wait on God to reveal His will?

**February 27, 2018**

## REAL LIFE

Readings for the day: Numbers 10, 11, 12, 13 and Psalm 90

There seems to be this yearning in the human heart for deep connection. To God. To other human beings. There is a real craving in the world today for authenticity. A desire to "be real" and be known. I hear it all the time and I feel it down in my bones as well. The problem, of course, is most folks don't really want to engage on an authentic level because it's not very pretty when we do! We run into all kinds of warts and sin and ugliness and we're not very good at accepting each other's faults. We aren't very good at showing each other grace. We aren't very good at forgiveness and reconciliation because such things take a lot of work. So we settle. We settle for less in our human relationships. We settle for not being known. Not being understood. Not being connected. And worst of all, we settle in our relationship with God. We only let Him in so far. We only let Him reign and rule over parts of our lives, not the whole. We only submit halfway and the result is a lot of pain and suffering and heartache.

Nothing's new under the sun. The people of God have been struggling with these things for thousands of years. It's like the struggle is hardwired into our system by the Fall. (Remember that tragic event in Genesis 3? It frames everything!) You think about the blessings Israel enjoyed. A literal pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God visibly present among them! God's Shekinah glory filling the Tabernacle. Moses literally speaking to God on their behalf. Silver trumpets blowing every time they went forth to remind them God would be with them. The parting of the Red Sea. The deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Rescue from the plagues. Manna in the wilderness. The miracles they experienced were incredible! And still they complained! Still they struggled to believe! Still they rebelled!

"And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp." (Num. 11:1)

"Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat!" (Num. 11:4)

"Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the Lord heard it." (Num. 12:1-2)

"And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num. 13:33)

Leading God's people has never been easy! Or any group of people for that matter! There is always complaining. Always whining. Always criticism. But guess what! That's real! That's authentic! That's people being themselves! And if we're honest, none of us are immune! Even Moses complains, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." (Num. 11:14)

So what's the answer? Humility. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Numbers 12:3, "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth." What a statement! Moses' leadership was not based on his power or eloquence or influence or wealth or talent. It was based primarily on his humility. His meekness. And because Moses considered others more important than himself, he wasn't threatened God put His Spirit on other leaders. He wasn't threatened when God's Spirit showed up in other parts of the camp. He wasn't crushed by the betrayal of Aaron and Miriam. He remained faithful.

Humility gives us the ability to accept other people for who they are...warts and all. It gives us the ability to extend grace even in difficult circumstances. It gives us the ability to address the log in our own eye first before we go to pluck the dust out of our brother or sister's eyes. Most importantly, it is humility that allows us to submit our lives to the Lord and to follow in His ways.

**February 28, 2018**

## GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Readings for the day: Numbers 14, 15, 16 and Psalm 95

Today's passage reveals two things in stark terms. If God were not faithful. If His steadfast love did not endure forever. If His grace was not extended to generation after generation. We would be dead. We would be destroyed. Our sin is simply too much. Our penchant for rebellion to hard to resist. Our pride too much to overcome.

The people of God quake in fear at the report of the spies. They mutiny against Moses and the Lord. They make plans to head back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to what was familiar. It reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." (26:11) But for the intervention of the Lord, they would have stoned Moses to death! Incredible! So God tells Moses to step aside so He can destroy them and start all over yet again. Once again, Moses is being tested. Once again, Moses is being challenged to stand in the gap for God's people. Once again, Moses intercedes. He calls on God to remember His own name. To be true to His character. To forgive as He has promised which is what God does.

At the same time, God has a mission. Come hell or high water, God will make His glory known on the earth! God will fill the earth with His glory no matter what! No obstacle will stand in His way. No power will prevent Him from accomplishing this great task! Not sin. Not evil. Not death. "But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord," (Num. 14:21) It's an incredible statement! One that drives God even to this day! One you and I exist to fulfill! God's plan is for God's people who are made in God's image to multiply and fill the earth! This is the "Great Commission" given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel. Jesus renews this Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel when He sends His disciples out into all the world to make other disciples!

This is God's great mission and the greatest obstacle standing in its way is...us! You and me! God's people! Korah rebels. Dathan and Abiram rebel. The people of God blame Moses and Aaron for their deaths. So once again, God has to step in. He must discipline His people. He must teach them to obey. So He sends plagues. He opens the earth. He reminds them of the law. He allows them to be defeated in battle. He makes them wander in the wilderness until an entire generation passes away. God is faithful. God is steadfast. God is holy. God will not be mocked. God will not allow His people to derail His mission.

So think about your own life? Where are you living in willful disobedience? Where are you living in stubborn rebellion? What sins are you clinging to, refusing to let go? Is it pride? Is it anger? Is it disappointment? Is it fear? Where are you personally getting in the way of God's mission to fill the world with His glory?

**March 1, 2018**

# BLAME SHIFT

Readings for the day: Numbers 17, 18, 19, 20

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Even their pastor!:-) I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Never mind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to do the homework I assigned. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Never mind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." (Num. 20:3-5) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. You brought us out here to suffer. It would be truly baffling if I didn’t see it everyday.

Jesus addresses “blame-shifting” in the Sermon on the Mount. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.” (Matt. 7:3-5) Essentially, we have to be humble enough to acknowledge our own fears and failures and struggles and sin before we dare to confront someone else on their issues. We have to be willing to look ourselves in the mirror and honestly confront our own faults before we point out to others where they fall short. In my experience, there is plenty of blame to go around in just about every broken relationship. It’s always a two-way street.

We live in a highly critical world. A quick glance through Twitter or Facebook reveals how quick we are to blame others. We blame the system. We blame the government. We blame the church. We blame liberals. We blame conservatives. We blame Republicans. We blame Democrats. We blame our leaders. We blame teachers. We blame coaches. We blame absentee fathers. It’s like “blame-shifting” has become the national pastime. What you don’t see is anyone taking responsibility for why they find themselves in the position they’re in. You rarely find anyone acknowledging the ways they failed and how that contributed to their pain and suffering and heartache. No, it’s always someone else’s fault which makes us the “victim.” And there is great power in our culture today in casting ourselves as “victims” for it means we don’t have to take responsibility for our actions. We set ourselves beyond accountability. No one then gets to confront us and we are safe. Or so we think. The sad reality is when we avoid confrontation, accountability and responsibility; we never grow. And because we never grow, we tend to experience only more loneliness, pain, and heartache. It’s a vicious cycle.

So where do you find yourself today? Are you the kind of person who takes responsibility for your failures? Is confessional prayer a regular part of your life? Do you find it easy to apologize and ask for forgiveness? When confronted, do you listen and receive what the other person is saying? Or do you get defensive? Do you blame shift? Do you take their criticism personally? In Christ, we are set free from the need to be perfect. In Christ, we are set free from the need to perform. In Christ, we have nothing to fear and no need to blame. In Christ, we can accept the reality that we are sinners in desperate need of grace.

**March 2, 2018**

## THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE

Readings for the day: Numbers 21, 22, 23, 24

When I first became a Christian, I started eating at this little pit BBQ place off Arapahoe in Boulder. It was owned and operated by an amazing man named Bruce. Bruce was the son of the famous "Daddy Bruce" who served the homeless of Denver for so many years, making sure they got a full Thanksgiving dinner. Bruce Jr. was cut from the same cloth as his father. He not only served the homeless of Boulder well, he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I don't know that I've ever met someone quite like him. He literally could quote you chapter and verse from the whole Bible. He would quiz me every time I came in before he would make me any food. He would tell the best stories about how God had worked in his life. One day, he was sharing with me his frustrations with how biblically illiterate Christians tend to be. He was a black Baptist preacher and could preach with the best of them. I still remember the crescendo of his sermon that day..."Doug, when I'm in need don't you give me Footprints in the Sand! I don't need no Prayer of Serenity! Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that's in the Bible!" I still chuckle to this day every time I think of it!

Today we read a crazy story about a fortune-teller named Balaam and his donkey. Israel is moving towards the Promised Land. God is going to fulfill His promise to Abraham. But it won't be easy. The land is already occupied. There are forces arrayed against them along the way. Nations and tribes and cities whom they will have to fight in order to claim this promise as their own. Arad. Amorites. Bashan. All fall before Israel. All are put to the sword. Devoted to destruction. And now it's Moab's turn. (If you remember, the Moabites are descendants from Lot who was Abraham's nephew. His oldest daughter got him drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant. So these are distant cousins of Israel.) One can almost imagine living in those days. Getting word of a new superpower rising from slavery. Defeating the Egyptians. Overrunning all who oppose them. Fear and trembling seize the Moabites. So Balak, their king, sends for Balaam. His hope is that Balaam will use his magic to put a curse on Israel, thus weakening them so they can be defeated. But Balaam is visited by God. God commands Balaam not to go with the princes of Moab. However, Balaam eventually relents before the pressure and promises Balak brings to bear. So he mounts his donkey and begins his journey. It's not long before the donkey freezes in its tracks. It can see the angel of the Lord blocking their path. Balaam, in his blindness both physically and spiritually, is unaware. God opens the mouth of the donkey (insert your favorite Shrek scene) and speaks to Balaam. The net result of all this is that Balaam will indeed go to Balak but will only speak blessings over Israel.

So what are we to make of all this? Magic? Fortune-telling? Donkeys that speak? The point here is that God uses all things to accomplish His purposes. Even our superstitions. Remember when Jacob peeled poplar and almond trees in order to breed a specific kind of goat and sheep in Genesis? Does anyone actually believe the power was in the trees? Or was it God using even Jacob's foolishness to accomplish His purposes? Or what about the bronze serpent on the pole? Is it really the talisman that saved Israel from the poisonous snakes that were killing them? Or was it God using even their delusions to deliver them? Think about the fallacies we live with today. The "invisible hand" of Adam Smith from his famous book, Wealth of Nations. The myth of universal human rights in a world where every tribe or nation seems to place a different value on human life. The notion that democracy is trans-cultural and can be universally applied in the way we apply it here in America. (A mistake that is costing us dearly in Afghanistan and Iraq...) The reality is we too believe in magic. We too believe in myths. They may be couched in more sophisticated language and political or economic theory but they are fairy tales nonetheless.

So what's a Christian to do? We have to push past our superstitions and look to God. We have to push past the "bronze serpents" we create and stop looking to "fortune-tellers" to show us the way. We have to dig deep into God's Word. We must fix our eyes on Jesus! See Him lifted high on the cross! Paying for our sin! Showing us the way home! Showing us how to live a life with and for God! He is our only hope! He is greater than any bronze serpent! He is wiser than any Balaam! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

**March 3, 2018**

## ZEAL FOR GOD'S GLORY

Readings for the day: Numbers 25, 26, 27, 28

Baal is the Canaanite fertility god. Worshiped by the tribes occupying the Promised Land, he will continue to entice the people of Israel to abandon the true worship of the Living God. The Moabites and the Midianites (nomadic tribesman who wandered frequently much like the Bedouin's today) worshiped Baal through sex and gluttony. They would hold massive parties where they would eat and drink to excess. In the midst of the drunkenness, they would engage in all kinds of sexual activity. All in an effort to show Baal how faithful they were to him so he would make their crops grow and their flocks multiply and open the wombs of all the women so they would bear children. So when Numbers 25 talks about the people of Israel "whoring" with the daughters of Moab, it is speaking literally. They were engaging in the worship practices of Baal and this was an abomination before the Lord. One of them even took it as far as bringing a Midianite woman before the Tabernacle and having sex with her in front of Moses and the whole congregation. It was a brazen act of defiance against God.

If we don't learn anything else from this passage, we must understand how serious God is about worship. Not just what we do on Sunday mornings for an hour but the worship we give Him every single day. God demands our single-minded devotion. God will not tolerate us worshiping other gods. God will not allow our love to be divided. It's black or white. You either love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength or you don't. There really is no gray area. This doesn't mean we will be perfect and God, in His graciousness, provides for our weaknesses. But the trajectory of our hearts must be set. God must be our North Star! God must be the sole object of our devotion! God alone is worthy to be praised!

It is critical to think about this passage in context of what we read yesterday. Balaam was paid by the king of Moab to curse Israel. Several times, he makes the attempt only to have God intervene. God will not allow Israel's enemies to curse her. He will protect and guard His people. But what about when Israel curses herself? What about when she brings judgment down on herself for her actions? What Balaam could not do, Israel did to herself by worshiping Baal at Peor and this incident becomes almost proverbial in the national life of Israel. It will show up again and again throughout the Old Testament. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Psalms, and Hosea all refer back to this moment in time when Israel broke the first commandment and abandoned her God.

We aren't so different, are we? Over and over again, God protects us. Provides for us. Guards us and keeps us. He rescues us from the curse of sin. He breaks the power of the devil. He overthrows death itself. But then we chase after other gods. We pursue success. We pursue wealth. We pursue comfort. We pursue safety. We make idols out of our children. Out of our health. Out of our professional careers. We even bring these idols with us to worship and ask God's blessing upon them! (I think of the picture that went viral this week of the religious cult in Pennsylvania asking God's blessing on their AR-15's! Craziness!)

Unfortunately, we do it all the time. I cannot tell you the number of people I have married over the years who engaged in premarital sex but then wanted God's blessing on their relationship. I cannot tell you the number of people over the years who shared with me God told them to get divorced. I cannot tell you the number of people who told me they felt God blessed their adultery. It's like we're still worshiping the Baal of Peor! Friends, God will not be mocked! God will not tolerate our sin! We cannot pretend there won't be consequences for our rebellion! It may not be Phineas with his spear but it could be much, much worse! "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." (Matt. 7:21-23)

What sin are you indulging in your life right now? What thoughts do you entertain? What feelings are you holding onto? What activities are you engaging in that will bring down God's judgment? A man by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr once argued that too many Christians want to believe in a "God without wrath bringing men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross." If you have fallen for this lie, you need to repent. If words like "judgment", "sin", "wrath", etc. have fallen out of your vocabulary, you are in danger of missing out on the heart of the gospel. Yes, God is love. But because God is love, He hates our sin. Because God is love, He sent His Son to die. Because God is love, He bore the wrath we deserved. Paid the price we owed. Satisfied the judgment we earned. God's love is not some warm fuzzy. It is fierce. Jealous. Loyal. Steadfast. True. And it will not tolerate any rivals.

**March 5, 2018**

# HONEST QUESTIONS

Readings for the day: Numbers 29, 30, 31, 32

It is important to read the Bible honestly. Eyes wide open. Not shying away from the difficult texts. Today's readings are hard. They raise hard questions. They raise hard issues. They force us to grapple with our understanding of God and Israel and history. Thankfully, I have many friends who aren't afraid to ask these questions and one, in particular, asked the following...

"Israel's warriors slaughter thousands in battle, including women and children, and this pleases God? "
"I would expect 2 million people to have left some sort of footprint over the course of 40 or so years of wandering." Where's the archaeological evidence?
"Anyone else wonder about all the animals sacrificed?" The number had to run into the millions!
These are fantastic questions and the logistics of the Exodus has presented a puzzle to scholars for centuries. A few things to help you along as you read...

First, Numbers was not written as a math textbook anymore than Genesis was written as a science textbook. Israel often reported their "numbers" collectively rather than individually and sometimes spoke hyperbolically to make a deeper point. For example, Numbers 11 talks about God giving quail to Israel to eat after they complained about the manna. One skeptic, doing the math, suggests God would have had to send 29 trillion quail if we take the calculations literally. Obviously, this is a misreading and the careful reader is able to make room for hyperbole without losing sight of the larger point. The Torah is not a system of equations to solve which is why Biblical numerology is junk science.

Having said that, it doesn't mean every detail of these stories should be taken allegorically or metaphorically. They did actually take place. There is real truth here that needs to be teased out. So, Israel's battles. Yes, they were bloody affairs. Yes, Israel slaughtered entire cities and put entire populations to death. "Devoting cities to destruction" was an act of divine judgment with Israel serving as God's instrument of holy justice. The nations Israel defeated and destroyed were evil by any definition. Filled with horrific practices like child sacrifice, sexual perversity, idol worship, economic exploitation, etc. The reality is these pagan nations earned their fate through their depravity. One can question the "fairness" of this approach since Israel engaged in some of these same practices but one also has to remember that what's "fair" is God rightfully destroying the human race for its sin. Israel was only spared as an act of grace.

Israel's desert wanderings. Much archaeological research has been done in this area with little to show for it. (Of course, I read a recent account of a contemporary archaeologist doing work in Sinai on the 1973 Yom Kippur war who found an Israelite Jeep under 52 feet of sand! So you can imagine how deep the evidence for the Exodus might be buried after thousands of years!) The reality is very little physical evidence has been found except for a couple of Egyptian records and a spontaneous explosion of Canaanite settlements around 1200BC. (Right about the time we would expect them to appear according to Scripture.) This begs the question of the route Israel took. Several different ones have been proposed. Furthermore, there are no graves. No pottery. No "footprint" as the question above suggests. Of course, this isn't unique to Israel. The Scythians who lived in the Russian steppes from 1000BC to the medieval era also left little trace. They too were a nomadic people. The reality is much of it is probably still to be found buried deep in the sand.

Israel's sacrifices. Without a doubt, life in ancient Israel was a virtual slaughterhouse. Practiced literally, the priests would be sacrificing millions of animals every single year. Here again the principle of representation applies as it is entirely possible one man's sacrifice would "represent" an entire family, clan, or tribe. Furthermore, considerable latitude was given in ancient near east cultures when it came to the practical

application of the law. At the same time, the sacrificial fires were kept burning day and night. By the time we get to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Talmud depicts priests wading knee deep in blood. It describes in some passages up to 1.2 million animals being slaughtered in a single day, something the Roman historian Josephus confirms. Archaeological evidence from dumps outside the city seem to confirm these findings as well. The reality is the sacrificial system of Israel created an enormous economic system that had to be supported by trade, animal husbandry, etc.

Obviously, there's a lot more that we could say about each of these topics but here's the big point. The Bible continues to bear up under the closest scrutiny possible. There is no ancient book more studied, more dissected, more questioned, more challenged than the Bible. And yet it continues to stand the test of time. If we resist the temptation to turn it into a textbook and read thoughtfully, we find the overall narrative is confirmed over and over again. In fact, in 2009 archaeologists found a 2,700 year old seal with name "Isaiah" on it near another seal bearing the impression of King Hezekiah. This is quite possibly the first physical evidence we have of the Old Testament Prophet Isaiah! Incredible!

**March 6, 2018**

# DEATH PENALTY

Readings for the day: Numbers 33, 34, 35, 36

I worked for two years at New Jersey State Prison as a volunteer chaplain. NJSP is where the state of New Jersey sends the worst of the worst. Murderers. Violent criminals. Sex offenders. Gang leaders. Mafia dons. It is also where they used to house death row. I never was allowed into death row itself but I remember standing outside the door, looking in. It was a sterile environment and the men housed there were cut off from the general population. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in 2007, five years after I left. But from 1690 to 1963, they executed 361 people.

The death penalty is a thorny subject for Christians. In theory, it does have biblical support drawn mainly from passages like we read today in Numbers 35. A careful reading of the passage reveals many fascinating details. Cities of refuge. Premeditated murder vs. accidental death. Avengers of blood. Congregational trials. Evidence. Witnesses. Motives. Methods. It's a very specific passage that actually places limits on vengeance in a way that would have been striking to other ancient near east cultures. It employs the principle of lex talionis or "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportional justice. It keeps vendettas from forming between families and clans that last generations.

Those who support the contemporary use of the death penalty on biblical grounds need to wrestle with the boundaries this passage sets. Provision must be made for the safety of the murderer while he/she awaits trial. Motive must be carefully discerned and the accuser is the one to carry out the sentence. If there was no premeditation, then the congregation is allowed to judge and show mercy by assigning the person to a city of refuge for a certain duration. (Lifetime of the current high priest.) There must be more than one witness to the crime. And you cannot tolerate murder in the land lest it become ritually polluted.

Obviously, it's quite the challenge to apply ancient near east law codes in a 21st century context. Layer in the obvious problems we have in our legal system with racial and economic injustice (statistically ethnic minorities and the poor are FAR more likely to be convicted in our culture), as well as the frequency with which our justice system convicts the wrong person (DNA evidence has been a game-changer here) and one can see why many would argue we should abolish the death penalty altogether. Furthermore, what are we do to with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount? "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22) Clearly, Jesus is accusing all of us of being guilty of murder in our hearts!

So what do we do? We must carefully and prayerfully consider our position on the death penalty. We must ask if it is just...not as an abstract concept but as a concrete practice. We must make sure our practices are just and if there is a hint of incompetence or injustice in the way we prosecute then we must forbear. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the gravity of our actions. Executing another human being is deeply significant. The shedding of blood is not something to take lightly. Unjust killing pollutes the land in which we dwell. Furthermore, to take the life of another human being before they accept Christ as Lord and Savior consigns them to an eternity in hell. All these factors must weigh heavily on us as we wrestle with this issue in our society.

**March 7, 2018**

## MOSES' LAST WORDS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 1, 2, 3

You finished Numbers! Great job! Another book down! Some would say you've just made it through one of the toughest stretches of the Bible. Pat yourself on the back as we dig into Deuteronomy.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament as it were. His final chance to encourage. Challenge. Confront. Comfort. He's now led Israel for decades. And he was no spring chicken when he got started! He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Under the mighty hand of God, he has created a system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable accomplishment.

Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. What would you say in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address God's people, what would be on your heart and mind? What would you want them to know moving forward? What lessons would you hope they learned?

One of my favorite speeches of all time was delivered April 3, 1968 by Martin Luther King Jr. on the eve of his assassination. He sounds a lot like Moses in my mind. "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like any man, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." I think at the end of the day Moses, like King, was happy. He knew he couldn't go over to the Promised Land but he died knowing his great work was finished. He had witnessed the salvation of God's people. He had seen the glory of the Lord.

When you finish your life, how will you feel? When you look back at all you've experienced. All you've accomplished. All you set out to do. When you think about your family. Your children. Your grandchildren. What will you want them to know about you? Say about you? Remember about you? Will it have anything to do with your faith in Christ?

**March 8, 2018**

## THE SHEMA

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 4, 5, 6, 7

Deuteronomy 6:4 contains the single most important prayer in all of Israel. “"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” It is the prayer known as the “Shema” (pronounced Sh’ma). Jews are required to recite this prayer twice a day. It is the first prayer they teach their children. It is the last prayer they pray before they die. It captures the essence of their monotheistic faith. Praying this prayer twice a day reminds the Jewish people of the personal relationship they have with God and His Kingdom. They are His chosen people. They are His royal priesthood. They are His holy nation. Set apart by God Himself to declare His glory to the nations of the earth. To fulfill the great promise once made to Abraham. "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations,” (Deut. 7:6-9)

Because God has chosen them. Because God has set His love on them. Because God has delivered them from bondage and slavery in Egypt. Israel is to return His love. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:5) This is the second part of the Shema. The commitment of the believer to honor God in every facet of their lives. We are to love God with all our heart. All our affections. All our feelings. He must love Him first above all other things. All other people. All of our accomplishments, dreams, and visions. We must love Him with our souls. Form the depths of our beings. From the deepest recesses of who we are. To love God with our “soul” is to literally love Him from our bowels. From our gut. From a place deeper than our minds. Deeper than our hearts. The very core of our beings. We must love God with all our might. All our physical strength and activity should be dedicated to the glory of God. All our work. All our play. All our relationships. All our physical labor. All of it is to bring glory to God. This is what the Apostle Paul is referring to in Colossians 3:17, “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

There is a lot packed into today’s reading. So many reminders of God’s great faithfulness to His people. Despite their sin. Despite their grumbling. Despite their complaining. God remains steadfast. This is the essence of the covenant of grace God has made with His people. Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. A lawyer challenges him one day to identify the greatest of the commandments. Jesus goes right back to the Shema. “And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40) Not only did Jesus place the Shema at the center of His life but He demands His followers do the same.

How are you seeking to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? What does that practically look for you in your life? If you do not know, let me challenge you to memorize Matthew 22:37 and ask God to give you the wisdom to know how to place the Shema at the center of your life like Jesus.

**March 9, 2018**

## SPIRITUAL ALZHEIMER'S

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 8, 9, 10, 11

"Remember." "Lest you forget." "Do not forget." The Book of Deuteronomy is filled with references to memory. Filled with warnings about forgetting the mighty works of God. Filled with encouragement to never losing sight of the faithfulness of God. Moses is keenly aware of a condition we all suffer from...spiritual alzheimer's.

My family has a history of Alzheimer's. It hit my paternal grandfather in his late thirties. It hit my paternal grandmother in her seventies. It hit my aunt in her late fifties. It hit my maternal grandmother in her eighties. And I expect it will hit me at some point in time. Alzheimer's is a terrible disease. It robs one of their most precious memories. As our memories fade, our personalities change. We say things we wouldn't normally say. We do things we wouldn't normally do. We almost become different people. My paternal grandmother was one of the most outgoing and energetic people I have ever known. She was bold. Courageous. Didn't care about social convention. She was eccentric and weird in a funny, unique way that made her beloved to those who knew her. When she lost her memory, she became withdrawn. Fearful. Scared. Insecure. I would visit her often in the care facility where she was staying and it was incredibly hard to watch her decline. Or I think about my maternal grandmother. She was beautiful. Dignified. Brilliant. She could play Bach and Beethoven by ear. When she lost her memory, she eventually declined into a catatonic state that was heartbreaking.

We all suffer from this disease on some level. It is so easy for us to forget all God has done. Despite all the miracles. Despite God's provision in the wilderness. Despite God's protection and deliverance and the many ways He declared His love for His people...Moses knew Israel would forget. He knew they would get into the Promised Land and begin to prosper. They would build homes and plant vineyards. They would harvest crops and raise their herds. They would conquer cities and lay claim to the territory once promised to Abraham. And in the midst of all this success, they would forget God. "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deut. 8:11-17)

We have to work hard to remember. We have to incorporate spiritual rhythms into our daily lives so we do not forget. By reading God's Word and humbling ourselves before Him in prayer and participating in corporate worship every week, we remind ourselves of the most important truth of our lives...we are not our own! We are not our own! It is God who gives us the power to get wealth. (8:18) It is God who gives us victory over our enemies. (9:1-3) It is God alone who is righteous. It is God alone who is holy. To God belongs the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. And the only reason we are not destroyed along with the rest of the nations is because God made a decision in eternity to love us and set us apart for Himself. "Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day." (Deut. 10:15)

This is why we walk in the ways of the Lord. This is why we keep His commandments. By following the Law of God, we are constantly reminded of His great goodness towards us. Reminded of His great love for us. Reminded of His great faithfulness. God demands our obedience not because He needs it. Not because He's controlling or manipulative or demanding or insecure. God demands our obedience because He wants to preserve in our hearts our memory of Him. "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord, which I am commanding you today for your good." (Deut. 10:12-13)

**March 10, 2018**

## THE END OF POVERTY

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 12, 13, 14, 15

Today's reading begins with a strong admonition to keep the First Commandment and what will happen should Israel stray. It is a strong, convicting reminder of how seriously God takes worship and the consequences are pretty self-evident. This summary verse is a good one with echoes of not only the Shema but also the Jesus' words on the greatest commandment. "You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and hold fast to him." (Deut. 13:4)

What I found more fascinating was this glimpse into how Israel was to handle poverty as a nation. Poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty – and the progress truly has been miraculous as over 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 – the struggle remains. Furthermore, this issue is complicated by how we define "poverty." There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than $1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than $3.10/day. But then there is this idea of "relative poverty" which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we approach our interpretation of the Biblical text.

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 contains part of the national tax code for the nation of Israel. Every year, the Israelites were expected to contribute a tithe (10%) to the Lord in sacrifices, etc. This essentially provided income and food for the Levites since they had no property inheritance among the tribes of Israel. A second tithe was contributed to provide food and income for the Israelites themselves during those seasons when they celebrated the required feasts and were not able to work their land. In addition to these first two annual tithes, a third tithe was required every three years to provide for the poor, orphaned, widowed, foreigner, and Levites who lived in the community to make sure everyone was provided for and no one went hungry. "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." (Deut. 14:28-29) For those keeping score at home, that places at the annual tax rate for an Israelite household at about 23% and they would contribute freewill offerings over and above their tithes to the Lord.

Is an end to poverty possible? Yes, according to Deuteronomy 15:4-5. "But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today." If God's people will obey God's voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of "absolute poverty" disappears. However, this will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land." Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this very human trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. For our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. “And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.” (Deut. 15:13-14) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic “reset” as the wealth of the nation – which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the “relative poverty” of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn’t otherwise have it.

It’s an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today’s global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunity. Then it becomes a whole lot easier to live generously. To provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us. Whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe. Jesus confirms what God said in Deut. 15:11 when he says, “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” (Matt. 26:11) This statement is not meant to make us throw up our hands in helplessness or just accept the current state of affairs. Instead, it is meant to drive us to generosity. To live like Jesus did. To lay down our lives so that others might live.

We are in the midst of tax season...how pleased is God with your giving over the last year? Are you growing each year in generosity? Do you have a plan to grow in this area of your life in 2018? Do you understand your God-given role in helping to solve the problem of poverty in our world today?

**March 12, 2018**

## THE DIVINE POWER OF GOD'S WORD

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 16, 17, 18, 19

"And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel." (Deut. 17:18-20)

God intends His people to live as beacons of life in a culture of death. This requires us to be different. Set apart. Transformed. Counter-cultural. It requires us to have our minds and hearts shaped primarily by God's Word rather than the ways of this world. It forces us to think through what we consume on a daily basis from the media, social media, and other outlets. We have to ponder how much time we are truly spending meditating on the Word of God versus watching television or YouTube or scrolling through Facebook/Instagram feeds.

Surprisingly, God's people have always faced this challenge. They have always been at risk of becoming just like the pagan nations around them. The temptation is to go with the flow of the culture rather than take a stand against it. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about Philistines, Amorites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Russians, Communists, Atheists, Republicans, or Democrats. The temptation remains the same. To exchange our allegiance to God for something more culturally acceptable.

This is why God commands the future kings of Israel to take out a pen and paper (or quill and scroll as it were) and literally write out for themselves every single word of the Law of God. Their work will then be checked/graded by the Levitical priests. Assuming the king passes, he will then keep the Law with him day and night. He shall immerse himself in it. Meditating. Reading. Pondering. Praying. The goal here is not just rote memorization but something much deeper. To "learn to fear the Lord his God." And why is it important to fear the Lord? Because it is the beginning of wisdom according to Scripture. And we cannot live without wisdom. Not well. The other thing this daily practice of reading God's Law will do is humble the king. It will keep him from believing he is somehow higher or better than his brothers and sisters. It will keep him from making the mistake so many of the pagan rulers make when they start to believe their own hype. They start reading their own press. They start to believe they themselves are gods and have the divine right to rule. We see this in our own time in places like North Korea, Russia, and now China as Xi Jinping eliminates term limits. There is nothing that leads more quickly to tyranny than when a world leader starts to believe there is no authority higher than their own.

The same is true for each of us. As soon as we lose sight of the reign and rule of God over our lives. As soon as we stop reading God's Word and stop believing what it declares about us and our sinful condition before the Lord. As soon as we start believing the cultural lie that we are our own highest authority. That we know best. That we deserve whatever we can get out of this life. We are doomed. Our lives will descend into tragedy and suffering and pain. Our most important relationships will break under the strain. We will never find fulfillment or deep satisfaction because we will have lost sight of the greater purpose for which we were created. To love and to serve Almighty God. To live under His direction and command. To pursue holiness as we seek to honor God in all we say and do.

This passage really is a call to self-examination. A courageous self-inventory must be made. Where am I struggling to submit my life to the Lord? Where am I struggling to live under His authority? Do those I am in relationship with experience me as humble? Gracious? Self-sacrificing? When I look at my schedule, where is God? When I look at my spending habits, where is God? When I evaluate my life goals, where is God? Do these things reflect His Lordship? Have I brought them under His authority? Have I truly asked Him to shape the desires of my heart?

**March 13, 2018**

## CHRIST BECAME THE CURSE

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 20, 21, 22, 23

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is this key passage that the Apostle Paul will pick up later in Galatians and apply to Christ. “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.” (Deut. 21:22-23) Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of “blessings and curses” in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” (Galatians 3:10-14) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we take on the curse because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God’s people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! Abraham believed God and was justified. What then happens to the Law? What about the all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God’s people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He literally takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law’s just demands. And the sign of this great salvific event is the Cross. The place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn’t hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law.

This, in itself, is incredible news but Paul’s not done! Not only did Christ remove the curse by His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings! All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus! All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ’s great faithfulness! This includes the very Spirit of God which is now our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God!

It is so easy to make the mistake of reading Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. We look at the list and see all the things we should do that we don’t do and all the things we do that we shouldn’t do. An honest person knows they’ve sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. An honest person knows they have done things that bring them under the curse. Even earned them death. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and experiences deep grief over what they have done. All that is good because it drives us to Christ! It brings us completely to the end of ourselves. The end of our pride. The end of our self-sufficiency. And it is there that Christ meets us with open arms. Hands and feet bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree. He embraces us. He lets us know all has been accomplished. The work of salvation has been finished. We are free.

**March 14, 2018**

## FIRST FRUITS

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 24, 25, 26, 27

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

The principle of firstfruits is an important one in the Bible. Simply put, when we produce whatever it is we produce, we are to take the first portion. The best portion. And offer it to the Lord. Before we take care of ourselves. Before we meet our own needs. Before we pay the mortgage. Before we head to the grocery store. Before we pay the bills. Certainly before we take that vacation. Before even putting money into savings or paying off debt. We are to give unto the Lord first.

Why? Is God short of cash? Does God need our money? Isn't this just a way for churches to manipulate God's people? How do I make sure the money actually gets to God or the people God loves? After all, I've seen celebrity pastors buy multi-million dollar homes! I've watched ministries spend all kinds of money on stuff that's not important rather than helping people! I've seen the abuse! I've seen the waste! Furthermore, I have all kinds of opinions on what my church should spend their money on. I don't agree with the way they do ministry or what they emphasize or how they operate. Why should I give them any money at all?

Those are great questions. And if we're honest, we've all probably asked them. But let's go a level deeper. Let's bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste in 2017? What extravagances did we indulge in? How much did we spend on stuff that's not important rather than helping others? It's a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish that then maybe we'll throw a little money God's way just to hedge our bets. We find ourselves in worship with the offering plate coming towards us so we take out our wallet and give God a $20. Throw Him a bone. Keep Him happy. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

According to the latest research, the average Christian gives 2.5% of their income away. (For comparison, during the Great Depression, the average was 3.3%.) Average giving by adults in Protestant churches across the United States is $17/week. 37% of regular church attenders don't give at all. And the higher the income, the less likely a person is to tithe or give 10%. Only 1% of those making 75k or more tithe their income. That's the bad news. Here's the good news. About 10 million Christians give 10% or more totally $50 billion dollars a year to churches and non-profits. 77% of those who tithe actually end up giving between 11-20% of their income away. And charitable giving grew in the US from 4.1% in 2016 to 4.6% in 2017 with the increase coming from individuals, corporations and foundations.

So back to the principle of firstfruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendants immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed them with manna. Brought water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

So what about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our firstfruits of time, talent, and treasure? (Notice I didn't say time, talent OR treasure because we cannot substitute one for the other.) This is truly what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls.

**March 15, 2018**

## BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 28, 29, 30

Obey God and you will be blessed. Your family will flourish. You will never be defeated. Your crops will never fail. Your flocks will only grow. You will be healthy and wealthy and prosper in all that you do. Disobey God and you will be cursed. Your family will suffer. Your enemies will be victorious. Your crops will fail. Your flocks will miscarry. You will be sick and poor and everything you do will turn to ash.

If only things were that simple...

This is perhaps the most misused and misunderstood part of Deuteronomy. Perhaps even the entire Bible. Prosperity preachers love this part. Especially Deuteronomy 28:12-14, "The Lord will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. And the Lord will make you the head and not the tail, and you shall only go up and not down, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, being careful to do them, and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I command you today, to the right hand or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them." They love to tell their listeners that if they will just obey God by sending in their money - "Sowing a seed" is the phrase they commonly use – God will make them the head not the tail. Their fortunes will only go up and not down. They will find healing for all their hurts. They will accumulate more possessions and earn more money than they know what to do with. All because they had faith and obeyed God.

If only things were that simple...

Life is not that simple. I've seen God's faithful suffer. I've seen their families struggle. I've seen the stock market crash and take their savings. I've seen natural disasters strike and destroy all they owned. I've seen cancer come out of nowhere and take the lives of some of the most godly people I've ever known. I've watched evil flourish. I've witnessed dishonest people get ahead. Horrible, manipulative, ungodly people flourish. And I've asked God how I can square what I've seen and experienced with what He says in His Word.

Here's God's answer...What does it mean to faithfully obey the voice of the Lord? (28:1) What does it mean to keep His commands and walk in His ways? (28:9) What does it mean to return to the Lord and obey His voice? (30:2) The key is not found in keeping His commands. Following God's Law is a means to a much greater end! As always, the key is the heart. "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deut. 30:6) The key is living from the inside out rather than from the outside in. You and I cannot "work" our way to God. We can't "obey" our way to God. We can't "earn" our way to God. That's "outside-in" thinking! The idea that if we just follow God's commands faithfully enough we will be blessed is nonsense. Life with God doesn't work that way! It's not an equation. It's not an A+B=C kind of deal. So we can't look at our life – with all it's ups and downs – and conclude that when life is up, God and I are good. Or when life's down, God and I are on the outs. That's not how life with God works.

It's just not that simple...

What God's after is the heart. Over and over again, He's makes this clear. Genesis. Job. Exodus. Leviticus. Numbers. Deuteronomy. The theme is consistent. God wants a family. A people with whom He will share His great love. Furthermore, He desires their love in return. Love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength! Return to Me with all your heart and soul! Love Me for who I AM! I AM the God who chose Abraham when he

was bouncing around Ur living life as a happy pagan. I AM the God who visited your forefathers and mothers. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob and Leah and Rachel. I AM the God who delivered you from slavery in Egypt. I AM the God who guided and protected you in the wilderness. I AM the God who has brought you to the Promised Land. Yes, obey Me! Not because you have to or are forced to or because you are afraid of what might happen. No! Obey Me because you love Me and long to serve Me! This is the key! Loving God from the heart will NATURALLY lead to obedience which in turn NATURALLY leads to blessing! Don't get these confused! Don't put the cart before the horse! The goal here is NOT the blessings! The goal here is God! God must be our supreme treasure! God must be our heart's truest and deepest desire! God must be our all in all!

So is He?

Maybe it's simple after all...

**March 16, 2018**

# THE SONG OF MOSES

Readings for the day: Deuteronomy 31, 32, 33, 34

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked uniquely by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his 120 years of walking with the Lord.

So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43)

"Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He..." For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

"They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you..." Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

"But the Lord 's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat— and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape..." Back to God, Moses returns. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

"But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth..." What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing.

Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

"The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness..." So God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

"For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free...See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand...Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land." It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

Friends, this isn't just Moses' story. It's not just Israel's story. It's my story. It's your story. And this begs a really important question...when the years grow short and your strength begins to fail and you're surrounded by your family and those you love, what song will you sing? Will you sing of God and His great faithfulness? Will you sing of His mercies and kindness? Will you declare His glory and majesty? Will you make known His mighty works to the next generation? What song will you sing?

**March 17, 2018**

## HARD QUESTIONS

Readings for the day: Joshua 1, 2 and Psalm 105

We are done with Deuteronomy! Great job everyone! Well done! You have now completed the Torah. The Pentateuch. One of the most important sections in all the Bible! I know it wasn't easy and I know the reading begged a lot of questions. This should happen every time we read Scripture reflectively and honestly and deeply. I love this verse from Joshua, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." (Joshua 1:8) It was one of the earliest I memorized after I became a Christian. But when we meditate on Scripture, it confronts us and forces us to ask some hard questions. Here are just a few that were posed today by some of you...

How can God, as Father, curse His children?
How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews?
Did Moses have a unique relationship with God or was he a cult leader along the lines of a Jim Jones?
How does the Old Testament speak to non-Jews about faith?
Am I worth saving? (A really, really, really important question!!!)
Let me see if I can take a stab at some answers...

The key to understanding is to put ourselves in God's shoes. Imagine you are a Father/Mother and you have children who are absolutely bent on self-destruction. They lie. They steal. They murder. They abuse each other. And this isn't just an occasional thing. It literally happens every hour of every day over weeks and months and years. It never ends. They are sociopathic in a way. They never stop. Now imagine you are not only a parent but you are also the primary civil authority in their lives. You have the power to punish. To judge. To sentence. And so you bring them before your "court." You show them mercy. You show them grace only to have them go out and continue their criminal activity. They are a danger to themselves and others. How would you respond? Would it not force your hand?

The same principle applies even more to the second question...How can God, as Creator, be so cruel to His creation? Especially non-Jews? Non-Jews were even more self-destructive. Their evil knew no boundaries. They had no law to restrain them. No prophet to teach them. It's essentially the story of Noah all over again. The evil in the world growing so great, God as the Righteous Judge, should wipe it out. But God made a promise. Never again to destroy the earth. So what's God to do? How are crimes to be punished? As the evil in humanity grows, how can it be restrained? Remember, we aren't jut talking about a few sins here and there that we feel bad about but move on. We're talking evil. The worst kind of crimes happening over and over and over again. Every hour. Every day. Every week. Every year. It's relentless. It's not cruelty to sentence a murderer to death even in our world. It's not cruelty to sentence a rapist to life in prison. It is justice.

Justice is the key. What the Old Testament teaches us – and what we have the most trouble grasping in the 21st century – is that sin is serious. It is a crime against a holy God. Every sin is an act of rebellion. Sedition. Treason. And again, I cannot stress this enough, we commit these crimes every hour of every day of our lives. And the non-Jews in the Old Testament were much, much worse because they didn't have the Holy Spirit living inside them restraining their sin. It was a brutal, violent, evil world. Our God is not just a Father. He is a King. And justice and righteousness and holiness are real. Just as real as love and grace and mercy. God is all of these all at once. So when we consider our sin or Israel's sin or the sin of the non-Jews in the Old Testament, we have to view it through the lens of God's justice system. Sin is not just bad behavior but criminal activity and justice demands that crimes be punished.

Enter Moses. Was he a cult leader or did he really have a unique relationship with God? Such an insightful question! We've all seen or heard of cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, etc. We're rightfully horrified at the mind control, intimidation, and fear tactics they employ. Self-styled messiahs should be exposed for the charlatans they are in our world. So what makes Moses different? Or Jesus for that matter?

First and foremost, one has to decide if what Moses' preached and how Moses' led reflected the character and nature of God. Remember the key verse from Exodus 34:6-7? "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the 3rd and 4th generations." Does Moses' teaching and leadership reflect this God?

I would argue it does. Moses acts as God's agent on the earth. At times, he executes justice. At times, he shows mercy. His primary job – which he failed at when he hit the rock twice in anger – was to show God's people the holiness of God. To declare God's glory and majesty and greatness to a people who so easily will forget. We always have to keep in mind that the "baseline" for God's people was sin. Unfaithfulness. Rebellion. Moses, through his actions, was continually calling them back to God.

Secondly, one has to grapple with the miracles he performed. If he truly parted the Red Sea, brought plagues on Egypt, brought water from a rock, etc. does this not in some way validate his message? Signs and wonders in both Old and New Testaments are meant to authenticate the message that is being preached. This is why healing miracles are often associated with Jesus' preaching. The miracles point to the truth of the message. Same is true with Moses. The miracles validate the message. For the life of me, I cannot think of any miracles performed by false prophets/cult leaders like Jim Jones, David Koresh, Adolf Hitler, etc.

Thirdly, there is a step of faith here. One has to decide whether the first five books of the Bible are truly the inspired Word of God or whether they are simply human stories. If the latter, then I do think it's tough not to come to the conclusion that Moses is a cult leader and these stories were written to justify the atrocities Israel committed. If, on the other hand, you believe the Bible tells the story – to use Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel's great phrase - of "God's search for man", then you have to conclude that Moses did have a unique relationship with God and therefore his actions/decisions were guided by God's hand and therefore just and right and holy.

So how does the Old Testament then speak to non-Jews about faith? Should we just bag the whole thing? (That's actually what the Nazi's under Hitler did by the way...) No, what the Old Testament teaches us is about the holiness of God. The righteousness of God. The justice of God that can NEVER be satisfied by human beings. No matter how hard we try to be faithful, we will always fall short. And this is a GOOD thing because it is setting the stage for the coming of the Messiah. The story of the Old Testament is indeed the story of God's unending, relentless search for man! He will not abandon them. He will not destroy them. He keeps coming back to them over and over again no matter how dark and evil their crimes against Him. From Adam to Noah. Noah to Abraham. Abraham to Moses. Moses to Samuel. Samuel to David. David to Exile. The story is all the same. Man's inevitable descent into madness and suffering and evil and self-destruction. Matched by God's great faithfulness. This is the story the Old Testament tells that sets the stage for the coming of Jesus. The ultimate act of faithfulness from a God who will never let us go.

And that leads me to the final question...One that is so very important. In fact, it is the key to understanding the whole Bible.

Am I worth saving? Whew. What a question! Here's the Bible's clear and unequivocal answer. No. You are NOT worth saving. I am NOT worth saving. There is NOTHING in me that is redemptive or holy or righteous or just.

The prophet Isaiah writes in 64:6, “All of us have become like one who is unclean and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” We are not worthy. In our natural condition, we deserve death. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. And this has been the natural state of every single human being who has ever lived or ever will live. Psalm 51 says we are literally conceived in iniquity. We are broken. We are dead in our sin. We have no hope.

But God...”being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us...makes us alive together with Christ.” (Eph. 2:4-7) Christ is worthy. I am not. This is the heart of the gospel.

**March 19, 2018**

# STONE ALTARS

Readings for the day: Joshua 3, 4, 5, 6

"And Joshua said to them, "Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, 'What do those stones mean to you?' then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever." (Josh. 4:5-7)

When you think back on your life, where have you seen God at work? Where have you seen His finger touch down? Where have you witnessed Him working a miracle on your behalf? How do you remember such things? How do you mark such occasions? Israel built altars. They would take uncut stones and stack them together to remind themselves of God's great faithfulness. As we get deeper into the Old Testament, it will soon feel like the landscape just gets dotted with these altars. It's like you can't travel anywhere in Israel without stumbling over an altar they've made! Altars were significant. Especially in an oral culture where many of the stories were not being written down as they happened but instead told from father to son, mother to daughter. Passing by an altar was an opportunity for the family to pause and remember and re-tell the tale of God's great love and miraculous deliverance for His people. These altars formed something like a "scrapbook" or "Instagram" account for ancient Israel. A place they could go to be reminded of their most precious memories.

Of course, preserving the institutional memory of Israel was not the only purpose for these altars. There was an "evangelistic" component as well. "And he said to the people of Israel, "When your children ask their fathers in times to come, 'What do these stones mean?' then you shall let your children know, 'Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.' For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Josh. 4:21-24) Remember, God's great aim is to fill the earth with His glory. His great vision at the end of time is that of every tribe, tongue, and nation coming to bow in submission before His throne. Even here, Israel is being reminded of her calling to be a light to the nations. To reflect to the world the greatness and glory and majesty of God. Sometimes that will mean executing divine justice on the pagan tribes before them. Other times it will mean showing great mercy as will happen to Rahab and her family in Jericho. Through it all, God is making Himself known to the world in and through His people.

The same holds true today. God is making Himself known to the world through His people. His plan hasn't changed. His purposes haven't changed. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Where His people struggle, God brings comfort. Where His people fail, God brings discipline and judgment. Where His people step out in faith, God meets them and performs miracles on their behalf. This is who our God is and always will be!

**March 20, 2018**

## JIHAD IN THE BIBLE?

Readings for the day: Joshua 7, 8, 9, 10

"But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction." (Joshua 8:26)

"As for Makkedah, Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho." (Joshua 10:28)

"And the Lord gave Libnah also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho." (Joshua 10:30)

"And the Lord gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he captured it on the second day and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah." (Joshua 10:32)

"And they captured Eglon on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish." (Joshua 10:35)

"So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the Lord God of Israel commanded." (Joshua 10:40)

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

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

But how does this God square with the God we see revealed in the New Testament? The God of love Jesus spoke so eloquently about? Here it is essential we remember how God defines love. It is not an abstract category or warm fuzzy feeling in the heart. It is not soft and sentimental. No, God defines love as sacrifice. Specifically, the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) What we have to understand is the only reason we get to receive the grace of God...the mercy of God...the love of God...is because of what Jesus Christ endured on our behalf. The Father essentially put His own Son under the ban! Devoted Him to

destruction so that we may live! This, friends, is the love of God! The Father pouring out His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son! The Son willingly offering Himself up as the sacrifice for all humanity's sin! Enduring unimaginable pain. Unimaginable suffering. Separation from His Father. Death. Hell. God descending to the uttermost darkness. It was without a doubt the most horrific act of Herem in the history of the world. More terrible than genocide is decide. God allowing Himself to be murdered by His own beloved creation.

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

**March 21, 2018**

## PERSPECTIVE

Readings for the day: Joshua 11, 12, 13, 14

It's about this time every year in my Bible reading that I start to get weary. Worn down by all the bloodshed and violence. Worn down by all the God-sanctioned religious warfare. Worn down by the thoughts of men, women, and children dying in these cities as Israel conquers the Promised Land. I am worn down by a world I do not understand. Worn down by the brutality of it all. Worn down trying to understand how God is driving it all. I come to the end of my finite mind. I come the end of my understanding. I come to the end of my ability to reason my way through. And I just sit with the horror of it all. Overwhelmed.

I recently had dinner with some friends. One of them does a lot of work in Rwanda with the mountain gorillas. He and his family have been engaged over there for decades helping with the research. He was there during the genocide. He saw the bodies piled up in the streets. Stacks upon stacks. It was horrifying. He can never get the images out of his head. If there's anything history has taught us, it is that man's inhumanity to man knows no bounds. The Killing Fields in Cambodia. The purges in Maoist China and Stalinist Russia. The Holocaust. And those are just the 20th century examples! The Mongolian conquest. The Crusades. The African slave trade. British occupation of India. Rome's brutal conquest of the Germanic tribes. For as long as human beings have walked this earth, there has been war. There has been violence. There has been suffering. In fact, some historians calculate that in the history of the human race, we've experienced four years of peace. FOUR! Can you imagine?

When human beings engage in such violence, they tend to pull on a common thread. God. God has ordained this war. God has sanctioned this violence. God is on our side. God commands us to fight these battles and destroy these enemies. But is this really true? I readily admit I have to struggle through the histories of the Old Testament more so than I do even Leviticus. I can make some sense of the law code but I cannot rationalize the death and destruction. So what's a faithful, Bible-believing Christian to do?

Three things help get me through this part of the reading every single year...

Joshua 5:13-15. At the beginning of the conquest, before the fall of Jericho, the commander of the Lord's Armies appears to Joshua. Joshua falls on his face before him and asks him if He is for Israel or for their adversaries. It's a great question. It's a common question. Essentially, he's asking the angel, "Are you for us or against us?" Are you on our side or their side? Are you team Israel or team Canaanite? I love the angel's response. "No, I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come." Basically, the only "side" I'm on is my own! I am no tribal deity. I am not like the other gods. I reign and rule according to my own sovereign purposes and plan.

My finite mind. My understanding of the world is shaped by time, culture, space, nation, etc. I am not an "objective" observer of history. There is no such thing. I have built in biases and assumptions that I bring to the table when I read the Word of God that act as "filters." These filters can be helpful or harmful depending on the text and will shape how I "receive" the Word of God in any situation.

Humility. I need to read with humility because I do not know all the answers. Nor will I ever. My questions and fears and doubts are real and I may not find satisfaction this side of heaven. That's okay. If there is a God who rules and reigns over the universe and if this God is good then I can ultimately trust Him. I can trust He sees things I cannot and He is orchestrating things to His own ends which ultimately are just and holy and righteous.

There is one more thing I always try to keep in mind. My own sinfulness. The evil I carry in my own heart. Like the Apostle Paul, I do things I know I should not do. I don't do things I know I should do. Every day is full of sins of "commission" and sins of "omission" that negatively impact the lives of those I love and the lives of those I am around. The evil in the world is not just "out there" but inside of me as well. So I read with the understanding that but for the grace of God, I too deserve the ban. I too deserve the Herem. I too deserve death and destruction. And that moves my heart to praise and thanksgiving for what God has done in Jesus Christ.

**March 22, 2018**

## STARTING VS. FINISHING

Readings for the day: Joshua 15, 16, 17, 18

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 100 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

Israel sprints out of the gates in their conquest of the Promised Land. They win victory after victory. Joshua's leadership is exceptional. His tactics strong. His strategic decisions brilliant. Always in the right place at the right time. Anticipating. Attacking and counter-attacking. It reminds me of the movie, When We Were Soldiers, and how Colonel Hal Moore seemed to make every right move. The first campaign comes to an end. Israel is now firmly and deeply entrenched. They are the new power to be reckoned with in the region. But Joshua cannot be everywhere all at once so now it is up to each tribe to go out and secure their allotment. They are to go out with the same boldness and courage that so marked Joshua and complete the conquest. They are to place their trust in God and His ability to fight on their behalf. But they fail. They fall short. They lose heart. So the Jebusites remain in the territory of Judah. The Gezerites remain in the territory of Ephraim. Other Canaanites remain in the territory of Manasseh. As they struggle to uproot those already living in the land, they start to grow afraid. Afraid the military might of those who oppose them. The iron chariots and those fortified in the hill country. They are afraid they won't succeed. They take their eyes off of Yahweh. They forget His faithfulness. They give into their fear and the conquest is never fully completed.

Finishing is hard. How many folks start this race we call the Christian faith only to wither along the way? Jesus knew this about us and He even told a story once about a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Some seeds fell on the hard path. Some seeds fell among the rocks. Some seeds fell among the weeds. Other seeds in good soil. Each tried to take root. The seeds on the path had nowhere to go so they were eaten by the birds. The seeds among the rocks had no place to put down roots so they sprung up quickly but then died. The seeds that fell among the weeds also sprung up but were eventually choked off. Finally, the seed that fell on good soil produced a bountiful harvest. What makes up the soil of your heart? Did the seeds of the gospel ever find purchase in your heart? Did they spring up only to die for lack of roots? Did the cares and the worries of this world choke off your faith? Or are you producing a harvest of righteousness? Are you finishing the race?

**March 23, 2018**

# WITNESS

Readings for the day: Joshua 19, 20, 21, 22

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

What does it mean to be a witness? And what are we "witnessing" to? For the tribes of Israel, the altar by the Jordan was built to remind them they were all part of one large family. Deeply connected by their common kinship with Abraham but also their covenant with God Himself. The tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh were concerned that future generations might forget this connection and start to see the Jordan River as the boundary between God's people and the rest of the world. They didn't want to be left out so before they crossed the Jordan to take possession of their inheritance, they built a monument of "imposing size." Not for burnt offerings. Not for sacrifices. But a witness to all of Israel that they were one people under Yahweh. Every time an Israelite would pass by the monument, it would "witness" to their shared history and deep connection.

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

Ultimately, the Bible itself is the pre-eminent witness. I love what Joshua 21:45 says, "Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass." The only reason we know this statement is true is because we have an accurate record of what took place. This is why we read the Old Testament. Within its pages, God "witnesses" to us over and over again of His great faithfulness and love. Even in the face of our sin. Even in the face of our rebellion. Even in the face of our evil. Even in the face of all our brokenness, God pursues us. God relentlessly chases us. God never lets us go.

I know reading through the Bible in a year is not easy! It indeed is a "monument of imposing size!" But as sit with God's Word and prayerfully reflect on all He has to say, we are shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine.

**March 24, 2018**

## WHO'S YOUR SPIRITUAL HERO?

Readings for the day: Joshua 23, 24, and Judges 1

My grandfather was my spiritual hero. A man who loved and served Jesus for over ninety years. He started preaching at 14. He didn't stop until he was in his late eighties. After retiring from full-time ministry and moving into a retirement community, he hooked on part-time at a local church and did all the visitation and pastoral care for the graduated care facility. I remember sitting with him in his living room and reading the Bible together after I became a Christian. He had read through the Bible who knows how many times over the years. It was my first time through. In the middle of our time together, he paused and said, "hmmm...never seen that before." I said, "What do you mean? Haven't you read through the Bible like a million times, granddad?" "Yes", he replied, "But there's always more to discover." When I graduated from seminary, granddad was dying. He had a few months left to live. He was living in a room with grandma who was catatonic from Alzheimer's and was suffering from some paralyzation due to a burst cyst in his ear. My mom warned me he probably wouldn't be able to talk. I walked into the room and for the next TWO HOURS he proceeded to talk my ear off about life and ministry and my future as a pastor. He was so proud. So excited. It was like he had been saving up all his words just for me. He "went the way of all the earth" just two months later. He and grandma died within two weeks of each other. It was the first funeral I performed as a pastor.

One generation rises. Another falls. But the promises of God remain the same. "Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left...Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God...And you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one word has failed of all the good things that the Lord your God promised concerning you. All have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed." (Josh. 23:6, 11, 14) Think of all the things Joshua had seen! Slavery in Egypt. The plagues. The parting of the Red Sea. God meeting with His people on Sinai. The Ten Commandments. Manna from heaven. Wilderness wandering. Water from rocks. The parting of the Jordan. The incredible victories against all odds. The beginning of the conquest of the Promised Land. What a life! And through it all, what marked Joshua was this unwavering commitment to serve the Lord. To love the Lord with all his heart and soul and mind and strength. Joshua was a worthy successor to Moses and led God's people well. And now at the end of his life, he challenges the people to carry on! To continue to trust God! To walk in faith and see the fulfillment of all God has promised!

"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Josh. 24:14-15) Choose this day whom you will serve. The question reverberates throughout history. Every generation is called upon to answer. Will we love and fear and serve the Lord? Or will we bow down to the gods of our own making? The gods of our culture? The gods we once served before coming to faith?

As for me and my house...we will serve the Lord!

**March 26, 2018**

## LIFE IS STRUGGLE

Readings for the day: Judges 2, 3, 4, 5

"Life is pain, highness." - Dred Pirate Roberts

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

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

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

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

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

**March 27, 2018**

# HUMILITY

Readings for the day: Judges 6, 7, 8, 9

One of my favorite books is by Andrew Murray. It's a classic titled Humility. A short little read with insights packed into every page. Here is how he defines humility. "Humility is nothing but the disappearance of self in the vision that God is all...The highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God. It can do this only as it is willing to be nothing in itself, that God may be all. Water always fills first the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the diving glory."

I think we can all agree humility is a virtue sorely lacking in our world today. The spirit of our age is arrogance, pride, criticism, entitlement, and self-indulgence. It infects our politics. It infects our workplaces. It infects our schools. Our homes. Our neighborhoods. Even our churches. Perhaps especially our churches. It's the spirit of the Pharisee. The spirit of self-righteousness. An unwillingness to submit to any other authority in our lives except our own. This includes God. Sure, we know how to say the right things. "God is first in my life!" "I love God the most!" "God is my all in all!" We sing songs that declare these truths. We sit through sermons where these truths are proclaimed. We tell these things to our Christian friends. But one look at our schedule. One look at our bank account. A glance at our Twitter feed, Instagram, or Facebook account. A moment of honest self-reflection. All these conspire to reveal what we really believe. We are our own gods.

Gideon was different. Not perfect. Not blameless in his generation. Not powerful and mighty among men. No, what marked him was his humility. The angel of the Lord found him treading out grain in a winepress. Providing for his family at great risk to himself. When the Lord called him to become the next judge over Israel, Gideon echoes Moses at the burning bush. "Who am I that you would send me?" So unsure of himself, he puts God to the test by laying out a fleece not once but twice! God honors his humble heart. Gideon was humble enough to place his faith and trust into action. He tears down the altar of Baal. He sends home his entire army before battle. And then when confronted at the beginning of Judges 8 by the Ephraimites who wanted to claim the glory, he humbled himself before them and honored them. It's a stunning display. Finally, when it is all said and done, the people want to make him king. He refuses the crown. He refuses to take God's rightful place in their lives. In the words of Murray, Gideon understood "the highest glory of the creature is in being only a vessel, to receive and enjoy and show forth the glory of God."

What about us? What does humility look like in our own lives? Surely, it is more than words. It is life lived intentionally under the sovereign authority of God. A life lost in the vision that God is all. A life lived before God, submitted to God, surrendered to God. What does such a life look like in the 21st century? It is a life of worship. Daily. Weekly. It is a life of Sabbath rest. It is a life of prayer. It is a life of reflection on the Scriptures. It is a life of service to the Kingdom. It is a life of devotion to our Lord. It is a life that intentionally directs all its resources – time, talent, treasure – towards God. It is a life that engages the world while remaining set apart. A life of risk where safety and comfort are sacrificed for the sake of the gospel.

Rest assured, such a life is not easy to live in our world today. Not with the demands on our time. Not with the demands on our resources. My wife and I were talking about it this morning as we looked at our schedule for the week. We signed our daughter up for a dance event that benefits a good cause but it will mean her missing Maundy Thursday worship and spending most of Holy Saturday at the dance studio. We regret our decision. More than that, we repent of our decision. Because we failed to put God first this Holy Week and this is only one of many small examples where I fail to give God the glory and honor He deserves.

**March 28, 2018**

## JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

Readings for the day: Judges 10, 11, 12, 13

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

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

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

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

**March 29, 2018**

## WHEN HEROES FALL

Readings for the day: Judges 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

I grew up in church. Sunday school every weekend. Learning the Bible stories via flannel board. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Noah on his ark. Moses parting the Red Sea. Joshua and the battle of Jericho. One of my favorites was Samson. For a young boy, what's not to like? Strength. Power. One man winning victory after victory culminating in a final heroic act of self-sacrifice where Samson literally brings the roof down on his enemies!

As I got older, I began to learn about all the stuff my Sunday school teachers left out. (Rightfully, by the way, as I was too young to understand.) Adam and Eve's rebellion and descent into sin. Noah and his family being saved but at incredible cost. Moses parting the Red Sea but often ending up in these violent clashes that would end in entire families being wiped out. Joshua devoting entire cities to destruction. And Samson. Morally compromised. Selfish. Immature. A man who seems to use his God-given gifts for his own gain and self-gratification. What are we to make of such unlikely heroes? Men and women who are subsequently enshrined in the great "Hall of Fame" of faith in Hebrews 11?

First and foremost, we are to see them as they are...not as we wish they would be. They are men. They are women. As such, they are sinners just like us. People whom God chooses to use despite our shortcomings, failings, and immorality. This is one of the best arguments FOR the trustworthiness of Scripture. It paints an honest picture of God's chosen people. Putting their weaknesses on display right alongside their strengths. Compare that to the sacred writings of other major world religions where heroes are whitewashed to perfection.

Second, we are to look beyond them to the true source of their strength. The true source of their wisdom. The true source of their miracles and great victories. It is the Spirit of the Lord that rushes on Samson and gives him the ability to tear a lion apart. Kill a bunch of Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Trap and tie torches to hundreds of foxes. Tear off a city gate. Bring an entire building down around him. This is not Samson's doing. It has very little to do with the length of his hair. That's superstitious nonsense! No, not cutting his hair was simply an outward sign of the Nazirite Vow his parents had taken on his behalf before he was even conceived. (Judges 13:2-5) Keeping the vow was a sign of his devotion and dedication to the Lord, the true source of his strength. When he treated his vow casually or flippantly by allowing his wife to nag him to death, his strength left him. Again, not because he cut his hair but because in so doing, he despised the Lord.

Finally, the entire book of Judges is meant to lead us to despair. Each judge over Israel seems less and less capable of leading well. They are increasingly morally compromised. Increasingly losing sight of the One True God. Increasingly abandoning the ways of the Lord and following their own paths. In fact, the city of Dan – a major city in the Northern Kingdom of Israel – will continue to be a city known for its idolatry. Jeroboam will put one of his golden calves here in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. So what begins with violence and idolatry by the tribe of Dan will continue until the day God sends the Assyrians to wipe out the northern kingdom altogether.

Why drive us to such despair? To teach us yet again of our need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is hopeless. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges. With each generation, man's inhumanity to man only grows. Only increases. Only becomes more pervasive. And we would be lost except for God. He continues to pursue us. He continues to reach out to us. He continues to be faithful even in the face of our unfaithfulness. The climax of this story is, of course, something we celebrate this Holy Week. Jesus' suffering. Jesus' death on a cross. Jesus' burial in a grave. Jesus' resurrection. God's ultimate and final victory over sin and death.

**March 30, 2018**

# HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for the day: Judges 19, 20, 21

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at one of her lowest points. She has forgotten Yahweh. She has become like all the pagan tribes around her. She is more focused on her own gratification than she is on serving and honoring the Lord. Her world is full of idols and sexual perversion and violence. Yes, she still goes through the motions. She still makes her sacrifices. She still prays. Fasts. Appears before the Lord at the appointed times. But it's all empty at this point. Everyone is doing what seems right to them. They are all following their own ways. They are plumbing the depths of sin. They are pushing the boundaries of evil. Unspeakable atrocities are taking place in Israel such as the gang rape of a woman whose body is then dismembered resulting in a genocidal war that basically annihilates an entire tribe. It's madness.

One of my favorite books is the Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. With penetrating insight, he describes the nature of man. Given the right conditions. Given the right set of circumstances. We will all succumb to temptation. In the book, Kurtz sets himself up as a god to be worshiped. He exploits those around him. He uses them for his own personal gratification and enjoyment. He is evil and selfish and insane. Towards the end of the story, he finds himself dying as he "returns" to civilization. His life flashes before his eyes. He reflects back on all he has done. And his final words are, "The horror! The horror!"

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying. Horror. It's a good word to describe what's going on in our world today. One only has to scroll through a Twitter news feed to see the hate that leads to violence that leads to death and then return the next day to watch the cycle repeat itself. Horror. If we're totally honest, it's a good word to describe what goes on in all of our hearts. All of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Perhaps it's providential that we read this section of Judges on Good Friday. Today we reflect on the Cross. On the death of God. The most horrific act in human history. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. Today we reflect on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. Today we reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. Today we reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil.

Today we also reflect on our salvation! God plunging Himself into the horror of our condition! Plumbing the depth of our darkness! Immersing Himself in the breadth of our madness! And embracing us as His own! Today we declare there is hope for the Levite and his concubine! Today we declare there is hope for the Kurtz's of our world! Today we declare there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

**March 31, 2018**

# REDEEMER

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

I love the book of Ruth. It upends so many expectations and helps us understand the heart of God. Ruth is a Moabite. A foreigner. A sojourner. She married an Israelite named Chilion and became part of his extended family. This was forbidden by the Law of God but it took place during the time of the judges when everyone was doing right in their own eyes. Tragedy strikes. Her father-in-law, Elimelech, dies. Ten years later both her husband and his brother die as well. This puts the whole family in dire straights. There are no men to work. No men to protect them. So Naomi makes the decision to return home. She encourages her Moabite daughters-in-law to do the same. Start over. See if they have better luck with a new family because hers has brought them only grief. Ruth refuses. She makes this extraordinary declaration, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) So powerful is her statement that we often hear it read at weddings thousands of years later!

Ruth not only returns with Naomi to Bethlehem, she cares faithfully for her mother-in-law. She puts her life at risk by going out to the fields to glean what was left after the reapers had made their way through. It was backbreaking, painstaking work. Women who did this were often molested, harassed, and abused. They were the poorest of the poor in the land. Completely without hope. In the providence of God, the field she chose belonged to a man named Boaz. A righteous man. A man who left the gleanings for the poor as the Law of God demands. (Lev. 19:9-10) A man who protected her from the men who worked for him. A man who included her among his own young women so she woudn’t be alone. Even invited her to sit and eat at his table. Boaz is a man who clearly honors the Lord. I love what he says to Ruth when she asks him why she has found favor in his eyes. “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:12)

Naomi cannot believe their good fortune! Ruth has been led by God to the very fields of the man who can redeem them! (Lev. 25) A man who is a close enough relative to bring them into his family and continue the family line! Thus unfolds this beautiful courtship in chapter three where Ruth goes and lies at Boaz’s feet to ask him to take them in. Boaz is humbled by the request and makes the necessary arrangements to become their kinsman-redeemer. They get married. Conceive a son. The family line continues which is important since her great-grandson is King David! Furthermore, many generations hence, her descendant Joseph will marry a young pregnant woman named Mary and they will have a son named Jesus. The Great Redeemer who will save His people from their sins!

After all the bloodshed and violence and suffering and pain, it is nice to read that not all was lost in Israel. Even in the time of the judges, there were still faithful men and women who followed the Lord. It is a great reminder to us in our own time that the night is always darkest right before the dawn. Today is Holy Saturday. A day where Christians reflect on the death of their Lord. His body lying on a cold slab. Wrapped in a burial shroud. Death seemingly having the victory. Sin and Evil seemingly having their way. The Son of God seemingly defeated. We wait this day with baited breath for we know what tomorrow brings! Victory! Jesus rising from the grave! Jesus throwing open the door of the tomb! Death could not hold him! Hell could not defeat Him! Sin and Evil had no power over Him! Jesus is our Great Redeemer! Jesus is our Great Savior!

**April 2, 2018**

## A NEW ERA

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

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

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

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

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

"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)
"For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes." (Jeremiah 16:17)
"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13)
God will not be mocked. When God's people continue to turn to sin instead of turning to Him in faithfulness, He will withdraw His presence. He will withhold His Word. He will give "them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...give them up to dishonorable passions...give them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done." (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) And that is exactly what had taken place in Israel and in Eli's own family. Eli failed to discipline and restrain his sons. Hophni and Phineas are the very definition of corrupt religious leaders who manipulate the faith for their own benefit. And though things look okay on the outside – i.e. sacrifices are being made, prayers are being said, worship is taking place – the people of God are spiritually dying. (By the way, we see these same things happening in our world today. Think of the health and wealth preachers who speak to thousands every week. Or the Christian self-help gurus who masquerade as preachers. Or the many preachers who have fallen into sin, reject any kind of accountability or spiritual authority or process of repentance, and then get back into the pulpit. As incredible as it seems, faithlessness is often very popular and faithfulness unpopular.)

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

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

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

**April 3, 2018**

# ALL THINGS NEW

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

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

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

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

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

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

Find a small group of close Christian friends who you can share life with. Eat together. Pray together. Share together. Hold each other accountable to pursuing Jesus.
Find a way to serve God and His Kingdom. Give back. Bless others. Be generous with your time and talent and treasure. It feels good to give our lives in service to something greater than ourselves.
Practice these disciplines over a lifetime and you will be amazed at the transformation that takes place. They will help you keep your eyes fixed on Jesus even in the middle of difficult trials and His promise is He will carry you through.

**April 4, 2018**

# REJECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 5, 2018**

## WHOLE-HEARTED DEVOTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 6, 2018**

# TRUSTING GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 7, 2018**

## GOD'S WILL AND GOD'S WAY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 9, 2018**

# AUTHENTIC PRAYER

Readings for the day: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52
The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. 150 prayers written by God's people. Written in times of celebration. Commemorating great victories and triumphs. Written in the midst of despair, exile, and defeat. Written for use in worship like the Psalms of Ascent. Written for very specific occasions. Written in the midst of real life.

David is on the run. He is being pursued by his own people. Betrayed by his own king. Unjustly accused. He has lost his position. His home. His family. One would think such circumstances would lead to bitterness and despair. Anger and frustration. Fear and uncertainty. These are honest feelings and David doesn't shy away from acknowledging them. "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, and an object of dread to my acquaintances; those who see me in the street flee from me. I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. For I hear the whispering of many—terror on every side!— as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life." (Psalms 31:9-13) One can hear in his words the anguish and heartbreak. He is afraid. He doesn't know what the future holds. There are no guarantees he will escape. So he brings these feelings authentically before the Lord. He humbles himself before his God. He knows the Lord sees his afflictions.
At the same time, David prays in faith for his very real needs. He prays for God's protection. "In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!" (Psalms 31:1-2)
He prays for God's guidance and wisdom. "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple. For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will lift me high upon a rock." (Psalms 27:4-5)
He prays for God's comfort and provision. "When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalms 34:17-19)
And most of all, David lifts his eyes above his current circumstances to praise God for who He is! God is worthy of praise even when we find ourselves in the middle of the most difficult times of our lives. "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad. Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!" (Psalms 34:1-3)

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

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

**April 10, 2018**

# TURN TO GOD

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

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

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

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

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

**April 11, 2018**

## LOVE YOUR ENEMIES???

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

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

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

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

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

**April 12, 2018**

## GOD IS MY HELPER

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 13, 2018**

## EPITAPH: WHAT MESSAGE WILL BE WRITTEN ON YOUR TOMBSTONE?

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

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

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

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

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

**April 14, 2018**

# WORSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 16, 2018**

# CONTRADICTIONS

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

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

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

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

**April 17, 2018**

## PRAYING THE PSALMS

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

When I read through the Psalms I try to imagine what David must be experiencing. What is he referencing when he says, "Heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O Lord —how long?" (Psalms 6:2-3) Is it disease? Is it depression? Is it life circumstances? Is he fearful of the future? Afraid of his enemies? Is he having a hard time being patient for God's Will to come about? Or the flip side, what happened that caused David to write, "When my enemies turn back, they stumble and perish before your presence. For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne, giving righteous judgment. You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish; you have blotted out their name forever and ever. The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins; their cities you rooted out; the very memory of them has perished." (Psalms 9:3-6) Had he just won another victory? Had he just put his enemies to flight? Is he referring here to the Philistines or to the people who were still following the house of Saul in Israel? Can he sense the fulfillment of God's promises are near? As always, I love David's honesty and transparency..."Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalms 10:1) He's not afraid to cry out to God from the depths of his heart.

Throughout history, the people of God have returned over and over again to the Psalms to learn how to pray. They have used them as a guide for prayer. They have prayed these words back to God. Made them their own. Prayer can be difficult. It's challenging to move beyond the rote prayers we learned in our youth. It's challenging to be honest and real with God. Frequently it can feel like our words are inadequate. Self-centered. Foolish. Like they bounce off the ceiling back into our laps. So many Christians I know and love struggle with prayer. Often when they ask me how they should pray, I will point them to the Psalms. Not just to repeat the words but to reflect on them and make them their own. Reflect on the feelings and emotions. Reflect on the heart of what David is saying. Let his heart's cry resonate with your heart's cry and lead you to express your deepest thoughts to God.

Our God is safe. He is a refuge. A stronghold. Our deliverer. We are the apple of His eye and He hides us in the shadow of His wings. He is our protector. Our comforter. Our friend. We can tell Him anything. The deepest desires of our hearts are not hidden from Him. Nor are the wounds. The hurts. The disappointments. The fears. The failures. God rejoices with us when we experience success. When the victories come in our lives. God weeps with us when struggle. When we grieve. God fights our battles for us. We may not always understand His ways. We may not always agree with His timing. His answer can be "No" just as easily as it can be "Yes." It can even be "Not Yet." Through it all, God is God and we are not and prayer reminds us the best place to be is at His feet.

**April 18, 2018**

# FAMILY HISTORY

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

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

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

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

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

**April 19, 2018**

## GOD'S GOOD GIFTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 20, 2018**

## CONNECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Find a place to serve God's Kingdom: Don't just build this "connection" for yourself! Find a way to share it with others. As you go out to serve Christ and His Kingdom, you will become someone else's point of connection to God and to community. Isn't that awesome? God will use YOU to be His hands and feet in another person's life.

Do these four things over the course of a lifetime and I guarantee...GUARANTEE...you will grow a deep, abiding relationship with Christ and with God's people. Will there be disappointments along the way? Yes. Will you feel hurt at times? Absolutely. Is it easy? Nope. Not in our world. But nothing worth doing is EVER easy and that is particularly true when it comes to the most important relationship in our lives! So place your trust and your hope in Christ and let Him lead you to the abundant life He promises!

**April 21, 2018**

## EVANGELISM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 23, 2018**

# DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 24, 2018**

## GENEALOGY AND RACE

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

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

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

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

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

**April 25, 2018**

# UNITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 26, 2018**

# TRUE WORSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 27, 2018**

# SERENITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 29, 2018**

# WHO IS GOD?

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

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

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

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

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

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

**April 30, 2018**

## WHO'S BUILDING YOUR HOUSE?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**May 1, 2018**

# GRACE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 8, 9 and 1 Chronicles 18

There's a famous story told about John Knox, the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland. He had a nightmare as he lay dying. When he awoke, he told all his friends that he had just been tempted to believe he had earned heaven and God's grace through the faithfulness of his life and ministry. But he quickly followed that up with these words, "Blessed be God who enabled me to bead down and quench the fiery dart, by suggesting to me such passages of Scripture as these; "What hast thou that thou didst not receive? 'By the grace of God I am what I am'. 'Not I but the grace of God which was with me'.

It is so easy to think we deserve God's grace. It's so easy to believe we've done enough. We're good enough. We're strong enough. We've worked hard enough. Yes, most of know the dictionary definition of grace - "unmerited favor" - but if we're honest, deep down we like to think we deserve it. Don't believe me? Think about how much we take God for granted? How little we value our time with Him? How easy it is for us to prioritize other things rather than keep God first? Think about our attitudes towards worship? Towards obedience? We like to act as if God is grading on a curve! We are so flippant about grace.

Today, however, we come face to face with grace in the story of David and Mephibosheth. David is now king. He has the nation firmly united behind him. He is winning battle after battle. Expanding their territory. Gaining tribute. Philistines. Moabites. Syrians. Edomites. All fall before him. Most kings, in their efforts to consolidate power, would seek out the last surviving members of the former royal family and have them put to death. Not David. David remembers his covenant with Jonathan. David remembers his promise to Saul. He seeks out the last surviving members of Saul's family in order to honor them. Bless them.

Enter Mephibosheth. Crippled. Weak. Broken. Living in abject poverty – Lo-debar literally means "no pasture" - where he has fled to hide. For years, he has eked out an existence hoping to escape the notice of the new king. Knowing what would likely happen should he be found out. But now he's been betrayed. His location is known. The king's soldiers show up to bring him before David. One can imagine his fear. One can imagine all the nightmare scenarios running through his head. He comes before David and bows his face to the floor at his feet. He begs for mercy though he knows he doesn't deserve it. And what's David's response? Grace.

Friends, we are Mephibosheth. We are crippled. Weak. Broken. We too live in abject spiritual poverty. We too have fled to hide from the King. Many of us have lived this way for years. Putting our heads down and barely eking out an existence. Enslaved to our sin, we tried as best we could to escape God's notice. But the Holy Spirit sees all and knows all. He found us out! He sought us out! He brought us before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Perhaps you remember the day that happened? The first day you actually humbled yourself before Jesus? I remember my fear as the weight of my sin hit me for the first time. I remember the sense of impending judgment hanging over my head. I remember how unworthy I felt before the Holy One of Israel. I remember asking God for mercy as I prayed the "sinner's prayer." And what I remember most of all is that feeling the first time grace washed over me.

Grace has nothing to do with me. Nothing to do with what I've done. Nothing to do with how good I am. It has everything to do with God. By showering us with grace, God is being faithful to Himself. Faithful to the covenant promises He has made. Grace takes the wounded, crippled, and broken and sets a place for them at God's table. Grace seeks out the spiritually disabled, those lost and wandering in darkness, enslaved to sin, dead in their trespasses and presents them before God. Grace goes to the most barren places, rescues the spiritually poor, and brings them to a place of plenty, where we are fed with the richest of fare. Most of all, grace takes those orphaned by sin and adopts them into God's own family!

Now here's what we most often miss about grace. It doesn't take away our brokenness. Mephibosheth remained crippled for the rest of his life. In the same way, we too remain crippled by our sinful nature. Why does God allow this? Again, the answer is grace. As Mephibosheth limped around the palace, leaning on his crutches, he was reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of the king. As you and I continue our struggle with sin. Tempted. Afflicted. Oppressed. We are being reminded over and over again of the amazing grace of our own King. That takes a wretch like me. Once lost. Now found. Once blind but now can see.

**May 2, 2018**

## THE LORD'S SIDE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

The Super Bowl had just ended. The Eagles won an improbable victory behind their backup quarterback Nick Foles. The confetti is raining down. The music is blaring. The players are celebrating on the field. A reporter finds Doug Pederson and asks him for his reaction to the big win. "I can only give the praise to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ for giving me this opportunity."Nick Foles, newly crowned MVP, sees God's hand in the big win as well. "All glory to God!" He exclaims. It's a common scene that gets played out after almost every big win in every sport college or professional across the US every year. Players and coaches honoring God for their big wins. Thankful to God for providing the victory.

It reminds me of David's words from Psalms 20. "Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." (Psalms 20:6-7) David has just won significant victories over the Ammonites and Syrians. He has subdued their lands. Defeated their armies. Killed their generals. Historians of this particular time tell us David was a powerful warlord who took advantage of a power vacuum in the region to carve out his kingdom. Egypt, the dominant power for so long, was weak. Assyria and Babylon had yet to rise. As David wins victory after victory, he steps up to the postgame mic to give God all the glory.

Now there's nothing wrong with ascribing to God all the glory for our successes in life. After all, He is the one who gave us our gifts and talents. He is the one who provides blessing and opportunity. We didn't choose where we were born. We didn't choose the family we were born into. So much of our success has nothing to do with us at all and so God rightly deserves all the praise. At the same time, we must not become arrogant. We must not assume God is "always" on our side or that God is "always" on the side of the victors. In a few chapters, David will find out what happens when he takes God's favor for granted. I have often watched the same athletes who praised God in victory have nothing to say in defeat. I have seen Christians praise God when things are going well in their lives only to question where God is when times get tough.

One of my favorite coaches, Mike MacIntyre of my Colorado Buffaloes, won a big victory a few years back. A reporter caught up with him as he was running off the field. "God was with us in the victory today but He was also with us through every defeat leading up to this point." Now that's a man who understands God! You may be experiencing a season of great blessing in your life right now. A season of success. A season where everything you touch seems to turn to gold. Or you may be experiencing loss. Tragedy. Struggle. Heartbreak. No matter what season you find yourself in, God is with you! God is for you! God will never leave you or forsake you! Simply turn to Him and you will find your joy and your strength no matter what comes.

**May 3, 2018**

# HISTORY

Readings for the day: Psalms 65, 66, 67, 69, 70

I still remember one of my professors in college walking to the board on the first day of class and writing in big block letters the word, "HISTORY." "History", she said, "is all about 'his' story and the first thing we need to do is reclaim this word for the rest of us." She then took out an eraser and re-wrote "HISTORY" as "HERSTORY" or "HYSTORY." Now, admittedly, this was a Women's Studies course at the University of Colorado at Boulder. So perhaps I should have expected something like this. And my initial reaction was pretty sarcastic and dismissive. However, over the years, I have come to believe the professor was more right than she knew at the time. History truly is "HIS STORY." That is to say, it's God's story. It's the story of God's engagement with His world and His people.

The Psalms express these deep theological truths so very well. David writes about creation. "O God of our salvation, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas; the one who by his strength established the mountains, being girded with might; who stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples, so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs. You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy." (Psalms 65:5-8) He writes about redemption. "Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man. He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There did we rejoice in him, who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations— let not the rebellious exalt themselves." (Psalms 66:5-7) He speaks to God's sovereignty. "Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth." (Psalms 67:3-4) He speaks to God's tenderness and comfort. "But as for me, my prayer is to you, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness." (Psalms 69:13) The beauty of the Psalms truly is the full range of human emotion and experience that gets expressed.

When you reflect back on your own life, what do you see? Do you see God's hand at work? Do you sense God's presence in times of crisis? Are you able to see God's sovereign hand guiding and directing your steps? Where have you experienced God's love? When did you encounter God's grace? God is just as active in our personal histories as He is in human history.

**May 4, 2018**

# #METOO

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 11, 12, 1 Chronicles 20, and Psalms 51

It is estimated by the World Health Organization that 1/3 of women worldwide are victims of sexual abuse. A 2017 poll taken by ABC News and the Washington post reports that 54% of American women have reported receiving unwanted and inappropriate sexual advances, most of which is never addressed. The #MeToo movement first got started in 2006 when Tarana Burke used the hashtag in social media to draw attention to the struggle of women of color, particularly in underprivileged communities. However, it really gained steam when the allegations of Harvey Weinstein were first made public in 2017 and it has since spread like wildfire through all sorts of different industries. Hollywood. Media. Corporations. Government. And yes, even the church.

Frankly, the reckoning is long overdue. For too long, the church has protected men who abuse and men who tolerate abuse. High profile cases in the Roman Catholic Church are matched with similar high profile cases in the Protestant world such as the Sovereign Grace scandal or the recent allegations made against Bill Hybels and Willow Creek. In a social media world, there is no longer any place to hide which is a very good thing.

The great heroes of the Bible have their own #MeToo moments. The story of David and Bathsheba is perhaps the most famous. David, flush with his success on the battlefield and drunk on his own power and privilege, decides to stay home rather than head off to war. As he stands on the roof, proudly overlooking all he has accomplished, he catches a glimpse of the beautiful Bathsheba bathing beneath him. He heart fills with lust. He covets this beautiful woman and who's around to stop him? The army is off at war. Her husband is one of David's mighty men which suggests David knew Bathsheba already. Perhaps this was a secret desire he'd been entertaining for years. He calls for her. Commands her to come. With her life on the line, she obeys and conceives a child from their one night stand. Now comes the coverup. David sends for Uriah but Uriah refuses to cooperate. So David orchestrates his murder.

It's a horrible story. One we cannot and should not reduce to a morality tale. Bathsheba is raped. Uriah murdered. A child dies. All because of David's insatiable lust and appetite for power. Left to his own devices, David might have gotten away with it. But God was watching. God is always watching. "For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun." (2 Samuel 12:12) God sends Nathan the prophet, David's own brother you'll remember, to confront him. Nathan risks his life to stand up to David. Expose his sin. Call him out.

Yesterday, legendary Bible teacher Beth Moore penned a poignant essay on her blog about her experiences with men over the years. It's a heartbreaking read. She shares how it's felt to be dismissed, ignored, put down, disrespected, and objectified. Her words are honest. Direct. Forthright. And offered in a spirit of Christ-like confrontation and love. They must be heard and she's not alone. There are women who occupy the pews and seats every Sunday who've had similar experiences and they too must be heard. Their stories must be shared. And men who occupy places of privilege and power must humble themselves to listen. To repent. Like David.

Psalm 51 is a beautiful Psalm. It expresses exactly what godly, humble repentance looks like. It acknowledges honestly our brokenness. Acknowledges honestly our sin. And begs God to create in us a clean heart. A right spirit. A broken and contrite, God will not despise.

**May 5, 2018**

## SIN AND SALVATION

Readings for the day: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122

The more I spend time with people, the more I am convinced that so much of our pain and heartache and struggle is because we do not truly understand who we are. We have a distorted self-image. We look in the mirror and we are blind to the true nature of the person looking back at us. This is why reading and re-reading and re-reading Scripture is so important. Within the pages of this precious book, God teaches us the deepest truths about ourselves. The narrative runs something like this...

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) You and I were designed to live in a world of perfection. A paradise called Eden. We were made in the image of God so that we might show forth the glory of God. We were given dominion and authority and power to rule over all God has made as a kind of vice-regent or undershepherd.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalms 51:5) We abandoned our vocation. We rebelled against God. We aspired to be gods ourselves. In so doing, the image of God was marred. Corrupted. Poisoned. Every single human being since Adam and Eve's fall has been born in brokenness. Born in sin. Conceived in iniquity. From the moment the sperm fertilizes the egg, we are lost.

"Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) We are lost but we are not hopeless! Out of love, the Father sent His only Son into the world that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish in their sin. All who believe in Christ are born again. Born a second time. This time of the Spirit.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Being born of the Spirit literally changes our DNA. Changes the fundamental reality of our existence. Gives us a new nature. A new heart. A heart of flesh sensitive to the leading of God to replace the heart of stone that was so rebellious and resistant. The image of God is now restored. Our vocation renewed. The commission re-issued. Go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize. Teach. Fill the earth. Subdue. Have dominion. Share my glory with all of creation.

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:52) The final promise. Jesus will come again. On the last day, a trumpet shall sound. The heavens will open. The dead will rise. And we shall be changed from one degree of glory to another. The imperfect shall be made perfect. The perishable shall be made imperishable. Sin and death will be destroyed. Eternity sets in. We are home.

This is the fundamental worldview of the Psalmist. It's the fundamental narrative they are singing about though the revelation of Jesus as Messiah still lies far off in the future. They trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father to bring about His will on the earth. They also understand this side of heaven that we are broken, sinful, corrupt creatures in desperate need of God's grace. And grace only comes as we confess. As we repent. It's more than feeling bad. More than feeling guilty. More than feeling ashamed. It's about turning from our sin. Turning towards God. Making the necessary changes in our lives in response to all God has done for us.

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalms 32:1, 5)

What do you need to confess today? Where have you fallen short? Where do you feel enslaved? Afflicted? Ashamed? Guilty? In what areas of your life has the Spirit brought conviction? Is it your thoughts? Attitudes? Actions? Feelings? The life of a believer in Jesus is one of constant confession as we come before the Lord acknowledging our sin, receiving His grace, and learn to follow in His ways. Does this mean we should live our lives in constant guilt? Live our lives in constant shame? Absolutely not! God's love is everlasting! And His promise is sure! "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalms 103:11-12) Cling to the love of God, sinner! Let His love be the cornerstone of your life! Let His grace set you free! Trust in His faithfulness to save you from depths of your sin!

**May 7, 2018**

# DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 13, 14, 15

All families live with some level of dysfunction. Dysfunction occurs where unhealthy behavior (rage, addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) is normalized, leading members of a family to make unhealthy accommodations rather than pursue repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Left unchecked, dysfunction leads destructive patterns of behavior that often impact generations as unhealthy coping skills are passed down from parent to child. Breaking generational cycles of sin is extremely difficult and requires incredible courage as well as sacrifice as dysfunctional family systems often violently resist change.

Consider the family of King David as the pre-eminent Biblical example of a dysfunctional family system. Of course, his situation was made much more complex by the cultural practice of polygamy which led to many children by many different wives and concubines, all seeking to ascend the line of succession. Dynastic considerations complicate what we read today but many lessons can be drawn that are helpful in our own lives. Amnon is the oldest son of David and heir apparent to the throne. As such, he has grown accustomed to power and privilege and simply taking what he wants when he wants it. His treatment of Tamar, his half-sister, is horrific in its own right but probably emblematic of how Amnon lives his life. Absalom is not much better. What begins as a noble desire to protect his sister from public shame ends in murder and a coup attempt against his own father. Who knows what prompted Absalom's move against David but it clearly was pre-meditated and even assisted by some of David's closest confidants. David doesn't help matters much. As king, he should have punished Amnon for his crime but instead appears to give him a pass. Once Absalom takes matters into his own hands, David appears both relieved and appalled. He refuses to forgive and reconcile with Absalom which only isolates him further and divides the royal household. David chooses to ignore the growing conspiracy until its almost too late and thus has to flee into exile. His family shattered. His kingdom divided. His country on the brink of civil war.

I think of my own family system. We've spent the last year in counseling together as we try to break patterns of sin that have not only been passed down but reinforced by our own sinful choices. I have had to learn to deal with my anger issues. Wrestle with my own fears and failures and disappointments. I've had to face the fact that I have caused my children pain through the choices I've made in how I've responded to the difference circumstances we've had to face as a family. I've had to take a long hard look at myself through Christ's eyes and repent. Ask for forgiveness. And pursue reconciliation. It's not easy. It requires humility and sacrifice. I have to relinquish my need for control. My need to protect my kids from the consequences for the choices they make in life. My need to project "success" to the world around me. I've had to come to grips with the fact that my family is as broken as any and I am a major contributor to that brokenness because of my own sin issues. Honestly, it's a painful journey. Then again, dying to self is always painful.

What about your family system? If your family's story was included in the Scriptures, what would others see? What failures? What successes? Would they see patterns of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Or would they see pride, neglect, abuse, addiction, and rampant conflict? Or perhaps a mixture of both? Where is Christ at work in your family right now? What areas do you need Christ to pay particular attention to in order to bring healing, wholeness, grace and peace? Are there particular family members you need to be praying specifically for? Who are they? What are the issues? How are you contributing to the pain? Ask Christ to help you chart a different path. One that leads to true transformation.

**May 8, 2018**

## THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF THE BIBLE

Readings for the day: Psalms 3, 4, 13, 28, 55

The Bible is such a strange book. One of the great mysteries of history is why this book survived when so many others were lost. Why has this book exerted such a gravitational pull on human beings of every tribe, tongue, and nation down throughout the centuries? Why is it that three billion people in the world today claim to follow its teachings? It certainly is not an easy read. Sixty-six different books written at different times by different authors. Hundreds of chapters. Thousands of verses. It's hard to get through even in a year. Then there's the content. War. Ethnic cleansing. Rape. Murder. Deceit. Privilege. Power. The "spiritual heroes" the Bible lifts up as examples are all deeply flawed. Abraham almost sacrifices his son. Jacob schemes his way to the top. Moses is a murderer. Noah is a drunk. David steals another man's wife and then has him killed when he won't participate in the coverup. These are the men after God's own heart? Can you be serious?

This morning, I was re-reading a wonderful essay by Karl Barth. Barth is considered the greatest theologian of the 20th century and he insightfully points out that we often come to the Bible asking all the wrong questions. He writes, "It is precisely not the right human thoughts about God that form the content of the Bible, but rather the right thoughts of God about humans. The Bible does not tell us how we are supposed to talk with God, but rather what God says to us. It does not say how we are to find our way to Him, but how God has sought and found the way to us. It does not show the right relationship into which we must place ourselves with Him, but the covenant which God has made with all those who are the children of Abraham in faith, and which God has sealed in Jesus Christ once and for all. This is what stands in the Bible. The Word of God stands in the Bible."

What makes the Bible different than every other book in history is that it contains within its pages the very Word of God. It tells a story. A grand narrative about God's eternal search for man. He is relentless. He is steadfast. He is patient. He never tires. Never rests. Never relaxes. Never takes a day off. He pursues. He chases. He keeps covenant faithfulness with His people. He is loyal. He is true. Despite all they do. Despite all their sin. Despite all the corruption and degradation and evil, God never leaves them. This is why a man like David can compose poetry after stealing Bathsheba and having Uriah killed. Because this story isn't about David. It's about God and what God's doing in David's life.

"But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head." (Psalms 3:3)
"In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." (Psalms 4:8)
"I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me." (Psalms 13:6)
"The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed." (Psalms 28:8)
"But I call to God, and the Lord will save me." (Psalms 55:16)

Now I get these verses are interspersed among a whole lot of other stuff that's not nearly as pleasant. Calls for vengeance. Calls for the bloody destruction of David's enemies. Bitterness. Anger. Feelings of betrayal and loss. There's a whole lot of darkness in the Psalms and yet even amidst the deep darkness, God's light has this way of breaking through. God has this way of making Himself known.

Such is true for us as well. When we honestly come before God. When we cry out to him from the deepest places of our hearts. When we throw off every pretense and lay aside our "holy facades". What does God hear? Fear. Desperation. Pain. Struggle. Heartache. Anger. Bitterness. All of us have a deep well of darkness within us called sin. All of us draw from that well every single day. Left to ourselves, we would wander in the darkness permanently. We would have no hope of escape. But thanks be to God that He still pursues His people! Still chases after us with His love! He will never rest until His light scatters the darkness of our hearts and makes all things new.

**May 9, 2018**

## CONSEQUENCES OF FAILING TO FORGIVE

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 16, 17, 18

There are consequences when we fail to forgive from the heart. Consequences when we fail to reconcile. Consequences when we fail to follow God's will and seek to restore broken relationships. The impact of those consequences tend to be commensurate with the authority and power and influence we wield. So a parent who refuses to take this step with their child can impact future generations. An employer who refuses to take this step with employees can cost a company. A pastor who refuses to take this step with her/his congregation can disrupt a congregation.

David was a king. A man who held the power of life and death in his hands. A man whose authority was supreme and final. The impact of his decisions impacted not just him or his household but a nation. This is true not only in the Absalom narrative but also at other times in David's life. There is a ripple effect to the decisions he makes. When he makes good and godly decisions, the nation is blessed. When he makes poor and ungodly decisions, the nation is cursed. As we read yesterday, David's refusal to execute justice when his daughter Tamar was raped creates a crisis in his family that eventually spreads to the nation. Absalom takes matters into his own hands leading to his exile. David brings him back but refuses to forgive him from the heart and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom begins to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as the Absalom's influence grows. He's almost caught completely by surprise when the news finally comes and he has to flee for his life. The ripples grow as allegiances shift and new alliances are formed. Ahithophel sides with Absalom. Hushai with David. Joab goes with David so Absalom makes Amasa his new general. Abiathar and Zadok stay in Jerusalem as priests but remain loyal to David. Shimei curses David. Ziba makes his move to take over what's left of the household of Saul. Everyone, it seems, is looking out for themselves. Such is the chaos that happens when forgiveness and reconciliation are ignored. It leads to all kinds of brokenness, suffering, and pain.

We've all probably had this experience. A friend says something or does something that hurts. We refuse to forgive. Now the rest of our friends feel forced to choose sides. A marriage breaks up. Divorce papers are signed. Once again, friends and family feel forced to take sides. A business deal goes south. Partners split up. Lawyers are called to divide up the assets. Clients and customers are pressured to shift their loyalties. Seasons of ministry come to an end. Pastors are let go. Forced out in some cases. Congregations split. Such experiences are painful and never easy. Too many of us take the path of least resistance which is avoidance. Abandoning the relationships we once enjoyed because forgiveness is too hard. Reconciliation too much. The way of Jesus too difficult.

And yet, His words continue to haunt us. Continue to push us. Continue to convict us. Forgiveness and reconciliation is ESSENTIAL to the Christian life. Face to face, coming to terms with our brothers and sisters is REQUIRED by Jesus if we are to call ourselves His disciples. We are not given any other options. Any other choices. Jesus wants His family to be unified not just in name but from the heart.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." (Matthew 6:12, 14-15)

"Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times." (Matthew 18:21-22)

"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25)

Think of the pain that could have been avoided had David listened to God. Think of the pain in our own lives that could be avoided if only we would listen to God. Who is Jesus calling you to forgive today?

**May 10, 2018**

# DEEPER PRAYERS

Readings for the day: Psalms 26, 40, 41, 58, 61, 62, 64

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

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

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

It's why he can express contradictory emotions all in the same prayer. "I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked...O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells." (Psalms 26:5, 8) He feels no need to try to make sense of it all. He trusts God can sort it out.

He can express his anger and desire for vengeance against those who hurt him. "O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun...The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth." (Psalms 58:6-8, 10-11) And almost in the same breath, be so tender. "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." (Psalms 62:8)

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

**May 11, 2018**

# DIVISIONS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 19, 20, 21 and Psalms 5, 38, 42

We are a fickle people by nature. Driven by our emotions, we struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to work past our pain. Our differences. Our jealousies. Our frustrations. Our failures. This struggle leads to division as we each go our own way.

David grieves for his son Absalom and almost loses his kingdom a second time.
The ten tribes of Israel grow jealous of the tribe of Judah and rebel a second time under the leadership of Sheba.
Shimei comes before the king seeking forgiveness for his rash words when David was fleeing for his life. Abishai wants to execute him on the spot.
Mephibosheth and Ziba both lay claim to the king's favor.
Joab kills Amasa in cold blood out of anger at being relieved of command.
Israel suffers because of an ungodly act committed by King Saul against the Gibeonites and makes atonement through human sacrifice.
We humans have a tendency to make a mess of things. It is just so hard for us to take a step back and see the bigger picture. We are highly reactive creatures. Refusing to give others the benefit of the doubt. Refusing to extend grace to those who have hurt us or disappointed us or let us down. We would much rather hold onto our anger. Hold onto our pain. Keep a detailed record of wrongs that we can trot out anytime we feel threatened or afraid. We justify our actions or inactions and the cycle of division continues.

Think about how we do life these days. We jump from church to church to church, never really putting down roots. Just as soon as we are let down or disappointed, we move on. Always with a "godly" justification, of course. "I'm not being fed." "I don't feel connected." "I don't like this pastor or that leader or they didn't meet my needs." It's just easier to move down the street to the next church rather than work through our issues.
Think about the number of different denominations that exist today. While some diversity may be legitimate, the fact that we divide over such petty, non-essential issues is a stain on the Body of Christ. It is direct rebellion against the command of our Lord to be one, even as He and the Father are one.
But it's not just churches who have this issue. It is society as a whole. Republicans and Democrats can't even exist in the same room anymore. Conservatives and liberals see themselves as mortal enemies. How many parents have I watched switch their kid to a different sports team rather than work through disappointment and conflict? (Seriously, how many different soccer or baseball clubs do we really need in Parker?) How many schools and teachers have watched families walk out their door because of a bad experience rather than sit down and work through the issues? The examples are legion in our culture today.
Division leads to weakness. The inability to face our fears, admit our failures, and work through problems creates a lack of resiliency in both the individual and society as a whole. Emotional. Spiritual. Even physical. We simply lack the capacity to process our pain and disappointments in a healthy way. We look for someone to blame. We attack. We accuse. We react. We rush in. And the results are often tragic.

So what's the answer? Confession. "For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me...I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning...I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you." (Psalms 38:4, 6, 8-9) Humility. "But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house. I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies; make your way straight before me." (Psalms 5:7-8) Seek God. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (Psalms 42:1-2)

**May 12, 2018**

# ALL THAT REALLY MATTERS

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 22, 23, and Psalms 57

I recently attended a prayer luncheon where the keynote speaker shared his testimony. Brought up Communist, he became a rising star and leader in a student revolutionary movement in college. His influence became dangerous which led to him leaving his studies to hide out in the mountains of his country. There he continued to draw followers until he and his small group of friends had amassed an army of 150,000. They engaged in guerrilla warfare for a number of years until they eventually invaded the capital city and overthrew their own government. He became Prime Minister. For five years he held his position until he eventually was betrayed by his close friend and imprisoned on crimes of corruption. It's tough to know what's true and what was politically motivated but in the man's own words, "he was the chiefest of the chiefs of sinners." He was a man of violence. A man who lived with a gun in his hand. He was a man of power. A man who enjoyed exercising authority over others. He was a man of great appetites. Using his power and influence to gratify his own desires. His end came as swiftly as his rise to power.

Because of his great influence, he was put in solitary confinement for years. No bed. No toilet. No place even to wash his hands. He suffered tremendously. He was lonely. He was afraid. One night, he had a vision. Jesus appeared to him. Offered him release in exchange for belief. He didn't answer right away. Things got worse. In the depths of his pain and heartache, he cried out for Jesus' return. The next night, the vision came back and this time the man got on his knees. He gave his life to Christ. Everything changed.

As I listened to this man's testimony, I was reminded of King David. David too was a man of violence. A man who was raised from a young age to a position of power and influence. A man who used that power and influence to gratify his own desires on more than one occasion. David too was a man of great contradictions. Capable of amazing love and generosity and grace in one moment and brutal, horrifying, seemingly capricious violence in the next. And now here he is at the end of his life still composing praise songs to God!

What are we to make of such a man? Wrong question. What are we to make of such a God? A God who would love a man like David? A man like the one I heard recently? A man like me? We are all people of great contradictions. All of us are capable of great good and great evil. Capable of great beauty and great ugliness. Capable of amazing acts of generosity as well selfish acts of greed. Perhaps this is why David kept writing his poetry? Perhaps he knew this truth deep down? Despite all his sin. Despite every mistake. Despite the people he had hurt along the way. David's confidence was in the Lord.

"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." 2 Samuel 22:2-4)

Where is your confidence today?

**May 14, 2018**

## THE LORD REIGNS

Readings for the day: Psalms 97, 98, 99

I find it easy to get discouraged. My wife tells me it's because I pay far too much attention to the news on my phone and I will readily admit I have a difficult time turning it off. The more I travel globally, the more I find my heart broken. Bombings at three churches in Indonesia. Riots and death in Gaza. Ebola outbreaks in west Africa. Brutal crackdowns on fellows Christians in China. Andrew Brunson imprisoned for his faith in Turkey. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more these events effect me. I am often troubled when I pray. I often find myself brooding over the chaos of the world. Wondering when God will finally put an end to it all.

I am just as troubled for events here at home. The plight of the poor. The racial strife that persists. The rage that seems to simmer under the surface of our society. I am baffled by the ability of people to walk away from relationships they've cultivated for years. Troubled by our wide-spread lack of resiliency. Our inability to process disappointment and pain in healthy ways. The deeper the Spirit takes me into Christ, the more I realize how essential forgiveness and reconciliation are to the life of any community. Be it a family, church, school, business, town, etc. We simply cannot survive without it and yet fewer and fewer people seem capable of grace.

I am broken by the personal experiences I've had recently. Walking with a family through the suffering and death of their five-year old son and grandson. Spending time in conversation with them. Praying with them. Loving them. Heart breaking for them. Walking with another friend through a recent cancer diagnosis. A man I respect and admire in so many ways fighting now for his life and his future after a tumor the size of a beach ball was removed from his abdomen. A couple I know struggling to hold their marriage together. Children I love fighting depression and anxiety. Yes, I know this is part of what I signed up for as a pastor but it doesn't make it any easier. I am no Superman. My heart breaks on almost continual basis for those I love and have the privilege to serve.

How I needed today's reading from the Psalms! "The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory." (Psalm 97:1-6) What a declaration of hope! God reigns! Not God will reign. Or God has reigned. But God reigns! The present tense! He reigns over the chaos. He reigns over the pain. He reigns over the disease and death. He reigns over it all. Globally. Domestically. Locally. Personally. God reigns! And because God reigns, I can be glad. Even in the midst of all my fears. Even as I stumble under the weight of all my burdens. Even when I am discouraged or troubled or broken. God reigns. I can rejoice. "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name." (Psalm 97:11-12)

Now I know many will argue this doesn't change a thing. It's not like war and violence and sickness and suffering are going away anytime soon. They will use world events as evidence to push back against the idea of a good and holy and righteous and sovereign God. They will argue it's impossible for God to be all these things when there is so much wrong in the world. This leaves us with one of only two conclusions, so they say. Either God isn't good. Isn't holy. Isn't righteous. And perhaps just doesn't care. Or God is not sovereign. He is not all-powerful. He doesn't reign and is at the mercy of the same forces we are that operate with such seeming impunity in our world. And if I didn't have faith. If I hadn't encountered God personally. If I didn't know God on an intimate level, I might be tempted to agree.

But I believe. I have faith. Even in the darkness, I trust the light will one day dawn. Even when the world is crashing down around me, I trust the One who holds all things in His hands. Even when the lives of those I love seem to be falling apart, I trust the One who holds all things together. God is reigning! God is on His throne! God is sovereignly directing all things for His glorious purposes! So I will sing! I will “sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” (Psalm 98:1-3)

**May 15, 2018**

## PRIDE AND POPULARITY

Readings for the day: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21, 22, and Psalm 30

More and more studies are being conducted on the impact of social media on our mental health. The results are scary. It is becoming clear that prolonged social media use presents like addiction with similar accompanying symptoms. (Neglect of personal life, mental preoccupation, escapism, etc.) When people attempt to stop using social media, they go through something akin to withdrawal. The more we use social media, the less happy we seem to be and the more socially isolated we become. The comparisons social media invites between our lives and those we are connected to is not good for our well-being. Furthermore, social media (which includes all the different apps with a social component to it) is specifically designed to trigger dopamine "highs" in the brain. Dopamine release is triggered by unpredictability, small bits of information that can be digested quickly, and most importantly, reward cues. (i.e. number of "likes" on FB, number of "followers" on Instagram, number of "retweets" on Twitter, etc.)

I think about the number of people I know who draw at least part of their self-worth off of the number of friends they have on Facebook. The number of times people hit the "heart" button on an Instagram pic. The number of retweets and likes a pithy phrase gets on Twitter or the amount of views on a YouTube video. Especially young people. But it's not just social media. I think of the number of pastors I know who draw their self-worth off the number of people who show up on a weekend for worship. I think of the drive there is in most churches for numerical growth. I know some pastors who seem to live or die based on whether they make OutReach Magazine's Top 100 list every year. I think of the uncritical assumptions too many Christians make that larger churches must be doing something "right" and smaller churches must be doing something "wrong." Or the reverse. I think of the number of folks I know who criticize large churches simply because they're large. I once belonged to a denomination where the salaries of all the pastors in each region were published and voted on each year. I remember one older man who came from a very small church standing up to rail against large church pastors whose salaries were more than his entire church's budget. Never mind the differences in scale or complexities of the job. He just didn't like big churches and made his opinions known.

Why are we so obsessed with numbers? It does seem to be an American phenomenon. I travel the world fairly regularly. I've been to China, South Korea, Mexico, Ethiopia, etc. I've interacted with pastors from all around the world in lots of different settings. In my experience, they just don't seem as hung up as we are on numbers. That isn't to say they ignore them. They pay attention. They evaluate. They are wise and discerning. But there isn't the emotional attachment American Christians, and especially American pastors – seem to have with attendance, buildings, and budgets. It's like we get a dopamine "high" every time the sanctuary's full.

It's why I find this story about David in 2 Samuel 24/1 Chronicles 21 so convicting. David wants to number his people. He wants to know the size of his army. He wants to measure his power. His influence. His accomplishments. He wants to feel secure. Safe. In control. The images I have in my head are of third-world despots throwing military parades to show off their strength. David is clearly feeling insecure and in that moment, Satan strikes. He comes along and tempts David according to 1 Chronicles 21 and God allows it to happen according to 2 Samuel 24. The results are tragic. "Thus says the Lord, 'Choose what you will: either three years of famine, or three months of devastation by your foes while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the Lord, pestilence on the land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.' Now decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me." (1 Chronicles 21:11-12) God is going to teach David a lesson in humility. He is going to teach David where to find his true strength. He is going to teach David where true security lies. In God alone.

70,000 die from the plague. This is horrific and we cannot understand why God would do such a thing. At the same time, we have to remember that such events take place at the mysterious intersection of God's will and human freedom. David's decision has consequences and because David is king, the consequences impact his people. The same is true even for today. The decisions our politicians make impact real people in real life and can cause real pain and suffering. David decides to number his fighting men and around the same time, a plague begins. It is brutal. Virulent. And it kills. Somewhere in David's mind. In the prophet Gad's mind. Probably in Joab's mind and the minds of so many others, these events are related. The plague is perceived as God's punishment on Israel for David's sinful choices. And perhaps it is. We cannot dismiss the possibility out of hand for God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He has clearly told His people over and over again that there are consequences...real, life-threatening consequences...for sin. God's justice and righteousness will not be mocked.

So how do I respond? What does this mean for my life? First and foremost, it leads me to confession. Repentance. It calls to mind all the times I too have placed my faith in numbers. Or my mental health and well-being in the number of likes I get from social media. I am not immune. So I confess my sin before God. Second, it leads me to the cross. To the place where the penalty for my sin was paid. To the place where God's judgment was fully and completely and utterly satisfied by the death of my Lord. I am not condemned. I need not feel shame. For God has done for me what I could not. Third, it inspires me to live for Him today. To live from that place of grace knowing God has torn down the dividing wall of hostility that exists between us and made peace with me by the blood of His Cross. I am forgiven so I can forgive others. Grace was extended to me so I can extend it to others. Love was shown to me so I can show love to others. I can rest secure in God's hands.

**May 16, 2018**

## PEAKS AND VALLEYS

Readings for the day: Psalms 108, 109

One of the things I love to do is climb mountains. In Colorado, we have over 50 mountains that top out at over 14,000 feet. Standing on top of Bierstadt, Longs, Pikes, Antero, Quandry, Grays, Lincoln, Democrat, etc. makes one feel like they are on top of the world. But the journey to get to the top can be brutal. I remember the first time I tried to climb Pikes Peak from the trailhead. 26 miles round trip. We got 12 miles in. One mile from the summit. Clouds started rolling in. We had to turn back. I've never been more frustrated. I remember when I was a kid and my dad took us to climb Longs. 16 miles round trip. A hard and treacherous hike. I was 12. My brothers were 10 and 8 respectively. We were supposed to get up at about 1AM to get on the trail. I've never prayed so hard in my life! (That dad's alarm wouldn't go off...ha!)

The spiritual life is a lot like climbing mountains. There are peaks and valleys. Despair and exhilaration. Struggle and success. Defeat and victory. That's what I think of when read today's Psalms. David is exuberant in his praise in Psalm 108. "My heart is steadfast, O God! I will sing and make melody with all my being! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn! I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations. For your steadfast love is great above the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the clouds. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!" (Psalms 108:1-5) God is good. God is glorious. To serve Him is to experience blessing and salvation. And then, in almost the same breath it seems, David cries out in anguish. Calling curses down on his enemies. "Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They encircle me with words of hate, and attack me without cause...May his days be few; may another take his office! May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit! May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!" (Psalms 109:1-3, 8-11) It's a brutal Psalm. Painful to read. David is raw in his desire for vengeance.

It's easy to dismiss one and embrace the other. Easy to dismiss David's anger and rage while embracing his love and grace and mercy. It's easy to try to separate ourselves from David. Differentiate. But then we read this from Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9) Or this from Jesus, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander." (Matthew 15:19) We remember what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that to even look at another person with lustful intent makes one guilty of adultery. To harbor anger in one's heart makes one guilty of murder. Clearly, we cannot trust what's in our hearts.

Many years ago, I was falsely accused. I was attacked personally and professional. I had an experience where another person tried everything they could to ruin me and my family. They questioned my integrity. They questioned my character. They even questioned my faith. I've never been more angry in my life. It was the first time I truly felt I had an enemy. And I am ashamed to admit, deep down in my heart. In dark places I don't like to acknowledge exist, I prayed for this man's destruction. I prayed for God to take him out of my life. And I found myself identifying strongly with David in his anger, rage, and pain. I also found God meeting me in those dark places and leading me back to the light. Teaching me that I am capable of great evil just as I am capable of great good. And the only thing that keeps me from becoming an angry, vengeful man is the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ.

**May 17, 2018**

# LEAVING A LEGACY

Readings for the day: 1 Chronicles 23, 24, 25, 26

"When David was old and full of days, he made Solomon his son king over Israel." (1 Chronicles 23:1)

Legacy. It's something all of us will leave. To our children. To our grandchildren. To those we work with. To those we serve. Over the past several years, I've served my denomination as the chair of our Ministerial Committee. In that position, I had the privilege of walking alongside several pastors as they made the transition into retirement. It wasn't always easy. Some of those transitions were smooth. Some were rocky. Some were planned. Some were unplanned. Some felt affirmed on their way out. Others felt pushed out by the people they loved. My biggest takeaway? We either plan for the day when we will no longer be around or someone else will plan it for us.

David made plans. He understood with all his wisdom and experience that he could set his successor, Solomon, up for success. So he organizes the Levites. Helps them transition from service to the Tabernacle to service in the Temple. Gives them new roles and responsibilities that fit the new situation they will find themselves in. He organizes the priests. Casts lots so they can be established in their terms of service. He sets up the musicians in their service. And then the gatekeepers, treasurers, and other officials. It is a massive undertaking. A complete reorganization from top to bottom of the entire leadership structure of a nation. Imagine would might have happened had David left this to Solomon to figure out? Imagine the infighting. The jockeying for position. The currying for favor. Imagine the chaos that might have resulted as the sons of Eleazar fought with the sons of Ithamar for the power of the priesthood. Imagine the sons of Levi, set free from their obligations to carry and care for the Tabernacle, refusing to care for the sacred elements of the Lord. Imagine the gatekeepers and musicians each deciding to do their own thing. Solomon would have had a mess on his hands for sure!

But David was faithful. He knew a significant part of his role was to finish well. To pass on a strong legacy to his son. Not just for Solomon's sake but for the sake of Israel as a nation. Because of my experience walking alongside so many pastors, my wife and I talk a lot about our legacy. Though I am still young, the years pass by so quickly. How am I preparing to pass on what has been entrusted to me? Should the Lord tarry and give me a rich and full life on this earth, I might have twenty-five good years of pastoring left. What will those years look like? How will I spend them? When will I know it is time to raise up my successor? How can I set them up for success? My children are beginning to leave home and head off to college. What kind of spiritual legacy have I given them? How have I prepared them to take on the roles and responsibilities of an adult? My parents are getting older and will begin to face the challenges that come along with aging. Am I prepared to care for them? Assist them? Make sure they continue to live a rich and full and vital life alongside their grandkids? These are important questions to ask and ponder and pray over no matter what season of life you find yourself in.

**May 18, 2018**

## THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 131, 138, 139, 143, 144, 145

Reading through the Psalms this morning was refreshing. Especially the final reading from Psalm 145. One cannot meditate on these words enough. One cannot hear these words enough. "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable." God is truly great. Greater than we can imagine. Greater than we think we know. Limitless in his power and knowledge. Limitless in his love and grace. Limitless in his righteousness and justice. His greatness is simply so great it is unsearchable. It is mysterious. Unfathomable. His will is inscrutable. We will never truly understand the mind of God because we are finite. We see through a glass darkly. We only can see part of the picture. We have such a limited view. But God's greatness knows no end! God's greatness knows no boundaries!

"The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all and his mercy is over all that he has made." Echoes of Exodus where God showed Himself to Moses. The true nature and character of God revealed in all its fullness and glory. God is gracious. His love is unconditional. His mercy is everlasting. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love. Nothing that can condemn those who are in Christ Jesus. No conditions. No circumstances. No sinful behavior. No addiction. No crisis. No tragedy. No doubt. No fear. No failure. Nothing in all of creation can separate those who are in Christ Jesus from the gracious, merciful, steadfast love of God. This is why "all your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord!"

"The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works." His Law is beautiful. Precious. It is like water to the soul. His commands are designed for human flourishing. His statutes are for our protection. All his ways are good and kind.

"The Lord is near to all who call on Him...He fulfills the desire of those who fear Him...the Lord preserves all who love Him..." O the wonderful promises of God! They are true! They are secure! They are more real to me than my thoughts. My feelings. My experience. They are the foundation of my life in Christ. Truly God fulfills His promises. Always in His way and in His time and according to His good plan.

I love the Psalms so much sometimes I just sit and let the words wash over me like waves at the seashore. Wave after wave of God's goodness. Wave after wave of God's promises. Wave after wave of God's glory. As I am drenched in the love and grace of God, I find myself quite naturally falling to my knees in praise. Falling to my knees in humble submission. Falling to my knees is thanksgiving for all He has done for me.

**May 19, 2018**

# GENEROSITY

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 27, 28, 29, and Psalm 68

"God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7) God loves it when His people give generously out of the bounty He has entrusted to them. God has given us all we need to take care of every single human need in the world today. According to the New York Times, it would take 10 billion dollars a year to provide clean drinking water to the world. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? It's 1/10 of what Europe spends on alcohol each year and about half of what the US spends on dog food. According to the UN, it would take about 30 billion a year to solve the world's food crisis. According to the WHO, it would cost $58/person to provide everyone with access to basic healthcare. About 371 billion by 2030. The impact? 97 million premature deaths could be averted, including more than 50 million children who never live to see their 5th birthday. 20 million deaths from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease would be prevented. Life expectancy would jump anywhere between 3-9 years. Incredible!

How do we get from here to there? How does one become a generous person? The kind of giver God loves? King David shows us the way. First and foremost, one must love God supremely. We must love God more than our wealth. More than our lifestyles. More than our safety. More than our comfort. We must love God with our whole hearts. Listen to what David tells his son Solomon. "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever." (1 Chronicles 28:9) Essentially, the key to Solomon's success. The key to his kingship will be his love for God.

Second, we must recognize God is the giver of all good gifts. "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name." (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) We don't own a single thing. Everything we have comes from God's own hands. He chose the place of our birth. He endowed us with gifts and talents and abilities. He sovereignly orchestrated the opportunities we've been given. All these things were outside our control and yet they are the secret to our success. Of course we work hard. Of course we do our best. We are not passive in this process. But the foundation of whatever success we've achieved in this life was not laid by our own hands but by God Himself.

Third, we must acknowledge we are unworthy of such divine attention. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding." (1 Chronicles 29:14-15) The world is constantly telling us we "deserve" all we have. We've "earned" all we've received. We are "good" and "righteous" and "worth" every penny of our wealth. The Bible calls this a lie. We are unworthy sinners. Unworthy of God's attention. Unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners in desperate, desperate, desperate need of grace. Our days are like a shadow. There is no abiding. In a generation or two, all we have accomplished will be dust and no one will even remember our names. But God loves us. And has dealt bountifully with us. And has secured for us an eternal home in the heavens if we will receive His greatest gift. Jesus.

Fourth, once we've set our hearts on Christ. Once we've acknowledged God as the "sole proprietor" of this world and all that is in it. Once we've humbled ourselves in our unworthiness before Him. Our hearts and hands

quite naturally open. Our fists unclench. Our fears and doubts fade. And we give. Give generously. Freely. Cheerfully. "I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you." (1 Chronicles 29:17-18)

When it comes to your money...is your heart directed towards God? Or does He get what's left over? When it comes to your wealth...do you see it as a tool in God's hand to do His work? Or do you misuse the gifts of God to provide a safe and comfortable lifestyle for yourself? As a church...are we seeking to feather our own nest or are we continually seeking to give more and more of what God has given us away? (For the record, I am thankful to serve a church who not only gives more than 20% of it's income away but has committed to raising that by 1% a year indefinitely.) As a nation...a Christian nation...are we committed to lead the world in generosity by caring for the less fortunate? Those trapped in cycles of life-threatening poverty? Are we willing to be "strong and courageous", sacrificing our own needs, wants, and desires so the world can have clean water, nutritious food, and basic healthcare? The reality is America could probably fund these initiatives ourselves both domestically and internationally if we tap faith-based networks that are already doing so much of the local work. When you pray...do you ask God to keep His "purposes and thoughts" in your heart so you will grow in generosity as a disciple of Jesus?

**May 21, 2018**

# PERSONAL GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 111-118

Christians believe in a personal God. Not a private god. Not a cosmic butler. Not a divine ATM machine. But a God who is personal, present, and who fulfills His promises. Today's reading is a good one. In so many of the Psalms, God reveals His heart to us. He is a God who is with us. He is a God who is for us. He is a God who is at work in us. He will never leave our side. He will never let us go. He will never give up on us.

"The Lord is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever...He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name!" (Psalms 111:4-5, 9) God's covenant with us in no way depends on us! What a glorious truth! It is completely and utterly dependent on the steadfast, faithful, fiercely loyal love of God!

"The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!" (Psalms 113:4-9) The Lord is especially tender towards those in great need. The poor. The needy. The barren. The hurting. The struggling. The depressed. The anxious. The lonely. God sees you! God looks down on your broken condition and He is at work to raise you up! There is nothing hidden from God. No secret pain or heartache. No injustice. No unrighteousness. The Lord sees it all and He will set all things right!

"I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live." (Psalms 116:1-2) God hears every cry. God sees every tear. God knows every anxious thought. God feels all our pain. And He inclines His ear towards us. He doesn't force us to come to His level. Doesn't require us to ascend the heavens to gain an audience with Him. He inclines. He descends. He listens closely. Intently. He gathers His beloved into His arms and leans in to make sure He hears every word. Every thought. Every prayer.

By the time you get to Psalm 118, it's like the Psalmist can't help himself. The words tumble over each other. Promise after promise. Declaration after declaration. So much to praise God for! So much to thank God for! One of the best ways to read the Psalms is back to back to back and let the words wash over you. Let them fill you. Let them give you confidence today. Let them give you strength.

The Lord is on my side.

The Lord is my helper.

The Lord is my strength.

The Lord is my song.

The Lord is my salvation.

Claim these promises as your own today. Let them guide you through each and every challenge. Each and every crisis. Each and every circumstance of your life.

**May 22, 2018**

## THE GODFATHER

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 1-2 and Psalms 37, 71, 94

Today I pictured Michael Corleone at the altar taking the baptismal vows as his henchmen settled score after score after score. Carlo. Tessio. Virgil Solozzo. Tattaglia. Cuneo. Stacci. Barzini. ("But I didn't know until this day, that it was Barzini all along.") At the end of David's life, there is yet another struggle for power. His son, Adonijah, sees his opportunity to take the throne. He gathers some of David's inner circle around him. He sacrifices sheep and oxen. He calls all the leaders of the nation to join him with a few notable exceptions. But he miscalculates. He moves too soon. David is not yet dead. The timing is not right. And the results are disastrous.

Solomon is crowned king by David at the acclaim of all the people. But David's not quite finished settling scores. He has a long memory. He knows who has wronged him. He knows who has betrayed him. And one gets the sense that he's been waiting. Biding his time. Getting ready for the right moment to strike. Joab. Shimei. Abiathar. Adonijah. All fall to the sword or are exiled as Solomon works to secure his throne. This is real life in the real world and whereas we may not assassinate our political enemies anymore, we certainly do all we can to discredit them and "assassinate" their character. Things haven't much changed since Solomon's time.

What do we take away from today's reading? Well, the biblical authors make it clear that God is using broken, imperfect people to bring about His righteous judgment. Joab is executed for committing the cold-blooded murders of Abner and Amasa. Shimei is executed for the curse he put on David as he fled for his life. Abiathar is exiled for his treason, thus fulfilling a decades old prophecy about Eli's family being expelled from service at the house of God. Adonijah is executed for his treason and sedition. Though it may make our modern sensibilities squirm, God's righteous judgment is a critical component of His eternal character.

A God without justice is a God who is powerless in the face of evil. A God without justice is soft and sentimental. A God without justice cannot stand against the violence and tyranny of this world. A God without justice is weak. But God is a God of justice. And He executes His righteous judgment on sin and evil in this world! This is why the Psalmist can declare, "Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!...For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land...The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming...For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous....But the wicked will perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish—like smoke they vanish away." (Psalms 37:1, 9, 12-13, 17, 20) Though it may not happen in this life, the promise of God is sure! Evil will get its due! Evildoers will not inherit the Kingdom! Satan and his demonic horde will eventually be bound and thrown into the lake of fire! God will make His victory complete! His justice will reign upon the earth!

Until that great day comes, what to make this reading in our own lives? God is a God of justice. He sees our sin. He sees the evil we commit not just with our hands but in our hearts and minds as well. Our evil thoughts. Our evil intentions. Our sinful and selfish ways. Sins of commission and sins of omission. We cannot escape the justice of God! And this should bring us to our knees in worship before the Crucified and Risen Christ who literally stood in our place. Took our punishment. Bore the wrath we deserved. Satisfied God's justice once and for all! Thanks be to God for what He has done!

**May 23, 2018**

## IF YOU LOVE ME...

Readings for the day: Psalm 119:1-88

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15) Jesus' words. Simple. Plain. True. Not if you want to earn my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be good enough for my love, keep my commandments. Not if you want to be worthy of my love, keep my commandments. Simply, "if you love me, keep me commandments." The reality is we cannot love Jesus and reject His commandments. We cannot love Jesus and reject His ways. We cannot love Jesus and reject the Law of God in our lives.

The other day I took my car into the shop. It keeps dying at random times like at stoplights and intersections. Not good! So they hooked it up to a diagnostic machine to see if they could determine the problem. The Law of God operates in much the same way. It serves as a diagnostic for what's truly going on in our hearts. When we read God's Word, do we find ourselves naturally wanting to obey? Do we find ourselves aspiring to be more than we are? Do we experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and a deep humbling in our hearts for how far we have fallen short? Do we repent? Do we experience regret? A godly sorrow? Or do we avoid God's Law? Do we reject God's Law? Do we find ourselves dismissing God's Law as antiquated? Irrelevant? Impossible?

We don't know for sure who penned the words of Psalm 119 but there is a tradition that tells us David wrote this Psalm in order to teach Solomon the "ABC's" of the spiritual life. (The Psalm is arranged in stanzas according to each letter of the Hebrew alphabet.) David, as we know, was a "man after God's own heart." Why? Certainly, it had nothing to do with his behavior. Over and over again, David proved himself to be the chief of sinners. Just like you. Just like me. No, what set David apart was his great love for God's Law. Despite his crimes. Despite his mistakes. Despite his failures. David never stopped loving God's commands. Never stopped aspiring to them. Never stopped seeking to follow them all the days of his life. David's love for the statutes, testimonies, and rules is expressed over and over again in this particular Psalm.

"Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart..."

"With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!"

"In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches..."

"I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word..."

"My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times...'

"Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors..."

"I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart!"

(Psalms 119:2, 10, 14, 16, 20, 24, 32)

Many Christians today claim to love Jesus and yet reject His commandments. They claim to love God and yet reject His Truth and His Way. They believe God's laws are culturally bound and therefore useless in today's world. They argue that God's laws are biased, privileged, and mysoginistic. They argue God's laws are too patriarchal and hierarchical and tyrannical. So they reject God's Law. They reject God's commands. They reject God's ways. But this is pure hypocrisy. One cannot love God and NOT love His commands. Jesus doesn't leave us that option. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Now it's important to remember to distinguish between the ceremonial laws governing the worship life of ancient Israel. The civil laws governing the national life of ancient Israel. And the moral law which is timeless and eternal. Laws forbidding the eating of shrimp are NOT the same as laws governing sexual immorality. Laws forbidding the mixing of two fibers in clothing are NOT the same as laws governing violence and murder. David is addressing the moral law in Psalm 119 as is Jesus in John 14:15. These laws were put in place to teach us how to follow God faithfully. To live a godly and blameless life before Him. They were put in place to convict us when we fall short and instruct us when we seek wisdom.

So do you follow David's advice? Do you meditate on God's law? Day and night? Do you love God's commands? Believe they are what's best for your life?

**May 24, 2018**

# WHAT WOULD YOU ASK FOR?

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

"At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night, and God said, "Ask what I shall give you." (1 Kings 3:5)

Put yourself in Solomon's shoes as you read today. You have a glorious vision of God. He literally bends the heavens to come down and enter your dreams as you sleep. He says to you, "What shall I give to you?" "What is it you want?" "Tell me your heart's desire and I will make it happen." What would you say? How would you respond? What would you ask for?

Take a moment. Don't let yourself respond too quickly. Let the Spirit search your heart as you ponder and reflect. What would you ask for? As you think, let me encourage you to get in touch with your deepest fears. We all have them. Secret fears we harbor in our hearts that we spend a lifetime running from or protecting ourselves from. So much of how we choose to live our lives is in response to primordial fears we all carry inside. Fear of failure. Fear of not having enough. Fear of being unsafe. Fears for our children or our children's children. Fear of insignificance. Fear of disease. Fear of death. What do you think Solomon was afraid of? As a young man, he had just inherited a powerful kingdom in the Middle East. (Not the safest or calmest place in the world, especially back then!) He was surrounded by powerful neighbors with powerful armies. He faced enemies both at home and abroad. As fabulous as his wealth was, it was fleeting in the ancient world. It could be here today and gone tomorrow. There was no FCC to guarantee his money. His people were looking to him for guidance and wisdom. What if he failed? What if he couldn't live up to his father's incredible legacy? All eyes turned to him as he ascended the throne. Would he be able to hold it? Would he preside over a period of peace and prosperity or would the nation crumble under his leadership? What if famines struck? What if the rains didn't come? What if harvests failed? Plagues struck his livestock? So much responsibility at such a young age!

I imagine Solomon's dreams were often filled with anxiety and fear. The pressure to perform had to be enormous. So when the Lord came to him with this question - "What shall I give to you?" - Solomon responds from the depths of his heart. "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" (1 Kings 3:9) Centuries later, a man named James would encourage God's people to pray a similar prayer. "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." (James 1:5) It's a potent prayer. Transcending time and place and circumstance. Solomon is clearly not simply focused on the present or even the short-term. He knows the challenges he will face. He knows the years will weigh heavy. He knows there will be trials and tribulations and struggles and heartache. He knows all of this and so he asks for divine wisdom to make good decisions for the sake of God's people. How selfless! How humble! How insightful!

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus teaches His disciples, saying, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) Isn't that amazing? Essentially, Jesus is asking his disciples the same question He once asked Solomon. What is it you want? Ask and I will give it to you! Seek it out and I will show it to you! Be persistent in prayer and I will open the door for you. I will let you into my presence. I will answer all your questions. I will meet all your needs. I will give you what your heart desires.

Wait a minute, you say! That cannot be true! We've all prayed lots of prayers that were never answered! We've all prayed lots of prayers that just seemed to bounce off the ceiling! We've all prayed lots of prayers and gotten the silent treatment – so we thought - from the Lord. So what's really going on here? What's Jesus really saying?

Jesus is no genie. We are not Aladdin with a magic lamp. Expressing to God our deepest desires and deepest needs is not the same as making three wishes! God probes the deepest recesses of our hearts. Psalm 42:7 describes it like this, "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me." The Apostle Paul says it like this in Romans 8:26-27, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And He who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." This is why Paul can say with confidence that God works all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose! Because God responds to the deepest needs of the human heart. The needs we can't give voice to. The needs we don't want to admit to. The needs are most afraid to express.

The most amazing thing about Solomon is that he's in touch with his needs. He knows he is weak. He knows he is young. He knows he is immature. He knows he is unable to carry the burden that has been placed on his shoulders. He acknowledges all of this and his prayer therefore comes from that deep place within as he asks for divine wisdom to bear up under the challenges that will come. Are you in touch with your deepest needs? Have you spent time reflecting on your fears? Have you come face to face with your failure? Do you acknowledge your weakness and insignificance and are you willing to bring those needs before God? This, friends, is prayer. Humble. Heartfelt. Authentic. Real. Honest to goodness prayer. And such prayers God will NEVER dismiss or despise! Thanks be to God!

**May 25, 2018**

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WISDOM AND FOOLISHNESS

Readings for the day: Psalms 119:89-176

A few years ago I read a book that helped me parse the difference between wisdom and foolishness. Wisdom, according to the author, is when we see the truth and adjust our lives accordingly. Foolishness, on the other hand, is when we demand the truth adjust to our reality. To put it another way, wise people will meet the demands of life while foolish people will demand that life meet their demands. Wise people receive feedback when given, own their own performance, mistakes, and issues and take responsibility without externalizing blame or giving excuses. Foolish people become defensive very quickly when confronted, refuse to own their own shortcomings, and often externalize by blaming those around them. Wise people listen. Fools dismiss or ignore.

Are you a wise person or a fool? How do you know? Well, how do you feel as you read the words from Psalm 119? What happens internally when you consider the demands of God's Law? Are you the kind of person who embraces God's commandments, however imperfectly? Are they your delight? Do you find yourself seeking to bend your life in submission to what God has revealed in His Word? Or are you the kind of person who resists God's laws? Dismisses them? Ignores them? Rationalizes away your sin? When you read or engage God's Word, do you seek to bend it to your will? Your life? Your desires? Are you a wise person or a fool?

The Psalmist is clearly wise...

"I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life..."

"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day..."

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"

"Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way."

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

"Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart."

"The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever."

(Psalms 119:93, 97, 103-105, 111, 160)

The Psalmist loves God's Word. Loves God's Law. Loves God's commands. The Psalmist seeks to do all he can to adjust his life to God's Will. To live his life under God's sovereign rule and authority. He makes no excuses for his sin. He doesn't hide his shortcomings. He faces his failures honestly and transparently. And he seeks God's face.

Sadly, so many in our culture today are fools. Even more tragically, they sit in our pews and attend our worship services. As the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10:2, they have a "zeal for God but not according to knowledge." They love God but not in the way He deserves or demands. Instead, they "do what is right in their own eyes." They bend God's Truth to their reality. They seek to make God's Word null and void either through outright rejection or simple ignorance. They refuse to submit their lives to His will or certain areas of their lives to His will and as a result, they live lives of quiet desperation. They are not evil people. They do not have bad intentions. They simply are misguided. As Paul says in Romans 1, "Although they knew God, they did not honor

him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools..." (Romans 1:21-22)

Let me be the first to say this is me! On some level. At certain seasons. In particular circumstances throughout the course of my life, I have tried to bend God's will to my own. I have tried to rationalize away my sin. I have tried to make twist and turn God's Law to make it fit my life. To no avail. I have thrown myself against the will of God so many times until I finally broke. Finally surrendered. And with that surrender has come wisdom. Not perfection. Wisdom. Self-knowledge. Self-understanding. Seeing myself for who I truly am, warts and all. And learning to trust God's ways above my ways. God's thoughts more than my thoughts. God's will more than my feelings. This is what it means to be wise, friends. The fear of the Lord truly is the beginning of wisdom!

**May 26, 2018**

# SEX AND GOD

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 1-5:1

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We won't let us picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. We flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is the book about? The love for a man and a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book only reveals how corrupt our understanding of human sexuality has become. We see it as dirty yet pleasurable. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom and yet is shocked when such unfettered freedom leads to abuse and violence. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us is that our sexual appetites are almost impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is actually destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? There's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a man and a woman become "one flesh" before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the "oneness" God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

**May 28, 2018**

## LOVE AS STRONG AS DEATH

Readings for the day: Song of Solomon 5:2-16, 6-8, and Psalms 45

"Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised." (The Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

I will admit I am partial to these verses. My wife inscribed them on my wedding ring. We've been together almost twenty-five years at this point and I can honestly say these words ring true now more than ever. Now life has not been a fairy tale. It's been hard. We've weathered some storms. The loss of a child. The failure of a ministry. The dangerously premature birth of our twins. Our children have struggled and battled and fought many battles. Kristi and I have not always been the best parents. We certainly have not always treated each other well. In fact, I almost lost her several years ago due to my workaholism and neglect. So we've had our ups and downs. But what we've learned through it all is that many waters cannot quench love. Many floods cannot drown it. Not if it's founded on the love God has for us.

As I mentioned in my last devotional, the Song of Solomon is not simply a human love poem. Traditionally it has been interpreted as describing the love God has for His people. It is God who sets us as a seal on His heart. It is God who sets us as a seal on His arm. It is God's love that is as strong as death. His love that is as fierce as the grave. When the devil offered Jesus the entire world in exchange for love, Jesus utterly despised him. God's love is eternal. Steadfast. Loyal. True. It is the one sure thing in this uncertain world in which we live.

Ponder the love of God today, friends. A love that will not let you go. A love that will relentlessly pursue you until the day you die. A love that was demonstrated on the Cross. A love that defeated the grave. A love that lives even now eternal in the heavens. A love that is being poured out continually by the Holy Spirit onto God's people so they will share it with the world. This love is available to us! This love never runs dry! Trusting in this love will save your marriage! It will transform your family! It will deepen your friendships! It will change everything. If you let it. If you will simply let Christ reign and rule in your heart. Rest in this love, friends. Let God quiet you with His love. May you walk today in His love and may you experience the blessing that comes from abiding in His love.

**May 29, 2018**

# THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM

Readings for the day: Proverbs 1-4

The world suffers because it lacks wisdom. It lacks understanding. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes. No one takes responsibility. There is always someone else to blame. We live in a world where it is hard for people to accept instruction. Hard for people to humble themselves and receive correction. We resort to yelling and screaming and pouting far too easily. We are a fragile and foolish people.

The world suffers for lack of wisdom. The world is full of challenges. Monumental tasks that cannot be solved by human effort. Cannot be solved by human ingenuity and intellect. The reality is we are not rational creatures. We are far more driven by emotion than we like to admit. Far more inclined to selfishness and greed and hatred than we like to admit. Far more susceptible to temptation than we like to admit. And the resulting corruption destroys any chance we may have at making the world a better place.

What this world needs is wisdom. What we all need is wisdom. And Solomon tells us if we want wisdom, there's only one place to go. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." (Proverbs 3:5-6) God is the fount of all wisdom and understanding. It is God who sees the deep things of this world. God who makes sense of the universe and all that is in it. God who creates order out of our chaos. It is God who can guide us through the maze that is human life. It is God who is our light in the darkness. God who is Truth in the midst of all the lies. And if we truly want to make this world a better place. If we truly want to experience the abundant life Jesus promises those who would follow Him, we have to trust God. We have to seek His wisdom above our own. We have to stop pretending we can do this life on our own.

How often do you pray over the decisions you make? How often do you ask God for wisdom when faced with a difficult situation? How often do you go to God's Word and rely on His Truth even it conflicts with how you think or feel? If this never happens, then I submit you are trying to live your life apart from God. You are trying to survive based on your own wisdom and strength. And I am here to tell you, it will eventually fail. God promises to grant wisdom to all who follow Him. All who will submit to Him. All who will surrender to Him. The fear of the Lord is truly the beginning of wisdom.

**May 30, 2018**

# TEMPTATION

Readings for the day: Proverbs 5-8

It begins with a thought. An attraction. A second glance. Something forbidden catches our attention and the enemy is right there. He's a smooth talker. Delighting in leading us astray. We take our eyes off of Jesus. The horizon shrinks to the immediate. We give no thought as to where this leads. We only feel the desire growing within us. If we could take a step back, we know where this leads. Nowhere. A dead end. A battle ensues. A fight within. A struggle between life and death.

When Solomon describes the temptress, he's not just talking about sex. He's describing in great detail what takes place within the heart of every human being as they wrestle with sin. Our battle with sin is not rational. It doesn't take place in the mind so much as in the heart. The seat of our desires. And it is extremely difficult to resist. It's why Solomon encourages his son to stay as far away as possible. To avoid any situation where temptation may arise. "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house…" (Prov. 5:8) Instead, he encourages him to focus on what he already has. What God has already given him. "Drink water from your own cistern, flowing water from your own well." (Prov. 5:15)

Unfortunately, we do not take Solomon's words to heart. We believe we can fly close to the sun. We believe we can walk right up to the edge without going over. "Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned? Or can one walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" (Prov. 6:27-28) Over and over again, I see this happen. Not just in my life but in the lives of so many I love and serve as pastor. Mistakes are made. Betrayals. Brokenness. And every time we talk it through. Trace it back. Untangle the mess. It begins with this attitude that we are somehow much stronger than we think. And that's why Solomon says, "He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray." (Prov. 5:23)

Resisting sin is part and parcel of the Christian life. The ancients called it the "mortification of the flesh." Paul talks about putting to death his fleshly desires. What does this look like in your life? And do you resist in faith or in your own strength? Friends, we cannot white-knuckle our sobriety. The only way to defeat temptation is to look to Christ. To focus all our attention and all our love and all our devotion on Him. When His love fills our hearts, there is no room for anything else.

**May 31, 2018**

## INTEGRITY

Readings for the day: Proverbs 9-12

"Anxiety in a man's heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad." (Prov. 12:25)

I know so many who struggle with crippling anxiety. They are young. They are old. They are men. They are women. They come from all different backgrounds. No one is immune. Many studies have been done attempting to pinpoint the source but the reality is there are a multiplicity of factors involved. Isolation. Despite tools like social media, people feel more disconnected than ever. Fewer and fewer report having a good friend. Someone they can call at 2AM if they have a need. This feeling of isolation leads to busyness as people fill up their schedules with all kinds of activities, longing to connect. But the opposite happens. The busier we become, the harder it is for us to connect and the more isolated we feel. Add to this all the stress we carry from our jobs, families, health, finances, etc. It's actually not hard to see why we are so anxious.

Anxiety in a person's heart does indeed weight them down. Saps them of their strength. Wears them out. Impacts their physical health. Their mental acuity. Their emotional stability. It hits every system in the body until we are debilitated. Unable to function on some level. So what's the answer? Walking in integrity. "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out." (Prov. 10:9) Now, at first blush, that may seem strange. Doesn't integrity have to do with honesty? Are you suggesting if we just tell the truth, we'll all be okay? Certainly that's part of it. But integrity has a deeper meaning as well. Just as buildings have a "structural integrity" so do human beings. Strong lives are built on strong foundations. They are built on strong, godly habits that keep us secure. When we walk in integrity with the Lord, He becomes our stronghold. Our refuge. Our fortress. And we are able to put aside all anxious thoughts. When we make Christ the foundation of our life. When we build our daily lives around godly rhythms. Christ promises we will experience a peace that passes all understanding.

So what are those godly rhythms? What does it mean to live with integrity before the Lord? It starts with humility. Humble submission to Christ. Surrendering to His Lordship over our lives. On this foundation, we layer daily prayer and reflection in the Scriptures. We layer in weekly worship with our church family. We layer in regular intentional time with a few Christian friends. It could be a mentor. A Bible study. A small group. And finally, we look for a place to serve our Lord. To give ourselves away for the sake of His Kingdom. These four spiritual practices become the four walls of a spiritual house that is strong and firm and secure because it is built in the Lord.

**June 1, 2018**

# MAKING PLANS

Readings for the day: Proverbs 13-16

"All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirit."

"Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established."

"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps." (Proverbs 16:2-3, 9)

"Doug, I want you to remember something as you go to Wisconsin. You are not going to plant a church. You are going to get involved in what God is doing. Whatever church comes out of it will simply be a byproduct of you joining the Lord in His work in your city. Don't ever forget this!" Unfortunately, that's exactly what I did. My mentor, Steve Hayner, was trying to keep me from making a massive mistake. He was trying to keep me from putting the cart before the horse. From getting out in front of God. But in my arrogance and pride, I thought I had it figured out. My way was pure in my eyes. How could it get any more pure than planting a church for Jesus? My heart had already put together a plan but I failed to grasp that it would be the Lord who would establish my steps. And when it came time for the Lord to weigh my spirit, I was found wanting.

It is so easy for us to fall into this trap. To "assume" that because we are doing God's work. Because we are engaged in ministry. Because we are taking care of our families. Because we are having success. Because everything we touch turns to gold that somehow God must be pleased. So we keep making plans. We keep dreaming dreams. We keep doing our thing and we forget all about God. We rarely consult Him. We rarely ask Him what He thinks. We rarely bring our plans before the Lord in prayer. Except when things go wrong, of course! When we run into barriers. Roadblocks. Failure. Then we cry out to God. What happened? Why me? What went wrong?

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain. Unless the Lord establishes our steps, we will stumble and fall. Unless the Lord has commissioned our work, it will fall apart. Unless the Lord is with us, our ways can never be pure.

There's a wonderful spiritual practice called the daily examen. It is the simple practice of bringing the details of our day before the Lord morning and night. Each morning when we wake up, we take our schedule of activities to God in prayer. We pay close attention to our hearts as we do. What makes us anxious today? What brings us peace? What are we excited about? Why? What causes fear? As we bring those things to God, we ask Him to bring consolation. To lead and guide us. To give us wisdom. And then at the end of each day, we repeat the exercise as we look back. What went well? What was hard? Where did we sense God's abiding presence? Where did He feel absent? Why? What did we learn? It doesn't take that long and yet it can make a huge difference in helping us understand the difference between asking God for His plan or asking God to bless our plan for our lives.

**June 2, 2018**

## THE POWER OF THE TONGUE

Readings for the day: Proverbs 17-20

"A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating." (Prov. 18:6)

"A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul." (Prov. 18:7)

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame." (Prov. 18:13)

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits." (Prov. 18:21)

Normally when I read these verse and the many others like them sprinkled throughout the Scriptures, I think of rash words. Words said in anger. Words said in frustration. Words intended to hurt. Words used as weapons. Words said in ignorance. And I do believe these are exactly the kind of words Solomon is referring to when he writes these verses. However, being in a different cultural context this week has given me fresh eyes to see another layer of meaning.

When I am preparing for one of my trips, I usually will have a few people ask me how I communicate. They ask if the local church planters I train speak English. They do not. They ask me if I have learned to speak Oromo or Amharic. I have not with the exception of a few words here and there. They then ask about the interpreter and how that goes. It isn't always easy. The challenge for the interpreter is not only communicate the words being spoken but the meaning being conveyed as well as the emotion behind the meaning. The best interpreters are able to do all three well but it is a monumental challenge! My friends Markos, Elias, Biniyam, Behailu, and Endashaw are some of the most brilliant linguists I know precisely because they are able to take on this challenge and meet it. They are able to do for me what I cannot do for myself.

The other thing I learn through this process is to confront my sense of privilege. When people asked about the translation process, I used to say, "They don't speak English so I use an interpreter." It's a subtle but important nuance as basically I am saying "they" are lacking because "they" don't speak my language so I must "help" them by getting an interpreter. The better and more humble way to put it would be to say, "I don't speak Amharic or Oromo so I need an interpreter." This puts the focus back on my weakness as a monolingual American.

Both my use of language and my assumption of privilege can make or break a cross-cultural relationship. It's only by the grace of God that my "mouth hasn't invited a beating" on any number of occasions where I was culturally insensitive. And because I teach basic theology, I have marveled that my ignorance of local customs, lingual nuances, etc. doesn't get more in the way. Again, all credit is due to the Holy Spirit as well as to the brilliance of the translators I get to work with when I am overseas.

The key to harnessing the power of the tongue is to bring every thought captive to Christ. To run every thought. Every emotion. Every idea we have through the grid that is Christ and ask ourselves if it honors Him. Chances are high that we are truly seeking to honor Christ with our lips, we will not speak careless words. We will not cling to our cultural privilege. We will not through gasoline on the fire of a conflict but instead use gentle words to turn away wrath. Positive words to bring hope. Loving words to ward off hate. You see, the power of the tongue works both ways. It can be used for good as much as evil. It can uplift as much as it tears down. In my experience, simply using my words to bless others makes a huge impact. How can you use your words today to bring about the blessing of God in someone's life?

**June 4, 2018**

# PRIDE AND HUMILITY

Readings for the day: Proverbs 21-24

"Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin…"Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride." (Prov. 21:4, 24)

There is no greater sin than pride. Pride lies at the root of all sin. It was pride caused Satan to fall from grace and glory when the heavens were young. It was pride that caused Adam and Eve to reject God's command and go their own way. Cain's pride was wounded so he killed Abel. It was Joseph's pride that got him in trouble with his brothers. In his pride, Moses thought he could deliver Israel without God. Saul, in his pride, refused to make right sacrifices. David's pride caused him to number Israel so he could see how powerful he was. Solomon, in his pride, thought he could worship lots of different gods and still remain faithful to Yahweh. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we see pride creep up in God's people with devastating effect.

Pride is still our greatest sin. Pride makes us think we know best how to live our lives. Pride makes us think we can stand in judgment over God's Word and determine what is relevant. Pride makes us think we are like God, discerning good from evil. But how's that working out? When we look at the world around us, is it not pride that is the root cause of the violence? The suffering? The pain? Is it not the pride of nations that causes them to go to war? Is it not the pride of privilege that causes some to look down on others? Is it not the pride of wealth that causes us to accumulate more and more while others go without? Is it not pride that drives our decision-making on a daily basis? We do what's best for us first without a thought for others. Haughty. Proud. Wicked. Scoffer. Arrogant. These are the labels God uses for us when we fall into this trap.

So what's the answer? Humility. Not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. Or less of ourselves than we ought. But simply thinking of ourselves less. When we think of ourselves "less." When we consider others before we consider ourselves. When we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus who – though He was God – did not consider His prerogatives as God something to hold onto. We begin to become humble. We take on the form of a servant. We begin to look like Jesus. And humility comes with its own reward. "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life." (Prov. 22:4) God blesses the humble. God blesses those who put Him first. Who put others first. He grants them His favor and they often find the very things they were chasing so hard after coming into their life. The difference, of course, is that these things no longer have any hold on us because Christ now has the tighter grip.

So are you a humble person? Are you the kind of person who needs compliments? Needs to be told how good you are? Are you the kind of person who hates compliments? Hates it when you are recognized for something you did? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who receives rebuke? Correction? Critique? Or do you grow resentful and angry? Are you the kind of person who crumbles at the first sign of disapproval? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who chases achievement? Are you the kind of person who avoids achievement? Both are signs of pride, friends. God wants you to think of yourself less. The truly humble person accepts honor and praise for the things they do well because they recognize God has blessed them. The truly humble person is generous with praise of others. Looks for opportunities to build others up. To spread the praise while taking responsibility for any failures. The truly humble person rejects any attempt of the enemy to make them feel worthless, afraid, or of less value in the eyes of God. A truly humble person is free because they do not live for praise nor in fear of praise. So are you a humble person? Pray for God to show you the way.

**June 5, 2018**

# MOUNT MORIAH

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

"Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite." (2 Chron. 3:1)

Brain's not 100% as I just landed in LA after a long 24 hours of travel that began yesterday at noon and still have one leg to go. Today's thoughts may not be all that profound!:-) However, I love today's passage mainly because of how it ties so many different threads together. Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount. It's the place where Solomon built his Temple. But as Chronicles mentions, it's also the place where David saw the angel of the Lord relent from his destruction of Jerusalem. 1 Chron. 21:16 tells us, "David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven..." This is really what temples were all about in the ancient world. They were the places where heaven and earth meet. Where human beings could come before God in a unique way. The Celts called them "thin spaces" and we too seek out these experiences in our own worship.

This isn't the only place Mount Moriah appears in the Scriptures. Moriah is also the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. And those of you who remember the story from Genesis 22, probably recall it was the angel of the Lord who stayed Abraham's hand. And for those who believe in the rapture and certain strains of end times theology, Moriah is the place where Jesus will return when He comes again.

What to take away from the building of the Temple? First of all, I think it's important to recognize sacred spaces in our lives. Places where God showed up in a powerful way. Bending the heavens to come to earth to perform a miracle or do a mighty work in our lives. Those spaces will hold a special place in our hearts as well they should. Second, we need to remember that we ourselves are now the Temple of the Living God. A walking, talking "Moriah" of sorts due to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. God has touched down in our lives. He has done something in our hearts. And we need to praise Him continually for the miracle of spiritual rebirth.

**June 6, 2018**

## THE TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It's serves as a great model for us as we think about our own prayer life. It begins with an ascription of praise for who God is and a recognition that He is utterly transcendent.

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart..." (1 Kings 8:23) Solomon acknowledges the greatness of God. His majesty. His glory. His splendor. He is not just one among many gods. He is alone is the true God of the heavens and the earth. He is also a God defined by faithfulness. Eternal loyalty. Steadfast love for His covenant people who are the humble recipients of His blessing. This attitude is truly the starting point of prayer. Prayer must begin with an understanding of who God is and who we are. We are not the same. We are not on the same level. God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the king and we are his servants. Prayer place us in a humble position before the Lord. This is the ONLY posture one can take when they come before God in prayer.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day..." (1 Kings 8:27-28) As we come humbly before the Lord, we are assured of His promise to hear us. To listen. To attend to our prayers. God hears every word. Every cry. He sees every tear. He knows the secret thoughts of our hearts and He delights when we bring those before Him openly and honestly. Solomon makes it clear that the Temple's primary purpose is to serve as a house for prayer. A place where Israel can come before God and lay their requests before Him.

God not only listens to our requests, He also hears our confession. Throughout this prayer, Solomon acknowledges the inescapable reality of sin. It is ubiquitous. It is endemic. It is simply part of who we are as God's people. So when a man or woman sins. When God's people sin collectively. Whether against neighbor or friend. Through systems of oppression or abuse. When Israel suffers defeat at the hands of their enemies or the rains are shut up in the heavens or famine strikes the land. In those moments, if Israel will humble themselves and pray and seek God's face, God promises to hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land. He promises to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know..." (1 Kings 8:39)

God will do all these things in such a way as to make His name great upon the earth. Even in Solomon's prayer, there is a missional, outward-facing component. "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43) God desires to fill the earth with His glory. Israel is called to serve this very purpose. In the way Israel orders her life and faithfully serves her Lord, she will be a witness to the nations and to all of creation of the steadfast love of God.

You can see why I love this prayer so much! As I said above, it is a great model for us to follow in our own lives as we ponder and reflect on our relationship with God. Because of Christ, Christians have access to the Father in ways Solomon, in all his wisdom, could never have imagined! Because Christ sits at the Father's right hand interceding for us continually, the door is always open. The way to the Holy of Holies always clear. We have a standing invitation to come before our Heavenly Father with the blessed assurance He will always listen. When you pray, pray with this eternal promise firmly fixed in your mind and heart.

**June 7, 2018**

# REVIVAL

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chron. 7:14)

Do you pray for revival? Revival in God's Church? Revival in our nation? Revival in your own heart? For years now, this verse from 2 Chronicles has been lifted up as the model prayer for revival. We look around at our culture today. We look around our nation today. All we see are divisions. The flourishing of hate. Racism rearing its ugly head. Sexual assault and abuse. Violence against women and children. Polarization leading to dehumanization and the demonizing of those who might disagree with us. It's painful and heartbreaking to see. Some blame social media. I do not. I believe social media has merely brought transparency to the pervasive evil that was already present.

In the face of all the sin and evil and suffering in our nation, the evangelical church took up this prayer from 2 Chronicles 7:14. We begged God to forgive our sin and heal our land. We begged God for revival and a fresh movement of the Holy Spirit. We begged God for transformation and spiritual renewal. But revival has not come. Our nation continues its plunge into darkness and chaos. So what happened? Did God fail to fulfill His promise? Did He NOT hear from heaven? Why hasn't healing come?

I believe its because we've played the Pharisee. As much as we desired God's forgiveness and healing, we refused to humble ourselves, pray, seek God's face, and turn from our own wicked ways. Evangelical leaders are failing morally in shocking numbers. Sexual temptation. Greed. Power. Influence. Fame. Fortune. Pastors purchasing private jets. Living in multi-million dollar homes. Sacrificing their commitment to Christ for political influence. Engaging in inappropriate relationships and adulterous affairs. Focusing more on building their brand than the Kingdom of God. It is brutal. Shocking. Heartbreaking. Hypocritical. We arrogantly assume we can police the moral behavior, thoughts, and attitudes of the general public while at the same time refusing to repent of our own sin. On this point, Jesus is 100% clear. We must take the log out of our own eye before we dare to point out the speck in someone else's eye. The harsh reality is we have lost all credibility.

So what do we do? We humble ourselves. Before the Lord. Before each other. Before the world. We are broken people. We are sinful people. We have no right to claim any moral high ground. We pray. We ask God to continue His sanctifying work in us. We beg the Holy Spirit to give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand the mind of Christ. We seek God's face. We stop believing the world revolves around us. We stop treating God like some on-call, cosmic concierge whose only purpose for existence is to meet our emotional needs. We stop treating worship like a consumer product and instead give God the worship He deserves in the way He demands. And finally, we turn from our wicked ways. We come clean. We confess. We repent. We make ourselves vulnerable and transparent before God, before each other, and before the world. Most importantly, we do these things authentically with no other agenda than to come clean before our Heavenly Father.

Jesus once said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." (Matt. 6:33) Too often we flip things around. Put the cart before the horse. Try to harness God's Kingdom to advance our own agendas – personal, social, or political. God will have none of it! He will not share His glory! He will not share the limelight! He will not share the credit! He alone is worthy! He alone is Savior! He alone is Lord! He doesn't need us. He doesn't need our wealth. He doesn't need our resources. He doesn't need our knowledge or talent or ability. He doesn't need our country. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. Empires rise and fall before Him. He knows the name of each of the billion trillion stars in the heavens. And yes, He hears our prayers. Yes, He will forgive our sin. Yes, He will heal our land. But only if we first relinquish our vain and selfish pride.

**June 9, 2018**

# THE GREATNESS OF GOD

Readings for the day: Psalms 146-150

I love these final Psalms. They extol the greatness of God. I can imagine all of Israel gathered at the Temple singing them at the top of their lungs. Wave after wave of sound ascending to the heavens. Their hearts on fire. Their passion for God inflamed. Their love for Him crescendoing. Their worship overwhelming the senses. It's a powerful thing to witness.

When I was in Ethiopia last week, I had the privilege of worshiping with a Mekane Jesu church. Pentecostal Lutherans. When they sang, it was a whole body experience. Dancing. Swaying. Clapping. They sang without any sense of self-conscious pride. No insecurities at all. No worries about the number of verses or choruses on repeat. No debates over personal preference. They simply sang from their hearts. Their joy was palpable. They love singing together. They love being together. They love worshiping before the Lord. It was powerful.

Like Israel, they praised the God "who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." (Psalms 146:7-9) They recounted God's goodness. They praised God's greatness. My interpreter helped me understand each chorus and verse. They sang about God's provision. God's protection. God's miraculous healing. God's deliverance from evil.

Like Israel, they praised the God "determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure...He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry...He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes...He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow." (Psalms 147:4-5, 8-9, 16, 18) It's the rainy season now and they are experiencing the blessing of abundant water flowing, bringing life to their dry land. Flowers are in bloom. Crops are flourishing. Herds increasing. The grasslands rich and full and green.

Like Israel, they know when they praise their God, they are joining their voices with the heavens and the earth. The heavenly host and the saints who have gone before them. They join the great cloud of witnesses around the throne of God to give Him the worship due His Holy Name. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!" (Psalms 148:1-4)

Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can abandon ourselves to worship in the way Israel once did! Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can put aside all pretense and pride and self-consciousness and insecurity and consumeristic thoughts and attitudes and worship God like our Ethiopian brothers and sisters! Oh how I long for the day when we would come face to face with our God! See Him for who He is! Worship Him in Spirit and in Truth! Give Him the praise He deserves! The worship He demands! Fall on our faces before His throne, casting all our crowns before Him! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

**June 11, 2018**

## THE TEST OF PRAISE

Readings for the day: Proverbs 27-29

I confess I have a strong need for affirmation. A strong need to be admired. A strong need to be respected. A strong need for praise. It began when I was young. Growing up in a demanding environment where it often felt like my best was never good enough. The bar always just a bit out of reach. I got good grades but not straight A's. I played football and lacrosse at a high level, even made all-state in lacrosse, but the conversations after games tended to center on my mistakes. I made Eagle Scout, thankfully the highest rank one could achieve but was pushed to get there as quick as possible. Looking back, I don't actually blame anyone. Not my parents or grandparents. We are just a high-achieving family. However, there is a darker side to all things and the darker side to this approach to parenting is that I became starved for affirmation.

Solomon seems to believe this is a common condition and he offers advice on how to deal with praise in a godly manner. "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." (Prov. 27:1) Perhaps another way of saying, "Do not count your chickens before they hatch." Do not assume anything. Do not take anything for granted. Do not fall into the trap of believing tomorrow is guaranteed. Do not fall into the trap of believing life moves from one success to another. There is failure. There is disappointment. There is pain. These are realities one cannot escape. "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." (Prov. 21:2) When you achieve something good, do not self-promote. This is incredibly counter-cultural in a social media world where self-promotion is the name of the game. Our self-worth is often rooted in the number of "likes" and "follows" we get on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. We post information to make sure everyone knows what we've done but Solomon encourages us to go the opposite way. To leave the praise to others. Leave the promotion to others. Leave the affirmation to others. Let it rise organically as it will mean so much more. "The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and a man is tested by his praise." (Prov. 27:21) What does the praise of others do to your soul? Does it tap those wells of pride in your heart? Do you find yourself hungering and thirsting for the recognition? Or do you go the opposite way? Do you deflect? Self-deprecate? Refuse to accept honest, heartfelt praise when it is given? Both betray a prideful heart that must be crucified. True humility is learning to accept praise when it is offered. Receiving affirmation for a job well done with a simple, "Thank you."

Another way to determine how you good you are at handling praise is to look at how you handle criticism. Are you able to receive critique when it is offered? Are you able to humbly submit to those in authority over your life such as a parent, coach, teacher, employer, etc? When they correct you, do you accept it or resist it? And what about when a peer confronts you? A co-worker or friend? Are you able to receive their rebuke or do you blameshift? React negatively? Push them away? Solomon challenges us to remain humble. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." (Prov. 27:6) When someone you love plucks up the courage to have the hard conversation with you...listen. They are being faithful. They are demonstrating great love and care and concern for you. Surround yourself with friends who are willing to tell you the truth even when it hurts rather than a bunch of people who only flatter you and tell you how great you are. They do not have your best in mind. "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." (Prov. 27:17) Bang two pieces of iron together and sparks often fly. Growing as a person is not easy. It requires struggle. Struggle is good. Fighting. Wrestling. Battling oneself is an essential requirement to becoming the person God created us to be. Jesus clearly teaches us that following Him requires death to self. We cannot do this on our own. We need people who will encourage us in this effort. "He who is often reproved, yet stiffens his neck, will suddenly be broken beyond healing." (Prov. 29:1) Resistance only leads to more pain. Take it from me. I've experienced the deep brokenness that comes from refusing to listen to those who had my best in mind. In my pride I thought I knew better. In my arrogance, I believed I had all the answers. And it took my face hitting the pavement for me to learn humility.

Where do you find yourself this morning? Are you able to take a step back and evaluate your life? When was the last time you received a rebuke? Listened to a critique? Humbled yourself before others? And what do you do with praise? When you achieve something, is your first instinct to share it on social media and what are you hoping to gain? What happens in your heart if you don't get a bunch of likes? Look back over the posts you've made over the years, what kind of image are you projecting to the world? Is it real? Or manufactured to garner praise? What steps do you need to take to follow Solomon's advice?

**June 12, 2018**

# CHASING THE WIND

Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 1-6

Robin Williams. Kate Spade. Anthony Bourdain. These are the famous faces of suicide. I could name several more from my own community who are not as famous. Kids. Young adults. Men and women in their late fifties and early sixties who feel they have nothing left to live for. According to the CDC, suicide rates have spike 30% in half of the states in the US in the last twenty years. It is now a leading cause of death, ranking tenth on the list. It's causes are manifold. Mental health problems. Relationship issues. Job loss. Financial pressures. Substance abuse. And it often strikes without warning. Colorado has one of the highest suicide rates in the nation and Douglas County, where I live, struggles significantly with this issue. I remember back in 2014, four teenagers in our area taking their own lives in the span of 11 days! And it's unfortunately a rare year when I don't perform the funeral of at least one suicide victim.

"Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity." (Ecclesiastes 1:2) The writer of Ecclesiastes (traditionally ascribed to Solomon) clearly takes a dim view of life. Work is vanity. Riches are vanity. Pleasure is vanity. Success is vanity. Wisdom is vanity. All is vanity. What do we gain by working so hard? No one remembers us after we're gone. Our wealth is passed on to another to enjoy. The righteous and unrighteous both die and are laid in the grave. All end up as dust. Clearly the Teacher is depressed. He looks around at all he has accomplished in his life and abandons all hope. He finds no meaning in anything he has done or accomplished. All he has to show for all his hard work and toil and pursuit of wisdom is sorrow. Grief. Pain. "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." (Ecclesiastes 1:18) "So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind." (Ecclesiastes 2:17) It's not easy to read. It's feels like we're reading the Teacher's personal journal and hearing his inmost thoughts as he grapples with despair. A similar cord is struck when one reads Mother Theresa's journals which were published posthumously.

One of the things I love most about the Bible is its honesty. It is raw. Gut-wrenching at times. It never sugar-coats or glosses over the harsh realities of life. Solomon in all his wisdom struggled with depression. Solomon for all his wealth and power felt inadequate. Solomon for all his success and achievement felt insecure. I imagine everyone can identify with him on some level. No matter how much you achieve. How much you accumulate. How popular you become. It's never enough. It's vanity and a striving after the wind.

So what's the answer? We'll find out when we finish the book tomorrow. After all has been said and done, the Teacher comes to one final, critically important conclusion. "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecclesiastes 12:13) In fact, some suggest we need to read Ecclesiastes back to front instead of front to back. I disagree. I believe it is important for us to follow the Teacher's example. Grapple with our own darkness and despair. Face our depression and anxiety and fear. Honestly come to grips with the utter hopelessness we have without Christ. What makes Ecclesiastes so powerful even to this day is the way it speaks to our hearts about idolatry. We have a tendency to place our trust in our own wisdom. Our own strength. Our own accomplishments. Our own wealth. Our own toil and hard work. Our pursuit of pleasure. Ecclesiastes exposes these idols as empty and meaningless which, in turn, points us back to God.

**June 13, 2018**

## ENJOY LIFE

Readings for the day: Ecclesiastes 7-12

Often lost in all Solomon's talk about vanity and emptiness and chasing the wind is the number of times he encourages the reader to enjoy life. Enjoy the time they have been given. Enjoy the hours and days of blessing. Enjoy the seasons when life is good. Yes, you will experience bad times. Yes, you will experience hardship and adversity. Yes, you cannot place your trust in wisdom, wealth, influence, or a good name. But you can still find joy. Simple pleasures of feasting, friendship, and family.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

"And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9-10)

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

To be sure, Solomon is encouraging a "sober" joy. A joy tempered by the realities of hard work, adversity, judgment, and death. A deeper joy that transcends superficial happiness. A joy that springs from a deep love of life and all the blessings God has given. The profound joy that comes from a life lived before God in this world. The joyful life for Solomon is not all bubbles and rainbows and unicorns. It's an utterly realistic joy. A joy that acknowledges the harsh truth about our broken world. A joy that walks eyes wide open to pain and suffering. A joy that doesn't run from trouble.

I've been a pastor for almost twenty years. I've spent countless hours counseling people from all walks of life. I've served congregations on the East Coast. The Deep South. The Midwest. And for the last eight and half years, out West here in Colorado. A common thread running throughout all those conversations is the universal desire for happiness. A craving for joy. But it's a joy without hardship. A happiness without sorrow. An unrealistic expectation that life can be lived...indeed should be lived...without pain and suffering. In the most extreme cases, the person seems to believe God "owes" them such a life. It's why one of the most frequent questions I have to help people wrestle with is "Why, God?" Why did God let this happen to me? Why didn't God protect me from this tragedy? Why does God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Such questions, at their best, reveal the longing we all have for the world to come. The world where God will wipe away every tear, end all injustice, and heal every hurt. At their worst, however, they reveal a deep misunderstanding of the world around us. A false expectation that this life can be lived without experiencing hardship and pain. Solomon is clearly confronting the latter attitude.

So how do you experience the world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Success and

failure? And do you seek the deeper joy God offers us in Jesus Christ? I love what Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these...Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all...Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (Matthew 6:25, 27-29, 31-32, 34)

**June 14, 2018**

## DANGER OF WEALTH

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Prov. 30-31

"Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." (Proverbs 30:8-9)

Today shows us why it is so good to read the Bible chronologically. Juxtaposing these verses over and against the reign of Solomon provides a striking image for us to reflect upon. We tend to think of wealth as a blessing from God. We rejoice when our ship comes in. We are thankful to live in beautiful homes. Drive nice cars. Take nice vacations. Build plenty of wealth to retire on and enjoy the twilight years of life. What we fail to consider is the very real spiritual dangers that accompany such wealth.

Solomon was fabulously wealthy. During his reign, Israel enjoyed a period of great peace and prosperity. The economy was strong. Unemployment was down. Silver was so plentiful it ceased to hold any value. His annual income was astronomical. 666 talents of gold equals almost 40,000 pounds of gold each year. An ounce of gold on the current market is almost $1,300 dollars. $1300x16x40,000 = $832 million dollars per year! Incredible! No wonder he overlaid everything with gold! No wonder he sat on an ivory throne! But with all that wealth came temptation. The temptation to become self-sufficient. The temptation to become self-reliant. The temptation to forget God as the One from whom all blessings flow. And that's exactly what happened. Solomon forgot God. Influenced by his foreign wives, he began building shrines to different gods. Trusting in his own strength, he failed to see the danger before it was too late. Unlike his father David, there is no indication in Scripture that Solomon ever repented of his sin. And though he finished his reign in relative peace, the nation would fracture after his son came to the throne.

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10) It is often said that money itself is not evil but only the love of money. This is true. However, I am a sinner so when you place money in my hands I have a tendency to fall in love with it. I almost cannot help myself. My heart is corrupt and naturally falls in love with material things. The more I have, the more susceptible I am to this particular sin.

Now consider where I live. Douglas County routinely ranks among the wealthiest counties in the country. The average household income is well above six figures. This places us in the top tenth of a percent of the world's wealthiest people according to globalrichlist.com. And while there are great blessings that come with such wealth, we have to acknowledge there is also great spiritual danger. We have a tendency to forget God. We have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-sufficient. Self-dependent. Is it any wonder then that our suicide rate is among the highest in the nation as well? Depression. Anxiety. Fear. Addiction. In our "affluenza", we have forgotten God. Our only hope is to repent and turn back to Him. To sacrificially and generously give away our wealth so that it loosens its grip on us. We must seek to store up treasures in heaven for where our treasure is, so our heart will be also.

**June 15, 2018**

## ENTITLEMENT

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

We live in a narcissistic age. The focus is all on “me.” It shapes the way we work. The way we live. The way we relate to others. Millions of dollars are being spent every year by advertisers and the media to convince us that “we” are the center of the universe. Our needs are what are most important. We deserve more. We are worth more. We are owed more. The messaging is endless. Relentless. Ubiquitous. It’s impossible to escape. The impact is devastating and wide-ranging. Entitlement affects our families, neighborhoods, little leagues, schools, businesses, churches, politics, you name it. Entitlement is the source of the “culture of outrage” one experiences on cable news and social media. Entitlement creates and reinforces divisions in our country because the grand American experiment was founded on the principle of self-sacrifice. But to the entitled, sacrifice is a foreign concept. Serving others anathema. Giving oneself away not in the vocabulary.

Solomon is dead. The wisest and most powerful king Israel has ever known is no longer on the throne. It’s Rehoboam’s time. Will he unite the nation? Clearly the opportunity is there. “Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king.” (1 Kings 12:1) All Israel showed up with the intent of making him king. This is his moment. All he has to do is reach out and capture it. The people even show him the way. Lighten our load a bit. Give us some rest. Your father worked us hard and we need a break. Do this and we will serve you. The wise counselors his father relied on for advice agree. "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." (1 Kings 12:7) Serve the people. Bless them. Honor them. Do right by them. If you will do this, they will serve you forever. But Rehoboam feels entitled. We don’t know his inner thoughts but I imagine he desired to do even greater things than his father. He aspired to an even greater fame. Greater glory. He doesn’t want to serve the people. They exist to serve him. This is the essence of the advice of his peers. Don’t show weakness. Don’t give an inch. Show them you’re twice the man your father was. It is better to be feared than to be loved. “My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.” (1 Kings 12:10-11) Entitlement. You owe me, Israel. I demand you serve me. I demand you submit to me. I demand you love me. The result? Outrage. Rebellion. Division. The fracturing of a once great nation.

Do you struggle with entitlement? When your child is benched at a game, do you automatically blame the coach? Believe he or she has been unfairly treated? When they come home complaining about their teacher, do you automatically assume the teacher has it out for them? When you are passed over for the promotion at work, do you assume something nefarious about the decision? When you hear politicians from the other political party speak, do you impugn their motivations? Assume the worst about their intentions? When you are disappointed at church, do you gossip? Spread rumors and lies? Such attitudes and actions betray a sinful sense of entitlement in your heart that needs to be confessed before the Lord.

Repentance in this area is also important. Repentance replaces entitlement with a servant-heart. A heart that longs to serve others rather than be served. Husbands lay down your lives for your wives. Wives serve your husbands. Fathers, don’t exasperate your children. Serve them as unto the Lord. Employers, don’t treat your employees as commodities to be used but honor them as co-laborers in the work you are doing. Employees seek to serve your employers with a gracious heart and be thankful for the job they provide. Teachers, serve your students. Students, serve your teachers and understand they are there because they have your best in mind. Coaches, serve your players. Do everything you can to further their athletic careers. Players trust your coaches. Put the good of the team above your own success. Politicians, work not for the good of your party but for the good of our nation. Church leaders, seek first the Kingdom of God and do all you can to help those God has entrusted to your care to grow in their relationship with Jesus.

Entitlement poisons everything it touches. A servant-heart blesses everything it touches. Where do you find yourself today?

**June 16, 2018**

## THE DANGER OF FALSE WORSHIP

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

"Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one. He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites. And Jeroboam appointed a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah, and he offered sacrifices on the altar. So he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves that he made. And he placed in Bethel the priests of the high places that he had made. He went up to the altar that he had made in Bethel on the fifteenth day in the eighth month, in the month that he had devised from his own heart. And he instituted a feast for the people of Israel and went up to the altar to make offerings." (1 Kings 12:25-33)

Yesterday, we read about Rehoboam's folly as he refused to listen to wise counselors and instead took his advice from fools. The result was the dividing of a nation. God had ordained Jeroboam to take over the northern kingdom of Israel. Ten tribes were entrusted into his hands. God was with him. God had established him. God had raised him up to be king. But Jeroboam was scared. Afraid of what might happen if his people returned to Jerusalem for worship. He was afraid their hearts would return to the house of David and he would lose his kingdom. So makes a tragic mistake. Rather than trust God, he creates his own system of worship. Rather than give God the worship He deserves and demands, Jeroboam makes idols. Establishes his own priesthood. Built his own temples and high places. Established his own feasts. To be sure, these things paralleled the system laid out in Scripture. They had the same forms and functions. They seem to accomplish the same purpose which was the worship of Yahweh. But they were not the same and the consequence for falsely worshiping Yahweh is utter destruction. The northern kingdom of Israel will be wiped off the map. The people will be scattered, never to return. It's a painful reminder of how deeply God cares about His own glory. Worship is about Him, not about us.

This story serves as a sobering reminder of how dangerous it is to bring our personal preferences into worship. This is something that afflicts so many churches in America today. God's people complain about the style of music. The personality of the preacher. The shape of the liturgy. God's people "judge" or "evaluate" the quality of worship by the emotional connection they feel during the experience. God's people seem far more interested in "relevance" than in biblical faithfulness. As such, Jeroboam's story should bring us all to our knees in repentance.

God cares about our worship. He expects, even demands, His people worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. He expects us to enter into worship solely focused on bringing honor and glory to Him alone. For He alone is worthy to be praised! Worship that honors God is faithful to Scripture. Music that honors God has little to do with style and everything to do with the words being sung. Prayers that honor God are humble and contrite. Liturgy that honors God connects us with the saints who have gone before us and we join them even as they worship now around God's throne. In short, while the ceremonial laws governing worship have been fulfilled by Christ, we still must give God the worship He deserves and demands. Anything less is an abomination. (And yes, I use that word intentionally...)

So let me be bold here. If you find yourself in worship thinking about how much you hate the music and refusing to sing...you are in sin. If you find yourself bored in worship even as the gospel is being preached...you are in sin. If you the primary reason you attend church is to be entertained or to be emotionally moved...you are in sin. If you jump from church to church without ever committing your gifts, talents, wealth, and abilities to a local church family...you are in sin. If you go to church to "be fed" rather than to give God the honor and praise He deserves...you are in sin. If you attend worship flippantly, casually, or only when it's convenient for your schedule...you are in sin. You must repent. You must ask God to forgive you and grant you a heart for true worship. Neglecting the worship of the Living God is serious, friends. Make sure your heart is right before God.

**June 18, 2018**

# THE FIRST STEP

Readings for the day; 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16

Life is full of challenges. Ups and downs. Successes and failures. Live for very long at all and you will experience struggle and heartbreak. It's part and parcel of living in this broken world. In over twenty years of ministry, I have had the privilege of walking with people through some of the hardest times in their lives. Times of great fear and stress. Perhaps it was a marriage that was failing. Children who wandered astray. Corporate down-sizing. Cancer. Sudden death. In almost every case, our first instinct is to go with what we know. Play to our strengths. Muster all our resources so we can make it through. We use our wealth, position, privilege, influence, relationships, talents, and abilities to cope with the pain. And although it almost feels instinctual. Rational even. It is almost always the wrong decision.

We see this play out in the lives of the kings of Israel and Judah. Over and over again, they are confronted with crisis. War. Famine. Disease. You name it. And over and over again, God reaches out to His people. He longs for them to turn to Him for comfort and provision and strength and protection. But they reject God. They pay off neighboring kingdoms. They utilize diplomatic back channels. They compromise on any number of levels, hoping to make it through. But God is watching. "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this, for from now on you will have wars." (2 Chronicles 16:9) God is looking for a people who will seek Him with all their hearts. "And they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, with all their heart and with all their soul..." (2 Chronicles 15:12) When God's people are faithful, they are blessed. God is their strength. He is their present help in times of trouble. When God's people are unfaithful, they are cursed. God withdraws His protective hand. Gives them over to their desires and lets them suffer the consequences.

Life is a battlefield. The Kingdom of God is always at war with the kingdom of self. This is true in every sphere. Marriage. Family. Neighborhoods. Schools. Work. Politics. Church. You name it. Every time two or more are gathered in Jesus' name, He is with them. And in being "with them", the conflict is joined! The battle engaged! Our enemy will not go gently into the goodnight. He will not fade away easily or give up his territory willingly. The struggle is real, friends. And it impacts every choice we make from the most significant to the most mundane.

When you wake up in the morning, the battle begins. Will you seek God's Kingdom first or satisfy your own needs? This impacts who gets the bathroom first, who feeds the kids, and who makes the bed. It impacts who makes the morning coffee at work, who takes out the trash, and who fields the nasty phone call. It impacts how money gets spent, how time is scheduled, and where resources are brought to bear. God wants all of it, friends! He will not settle until He is Lord of all of life! Until every knee bows – in heaven, on earth, and under the earth - and every tongue confesses that He is Lord! So let me encourage you to make your "first step" today a step of faith. Place your trust in Jesus for all your needs and watch Him go to work.

**June 19, 2018**

# TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 15:25-34, 16, and 2 Chronicles 17

Humanity is totally depraved. Left to our own devices, we will turn to sin over and over again. “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” (Proverbs 26:11) This is a pattern revealed in Scripture from the opening pages of Genesis forward. God raises up a man or woman after his own heart. Think of Seth. Noah. Abraham and Sarah. Moses. Hannah. Samuel. David. But as each generation passes, things go from bad to worse. The faithfulness of our forefathers is lost in our lust for power and control and self-gratification. We’ve seen this before and we’ll see it again. Jeroboam abandoned the ways of David. Despite the fact that God Himself raised him up and gave him the northern kingdom, Jeroboam refused to worship God in the way He deserves and demands. The result is chaos. A kingdom in constant conflict. Assassinations. Betrayal. Rebellion. And throughout this refrain, “He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...”

What keeps us from experiencing a similar fate? Faith. I love how the Bible describes King Jehoshaphat. 2 Chronicles 17:6, “His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord.” What does this mean? Jehoshaphat removed all the idols and shrines that had been built on the hills throughout Judah. He loved God and followed His commandments. He sent out his officials to the farthest reaches of his kingdom to bring God’s Word to the people. Doesn’t that sound like the Great Commission from Matthew 28? Rather than wait for the people to come to him, come to the Temple, come to Jerusalem to learn about the ways of God; Jehoshaphat is so passionate about God, he sends out evangelists!!! Incredible! And what happens as a result? Jehoshaphat is given great honor by the Lord. Wealth and riches begin to flow into his hands. Power and authority. His kingdom experiences a season of peace for the fear of the Lord had fallen on everyone around them.

Is your heart courageous in the ways of the Lord? What does that look like today? Not much has changed in a few thousand years. Do you seek God daily for wisdom and guidance and strength? Do you love His Word? Hunger and thirst for time with Him? Do you love to worship? To gather with God’s people to bring God praise? Do you seek to serve Him in all you do? Is your work an offering? Is your home a temple? Do you share the good news of the gospel with those around you who do not know the Lord?

Do you pray for revival in our nation? Do you want to see God move powerfully in our town? What is required is men and women of faith whose hearts are courageous in the ways of the Lord! It’s literally the only answer and the only hope we have! I’ve seen it in action. I’ve seen what happens when men and women dedicate their lives to God. They plant churches. They risk pain and suffering and persecution and death for the sake of the gospel. They give up all they have for the glory of Christ. If I’ve learned anything from my Ethiopian brothers and sisters it is this...nothing can stop a man or woman whose heart is courageous in the ways of the Lord! Thousands of new churches. Hundreds of thousands of new believers. Entire communities and regions being transformed. There’s simply nothing like it on earth!

**June 20, 2018**

## THE WORD OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 17-19

I love the story of Elijah. I love his faithfulness. I love his courage. I love his passion. I love his heart. What makes Elijah so great was his ability to listen to the Word of the Lord. His sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. His humble submission and willingness to sit in God's presence in silence. There was nothing great about Elijah. Nothing unusual. Nothing out of the ordinary. He was simply a human being. A human being like any other human being. A man just like any other man. But he was called to play a specific role in God's Kingdom and the life of Israel.

Elijah was a prophet. A man set apart to hear the Word of the Lord and deliver it to God's people. The Word of the Lord came to Elijah, telling him there would be a famine in the land and to go and live by a brook where the ravens would feed him. When the brook ran dry, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and told him to go to Zrephath where a widow would care for him. When the widow's son died, the Word of the Lord came through Elijah to raise him the dead. The Word of Lord challenged Elijah to risk his life and confront King Arab. Queen Jezebel. 450 prophets of Baal. After a miraculous victory, the Word of the Lord opened Elijah's eyes to see the coming rain. When Elijah ran for his life, the Word of the Lord again came to him bringing comfort and peace.

Notice where the power lies. Not in Elijah. Not in his strength. Not in his confidence. Not in his power. No, the Word of the Lord has an authority all its own. A divine power to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself against the knowledge of God. It is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike. And if there is anything that sets Elijah apart, it is his obedience. Simply his willingness to hear and obey, seemingly without question. This is what makes him great.

Do you want to be great in the Kingdom? Do you want to do great things for God? Do you want the abundant life Jesus promises? Do you believe you will do greater things than even Jesus himself? As He promises in John 14:12? "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) You don't need wealth. You don't need education. You don't need professional success and achievement. All you need is obedience. A humble spirit. A willing heart. God specializes in using such vessels for His glory in the world.

**June 21, 2018**

# GOD OF THE HILLS AND THE VALLEYS

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 20-21

Do you know what God cares about most? His name. His glory. Whenever anyone would diminish Him in any way, God responds. God acts. God reminds us who He is and what He's all about. Ben-hadad invades Israel. He places his trust in his power. His military might. The 32 client kings who joined him. His numbers are overwhelming. Israel has no chance. But Ben-hadad makes a fatal mistake. He underestimates God. Overconfident. Prideful. Arrogant. He defies God and suffers an embarrassing defeat. Licking his wounds, he prepares yet another invasion. Again he gathers his forces. Again his numbers are overwhelming. Again Israel has no chance. But once again, Ben-hadad underestimates God. His servants encourage him in his foolishness. "And the servants of the king of Syria said to him, "Their gods are gods of the hills, and so they were stronger than we. But let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." (1 Kings 20:23) Once again, he is defeated. Not by Israel but by the Lord as God declares His authority over both hills and plains.

You would think Ahab would learn from this experience. Sadly, he does not. He too underestimates God. He refuses to obey God and devote Ben-hadad to destruction. He compromises. He equivocates. He cuts a deal. But God doesn't cut deals. God will never compromise. He is fiercely jealous for His name and His fame. Ahab compounds his sin by concocting a scheme with his wife to steal Naboth's vineyard. He not only has Naboth killed but he takes possession of his family inheritance. In all these things, Ahab shows himself to be selfish and petulant. Almost like a child. He pouts when he doesn't get his way. He gets angry and offended easily. He refuses to listen to God until it is too late and he dooms his son in the process.

What do you believe about God? Is He only the God of the mountaintops of your life? Is He only present when you feel a spiritual high? Have a moving experience during a worship service? Do you only connect with Him when you are in worship on a Sunday morning? What do you believe about God? Is He the God of your valleys as well? Those times when you feel like you're walking in darkness? Those moments when depression and despair threaten to overwhelm? Those experiences which devastate and cause so much pain? Is He there with you? What do you believe about God?

What you believe matters. What you believe drives how you behave. If you believe God is limited. Weak. A God who is NOT omnipresent or omnipotent. Then you might act like Ben-hadad or Ahab. Believing God is confined to either the hills or the valleys of your life, you may believe you can get away with a certain level of sin. You may believe God helps those who help themselves. You may believe you can make it on your own. And you will fall into the trap of self-sufficiency. You will rely on your own wisdom and strength. And you will fall short of God's glory. On the other hand, if you do believe God is all-powerful and ever-present, then you will act accordingly. You will submit every decision. Every action. Every thought to Christ. You will seek to bring all things under His Lordship. You will seek to align your will to His rather than the other way around.

God cares about His glory. God cares about His great name. And God intends to fill the earth with His glory through the faithful obedience of His people. This was as true for Israel as it is for us today. This is why Jesus says to His disciples, "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

**June 22, 2018**

# ACCOUNTABILITY

Readings for the day: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

Do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who is willing to be honest? To give it to you straight? Someone who is unafraid to spare your feelings? Do you have someone in your life who holds you accountable? Who asks you hard questions? Who is willing to confront you on your sin? Do you have someone in your life who you listen to? Respect? Love enough to receive their critique well? Sadly, it's my experience that most Christians do not have such a person in their life.

Ahab such a person...and he hated him. "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." (1 Kings 22:8) Ahab was an insecure king. He didn't want to hear the truth. He surrounded himself with people who would tell him what he wanted to hear. Sycophants. "Yes-men." People who did not have Israel's best in mind but only their influence and position before the king. It was so obvious, King Jehoshaphat immediately picked up on it as they planned their attack on Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from the Lord so he asked Ahab to call a real prophet. Someone who was willing to speak the truth. To share God's Word even if it involved judgment. So Ahab calls Micaiah. And Micaiah delivers the bad news. "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the Lord said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace." (1 Kings 22:17) Ahab throws up his hands. I told you so. This guy has it out for me. He never brings me good news. And then Micaiah goes on, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'" (1 Kings 22:19-22)

This section is key. When we refuse to repent. When we refuse to humble ourselves before the Lord. When we refuse to listen to His voice. He brings judgment. He forces us to our knees. He actively opposes the proud. God sends a lying spirit into the sycophants that Ahab surrounded himself with. He uses the very means Ahab had chosen to insulate himself against the Word of God to bring about Ahab's destruction. Let that sink in for a minute.

Now let me ask again, do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who can speak hard truth to you in love? Someone who is bold enough to hold you accountable? Someone you submit to? Someone you humble yourself before? Someone who is close enough as a brother and/or sister and who is faithful enough to confront you on your sin? If you do not have such a person in your life then let me suggest you may have made the same mistake – wittingly or unwittingly - as Ahab. You have surrounded yourself with people who do not have your best in mind and you need to go deeper. You need to challenge yourself. Make yourself vulnerable. Empower another person to hold you accountable. The reality is we do not "die to self" naturally. We must be forced to give up our life. We must be challenged to give up self. We must be held accountable as we struggle along this narrow way.

**June 23, 2018**

# MIRACLES

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 1-4

Why does God perform miracles? What is the point of signs and wonders? Why do they seemingly happen in some places but not others? Why do they appear so random? In our reading today, both Elijah and Elisha perform miracle after miracle. Future telling. Pools of water suddenly appearing in the desert. Water purification. Incredible military victories. Vessels overflowing with oil. Resurrection. Driving out poison with flour. Multiplying bread to feed a hundred men. To the skeptical, stories like these make the Bible seem primitive and superstitious. To the doubter, stories like these can be confusing and frustrating as they wrestle with why they don't seem to happen much anymore. To the faithful, stories like these encourage belief and deeper trust in God. However, the question still remains...why does God perform miracles?

Why does God break through the time/space continuum? Why does He suspend the laws of nature and the universe? Why does He intervene in certain situations but not others? Reach down and touch certain lives and not others? These are important questions that must be faced and thankfully, the Bible provides a clear answer.

First and foremost, miracles are given for the purpose of pointing God's people to faith. They are not ends in and of themselves. They are signposts. Pointing beyond themselves. They are given to direct our attention heavenward to the Lord of all creation. The Author of all life. They are stark reminders that we are not at the mercy of our circumstances. This world and all the natural laws that govern it – from gravity to thermodynamics to photosynthesis - is not all there is. There is a God who stands above and beyond such laws, who is able to set them aside for reasons He Himself only knows and understands.

Secondly, miracles are given so that God's people might always cling to hope. Even when circumstances seem their most dire. When evil seems to be on the march. Injustice and oppression winning the day. Persecution at its fiercest. Rage and violence burning white hot. Disease ravages the body. Famine and poverty threaten our well-being. Even in the darkest of times, we still have hope. Hope in a God who can and does intervene. Hope in a God who draws near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. Hope in a God who fights on behalf of the poor and oppressed and outcast and stranger.

Third, miracles are given to remind us how limited and finite we are as creatures. Power. Wealth. Influence. Control. We like to live with the illusion that we are the masters of our own destines. The captain of our fates. We like to think we are in charge. We like to act like we've got everything under control. But miracles remind us who truly holds the power. Miracles remind us of our relative insignificance in the grand scheme of things. Miracles bring us face to face with the power of God and, like Job, we shut our mouths and fall on our faces before Him.

Ultimately, miracles force us to look beyond ourselves. Beyond our needs. Beyond our circumstances. Beyond our wisdom. Beyond our strength. Miracles force us to trust in God. To trust in His purposes and His design. We cannot bend God to our will. There is no magic formula to get God to do our bidding. Miracles happen on His time and in accordance with His will. Our job is to believe. To have faith. To place our lives in His hands and trust Him for the outcome.

**June 25, 2018**

## OPEN OUR EYES

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 5-8:1-15

I have heard it said that the world has yet to see the power that would be unleashed through one man or woman who's sold out to God. I disagree. I think we see such power all the time. Certainly in Scripture. Take the story of Elisha for instance. He's like a one-man wrecking crew when it comes to Syria. Ben-hadad wanted to destroy Israel. Invaded time after time. He had the best generals. Mighty men of valor like Naaman. The odds were surely in his favor. But Israel had one advantage...Elisha. A man who loved God with all his heart. From Elisha's deep faith sprung wisdom and insight and even prophetic utterances. He thwarted the plans of Ben-hadad to such an extent that his counselors believed it was like Elisha was hanging out in Ben-hadad's bedroom!

Elisha posed such a great threat that Ben-hadad sent his entire army on a seek and destroy mission. Find him. Kill him. Destroy whatever city is giving him refuge. So Elisha and his servant wake up one morning only to see the Syrian army arrayed in all its might before them. It must have been an intimidating sight. The servant is immediately afraid. What will we do? How will we survive? But Elisha doesn't miss a beat. He asks God to open the eyes of his servant so that he can see what Elisha sees. Horses. Chariots. The mountains ringed with fire from the army of the Lord.

This is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture because of the reminder that though my circumstances may seem bleak. Though I may undergo all kinds of trials and tribulations. Though I may suffer and struggle and hurt. Though the enemy wage war against me. Though the government or culture or society grow increasingly hostile to the gospel. No matter what may come, my adversaries – as numerous as they may be - are no match for the armies of the Lord! His sovereign hand continues to lead and guide and protect. His power cannot be measured. His wisdom cannot be fathomed. And if I will simply lift my eyes above the hills, I will see where my true help comes! (Psalm 121)

"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) I frequently find myself in positions where I am weak. I have no power. No authority. I am not strong or swift or wise or wealthy. In those moments, I am tempted to despair. And that's when God has me right where He wants me! God does His best work when I come to the end of myself. God does His greatest work when I get out of the way. God is at His most glorious when I am weak and afraid and lonely and have nowhere else to turn. All I have to do is open my eyes. See the power He has brought to bear. Sit back and watch Him go to work. Trust Him for the victory.

**June 26, 2018**

## WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY WHEN I'M GONE?

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21-22:1-9

"And he departed to with no one's regret." Woof. That's rough. To come to the end of your life with no one to mourn your passing. No one to make fire in your honor. No words shared at your funeral. Nothing to say in your obituary beyond your birthdate and death date. Perhaps Jehoram earned his fate. After all, he killed all his brothers when he ascended the throne. He enticed the people to abandon the worship of the Living God. He lost several battles. Suffered terribly at the end of his life, dying in great agony. He left Judah far worse than he found it. All in all, a terrible king.

I've performed these kinds of funerals. Funerals where very few people attend. Very few words are said. Very few kind sentiments expressed. I remember a tragic funeral for a young woman who was kidnapped and murdered. She ran with a rough crowd all her life and it tragically caught up to her. All her closest friends could talk about was the way she partied. How much she could drink. It was heartbreaking. I remember a funeral for an older man who died from alcoholism. About three or four people showed up for his funeral and they all wanted it over as soon as possible so they could get out of there. No words to share. Nothing about love. Compassion. Family. He died pretty much alone. To no one's regret.

These moments are burned into my memory. I cannot shake them no matter how hard I try. They serve as a lesson to us all about how we live and why we live. To honor what's truly important in life. God. Family. Friends. To take the time and make the time to live not for ourselves but for the sake of others. To give ourselves away in an attempt to make this world a better place. To leave this world better than the way we found it. It may be breaking a generational pattern in your family. Speaking kindly to friends in need. Helping a stranger. Maybe it's serving in a particular mission endeavor at home or abroad. Or just taking the time to tuck your kids into bed at night and tell them a story. Sometimes the most significant moments of our lives are the simplest.

Through it all, the most important thing we can do is seek after God. Ask Him for His wisdom to show us the way. To help make our lives count. Serving Christ is the best way to leave a legacy as we have seen over and over again throughout the books of 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles. The legacies of each king is measured primarily by how they honored God with their lives. Honor God and their lives and subjects were blessed. Dishonor God and their lives and subjects were cursed. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you." (Matt. 6:33) Sounds like a great way to live!

**June 27, 2018**

## DEJA VU Missed Day

Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 22:10-12, 23

**June 28, 2018**

## DEJA VU

Readings for today:  2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

Well, it happened. Missed my first day. I realized it when I woke up this morning. Here's the really cool thing. Lightning didn't strike me. God wasn't up in heaven shaking his head. Turning his back. Giving me the silent treatment. No judgment. No condemnation. Just joy that I was back again today praying and reading and reflecting on His Word. I've been reading through the Bible in a year for over twenty years now and somewhere along the way I always get behind. No worries! The great thing about the Bible is you just pick up where you left off or if you get too far behind, you just skip ahead. And God always honors the time we put in.

As I read the passages for yesterday and today, I see the same tragic pattern emerging. The same pattern that's been in place since the Fall. Cain and Abel. The state of the world just before the Flood. Tower of Babel. The time of the Judges. Left to her own devices, humanity inevitably descends into godlessness. Violence. Suffering. Pain. Jehu is called to be God's hand of justice. He executes God's will in a brutal, terrifying fashion. It is a harsh reminder of how seriously God takes our sin and serves as a foreshadowing of hell. By contrast, the rise of Joash reminds us God always claims a remnant for Himself. A faithful people who follow His will and provide hope for the nation. Joash lived most of his life in faithfulness and the result is peace and prosperity and security. He restored the Temple. He cleansed the land of idolatry. He led the people back to true worship of the Living God.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. We see this dynamic played out over and over again throughout the Scriptures. I love what it says in 2 Kings 13:23, "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now." No matter how far humanity falls. No matter how bad things may get. No matter how much violence and suffering and pain may be taking place. God is faithful. God is true. God is steadfast. Immovable. He will not abandon us. He will not forsake His people. He loves us with an everlasting love. "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalms 30:5)

**June 29, 2018**

# COMPROMISE

Readings for the day: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. Often the righteousness of kings is judged on whether or not they tolerate them. What are they? Originally, they were sacred spaces where the Canaanite tribes worshiped their gods. If you flip back to Deuteronomy 12, you read these words, "You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place." (Deut. 12:2-3) Yahweh had set His people apart. They would be different. They would not be like any other tribe or nation. Because they were a nation of priests, they would worship Yahweh in the way He prescribed. "But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you." (Deut. 12:5-7)

Where was this place? Originally, it was the Tabernacle that traveled with them in the wilderness. After Solomon, it was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place where God had set His name and indwelt with His presence. This was the "place" the Israelites were commanded to seek when they worshiped. However, the travel could be difficult. The cost was high. It meant time away from the fields. Time away from home. After the kingdoms split, it meant possible defection by the northern tribes so the Israelite kings set up their own shrines (the sin of Jeroboam) and forbid their people from traveling to Jerusalem at the prescribed times. The people set up their own shrines to Yahweh on the very high places He once commanded them to destroy. If we assume the best of them, they were trying to worship Yahweh. Trying to remain faithful. Just not in the way He demanded or the way He deserved. At their worst, they adopted the worship practices of the locals and sought other gods.

God cares about our worship. He cares about what happens week in and week out in local churches all over the world. Not because God is taking attendance but because God seeks worshipers who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Worshipers who will give Him the worship He demands in the way He deserves. Worshipers who will not compromise. Worshipers who will honor Him as holy. Worshipers who refuse to make themselves the center of the experience. Worshipers who lay aside their wants, their needs, their desires, their preferences to come before the Lord in humility. To do anything else is to create a "high place." A shrine to another god. And most of that time, that "god" is Self. The besetting sin of the Western Church is the idolatry of self. We are the object of our worship. Our satisfaction is the key performance indicator. We engage worship based on our own personal preferences. We refuse to honor God as holy. God as supreme. God as Lord. We are proud. We are arrogant. We think far too much of ourselves. And if the lives of the kings teach us anything it is this...God will not be mocked. We will be judged on the basis of who or what we worship.

Where are the high places in your life? Do you find yourself despising the gathering of God's people? Do you find yourself avoiding weekly worship? Do you find yourself struggling to hear the Word? Sing the songs? Pray the prayers? Let me gently but boldly call you to repentance, friends! Remember whose presence you are in! Remember who you've come to serve! Remember what worship is all about! Repent. Confess. And ask the Spirit to renew your passion for true worship.

**June 30, 2018**

# LOVE YOUR ENEMY

Readings for the day: Jonah 1-4

Jonah is a great book. Especially when we read chronologically. We just finished reading about the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and now we read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. Jonah is an unwilling prophet to say the least. He must have had a tremendously frustrating career. His own people refuse to follow the Lord. They keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. They are unfaithful. They are unworthy. They are idolatrous. They are evil. As a result, God sends the Assyrians to punish them. To drive them to their knees in humility and repentance. When that doesn't work, those same Assyrians become the instrument of His righteous judgment on His own people. One can only imagine the hatred a man like Jonah would harbor for such people. They are Gentiles. Unbelievers. Unclean. Unworthy of God's grace. But then he receives the call to go and preach the gospel to them. What the heck?!

Jonah is a great book to read today. Our world is full of hatred and enmity. Social media gives full vent to our anger and rage. Judging others seems to be the order of the day and grace is in short supply. If someone disagrees with you, they are almost sub-human. Worthy only to be unfriended, unfollowed, and publicly shamed. If someone questions you, they become a target. Attacked. Torn down. Their character assassinated. If someone doesn't affirm you, they get cut out of your life almost immediately. It is sad and disheartening and ultimately self-destructive.

Perhaps this is why Jesus calls us to love our enemies. Love humanizes. Love requires grace and forgiveness. Love requires listening and humility. Ultimately, love is selfless. It forces us to take a good hard look at ourselves, our motives, our intentions, and lay them aside before engaging others. It celebrates diversity and assumes the best of others. It honors difference and dignifies those who disagree. It is deeply practical. And it is what should set believers apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, believers seem to have forgotten this command. They explain it away. Rationalize it. Reject it. And the result is only more pain as the vicious cycle continues. Every believer should ponder and pray over the closing words of Jonah..."When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:8-11) We need to ask ourselves if we do well to be so angry? So enraged? We need to ask ourselves if we pity those who are like us more than those who are different? Pity those who agree with us more than those who disagree? Pity our friends more than our enemies? Should God not pity Democrats and Republicans? Liberals and conservatives? Whites and blacks? Asians and Latinos? Aboriginal people as well as immigrants? Should God not pity Americans as well as Mexicans? Israelis as well as Palestinians? North as well as South Koreans? Should God not pity Trump supporters as well as Hilary supporters? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

Who are you at war with in your life today? Who engenders hatred in your heart? What enemies is God calling you to reach? Will you go? Or will you run?

**July 2, 2018**

## LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN….

Readings for the day: Amos 1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 3, 2018**
**WHAT TIME IS IT?**

Readings for the day: Amos 6-9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 4, 2018**

# SPIRITUAL ADULTERY

Readings for the day: Hosea 1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 5, 2018**

## SIN HAS CONSEQUENCES

Readings for the day: Hosea 6-9

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

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

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

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

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

**July 6, 2018**

# THE TENDER LOVE OF GOD

Readings for the day: Hosea 10-14

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

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

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

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

**July 7, 2018**

# FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for the day: Isaiah 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

**July 9, 2018**

## DOUBLE-MEANING

Readings for the day: Isaiah 5-8

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

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

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

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

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

**July 10, 2018**

# THE SALVATION OF GOD

Readings for the day: Isaiah 9-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 11, 2018**

## MACRO-PARENTING

Readings for the day: Micah 1-4

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

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

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

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

**July 12, 2018**

## LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARMS

Readings for the day: Micah 5-7

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

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

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

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

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

**July 13, 2018**

# ONE FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 14, 2018**

# HONOR/SHAME

Readings for the day: Isaiah 13-17

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

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

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

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

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

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

## July 16, 2018

## A T5IME FOR EVERYTHING UNDER HEAVEN

Readings for the day: Isaiah 18-22

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

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

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

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

**July 17, 2018**

## WHY ARE WE HERE?

Readings for the day: Isaiah 23-26

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

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

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

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

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

**July 18, 2018**

# CONSECRATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 19, 2018**

# IN THAT DAY...

Readings for the day: Isaiah 27-30

"In that day..."

The Lord will punish and slay Leviathan
The Lord will plant His vineyard
Israel will blossom and bear fruit
The Lord will gather all His people from where they have been exiled back home to Jerusalem
The Lord will be a crown of glory to His people
The Lord will restore justice to the land
The Lord will give strength to those who defend the gates
These are just a few of the promises gleaned from the reading today. God acting on behalf of His people. God bringing mercy out of judgment. Peace out of conflict. Honor out of shame. God not passing over the iniquity of His people or allowing sin and shame to pass but instead purifying His people through righteous judgment and holy discipline that He might restore them once again.

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

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

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

We will weep no more
We will see Him face to face
We will know His ways and walk in them
We will tear down every idol in our lives
Our brokenness will be bound and our wounds healed
We will sing a new song in the night
We will keep the holy feast
We will witness the victory of the Lord our God
Friends, that day is coming and is already here! In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ the new day has dawned! God has laid His cornerstone! God has set His foundation in Zion! God has annulled our covenant with death! God has set aside our agreement with the grave! God has given us the victory! All we have to do is trust. Believe. Have faith. Place our lives in His hands. He will never let us down.

**July 20, 2018**

# GOD IS OUR STABILITY

Readings for the day: Isaiah 31-35

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

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

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

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

**July 21, 2018**

# ONLY ONE GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 23, 2018**

# TESTING

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 24, 2018**

## I WILL HOLD YOUR HAND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 25, 2018**

## CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.

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

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

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

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

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

**July 26, 2018**

# LET GOD CARRY YOU

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

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

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

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

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

**July 27, 2018**

## SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for the day: Isaiah 50-53

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

I cannot fathom the journey so many in this country have endured. The horror. The pain. The suffering. It's immense. Indescribable. Beyond words. And yet, I would argue the forgiveness and reconciliation they have found is equally, if not more, profound. The other day I asked a woman if she was ethnic Tutsi or Hutu. "Neither" was her reply. "Here we are all Rwandan." She went on to describe some of the hell she and her family had been through and the freedom they had found through forgiveness. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection.

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

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

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

**July 28, 2018**

## CONTEXTUAL REFLECTIONS

Readings for the day: Isaiah 54-58

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 30, 2018**

# REBUILDING

Readings for the day: Isaiah 59-63

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**July 31, 2018**

# POTTER'S HAND

Readings for the day: Isaiah 64-66

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

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

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

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

**August 1, 2018**

## EVERYTHING RISES AND FALLS ON LEADERSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 2, 2018**

# JEALOUS GOD

Readings for the day: Nahum 1-3

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

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

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

"The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him." (Nahum 1:2-6) Assyria will learn this lesson in spades. As will the other nations who dare defy the Living God.
But what about God's people? What is our response to this God? How should we approach this God? With fear and trembling? On some level, yes. With humility and submission? Certainly. With terror and dread? Absolutely not! Why? Because our God is also good. And He loves His people. He is faithful to His people. "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him." (Nahum 1:7)

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

**August 3, 2018**

# HUMILITY

Readings for the day: Zephaniah 1-3

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 4, 2018**

## LIFE ISN'T FAIR

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 6, 2018**

# GOD IS ENOUGH

Readings for the day: Habakkuk 1-3

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

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

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

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

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

**August 7, 2018**

## THE WAY TO REVIVAL

Readings for the day: Joel 1-3

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

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

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

"Put on sackcloth and lament, O priests; wail, O ministers of the altar. Go in, pass the night in sackcloth, O ministers of my God! Because grain offering and drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord." (Joel 1:13-14)
"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain offering and a drink offering for the Lord your God?" (Joel 2:12-14)
"Blow the trumpet in Zion; consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the people. Consecrate the congregation; assemble the elders; gather the children, even nursing infants. Let the bridegroom leave his room, and the bride her chamber. Between the vestibule and the altar let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep and say, "Spare your people, O Lord, and make not your heritage a reproach, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, 'Where is their God?" (Joel 2:15-17)
These are challenging words. Joel is unafraid to get in our face. They leave us no room for equivocation. We either accept them or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. Reject them to our own peril. Accept them and receive the promise.

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

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28)
The answer we keep avoiding is simply this...surrender. Relinquishment. Submission. To God’s will and God’s ways and most importantly, God’s love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. Repentance is the precondition to revival. Surrender is the precondition to the pouring out of God’s Spirit. We cannot receive from God until we open our hearts and unclench our fists. And this is a process. It’s not something that happens easily. It is a daily decision we make to place ourselves before the Lord. Bow the knee. Believe Him for who He is and what He has to say. Obey His commands.

**August 8, 2018**

# THE PATHOS OF GOD AND HIS PROPHET

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 1-4

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

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

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

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

**August 9, 2018**

## THE GRIEF OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 5–8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 10, 2018**

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 9-12

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

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

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

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

**August 11, 2018**

# DISCOURAGEMENT

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 13-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 13, 2018**

# FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 17-20

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 14, 2018**

# AT WAR WITH GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 21-24

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 15, 2018**

# FALSE PROPHETS

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 25-28

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

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

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

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

**August 16, 2018**

## FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU...

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 29-32

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

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

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

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

"Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease." (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In essence, live your lives. Do what you've always done. Don't spend your days looking back at where you've been but forward to the future.
"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) Pray for your enemies. For those who destroyed your way of life. For those who killed your loved ones. Conquered your land. Burned your cities. Destroyed your nation. And don't just pray. Actively seek to bless them. Bless their city. Bless their communities. Be salt and light in this new place.
"For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place." (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul. This is not going to quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children's children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.
It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

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

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

**August 17, 2018**

## REJECTING THE WORD OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 33-37

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

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

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

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

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

**August 18, 2018**

# DISAPPOINTED WITH GOD

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

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

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

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

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

**August 20, 2018**

## BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 21, 2018**

## FEAR OR FAITH?

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 41-44

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 22, 2018**

## FAMILY FEUD

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 23, 2018**

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 45-48

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 24, 2018**

## THE POWER OF GOD

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 49-50

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 25, 2018**

# RAW EMOTION

Readings for the day: Jeremiah 51, Psalm 137

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

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

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

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

**August 27, 2018**

# LAMENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 28, 2018**

# ROCK BOTTOM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 29, 2018**

# VISIONS

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 1-4

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

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

Revelation – The very word, "apokalypsis" in the Greek means "revelation" or "disclosure." Apocalyptic literature is marked by a direct revelation from God to a seer or prophet, usually in visions or dreams, who then writes down what he sees.
Mystery – The meaning of the visions are often shrouded in mystery. They might refer to past, current, or future events. They may include strange images from the world beyond. While the seer or prophet may write them down in great detail, deciphering them is a significant challenge.
Symbolism – The visions are rife with symbols drawn from nature, ancient near east mythology, astral phenomena, etc. These symbols are used by the seer or prophet to make sense of what he sees and could represent coded language in order to pass imperial censors who may be screening their correspondence.
Resistance Literature – Because the prophet is typically writing from an "exilic" perspective where he and his people live under oppression, his focus is on the future rather than the present. The visions are meant to provide hope to a people who are suffering.
God is sovereign – The overarching message of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is that God reigns. He is supreme. He will judge the nations. He will have the final victory. Despite their present conditions, God's people are to place their trust in Him.
Ezekiel sees a vision. God appears to him in all His glory and splendor. Living creatures with strange faces. Wheels heading in every direction. High winds. Burning coals of fire. And above it all a throne where a majestic figure sits. It's so overwhelming that Ezekiel sits speechless for seven straight days.

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

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

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

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

**August 30, 2018**

## THEY WILL KNOW I AM THE LORD

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 5-8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**August 31, 2018**

# THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 9-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**September 1, 2018**

## THE GOSPEL IN EZEKIEL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 13-16

Time to take another deep breath and step back. If one can get past the graphic imagery of chapter 16, one will see a compelling picture of the gospel emerge. A gospel that is as much for Israel as it is for the church today. In this chapter, God retells their national story from His point of view. He reminds them of their humble beginnings. Reminds them of His lavish blessings. Reminds them of their great betrayal. Reminds them of His everlasting covenant. This is their story. This is our story. This is the gospel story.

Where does our relationship with God begin? Not with us. We did not choose to love God. We could not choose to love God. No, we were helpless. Abandoned. Left all alone. Stillborn spiritually. It was not our beauty that caught God's eye but our desperation. "And as for your birth, on the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you, but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born. "And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' I said to you in your blood, 'Live!' (Ezekiel 16:4-6) Out of pure compassion and grace, God adopted us as His own. Brought us into His family. Took us from the field where we had been cast. Bathed us. Fed us. Clothed us. Rocked us. Sang to us. Raised us. "I made you flourish like a plant of the field. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full adornment. Your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare." (Ezekiel 16:7)

What does our relationship with God look like as it matures? We grew up under His watchful eye and gracious care. When the time was right, God took us as His bride. He covered our nakedness with the corner of His garment. He made His vow and covenant with us. (Remember the ceremony from Genesis with Abraham?) He bestowed riches and honor and glory on us as befits the bride of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the whole world marveled at what God had done. The whole world came to see the splendor and glory of Israel. The whole world envied the relationship she had with her God.

But Israel grew proud. She began to believe her own hype. She read her own press clippings. She trusted in her riches and beauty and power and influence. She abandoned her covenant with the Lord and began to serve other gods. God's bride now playing the whore. She literally took the gifts God had given her and gave them away to idols. Fed them with the bread God provided from His own hands. Things got so bad that Israel began sacrificing their innocent children to appease these other bloodthirsty gods. "How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute..." (Ezekiel 16:30)

Therefore God brought judgment on His bride. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God..." (1 Peter 4:17) God will not spare His bride. In fact, He holds His bride to an even higher standard. Higher than Samaria. Higher than Sodom. "Bear your disgrace, you also, for you have intervened on behalf of your sisters. Because of your sins in which you acted more abominably than they, they are more in the right than you. So be ashamed, you also, and bear your disgrace, for you have made your sisters appear righteous." (Ezekiel 16:52) God disciplines those He loves out of a desire to see them cleansed from sin and brought to glory. "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son or daughter whom he receives." (Hebrews 12:5-6) His desire is for His bride to return. To come back to Him. To be faithful and true once more. To remember from whence she came and to honor her Husband for all He has done. Why? So the world may again marvel at the intimacy of their relationship. So the world may again say, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (Deuteronomy 4:7)

This is why Ezekiel 16 ends with this note of hope. “Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant...I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God." (Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63) God has atoned for His bride. On the cross, He paid for all her sin. He took all her punishment. All her shame. All her self-inflicted degradation on Himself. On the cross, the faithful Husband gave His life for the sake of His bride “so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.” (Ephesians 5:27)

**September 3, 2018**
**IS GOD NOT JUST?**

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 17-20

Today's reading poses a very important question. One we all ask. One that seems almost hardwired into our souls. Is God just? God's people have been asking this question for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering and struggle and strife. And because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding.

I hear these questions all the time. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just." (Ezekiel 18:25) From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. We keep trying to find someone to blame for all our problems. Rather than looking at ourselves and the depth of human depravity, we look to God and look to blame-shift. We try to escape the natural consequences of our selfish behavior by pretending that somehow the issue is God's..."He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..." All the while, we refuse to face the truth about the man or woman we see in the mirror.

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let them down. The failure is their own.

Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His precious words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are only responsible for you. You are not responsible for the sins of your parents or friends or extended family. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Friends, the secret to a life lived well before God has EVERYTHING to do with submission. Surrender. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of your sin. We come to the Cross on our knees. The ground is level. All are equally guilty in His sight and yet all are equally made righteous by the death of His Son. Nothing about you is left untouched. Unhealed. Unchanged. God will save to the uttermost those who turn to Him.

**September 4, 2018**

## INSIDE THE STORY

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 21-24

One of the biggest challenges we have to overcome...especially when we read the Old Testament...is out tendency to see ourselves as neutral, third-party observers. We read the words and then decide if we believe them to be true or not. We think of ourselves as dispassionate, rational, and objective. We stand outside the biblical story. We take the parts we like and we jettison the parts we don't like. We believe we have options. We believe we get to determine what's true for us. And we cling on to those passages that help us understand how we are to be saved. It's a highly individualistic, highly rationalistic, thoroughly Western, uniquely Protestant approach to engaging the Bible. And it would have been utterly foreign to the biblical writers themselves.

Ezekiel sees himself as part of one long continuous story that harkens all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He sees himself playing a very minor role in the grand sweep of God's epic tale of deliverance and salvation. He understood himself to be caught up in this story. His life as one thread in a much larger tapestry. His job as a Jewish man, much less a prophet of God, was to find his place in this story. To play his part. To do the work his God had called him to do. So as he surveys the landscape of what's happening around him. As he looks to the heavens and charts the courses of the stars or ponders the rise and fall of the great empires around the Ancient Near East or considers the desperate straights of his own people; he interprets all of these things from a theological perspective. He tries to discern God's hand in all that's taking place. Tragically, this includes the death of his own wife.

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down." (Ezekiel 24:16) I cannot imagine the pain Ezekiel must feel at the loss of his beloved. We do not know much about their relationship but the fact that God Himself calls her the "delight" of Ezekiel's eyes probably says much. Their love must have been strong. Their intimacy deep. And yet when she passes, Ezekiel is not allowed to mourn. This may strike us as a little weird but for Ezekiel's contemporaries it would have been shocking. Jewish culture is highly expressive when it comes to grief. People in those days would literally hire professional mourners to weep and wail alongside those who had lost loved ones so they wouldn't feel ashamed to express their pain and heartbreak. Funerals would last for days and involve the whole community. Food would be eaten. Stories shared. Tears cried. It was a powerful, visceral ritual designed to help those who had lost loved ones process their grief. But Ezekiel is denied this experience. Why?

Why would God treat his prophet in this way? How could Ezekiel see God's hand in all this? What in the world made Ezekiel think that God was calling him NOT to grieve! NOT to mourn! NOT to weep? Again, it comes back to how Ezekiel understood himself. He lives within a much larger story that is unfolding over the centuries. God making Himself known to His people. God walking alongside His people. God relating to His people. Ezekiel understands all of life to be lived under the sovereign Lordship of Yahweh. Not just in the abstract but in the everyday. Ezekiel believed God was at work in every moment of his life. Every experience. Every success. Every failure. Every joy. Every pain. God ruled over it all and God was using it all for His purposes. So when his wife dies, Ezekiel somehow understands this to be yet another sign from God to His people. Ezekiel's own life. Ezekiel's own heartbreak will be used to demonstrate the depth of God's heartbreak and grief over the sins of His people. "Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God." (Ezekiel 24:24)

I know this sounds very strange to our ears and yet it is the key to understanding the Bible. It is the key to understanding why the people in the Bible did the things they did. It is the key to understanding why Noah built an ark. Sarah's laughter. Abraham going up a mountain to sacrifice his son. Moses confronting Pharoah. Joshua

renewing the covenant. Deborah's song. Samuel hearing God's voice. David dancing before the ark. The religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. The tears of Jeremiah. All of these great men and women believed their lives were not their own. They believed they were instruments in God's hands to use as He saw fit for His own purposes and glory. They had no identity outside of God. No independent existence apart from Him. They had no story to call their own. No, their lives were completely wrapped up in the much larger story God was telling about deliverance and salvation and redemption and final restoration! That's why Ezekiel could look at the death of his wife through a theological lens, even seeing it as yet another prophetic sign for God's people.

Imagine how your perspective on life would change if you saw the world through Ezekiel's eyes! Imagine seeing God's hand at work in every instance. Every encounter. Every experience good or bad. Imagine seeing God's purpose behind every success or failure. Every joy or sorrow. Every moment of every day. Imagine it was God speaking to you through every conversation. God teaching you and humbling you through every trial and hardship. Imagine God showing you His faithfulness as He gives you far more than you can handle. This, friends, is one of the deep and most profound messages running from Genesis to Revelation. God attempting to give us His eternal perspective. God trying to help see things from His point of view. From the vantage point of God's eternal kingdom, everything changes. The rise and fall of nations. The 24 news cycle. The triumphs and tragedies of life. The ordinary and mundane. All of it transformed. Impregnated with eternal significance -or insignificance as it were – in God's hands.

If only Ezekiel were alive today! I think he'd say, "Don't weep for me. Weep for the world. Weep for the lack of faith. The pervasiveness of sin. The rise of evil. The brokenness of God's people. Save your tears for the coming judgment of God."

**September 5, 2018**

## CELEBRATING ANOTHER'S FALL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 25-28

Yesterday I sat at a local yogurt shop with several middle school boys. It was our first small group of the year. The lesson happened to be on Genesis 1:27 where God describes how He made human beings in His image. Male and female. Black and white. Rich and poor. All bear the signature stamp of their Creator. We talked through the implications of this passage for each of them as they start school. Already their peer groups have formed. Already they know who's popular and who's not. Already they know who the jocks are and the nerds. The kids who struggle and the kids who succeed. The kids who have tons of friends and the kids who are lonely. We then flipped over to Galatians 3:26-28 where the Apostle Paul challenges us to move beyond our social categories and divisions and embrace one another in Christ. After the conversation, we discussed how we can put this into practice. Each boy gave us the name of a fellow student they know who they struggle with. Someone who is hard for them to love. Someone they may have made fun of or bullied even in the past. Their accountability point for the week is to approach that student and find a way to love them concretely in the name of Jesus. Sit with them at lunch. Hang out with them at recess. Confess their sin to them and ask for forgiveness if they've treated them poorly.

As Christians, we do not celebrate the struggles of others. We do not rejoice at their fall. We do not take secret pleasure in their pain. Ezekiel makes it clear that people who do such things will be judged. Either as individuals or as nations. The nations surrounding Israel watched them struggle and eventually fall into ruin. They rejoiced when it happened. Threw parties. Danced in the streets. They even took the opportunity to pile on for their own revenge. Ammon. Moab. Seir. Edom. Philistia. Tyre. All of them are guilty. All of them are judged. Perhaps Tyre most harshly. God even compares her king to Satan. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground..." (Ezekiel 28:12-17)

The reality is when we rejoice in wrongdoing. When we celebrate the fall of others. When we take pleasure in another person's pain and heartbreak, we are operating under the influence of the evil one. He loves watching God's people tear each other apart. He loves creating divisions and factions. He loves to isolate and attack and devour and destroy. As Christians, we must resist this temptation. We must resist the temptation to label others as our enemies. We must resist the temptation to make fun of others at their expense. We must resist the temptation to wound and hurt and pile on when someone's down. Instead, we must lift them up. We must encourage. We must stand at their side. Show compassion. Grieve with them and for them. Our hearts must break with their hearts. This is what it means to be Christ to others. To show Christ to others. To love Christ as He has loved us.

**September 6, 2018**

# PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 29-32

One of the besetting sins of humanity is our pride. Like Adam, we truly want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God. Pharaoh is simply one of the many examples we could cite just from the Bible much less other ancient/modern sources.

Interestingly enough, those who would be gods almost always fall into the same pattern. They almost always make the same mistake. In an effort to prove their "godliness", they build monuments to themselves. Monuments to their own glory. Monuments that stretch as high as possible, reaching up towards the heavens. Think of the Tower of Babel. Think of the obelisks and images and pyramids of Pharaoh. Think of the temples and palaces and structures archaeologists have discovered all over the world in almost every great culture. Now think of our own time. Think of our own country. Think of how those who would be god build monuments to themselves through social media. Marketing. Advertising. The goal is to have the #1 hit single. The #1 bestseller. The largest, multi-national corporation. The most political influence and clout. They use their resources to self-promote, all in an effort to make their own name great. Pastors and churches are not immune. The goal for many is to draw the largest crowds. Raise the most funds. Build the biggest buildings on sprawling campuses across the country.

Do we not realize the risk we are running here? We who would be great should take heed from the warnings God has given through the prophet Ezekiel. "All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword." (Ezekiel 31:14, 18)

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to my heart. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life.

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He has me. To never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. To simply walk with open hands before Him.
Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. To never self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. To let others take the credit and in fact, spend my life and influence promoting others above myself.
Insignificance: God has commanded me to acknowledge my insignificance. In the grand sweep of God's eternal plan, my contributions are very small. I am not an essential cog in this machine. I am not irreplaceable. I simply am one servant among billions who is being called to play his very minor role in God's Kingdom.
Does all this mean success is evil? Does all this mean wealth and power and privilege are to be resisted? Does all this mean we should never aspire to anything? Never work hard? Never try our best? Anyone who knows me, knows that cannot be true. The key is our motivation. True humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. Rather it is thinking of oneself less. Again, it means walking with open hands before the Lord. Letting Him fill them up with His plans for your life.

As I've learned to walk with an open heart before the Lord, it's been amazing to see where He's taken me. Humbling to see what He's entrusted me with. Leadership in an incredible church. A certain degree of influence in my denomination. An adjunct faculty position at Denver Seminary. Opportunities to teach overseas and help lead a revival in the Horn of Africa. He's taught me how to be a better husband and father. A better friend and neighbor. All of this came to me from God's own hands. I did not seek it out nor was I remotely qualified on paper for most of these positions. God simply moved me like a pawn on His great chessboard as He works out His will for the world. And I am happy and content to play my part.

What about you? Do you find yourself aspiring to greatness? Seeking to achieve all you can? Accumulate all you can? Earn the recognition of your peers? What drives you? What feeds your ambition? Is it the Lord or is it your pride? Heed the words of Ezekiel. Take care lest you follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him guide your steps.

**September 7, 2018**

## GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 33-36

Today's reading brings with it a cascade of images. Watchmen. Shepherds. Scattered sheep. New covenants. Ancient prophecies. Culminating in one of the most beautiful promises in the Old Testament...the gift of God's Spirit. Is there a thread that ties this all together? Or does God simply have too many tabs open in His browser? Is there a common tie or theme or guiding principle at work here? Or is God doing His best "Jackson Pollock" impersonation? Sometimes when we read the Old Testament, especially in the prophetic literature, it can feel scattershot. Like a bunch of random events some scribe collated at a later date, none necessarily having to do with any other.

Today, however, is different. There is a thread that weaves itself throughout these chapters. Building towards a beautiful crescendo where God Himself promises to invade time and space to perform heart transplant surgery on His people. It all starts with this idea of the "watchman." Watchmen were essential in the ancient world. They stood guard on the walls of the village. Day and night they faithfully manned their posts. Never resting. Never sleeping. They bore a great responsibility. The safety of their people rested on their shoulders. Should an enemy invade, it was the watchman who would give warning. Should natural disaster strike, it was the watchman who often saw it coming. When the watchman gave warning, it was up to the people to respond. To take action. God tells Ezekiel he is to act as a watchman for Israel. To sound the warning when he sees them falling into sin. To point out where they are wandering off the path of righteousness. To challenge them to turn from their sin and return to God. If Ezekiel is faithful, he will potentially save his people. If he is faithless and refuses to speak up, he will have failed his people and their blood will be on his hands.

Why such a drastic call to action? Because the shepherds God has placed over His people are corrupt. Instead of caring for the sheep, they actually feed off them. Instead of protecting the sheep, they let them wander all over the place. Instead of seeking those that are lost, they abandon them to their fate. These faithless shepherds are only concerned with themselves. They've grown fat and lazy. They use the sheep to further their own purposes. Their own agenda. To enrich themselves and make their names great.

God looks down on His people. They are scattered and suffering. Lonely and afraid. Lost and wandering. Wounded and weak. Injured and hurting. And this pierces God's heart. So He takes action. "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezekiel 34:11-16) It's an unbelievable promise. God renewing His gracious and glorious covenant with Israel!

Why would God do such a thing? For the sake of His great name. "Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes." Remember, God's primary concern from creation to redemption to final glorification is His own glory. His own honor. His own reputation. God will make His name famous on the earth. God will make Himself

known among the nations. God's name will be lifted up! God will be worshiped in the way He deserves and the way He demands! One day, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth! And what's happening here in Ezekiel is just a foretaste of what's to come.

So how will God make this happen? How will He take a stubborn and rebellious and sinful people and turn them into worshipers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:22-28) Isn't this amazing? God is not content to sit up in heaven and wait for us to get it right. He isn't going to sit back and watch as we work our tails off to get to Him. He isn't going to stand by as we struggle and suffer and fight the forces of darkness that attack us on every side. No. He WILL rescue! He WILL redeem! He WILL save! He lifts us up. Holds us in His arms. Bathes us in His grace. Transplants our broken hearts. Infuses us with His very Spirit. Gives us new desires. New appetites. New loves. And so we find ourselves walking in God's ways. Obeying His rules. Living by His commands. Not because we have to but because we want to! Not because we're forced to but because we long to show our devotion to our Heavenly Father! Not out of fear or anxiety of what might happen if we make a mistake but from a deep sense of peace and security that flows from our confidence in the unconditional love of God.

This, friends, is God's plan. From eternity. Before the heavens and the earth were made, God predestined us in love to enjoy the riches of His grace!

**September 8, 2018**

## DRY BONES

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 37-40

Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones is one of my favorite passages in all the Bible. I love how God uses Ezekiel to literally raise the dead to new life. In a sense, every time I get up to preach this is my prayer. That God would awaken hearts that have become dry. Stale. Still. Dead. And bring new life through the preaching of His Word and the movement of His Spirit.

Of course, the power to raise the dead to new life doesn't come from me. And this is of great comfort! Ezekiel was simply called to prophesy. To speak the words God gave him. This was his act of faith. To declare the goodness and glory of God to a valley full of scattered bones. We never know what season we will be born into. Some are born into seasons of revival where the church is vibrant and growing and seeking the Lord with all its heart. Some are born into seasons where the church is dying and struggling and enslaved to fear and sin.

Ezekiel was called to be a prophet in exile. At a time in Israel's life where it seemed all hope had been lost. Their beautiful city had been destroyed. Their Temple raised to the ground. Their land conquered and occupied by foreign invaders. All the promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But in the midst of this national catastrophe, God brings a word of hope through His prophet. Ezekiel prophecies to the dry bones of Israel and a great "rattling" is heard. The scattered bones come together. Muscles and tissue and sinews form. The bodies rise. A great multitude as far as the eye could see. So Ezekiel prophecies again and the Spirit of God begins to blow. The dead bodies come alive! And why does God perform such a miracle? What is His primary aim and goal? Listen to what He tells Ezekiel. "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:13-14)

Now consider our own spiritual condition. The church in Europe and America is dying. For too long, it has tolerated sin. Think of the scandals rocking the Roman Catholic Church or the number of influential Protestant pastors whose moral failings have been exposed. Think of the number of churches who have lost sight of their mission in their arguments over styles of church music or the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. Think of the number of churches who have exchanged the truth of the gospel for the lies of our culture. Think of the number of churches who are closing their doors every day in communities across our country. It is heartbreaking. It can seem hopeless. I close my eyes and it's almost like I can picture the valley filling up with the bones of these formerly great congregations.

Now let's make it personal. As a pastor, I meet so many Christians who are struggling. Suffering. Dying spiritually. Their connection to God is tenuous at best. They've made choices and those choices have taken them far from God. They no longer spend time in His Word. No longer spend time with Him in prayer. No longer gather to worship with His people. Their everyday lives are filled with sinful pursuits they don't even recognize because they do not give God a second thought. Their hearts are not broken by the things that break God's heart. Instead, they spend their lives chasing their own happiness. Fulfilling their own wants and desires. They jump from church to church, never really putting down roots. Never really building authentic community because to do so would require them to die to themselves. It would require them to forgive past hurts. Look past the sins of others. Endure the heartache and pain that is part and parcel of the journey of building deep friendships. The end result of all this is spiritual death. This way of life ends in a valley of dry bones. But thankfully, even there, there is hope! For God can meet us in our valleys just as surely as He met Ezekiel! God can raise us to new life in these valleys just as surely as He did the people of Israel! With God, hope is never completely lost!

So where does life find you this morning? Are you traveling towards a valley filled with dry bones? Can you feel your spiritual life growing stale and your heart towards God growing cold? Examine your life! Take stock! What sin are you holding onto that is dragging you down? Has God given you new life? Raised you up yet again? Breathed His Spirit into your soul? Awesome! Now who do you need to tell? Over whose life do you need to "prophesy" so that they too might live?

**September 10, 2018**

## THE LORD'S RETURN

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 41-44

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds all of us to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were canceled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for almost a year. Another friend of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple." (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Our cars are repossessed. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships break down in divorce. We experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon you! He is with you! His glory is your sanctuary and your rearguard! If you walk by faith. If you trust in Him. If you surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide for you. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of your life. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

**September 11, 2018**

## MEMORIAL

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 45-48

Today we remember. We remember firefighters racing into burning buildings. We remember first responders dragging people to safety. We remember police officers laying down their lives to protect the innocent. We remember ordinary people committing extraordinary acts of courage and bravery to guard against the loss of even more life. Most of all, we remember the almost 3,000 people who were killed in one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in history. Lives were forever altered on that day. Almost twenty years later, the pain still remains fresh for those who lost loved ones.

If you go to the 9/11 memorial today, you will see a memorial pool. Specifically designed by an architect who watched the second plane hit the South Tower from a rooftop on the Lower East Side, he found comfort in the days that followed by the waters of the Hudson River. He also found inspiration. Rejecting any notion of rebuilding on the smoldering ruins, he imagined a scene where a deep void was continually being filled by water. A powerful representation of grief and loss, the memorial pool is a perfect reflection of his vision. As each individual stream flows over the edge of the pool, they join together at the bottom to become one. Constantly emptying. Constantly refilling. Those who visit sense healing in those waters. Hope in those waters. Even while acknowledging the reality of the void.

Ezekiel sees a similar vision. Water flowing from the Temple of God. It begins as a trickle but soon becomes a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Their fruit providing food and sustenance to all. Their leaves never wither or fade. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

For the Christian, we recognize the prophetic nature of Ezekiel's vision. Many centuries later, the Apostle Peter will actually stand on the steps of the Temple and preach the gospel for the first time. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully through his words and 3000 gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Along the very stairs where Peter most likely preached are the ceremonial mikvehs where Jewish believers would wash before going into worship. The 3000 who were saved were probably baptized in those very waters! What began as a trickle soon became a mighty river as the Spirit moved in the hearts of those early believers. From 20,000 at the end of the 1st century to over 20 million some two hundred years later to over 3 billion today; the gospel of Jesus Christ just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

God is still on the move, friends! Even after all these centuries, lives are still being changed by the gospel! It moves out into the wasteland of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And it brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

**September 13, 2018**

## SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Readings for the day: Daniel 1-6

"In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..." (1 Peter 3:15)

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he never once seems to waver. When he was a young man, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king's household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling one of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God's truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he counsels a king whose ego is out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. "But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God's Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God's way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don't measure up, we'll do it your way. It's a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. And he treats the man with gentleness and respect.

Fast forward a few years. Now Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that everyone is to be killed because no one can pass the king's test. Once again, Daniel approaches the captain of the guard with gentleness and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle

happens as God Himself appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

More years pass. More dreams and visions. The king actually goes insane for a period of time. Mysterious handwriting appears on a wall. Nebuchadnezzar gives way to Belshazzar who gives way to Darius. Political power shifts and once again Daniel finds himself put to the test. Now an old man, he has lived his life with great integrity. His political opponents try to dig up dirt on him but can't find any so they attack his faith. The core of who he is. They make it illegal to pray for thirty days. This is old hat for Daniel so he does what he always does. He continued his regular practice of prayer. When arrested, he humbly submitted to the king's injustice, trusting God with his fate. When God delivered him from the lions, Daniel answered the king with gentleness and respect, giving him the reason for the hope he has lived his whole life by. "O king, live forever! My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." (Daniel 6:21-22)

Daniel is an amazing example of faith to us all. In the way he lives his life, he shows us how to live and engage our increasingly non-Christian world in a faithful way. We do not have to relinquish our faith in Christ to serve in politics or business or education or any other field for that matter. Holding onto Christ in our hearts, we do have to be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in Him. People will ask. They may wonder why we do the things we do or refuse to act in ways that are dishonest or morally compromised. We may be attacked for our faith at times. Through it all, we are not to respond with violence or anger or fight for our "rights" but instead stand firm with gentleness and respect. We are not to resort to the underhanded ways of this world to accomplish the will of God. We must not use the ways of this world to achieve the purposes of God. Instead, we must let go and let God act as He chooses. Use us as He pleases. Place our lives and our future in His hands.

**September 14, 2018**

## PROPHETIC VISIONS

Readings for the day: Daniel 7-9

What the book of Daniel is most famous for are the visions Daniel sees in the night. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these dreams. Are they historical? Referring to past events and past kingdoms that have come and gone? Do they tell the future? Of a time when the great Enemy will rise and attack God's people? Are they both? Can we learn from what has happened in the past and look for those same signs to take place in the future? And what does it all mean for the Christian in 21st century America? How does it all relate to our daily lives?

I think we often miss the forest for the trees when it comes to reading Scripture. We get so wrapped up in the details. So lost in the weeds. And we lose sight of the overarching message God has for us. Daniel and his people are in exile. They have experienced national trauma on a level we simply cannot grasp or imagine. Their pain and suffering is real and terrible. Their hopes and dreams have been crushed out of existence. Ground under the heel of a merciless pagan empire. Everything they once held dear has been destroyed. These are the circumstances in which God has placed Daniel. He has been a counselor to pagan kings. He has served foreign rulers. He has done all he can to embrace the call God placed on His people back in Jeremiah to "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." (Jeremiah 29:7) And he has prospered. He has been given power and authority. He has access and influence. He has wealth and privilege. He is considered one of the greatest wise men the empire has ever produced. But one thing continues to set Daniel apart...his great faith.

Daniel never loses sight of God. Never loses hope in a future restoration where God will act to deliver His people once again. Daniel trusts God. Daniel is faithful to God. At great personal risk, Daniel has demonstrated this faith over and over again. Lions. Fiery furnaces. Under threat of torture and death. Daniel has seen it all and done it all and not only survived but thrived. And now God is again visiting him with visions and dreams. He is showing him the future. Kings and empires will rise and fall. The pain and suffering they inflict will be great. The fear they will engender will cause many to flee. Safety and comfort will be in short supply. But over it all, there is this promise. God is in control. God is on the move. God is bringing human history to a predetermined end with Christ taking His seat in glory and His kingdom shall never end.

"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened...I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14) Forget the four great beasts. Forget the visions of lions and eagles and bears. Rams and goats thundering towards one another across the earth. Forget the terrifying beast with ten horns or the little horn with the big mouth. The focus of Daniel's vision is on the One called the Ancient of Days. The One who reigns and rules over it all. Pure as driven snow. Engulfed in holy fire. Tens of thousands at his beck and call. He judges the earth. He judges kings and rulers. He holds all dominion and power in His hand. And He calls to the Son of Man. Out of the clouds of heaven comes the Christ and He is given all authority on heaven and on earth. All peoples and nations and tribes and tongues shall serve him. His kingdom shall never end. This is the main point of the vision Daniel receives. God letting his beloved prophet know He is not done. There is still hope. There will come a day when Christ shall come and all things shall be set right and made new.

And what happens to us on that great day? Listen to how Daniel describes it, “And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High; his kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.'” (Daniel 7:27) We get to share in this glory! We get to share in this victory! When Christ comes again in glory, we will be given dominion and power and authority to reign and rule at His side and under His Lordship! There will be no more sin. No more evil. No more crying. No more pain. No more suffering. No more fear. For God Himself will be our God and we shall be His people! This is the great hope of the gospel! The great hope sealed by Christ’s death and resurrection! An empty tomb bears witness! Millions upon millions throughout history all stand to give their testimony! Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!

**September 15, 2018**

# DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for the day: Daniel 10-12

Biblical prophets speak truth to power. Biblical prophets bring hope and assurance to God's people by reminding them of God's sovereign power and plan. Finally, Biblical prophets often foretell the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here's a brief timeline...

535 BC – Third year of Cyrus the Great's reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel's grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel – most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God's chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their compete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary "buffer state" in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. "But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand." (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time..." Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God's people are trying to build. And the worst of them all – Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:1-3)

What's the relevance of all this history for God's people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even

amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

**September 17, 2018**

# REBUILDING

Readings for the day: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3

Our God specializes in rebuilding. He takes what is broken and He builds it back up. He takes what is ruined and He raises it back up. He takes what's been torn down and He pulls it back together. We see it over and over again throughout the Scriptures. After Adam and Eve sin, humanity descends into evil and chaos resulting in a great flood. God rebuilds using Noah. Humanity scatters in confusion at the Tower of Babel when their languages are confused. God rebuilds using Abram. Abram's descendants are enslaved and brutally oppressed in Egypt. God rebuilds using Moses. Israel plunges into complete anarchy at the end of the Book of Judges. God rebuilds using a prophet named Samuel and a king named David. Both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel fall into idolatry and are invaded. Their way of life destroyed and the people carried off into exile. God rebuilds using men like Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zerubbabel.

God rebuilds His Temple. God rebuilds His city. Most importantly, God rebuilds His people. He brings them back home just as He promised. He stirs the heart of a pagan king. A Persian named Cyrus who has destroyed the Babylonian empire. A royal decree is issued. Sacred elements are gathered. The people begin their journey back home. It's a massive undertaking involving thousands of people. Genealogical records are consulted to make sure the leaders all come from the correct lineage. Those eligible for the priesthood are identified. Those eligible to serve from the Levite tribe are identified. The direct descendants of the temple servants and royal servants are identified so they can all be restored to their rightful place, God leaving no detail left to chance. When they arrive, the first thing they do is rebuild the altar so they can worship. They keep the Feast of Booths according to God's Word. And most importantly, they lay the foundation of a new Temple which causes the old to weep and the young to praise. It had to be quite a moment.

Sadly sin will run its course once more. God's people will struggle and suffer yet again. As Daniel foretold, they will become a pawn in a much greater conflict as kingdoms clash over the legacy left by Alexander the Great. Eventually, Rome will rise and crush all in her path. Herod the Great will be installed as a "client king" set to rule over Israel. In a bid to curry favor, he will refurbish the Temple but his corruption and penchant for violence is evident to all. Tensions rise. Factions jockey for power and influence. Israel is a powder keg ready to blow at anytime. And into this mess, a baby is born. A child grows up. His name is Jesus. Come to save His people from their sins. Come to rebuild the ancient ruins. Come to restore God's Kingdom once and for all. He dies on a cross. An apparent failure. But three days later, He rises from the dead in glorious triumph! Delivering the final, decisive blow to sin and evil in this world. Right before He ascends into heaven, He commissions His disciples. His follower. Those who would eventually be called "Christian" to carry on His rebuilding work. Armed with tools like compassion and grace and mercy, they are to go out into the world proclaiming the gospel to every tribe, tongue and nation. They are charged to build up a spiritual house. Equipping the saints for the work of God's Kingdom.

So what about you? Where is God at work in your life today? Where is He rebuilding? Where is He restoring? How is He using you to rebuild and restore others in His name?

**September 18, 2018**

# POLITICS

Readings for the day: Ezra 4-6

The return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon was a significant political event. Jerusalem was known throughout the region as a powerful and influential city. Once ruled by mighty kings with large armies who refused to bow the knee to the various empires who had attacked her over the years. Rebuilding her constituted a threat to the status quo. A threat to the established peace. A threat to the current political order. Furthermore, rebuilding the Temple was even more threatening. The Temple of God stood as the religious, social, and political center of the nation of Israel. To allow this structure to be rebuilt was to allow the people of God to reclaim their national identity. National identity leads to national pride. National pride would lead to calls for freedom, independence, and the re-establishment of the geographical borders laid out by God Himself. All of this created a lot of fear and unrest among the people who were living in the area at the time of the exile's return. Not only that but when they ask to join in the work, they are rejected. Not arbitrarily but because they are unclean and impure and God's Temple must remain holy as do God's people.

Thus begins a political back and forth. Letters are dispatched. Extensive searches are conducted in the archives of the empire. People leverage their influence and connections to try to either hinder or help the work. Names are dropped. Bribes offered. Anything to frustrate the purposes and plan of God. Initially, the political opponents of Israel are successful. The work ceases for a time. But God sends two prophets – both of whom we will read in a bit - with the message to resume work. To remember who has called them to this work. Who has authorized this work. And who gives them all the resources they need to accomplish this work. They answer to God alone and not to the kings and princes of this world. "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." (Ezra 5:11)

It is tempting in our world today to think we need political cover to help us accomplish God's plan. It is tempting to cozy up to politicians and seek their approval for all we do. It is tempting to give them a platform at our events or in our churches or even in our pulpits with the hope that we will gain favor with them for the future. It is tempting to align ourselves with one political party or the other. It is tempting to rationalize the ungodly behavior of our political leaders with the hope we will gain access and influence. It is tempting to compromise our convictions in order to gain their support. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah all remind us otherwise. Our hope is in Christ alone. Our future is held in God's hands. Only He can provide the resources to accomplish His plans. Only He can give us the power and authority to live and to walk in His ways. We serve a greater King and a greater Kingdom, friends! We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us! We live in this world but we are not of this world! Our citizenship is held in heaven!

At the same time, we do live in the real world. We cannot withdraw or stick our heads in the sand. We cannot pretend like the world around us doesn't exist. We cannot ignore the very real problems our nation faces nor the challenges that confront our political leaders. We must pray for them. We must respect and honor them. Given the opportunity, we must seek to share God's wisdom with them. Influence them in ways that align with God's Kingdom. Confront them gently but firmly on their shortcomings. This is our calling in this world because we serve the God of heaven and earth who reigns and rules over all.

**September 19, 2018**

## SELF-CENTERED VS. GOD-CENTERED

Readings for the day: Haggai 1-2

St. Augustine once wrote that the main problem with humanity is our disordered loves. Our misdirected desires. Our disoriented passions. Human beings were created perfect. Made in God's own image, each man, woman and child bears His likeness. In the Garden at the dawn of time, we experienced perfect fulfillment. Complete satisfaction. True joy. Nothing threatened our peace because all our passions and desires were directed towards pleasing God. We loved Him with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. From this intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father flowed every blessing.

Then sin entered the world. Sin wrecked us at a foundational level. Psalm 51 says we are conceived in sin and born in iniquity. This brokenness exists on a cellular level. It is present from the moment the sperm meets the egg in the womb. Everyone is born this way. It is something we all hold in common though it takes different forms in each of our lives. Whatever passions, desires, and loves we are born with, they all are ultimately misdirected and disordered without Christ. What this means is that everything is oriented inward. Towards the self. So we take the good gifts God has given us and we primarily use them to self-promote. We take the good resources God has given us and we primarily use them to self-protect and self-provide. When we struggle, we turn to self-help. We seem obsessed with self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment. Fundamentally, we have removed God from the center of our lives and replaced Him with the false god named Self.

We see this bear out in Haggai's time. The people of God returned from exile. They rebuilt their homes. They replanted their fields. They made sure to take care of themselves and their families first before turning to the work of God. "Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes...Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified, says the Lord. You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the Lord of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors." (Haggai 1:3-6, 8-11) Was there anything wrong with building homes? Of course not. Anything wrong with planting fields? Nope. Anything wrong with eating and drinking and wearing clothes and earning a wage? Not at all. The key was the attitude of their hearts. They didn't put God first. They didn't seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Instead, they were trying to do all life on some level without God. They were trying to make their own way in the world. They wanted to be self-sufficient. God confronts them on the sinful, selfish trajectory of their hearts. He exposes their disordered loves and calls them to repent. To demonstrate their love for Him by rebuilding His house.

Thankfully, the people of God respond. They obeyed God. And the result is the promise of His abiding presence. "I am with you, declares the Lord." (Haggai 1:13) There is no greater blessing than the Lord's presence in our lives. The people of God have always found peace and comfort and safety in His arms. God told Abraham He would be with him and his descendants forever. God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle in the wilderness so the people would always have a visible, tangible sign of His presence. God moved from tabernacle into the Temple during the reign of King Solomon. And it was the failure of the people to truly apprehend how unique and special it was for them to have such an intimate relationship with God that gets them in trouble and leads to exile. Now they've returned. They're rebuilding. They're re-establishing themselves in the Promised Land.

Surely the most important task they can set themselves to is to restore God's house so they can lift up His name in worship and praise!

Haggai is a very convicting read. Especially for 21st century American Christians. We are raised in a culture that prizes self-sufficiency. Idolizes the self-made man or woman. Stresses over self-protection. We are the richest nation on earth and yet, if we're totally honest, most of our wealth is spent on selfish pursuits. Most of our times is directed towards selfish ends. Most of our energy is wasted on selfish aims. Does this mean we never help others? Of course not. We often help others...because we love, in part, how it makes us feel. Does this mean we aren't generous? Of course not. We are a very generous nation...because we love, in part, the feelings of moral superiority it gives us. Does this mean every good thing we do is evil? Of course not. We simply have to recognize how sin wields its corrupting influence over our loves, passions, and desires.

So what's the answer? Jesus. Once we submit our lives to Christ, He deposits His Holy Spirit into our hearts. And once the Spirit takes up residence, He begins to go to work. Reordering our loves. Redirecting our desires. Re-orienting our passions towards God. We start to find joy as we worship and serve Him. We experience the peace that comes along with our awareness of His abiding presence. We start to discover a fulfillment and satisfaction we never thought possible because Christ is now our greatest treasure.

**September 20, 2018**

## YAHWEH REMEMBERS

Readings for the day: Zechariah 1-7

Zechariah literally means “Yahweh Remembers.” And it’s an appropriate name when one considers the main message of the book. Despite all that has happened to Israel, Yahweh has not forgotten her. He has not forgotten her in her exile. Not abandoned her to destruction. Not left her for another people. He is still her God and she is still His people. Zechariah most likely returned from exile with his grandfather Iddo and father Berechiah. He came from a lineage of priests and in addition to this leadership mantle, was called by God to serve as a prophet alongside the much older Haggai. Whereas Haggai’s prophetic message had a convicting tone, Zechariah’s was more encouraging.

“Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts: Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts...” (Zechariah 1:3)

“And the Lord answered gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, 'Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion.” (Zechariah 1:13-14)

“Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem.” (Zechariah 1:16-17)

“Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst.” (Zechariah 2:4-5)

“Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you. And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem." (Zechariah 2:10-12)

“And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments...Thus says the Lord of hosts: If you will walk in my ways and keep my charge, then you shall rule my house and have charge of my courts, and I will give you the right of access among those who are standing here.” (Zechariah 3:4, 7)

“Then he said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts. Who are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain. And he shall bring forward the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it!” (Zechariah 4:6-7)

“Thus says the Lord of hosts, "Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the Lord and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. And there shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.” (Zechariah 6:12-13)

These are among the most glorious promises Israel has ever received. They speak of honor and blessing and restoration. They refer to the rebuilding of the Temple. The restoration of the priesthood. The glory of the worship that will once again fill the Lord's house. God is raising up political leaders like Zerubbabel and religious leaders like Joshua to guide and direct God's people to carry out the work God has planned for them. They will again be a light to the nations and will bless the people of the earth. Every obstacle that might rise in their path, God Himself will lay low. Most of all, God's name will once again receive the glory it deserves.

It is easy at times to feel forgotten. It is easy at times to believe God has somehow abandoned us. When we experience pain and hardship. Suffering and struggle. Trials and temptation. It is easy to lose sight of God in the midst of it all. Zechariah reminds us God never forgets. God never abandons or forsakes us. He never leave us on our own. He is always with us. He will complete the work He began in us. He bring to pass the plans He has for us. He never fails. He is always faithful. No matter what you may be facing today, God is with you. The Lord of hosts is on your side. Trust Him. Believe Him. Lean on Him for strength. Remember what He said to Zerubbabel. Not by might. Not by power. But by My Spirit, says the Lord!

**September 21, 2018**

## MESSIANIC PROPHECIES

Readings for the day: Zechariah 8-14

Anyone who is familiar at all with the gospel story will recognize the Messianic prophecies embedded throughout Zechariah's visions. This is a critical reminder of the importance of the Old Testament. We have to understand the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of a story that has been unfolding for centuries. Jesus is the true fulfillment of the covenant God first established with Abraham. He is the true seed. The promised Son. The faithful Israelite. He is the perfect embodiment of God's eternal plan and its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, as God interacted with His people, He dropped clues as to what was coming. The "Day of the Lord" it was often called. A day when the Messiah would come and Israel would be saved. The people of God looked for this day. Longed for this day. Prayed for this day. Especially in periods of great hardship and suffering. So again, Zechariah is prophesying at a time of great change and upheaval. Decades of exile and slavery has come to an end. The people have survived Babylon. They've survived attempts at genocide. They've survived attempts to forcefully assimilate them into a broader, pagan culture. And now they've returned home. To a ruined city. To ruined homes. To a ruined Temple. Time to start over. Where will life go from here? Will God remain faithful? What life will they build? These are the fundamental questions they're asking and God sends Haggai, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah – among others - with the answer.

He gives them a picture of the future. When Messiah's Kingdom comes to earth. And so we read familiar words like...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

"Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter." (Zechariah 11:12-13)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zechariah 12:10)

"And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)

And these words – often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament – remind us God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Until that great Day comes, what should then we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. Zechariah encourages us just as he encouraged God's people so many centuries ago.

"Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain...Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in

the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness." (Zechariah 8:3, 7-8)

"On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!" (Zechariah 9:16-17)

"I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them." (Zechariah 10:6)

The Lord is our God. We are His people. When we call on Him, He will answer. When we knock, the door is always open. When we've sinned, there is always grace. Believe this for your life today!

**September 22, 2018**

# PERSECUTION

Readings for the day: Esther 1-5

"There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them." (Esther 3:8)

God's people have always been at risk. The systematic murder of the Hebrew children in Egypt. The battles they fought on their way to the Promised Land. The invasions of the Assyrians and Babylonians. This genocidal order from Haman the Agagite. The Jews will suffer under the Seleucid empire in the intertestamental period. They will be persecuted by the Romans for their "atheism." (The Romans couldn't understand the lack of idols.) There will be pogroms in Europe during the medieval period as anti-Semitism became popular culminating in Hitler's Final Solution. Even after the modern state of Israel was created, the Arab nations surrounding them promised to annihilate them completely. There is just something about the people of God that sets the pagan world on edge.

The same is true for Christians. In the early days, Christians were understood to be just another Jewish sect. Rising out of the synagogue, they proclaimed to worship a Jewish Messiah. Like their Jewish brothers and sisters, they didn't worship idols. Refused to bow down to other gods. Willingly went to their deaths in the arena rather than recant their faith. They answered to a higher law than the laws of the kingdoms of this earth and that set the empires of this world on edge. They were killed in Rome. Killed in China. Killed in Japan. Killed in the Amazon. All over the world, Christians have spilt their blood and continue to do so to this day. All for the cause of Christ.

Esther is a heroic story. The story of how one teenage woman was positioned by God in order to deliver His people. Esther is a savior. A messiah in a sense. She was raised up "for such a time as this" and she answered the call. She was courageous. She was brilliant. She was faithful. And even though God isn't mentioned in this story, He certainly hovers in the background sovereignly orchestrating all things.

Esther is our story. All of us – young and old alike - have been positioned by God in some way to be salt and light in this world. Salt not only brings out flavor but acts as a preservative. Light not only illumines the night but provides safety as it chases away the darkness. The church of Jesus Christ has been sent into the world to help preserve and protect. We heal those who are hurting. We visit the sick and dying. We minister to those in prison. We provide for widows and orphans. We take the side of the downtrodden and oppressed. We fight for those in bondage and slavery. We take up the cause of God's justice in the world. This works itself out in large scale, globally significant projects and it works itself out in everyday encounters at the office, in the classroom, with our neighbors, friends, and family.

Why do we live the way we do? Why do we keep laws no other nation or kingdom or tribe understands? Why do we embrace our unique identity as God's chosen people? For the Jew, it is because they remember they were once slaves in Egypt and God delivered them with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. For the Christian, it is because we remember we too were once "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12) But now God has delivered us with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He reached down from heaven and saved us by the blood of His Son. He "who has made us has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14) and become our peace. This is what sustains us through every trial and temptation. Through every persecution and pain. Through all struggle and suffering. I consider all things rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ.

**September 24, 2018**

# DIVINE REVERSAL

Readings for the day: Esther 6-10

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories from their own family histories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Persian Jews, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire must have felt! They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act or the election of President Obama in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which where unfortunately violated almost immediately...) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Or the joy that comes to children as they experienced love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or currently are facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Le Esther give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

**September 25, 2018**

## OFFERING

Readings for the day: Malachi 1-4, Psalm 50

I am the parent of four teenagers. They are all strong-willed. All independent thinkers. They are all straining at the leash, longing to be on their own. I love it. It's exactly how it should be. But they aren't ready yet and my job in this phase of life is to coach them. To encourage them. To guide them. How do I know they aren't ready? Because their attitude and effort is still subpar. They don't complete their work all the way. They leave far too many things undone. They struggle to submit. They struggle to take responsibility. They are afraid of – in their words - "adulting." I get it. I remember feeling the same way when I was their age.

When I read Malachi, it feels to me like God is dealing with a bunch of adolescents. Believers whose attitude and effort is subpar. Yes, they bring their sacrifices to the Lord but they are blemished. Yes, they meet their obligations in worship but it's not their firstfruits. They say and do all the right things but their hearts are not pure. They are just going through the motions. And God knows all this! He sees the sacrifices they have to offer. "When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil?" (Malachi 1:8) He sees right through all the BS. "Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it." (Malachi 2:3) He knows their tears are simply for show. "You cover the Lord 's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless..." (Malachi 2:13-14) He can count. He knows they aren't giving in accordance with His commands. "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions." (Malachi 3:8) And yet, when confronted with their sin, what do the people do? They protest. Throw up their hands. Stomp their feet. Raise their voices. Shift the blame. It's typical adolescent behavior.

What is God's desire? He wants His people to grow. He wants them to be strong. He wants them to be wholly devoted to His great name. "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts...For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations." (Malachi 1:11, 14) He wants His people to be pure of heart and true in faith. "My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 2:5-7) His desire is to bless and not curse. To give and not withhold. To pour out abundance upon them so that they nations will see all God has done. "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 3:10-12)

But God also knows our hearts. He knows what He expects is impossible for us to achieve. He knows the corruption that exists at the core of our being. The sin that so easily entangles. We brought this on ourselves and God has been trying to teach us how helpless and hopeless we are without Him. So He will send His messenger to accomplish all that we could not. He will be the Faithful One. He will be the True Israelite. He will be the Messiah and Savior of all who believe. "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord." (Malachi 3:1-3) He will purify our offerings. He will sanctify our hearts. He will make us righteous before the Lord.

**September 26, 2018**

## RACISM IN THE BIBLE?

Readings for the day: Ezra 7-10

Today's reading definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we live so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce simply over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Or was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing it's ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, and, at a more fundamental level, the US Bill of Rights that will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in ancient near east culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with the Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms were defined in a very real sense according to the god they worshiped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust and ethnic purges of the last 150 years.

From a Biblical standpoint then, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were very real questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to

captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today." (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don't know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast side? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God's Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger and most vulnerable in our midst as it is about intermarriage.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. I can only here offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so I've encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially "put away" the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It's not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So where do you find yourself today? What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life?

**September 27, 2018**

## THE WORK OF PRAYER

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 1-4

What is your first response when facing a crisis? What is your initial instinct when you receive bad news? When life seems to be falling apart, what do you turn to? For many, it is alcohol or drugs. Opioids. Marijuana. Psychedelics. All are readily available in my community. For many, it is sex. Porn. Tinder. Hook-up apps. All pose very real temptations to those who in need of a "fix." For many, it is work. Longer hours. Longer days. More gratification. More achievement. More success. It can be intoxicating. However, all these behaviors only postpone the inevitable. At some point in time, we have to face our fear. We have to enter the darkness. We have to deal with the heartbreak and pain.

Nehemiah receives the worst news imaginable. He had asked about his people. How many had survived? How many were still living in Jerusalem? What was life like for them? The news was grim. The people were helpless. Vulnerable. Weak. They were barely hanging on. Without a wall to protect them, there was no way they would survive. So how does Nehemiah respond? With prayer and fasting. Weeping and mourning before the Lord for days. Many would argue he's wasting valuable time. He should use his position of influence to get what he needs to save his people. He should run to the king immediately to let him know what's happening. Why waste time in prayer? Surely God understands! And can't Nehemiah pray along the way? Why now? Why wait? When there's so much work to be done?

We live in a busy world. A world that puts the pedal to the metal 24/7. A world that sets a relentless pace. It is easy to get caught up in the race. It is easy to pull up anchor and let yourself be driven by all the activities and opportunities the world puts in front of us. It's easy to go from crisis to crisis without ever stopping to ask why? Why am I trying so hard? Why am I running so hard? What am I trying to avoid? Who am I trying to impress? What's the cost? Prayer forces us to slow down. It forces us to sit in the Lord's presence and wait for His Word. Prayer silences the cacophony of voices that fill our head every single day. Or at least quiets them for a few moments. Prayer brings us in touch with what is truly real and noble and true and allows us to identify the lies we so often believe. Prayer gives time for wisdom to sink in. For plans to be made. For actions to be mapped out.

Consider again the example of Nehemiah. After praying and fasting for days, he wipes his tears and resumes his post as cupbearer before the king. The king sensed his mood however and asked him what was wrong. Nehemiah clearly had prepared for this moment. When asked, he laid out his concern and his plan. "I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me." (Nehemiah 2:3-8) Nehemiah left nothing to chance. In prayer, he had sought the wisdom and counsel of God. He waited for days until the Lord revealed His will. He emptied himself through fasting in order that he may receive. And God was faithful. God gave him a plan to present to the king. Furthermore, because Nehemiah appealed to God first, God gave him favor when it came time to appeal to the king.

Too often prayer is an afterthought. A last resort. Something we do when it's time to "break glass in case of emergency." Too often we look at prayer as a passive exercise. We assume it is a way of avoiding hard work or hard conversations. We don't value prayer as we should. Instead, we are people of action. We want to move and move now! We want to act and act now! We demand instant gratification and instant success and instant feedback. Especially in a social media world. But prayer is vital to the life of a believer. It slows us down. It calms us down. It gives us perspective. All good things in our world today!

What's your prayer life like? Do you make time to pray each day? What do you pray for? Wisdom? Understanding? Insight? Strength? Peace? All these things and more are available to you through our Heavenly Father. All you have to do is ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened.

**September 28, 2018**

## RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 5-7

The call of the gospel is to lay down our lives for others. To do as Jesus did. Jesus is God. As such, He could have chosen to hold onto His divine right to rule. His divine right to reign. His divine right to wield authority and power and compel obedience. But Jesus relinquished those rights. He laid them aside. Taking on the form of a servant. He became obedient even unto death. And not just any death but the most humiliating, degrading death possible. Death on a cross. At any time, He could have called down legions of angels to crush His enemies. At any time, He could have taken back up His authority and destroyed His enemies. But Jesus relinquished His rights because He had a greater prize in mind...the approval of His Heavenly Father. Jesus put no stock in the ways of this world. The accolades of this world. The kingdoms of this world. The treasures of this world. He placed no value on anything this world had to offer and instead looked to the world to come for His hope. This is why His Father exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. His willingness to lay everything down in humble obedience to His Father's will was vindicated by His resurrection, ascension, and exaltation.

I see Christ in Nehemiah. A man who was willing to relinquish his rights and lay everything down for the sake of God's people. A man who put service to His nation above his own well-being. He had every right to demand tribute as governor. He had every right to levy taxes and exact a heavy toll on his constituents. He had every right to demand a portion of the interest the wealthy had placed on the poor. But he gave all that up and by doing so, set a godly example before the people. "From the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver...But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work...we acquired no land...what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people." (Nehemiah 5:14-19) And how did the people respond to such godly leadership? The rich forgave the debts of the poor. Land was restored to their rightful owners. Interest was no longer accrued. The people were set free. Such acts of generosity were a sign to everyone that God was in their midst.

What about us? We live in a nation consumed with selfishness and greed. Everyone seems out to get "theirs." Everyone is concerned about protecting their "rights." Everyone wants justice. The problem is we don't all share the same view of justice. We believe all truth is relative. We all want an equal share but often refuse to make equal sacrifice. Too many feel entitled to what they have rather than view it as a gift from God. Too many do all they can to protect what they have rather than walk with open hands. Too many hoard all they have rather than give generously. And here I am just talking about the Christians! The very people who claim to follow Christ!

It is estimated that if every American who called themselves a Christian tithed, an additional 165 billion dollars could be raised? Think of the global problems that could be solved with that kind of money! According to the United Nations, 25 billion dollars could relieve world hunger, starvation and death from preventable disease within five years. 12 billion could eliminate illiteracy in five years. 15 billion could solve the world's water and sanitation issues. 1 billion could fully fund all overseas mission work. Do all that and you would still have almost 100 billion left over! (Source: www.relevantmagazine.com/love-and-money/what-would-happen-if-the-church-tithed) Imagine how the reputation of the church would change if we got serious about following the example of our Savior and laid down our lives for others? Imagine how the world would change if the church would relinquish her rights and instead sought to serve? Imagine how many lives would be saved if we truly embraced the heart of the gospel like Nehemiah and so many others who have gone before us?

**September 29, 2018**

## TELL THE OLD, OLD STORY

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 8-10

Creation. Abraham. Egypt. Exodus. Judges. Promised Land. Kings. Temple. Priests. Prophets. Exile. Return. Whenever the people of God renew their covenant with the Lord, they take time to remember their story. They understood their current situation was but the latest link in a chain of events stretching all the way back to the Garden. All the way back to God Himself at the dawn of creation. But for God, they would have been destroyed. But for God, they would have been erased. But for God, there would be no history. No story to tell. Listen to them tell it again and think about how far they've come...

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved

them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress." (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

Those of you who have been tracking with us through the Bible this year know these stories. You read them in great detail. You pondered them. You prayed over them. You listened for the voice of God in them. Many of you grew frustrated at times. You couldn't understand why they kept making the same mistakes. You got angry at times. You couldn't understand the righteous judgment of God. Many of you laughed and cried and wrestled and struggled with the lessons the people were learning. About themselves. About their God. About His plan and His future.

It's important for us to remember this story. To read it over and over again for it is our story as well. As Christians, we are grafted into this story. Adopted into this family. Warts and all. These people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. Sisters and brothers in the faith. And we are so like them. If we're honest with ourselves, we too make the same mistakes over and over again. We too sin and fall short of the glory of God. We too deserve judgment and death. Punishment and exile. But we have the benefit of living after Christ. Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserved. He went into exile for us. He endured the righteous wrath of God so we do not. He stood in our place just as surely as He stands in the place of the Old Testament saints who came before us. He is Savior of the world. Past. Present. Future. He is the Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. His blood is sufficient to cover every sin. As we head into the New Testament, we must hold onto our history. Christ came as the climax of this history. He is the One to whom the Old Testament points. He is the One in whom all prophecies are fulfilled. He is the One every single saint from Abraham forward looked to by faith.

**October 1, 2018**

## A DARK ENDING

Readings for the day: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalm 126

I grew up watching Star Wars as a kid and it is generally accepted that The Empire Strikes Back is the best of the original trilogy, if not the best in the entire series. It's a very dark movie. Evil is on the move and in fact, seems to be winning. The end of this second installment finds the heroes in disarray. Luke Skywalker has lost a hand and his innocence as he finds out Darth Vader is his father. Han Solo has been captured and frozen in carbon so he can be delivered to Jabba the Hut. Leia, Chewbacca, the droids, and Lando aren't quite sure what to do and the hopes of the rebellion seem very slim. It's all a set up of course. The final installment of the series will see the heroes overcome all these obstacles to win an improbable victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Stop me if this plot seems familiar at all.

The Old Testament – whether you read it chronologically as we have this year or you simply read the books in order – doesn't end well. Israel is in disarray. Despite their return to the Promised Land, they simply cannot get it right. They are unable to remain faithful. They intermarry. They profane the Sabbath. They worship other gods. The whole point of the Old Testament on some level is to drive us to complete and total despair. To bring us to the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our resources. The end of our wisdom so we will cry out for God. It's to prepare God's people for the coming of the Savior who is Jesus Christ. Because it is impossible for us to remain faithful, He must do it for us. Because it is impossible for us to obey God's Law, He must do it for us. Because the sacrifices are only temporary, Jesus must become the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. Hanging between heaven and earth. Representing both God and humanity. He intercedes for us even as He takes our place.

If you are wired like me, you find the end of the Old Testament incredibly unsatisfying. It goes over like a lead balloon. A wet blanket. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The reason I feel this way is because deep down I want to believe I can be a good person. Deep down I want to believe that if I work hard enough, stay disciplined enough, read the Bible enough, pray enough, worship enough, you name it; I can work my way to God. I can find favor with Him. I can earn His praise. But Ephesians 2:8-9 confronts me with the truth, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Saved by grace. Saved through faith which itself is a gift from God. None of my works matter in the grand scheme of thing because God will not allow me to boast in anything except Christ.

We've spent nine months in the Old Testament. It's a long, hard slog no doubt. We have watched the same pattern repeats itself over and over again. God raises up His people only to watch them fall into sin. Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Moses and the Exodus. Joshua and the Judges. Samuel and Saul. David and Bathsheba. On and on the list goes until you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and the Exiles. All of them sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of them are like sheep who have gone astray. All of them unworthy of anything but God's judgment. So how does God respond?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

**October 2, 2018**

## READING THE BIBLE WHOLISTICALLY

Readings for the day: Psalm 106, John 1:4-14

For decades, maybe even a few centuries, there has been a strong push among biblical scholars to break the Bible down into it's component parts. To atomize the Scriptures so we can get to the truth. To divorce each word, each phrase, each passage from the rest of the material around it so we can put it under the microscope. When I was in seminary we were taught to stay within the text. To stay within the particular chapter we were reading. We most certainly were not encouraged and, in some cases, not allowed to draw from other books of the Bible to make our exegetical case. Such efforts were dismissed in favor of a "dis-integrated" approach that frees the interpreter from the constraints of the overarching narrative.

The problem, of course, is this notion is completely foreign to the Biblical authors themselves. Clearly whoever composed Psalm 106 had no trouble drawing on material from all over the Bible as he prayed to God. Egypt. Exodus. The wilderness wandering. A golden calf. The great sin at Peor and the valiant actions of Phinehas to stay the plague. The conquest of Canaan. Inhabiting the Promised Land. Kingdom. Exile. Return. He basically is telling and re-telling the story of Israel as he prays. Recounting the great faithfulness of God as he remembers and cries out for salvation once again. He understands his place the larger narrative. He understands his role in the larger story. He sees Scripture "wholistically" and draws great comfort from the text.

Jesus himself took this approach. He saw the Scriptures a "unified" whole that could not be separated or broken down into hermetically sealed little packages, one having nothing to do with the other. Listen to what he tells two disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection. "And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Luke 24:25-27) Jesus' life, death, and resurrection makes no sense if it is not connected to the larger story of God's salvation. The greater plan God has been working out since the foundations of the world. Jesus' birth seems random and even capricious – at least to Mary - unless it remains anchored in the prophetic witness of the Old Testament. Jesus' teaching seems like it comes out of left field unless it remains linked to the Law of God revealed on Mt. Sinai. The cross - divorced from the context of the Old Testament system of sacrifices - becomes a horror rather than a hope. The resurrection, rather than sounding the death-knell of sin and death and evil, becomes this strange, other-worldly, super-spiritual, psychosomatic event that doesn't really change much at all.

It is without question that every single author of every single book of the Bible believed with all their heart, soul, and mind that the events they recorded were part of the eternal plan of God. The Apostle John especially understood this great truth when he wrote these immortal words, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14) With the advent of Jesus, John knew the world had changed. The curtain had closed, so to speak, on human history as God Himself took the stage. Light now shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. Good stood toe to toe with evil and backed him down. God had now entered our world of brokenness to mend it and make it whole. And the great news for all of us is this, "To all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives the right to become children of God, who are born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

**October 3, 2018**

## PROMISE KEEPER

Readings for the day: Matthew 1, Luke 1-2:38

"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet…" (Matthew 1:22)

God always delivers on His promises. God is always faithful to His covenant. God is always true to His Word. The birth of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan. This is the primary message of the gospels. It is why Matthew begins with a long genealogy tracing all the way back to Abraham. It's why Luke will trace his genealogy all the way back to Adam. It's why all the gospel writers connect the miraculous birth of Jesus to the promises God gave to the prophets. Matthew cites Isaiah and the virgin who will conceive. Luke summarizes Malachi and the one will come in the spirit of Elijah. It's why Mary and Zechariah both sing songs recalling the great things God has done.

The advent of Jesus reveals the full measure of God's radical commitment to His creation. To the people who bear His image in the world. The advent of Jesus is God's "Yes" to our rebellious and defiant "No." He is God's declaration of unconditional love and grace and mercy. He is God's affirmation in the face of our fear. He is God's acceptance in the face of our loneliness and struggle. He is God's answer to all our questions.

The road to Jesus was a long and winding one. All one has to do is go through the list of names Matthew sets out and recall their stories. Each of them is broken in their own way. Each of them struggled with fear, uncertainty, pain, and heartbreak. Each of them struggled and suffered. None of them are clean or pure or holy in and of themselves. And yet God uses all of them to tell His story of salvation. God uses the barrenness of Abraham and Sarah. The incest of Tamar. The prostitution of Rahab. And an unclean Moabite named Ruth. God uses the adultery of David and Bathsheba. The arrogance of Rehoboam that divides a kingdom. And the blasphemous idolatry of Ahaz and Manasseh that leads to exile. God uses another barren couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth to prepare the way for His Only Begotten Son who will be born of a young virgin named Mary who is betrothed to a poor carpenter named Joseph. This is the lineage of Jesus. It is dysfunctional. Full of brokenness and sin. And yet it is through this rather ordinary line of people that God makes good on His promise to bring salvation to the world.

What about you? What is your story? What is your life like? What is your family like? What skeletons lie deep in your closet? What fears keep you locked up inside? What wounds do you carry? What dysfunctions do you grapple with? And how have you seen God at work through it all? Or do you see God at work through it all? Friends, the promise of the gospel is this…In Christ, God works together all things – ALL THINGS – for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Cling to the promise of Christ today! Trust in the promise of Christ today! Believe in the promise of Christ today!

**October 4, 2018**

# FAVOR WITH GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 2, Luke 2:39-52

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Wise men from the east. Probably pagan astrologers who watched the skies over Babylon. Men who possibly had been raised on the stories of their fabled Jewish forebears, Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, come to Israel following a star. The heavenly sign was so compelling they traveled who knows how many miles over how many weeks to worship and offer gifts to a newborn king.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The king of Israel. Descendent of Esau through his father who had converted, Herod was raised a Jew. However, he was not of the Davidic line and therefore was considered a pretender at best to the throne. Furthermore, he reigned at the whim of Caesar, his first allegiance being to the Roman Empire rather than Yahweh. He received the news the wise men brought and was troubled. The news of a new king being born would be a threat to his own power. So he marshals his forces and lays waste to the entire region surrounding Bethlehem, killing all the male children under two years of age.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. Joseph and Mary are traveling home from their annual trek to Jerusalem. After they make camp for the night, they realize Jesus is not with them. He has remained behind. So back they go frantic in their search for their now 12 year old son. For three days, they searched high and low throughout the city only to find him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. “Why have you treated us like this?” Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. And Jesus humbles himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Jesus evokes the strongest reactions. The Heavenly Father looks down on His Son. Sees him in danger and sends an angel to warn his parents. Sees him at the Temple listening and learning from the teachers of the Law. Sees him as he grows up under the love and guidance of Joseph and Mary. The Father sees it all and grants the Son favor. Blessing. Wisdom. Strength. Preparing him for the day when he would launch his ministry. Laying the groundwork for what’s to come.

What’s your reaction to Jesus? How do you receive Him? Is it with a glad heart? Do you feel yourself compelled to seek Him and grow a relationship with Him like the wise men? Is it fear? Do you, like Herod, respond in fear and anxiety to the idea that Jesus would be your Lord and Savior? Is it frustration? Like Joseph and Mary, does Jesus sometimes confound your expectations? Or do you respond with love and devotion? Is Jesus finding greater “favor” with you with each passing year?

**October 5, 2018**

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

Readings for the day: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction." (Malachi 4:5-6)

John the Baptist is one of the most fascinating figures in all the Bible. He is Elijah reborn. The one whom Malachi prophesied would prefigure the coming of the Messiah. He is the messenger. The final Old Testament prophet. Like the prophets of old, he lives an ascetic lifestyle. He dwells in the desert. Survives on locusts and wild honey. Wears clothing made from wild camel hide. From birth, he was set apart as a Nazarite which meant no wine touched his lips nor would he cut his hair. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and he was sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord.

John preached a message of repentance. In keeping with his prophetic forebears, he pulled no punches. He showed no fear. In the face of political and religious opposition, he spoke the truth. He called out the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. He called out the immoral behavior of Herod the tetrarch. He called out the sins of the people as they came to be baptized. He called them to obedience. Called them to surrender. To sacrifice. To devote their lives to Yahweh. And revival began sweeping the region.

God called John to serve a very special purpose. Though it meant prison. Though it would eventually cost him his life. John was called to prepare the way for Jesus. To make His path straight. To lift up every valley. To tear down every mountain. To straighten out the crooked and smooth the rough edges. He was called to lay the groundwork for the ministry of the Messiah so that all people might see the salvation of God. His calling was not to fame. Fortune. Safety. Security. Comfort. Peace. As soon as his ministry gets rolling, he hands it off. As soon as he is becoming popular, Jesus shows up on the scene. As soon as he really starts getting traction, he steps aside.

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) This is our calling as well. To step aside. To get out of the limelight. To do all we can to point everyone to Christ. It may not make us popular. It may not gain us fame or fortune or a good reputation. It may cost us some of our rights. Some of our freedoms. Some of us may indeed be put in prison. Some of us indeed may lose our lives. (Not necessarily here in America but certainly in many places around the world.) The calling John received from God has been given to the church. To preach the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. To call people to repentance before the Lord. To call people to surrender their lives to Jesus before it's too late. Before the day of judgment comes. Before the ax is laid to the root of the tree and the wicked are cut off. We too must make straight the path for Jesus. We too must lift up every valley. Tear down every mountain. Straighten out the crooked and smooth over the rough edges. In short, we must do all we can to remove every barrier to Christ. We must ourselves get out of the way so that others will see Jesus.

**October 6, 2018**

# TEMPTATION

Readings for the day: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-2:12

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15)

Jesus was fully human. He took on a fully human nature. With all its weaknesses. All its brokenness. All its vulnerabilities. As such, He knew temptation. He knew the temptation to provide for Himself. To satisfy His own needs. To put Himself above the will of His Father. "Command these stones to become loaves of bread." He knew the temptation to make a name for Himself. To perform spectacular feats and miraculous deeds in an effort to extend His "brand." To lift His name up above that of His Father. "Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple." He knew the temptation to compromise. To accomplish His Father's will by means other than the cross. "I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory if you will but worship me." Jesus suffered these temptations and more throughout His life and ministry. And yet, He remained without sin. He remained faithful. Steadfast in His love for His Heavenly Father.

Can you imagine the frustration of the devil? Here is his chance. Here is his opportunity to wreck it all. To take down the very Son of God and destroy the eternal plan of God. He knows he's no match for God. He knows he is a created being. He knows he exists only because God's mysterious will allows for it. And yet, he is so bitter and angry and prideful, he wants to do all he can to kill and destroy that which God loves. And what does God love most? His Only Begotten Son. So if the devil can get to Him. Get Him to sin. Corrupt Him in some way, shape or form. Turn Him from the cross then he wins. But Jesus peeps his game. Sees right through his schemes. He raises the shield of faith and extinguishes every single flaming dart of the evil one. He counters every thrust with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and parries every blow. And what happens? The devil flees.

Friends, you and I face temptation every single day. 1 John 2:16 describes it as "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" and these things are not from the Father but are of the world. They are part and parcel of our experience as human beings. It is a weakness we bear from conception. A vulnerability we all share due to our broken, sinful, fallen natures. None of us escapes. None of us is immune. The temptations may take on different forms or different shapes but, at their root, they remain the same. Learning to identify and then resist temptation is a key part of the Christian life. It is one of the keys to deeper intimacy with Christ.

How does one resist temptation? How does one take their stand – as Christ did - against the devil and put him to flight? We do what Jesus did. First and foremost, we cultivate a deep and intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father. Through prayer. Meditation on God's Word. Worship with God's people. Regular participation in the sacraments. These ordinary means of grace become extraordinary sources of strength when temptation comes. They are the wells we draw on for water when the devil would put us under siege. Second, we identify the lies the devil is trying to get us to believe. Lies about ourselves. Lies about who God is. Lies about life in this world. The devil is the "father of lies" according to Scripture and he is constantly seeking to deceive us so we will fall into his traps. Third, we counter the enemy's lies with the truth of God's Word. When tempted towards self-reliance, we remind ourselves every good gift comes from God. When tempted towards self-promotion, we remind ourselves it is God who lifts up and exalts those He loves. When tempted towards self-protection, we remind ourselves it is God who is our fortress, our sanctuary, our Protector. When tempted to build our self-esteem, we remind ourselves we are not our own. We were bought with a price. When tempted to focus on our self-image, we cling to the truth that we were made in the image of God. These temptations are all around us.

We are inundated by them every single hour of every single day. Social media. Peer interactions. The different voices in our heads. We are under constant bombardment to define ourselves outside of Christ.

And that is why the writer of Hebrews is so quick to remind us that our great High Priest is faithful. Jesus, though tempted in every way as we are, remains without sin. He lives to intercede for us for He knows the struggle is real. He knows the power of your compulsions and addictions and predilections. He knows what draws you away from Him. And He is faithful to strengthen us. He stands ready to guide and protect us. He is with you always. Even to the end of the age.

**October 8, 2018**

## REFLECTING JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

"So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them." (Matthew 4:24)

The news broke today of a dramatic increase in suicide threats being reported in my home state of Colorado. A ninefold increase in the last six years. It's heartbreaking. And it only confirms what I hear from law enforcement and professional therapists in our area about rates of depression and anxiety skyrocketing, particularly among young people. Adding to this toxic brew are climbing rates of substance abuse. Recent studies show Colorado ranks #1 among all 50 states when it comes to opioid painkillers, alcohol, cocaine and marijuana. Deaths related to overdose increased significantly from 2002-2015 with 904 Coloradans dying from drug use and 847 from alcohol in 2015 alone. According to an article posted on drugrehab.com - (https://www.drugrehab.com/colorado/trends) - Colorado is home to some of the worst rates of drug-related deaths in the country. It's tragic and terrifying.

I have felt for a few years now that we are seeing the beginnings of a tsunami of pain that is just starting to hit our shores. Our children are suffering and dying all around us. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those who disagree. (Witness what Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh's family are both going through at the moment.) It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment. Of course it must be acknowledged that what seems new to many of us has been the normative experience for so many of our friends of color or members of the LGBTQ community. They have lived with these threats for decades or more. But is this all there is? Are we doomed to live our lives under such threats? Constantly withdrawing or drawing our boundaries ever tighter in order to protect those we love? Or is there a different way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saduccees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. This was the world into which Jesus was born. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As his fame grew, many people came from all over to bring him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. And this only drew more hurting people to him. God was glorified. The Kingdom drew near. Salvation came to so many. All in the name of Jesus.

Could the church serve a similar role today? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? To go out each and every week – having been filled and equipped in worship - to share the good news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate, even as she called the community around her to greater faithfulness? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our internal theological fights and squabbles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced grace as a way of life? What if we put aside our need for political influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully and thoughtfully engage across the political spectrum? And what stops us? Why not start right now? Even today?

Friends, true followers of Jesus should be known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. What is your church known for? And how can you – as a member of that local church - represent Christ more faithfully today?

**October 9, 2018**

# IT'S ALL ABOUT JESUS

Readings for the day: John 3-5

From the moment I was saved on the campus of the University of Colorado up in Boulder, I've had a passion to share Christ with others. I evangelized my family. My college buddies. My co-workers after college. I even found myself evangelizing while at Princeton Theological Seminary if you can believe it! Over the years, I've shared with Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons. More recently in my trips to Africa, I've encountered and shared Christ with those who follow more traditional tribal beliefs. And the one thing I've learned over the years is this...it really is all about Jesus.

I remember meeting with Mormon missionaries in college. Every year I would walk up to their information desk the first week of school and ask to meet. I would be up front and honest with them about my motivations. I wasn't interested in converting but rather having a dialogue about the differences between Christianity and Mormonism. It is tempting in these conversations to major in the minors. To talk about all the esoteric beliefs they hold to vis a vis our own. None of those conversations bore much fruit to be honest. Where we really gained traction is when we started talking about Jesus. Is He God? Or simply the Son of God? Is He the Creator? Or a created being just like us? Is He the Word Incarnate? Or just an enlightened teacher?

Today's reading makes it clear how Jesus saw Himself...

Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.
For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.
For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.
For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.
For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.
I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.
I have come in my Father's name, and you do not receive me. If another comes in his own name, you will receive him." (John 5:19-23, 26-27, 30, 43)
These are stunning claims that would have put Jesus right in the crosshairs of the religious leaders of His day. They knew He was claiming to be God. Claiming a kinship with the Father that was unique to Himself. Indeed, just a few chapters later in John, Jesus will sum it all up by stating, "I and the Father are one." Not just in spirit. Not just of one mind or one accord. But actually one in essence. In being. Which is why the Jews pick up stones to kill Him for blasphemy.

My Mormon friends and I went round and round on this point. Is Jesus God? My Muslim friends and I have gone round and round on this point as well since they revere Jesus as a prophet. But Jesus isn't just an enlightened teacher. Jesus isn't just a great prophet like the others mentioned in the Bible. Jesus isn't just one of the sons of God. He actually is God! As such, He alone has the power to give us new life! He alone has the authority to judge! He alone can raise the dead! He alone can deliver us from sin and evil! And if we still harbor doubts, Jesus calls witnesses to His defense. "If I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father

who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." (John 5:31-32, 36-40)

Friends, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's eternal plan of salvation. He is the one to whom all human history points. He is the climax of the covenant. He is the telos of the Law. He is the capstone of creation. He is the Alpha and Omega. The First and Last. The Beginning and the End. All who believe in Him shall be saved. All who reject Him stand already condemned. This was his message to Nicodemus. To the woman at the well. To the man at the pool in Bethesda. It is His message to us as well.

**October 10, 2018**

## LORD, HELP ME GET ONE MORE

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:1-4, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, 2, 3:1-21, Luke 5:12-39, 6:1-19

One of my favorite movies is Hacksaw Ridge. It tells the story of Demond Doss who won the Medal of Honor for his courage during the Battle of Okinawa where he single-handedly saved 75 men. Doss was a combat medic who famously became a conscientious objector and refused to carry a weapon or kill an enemy soldier even in self-defense. Doss was persecuted for his devout Christian beliefs. He was frequently abused as his superiors attempted to drum him out of the army. He was even court-martialed. However, he persevered and served with great distinction. He won several awards for valor as he rushed into the heat of battle to save lives. His greatest moment came when his company attacked and tried to capture Hacksaw Ridge. They were met by a deadly counterattack by the Japanese and less than a third of the men made it safely down the cliff face to safety. Doss stayed behind. He prayed, "Lord, help me get one more." And back onto the battlefield he went. Dragging one man after another to safety and lowering them down the cliff. For twelve hours he worked. Saving one soldier every ten minutes. It was truly miraculous. On May 5, 1945, as the army formed up to retake the ridge, they waited for Doss to finish his devotions and pray for them before going into battle. It was the Sabbath day. Doss was wounded four times on Okinawa. He saved lives by taking the brunt of a grenade blast which left shrapnel in his arm. While being evacuated, he saw a wounded soldier and rolled off the stretcher to treat him. He gave up his stretcher for the man and while he waited, was shot by a sniper. Desperately wounded, he crawled 300 yards to an aid station under heavy fire where he was rescued.

What does this movie have to do with Jesus? I truly believe when God looks down on the earth, He sees a war raging. A battlefield strewn with the bodies of those he loves. They are broken. Wounded. Hurting. Struggling to survive. Lepers. Paralytics. Withered hands. Blind. Deaf. Lame. We come in all shapes and sizes and all of us are under relentless, ruthless attack by the enemy. Into this world steps Jesus. He prays to His Heavenly Father, "help me get one more." Lepers are cleansed. Paralytics rise and walk. Withered hands are restored. Blind receive sight. Deaf hear. The lame dance. The enemy tries to stop him. They accuse Him of blasphemy. Eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners. Working on the Sabbath. But Jesus came for the sick not the well. He came for the sinners not the self-righteous. Jesus prizes mercy over sacrifice. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus would eventually be killed for His beliefs. He would give His life on a Cross.

The world is still a battlefield. A war rages all around us each and every day. The enemy's attacks are relentless and ruthless. The devil wants to cause as much pain as he possibly can. He seeks to devour and destroy all God loves. Into this world, Jesus sends His people. To be His hands and feet. To come alongside the lost and lonely and hurting in our world. To bring healing and hope in His name. The church is like a MASH unit in the midst of this great spiritual battle. And Jesus sends us out to save lives one at a time. Is it dangerous? Yes. Will it be costly? Yes. Will we find ourselves tired and exhausted at times? Absolutely. Wounded along the way? You bet. But our passion for the casualties of this war must outweigh our comfort. Our sense of safety and well-being. Christ gave His life for us. Are we not called to give the same in return? Today, and everyday, may your prayer be as you leave your home, "Lord, help me get just one more."

**October 11, 2018**

# BUILDING A LIFE THAT WILL LAST

Readings for the day: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last forever. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture's pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it's not good for us. We all know the pace we're setting isn't healthy. We all are feeling the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all are struggling under the pressure that's been created and exasperated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can't we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to die before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to "follow your heart" and "be true to yourself." I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we "can be whoever we want to be" and to do "whatever feels good." I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most?

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do this life on their own. They "believed in themselves" but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life "my way" only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you've even been tempted to put an end to it all. Don't believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

How do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives!

Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that's emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wine skins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we've received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of "do's and don'ts"instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God's favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn't about perfection, friends. It's about the journey. It's about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That's okay. That's actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

**October 12, 2018**

## A DINNER PARTY WITH JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man. This woman of the night. This poor addict struggle with many things. Their lives are a train wreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man. This woman. This addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Me more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you! God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it! NO! He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance! Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus!

**October 13, 2018**

# THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Readings for the day: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

It's one of the most challenging questions I face as a pastor and believer in Jesus Christ. How can a good God allow evil and suffering in the world? My atheist friends rightly press the question even further. "The existence of evil and suffering in the world leaves two possibilities...either your God is good but not all-powerful. Impotent in the face of evil and suffering. Helpless to stop it. Or your God is all-powerful but not good because He chooses not to step in. Either way, your God ceases to be god. Heads we win, tails you lose."

The Pharisees and religious leaders were essentially asking Jesus the same thing. Does He truly have the power and authority to defeat evil? And is His power good? Does it come from God? The reason they asked these questions is because they had just seen Jesus perform an exorcism. It's not the first time. They've probably heard reports of other miracles of deliverance. But now they are seeing it with their own eyes. A mute man released. Set free. Words literally tumbling out of his mouth. It's like everything he's wanted to say for so many years comes rushing out in a torrent all at once. Exorcism wasn't a common practice in Israel in those days but it wasn't unknown either. There were other Jewish exorcists running around, claiming to cast out demons but something about the way Jesus did it was different. The power and authority He exercised was clearly unique and set the religious leaders on edge. What were they seeing? The demons obeyed this man's every word. What did that mean? Grasping for understanding, they accused Jesus of being in league with Satan or Beelzebul himself. Perhaps the reason the demons obeyed is because Jesus' power came from the prince of demons? Jesus shoots that theory down. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Why would Satan fight against himself? That leaves only one other option. Jesus is confronting evil and darkness and the devil with the power of God.

Now we enter really dangerous territory. If the Kingdom of God has come. If Jesus is casting out demons by the finger of God Himself. If the Holy Spirit is at work in these miracles then to deny them is to deny God Himself! An unforgivable sin! An unpardonable offense! If the religious leaders persist in their skepticism and unbelief, they will find themselves on the outside looking in when the Kingdom of God finally comes. This is why Jesus is so confrontational with them at the end of Luke 11. He wants them to believe. He wants them to come around. He wants them to lay aside their skepticism and disbelief and embrace Him as the Son of God and Son of Man. To see what He's doing as the work of God in confronting evil and suffering. To see what He's doing as the goodness of God in action in destroying all the works of the devil. The blind see. The deaf hear. The mute speak. The lame walk. Those who are oppressed and possessed are set free. These things are not random miracles. They are intentional acts of God to break the power of evil and suffering in our world.

And the work Jesus is performing here is just the beginning. After His death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus pours out His Spirit on the church. The people of God. The Body of Christ. We now are called to go forth – with the same power and authority - to confront the darkness! To defeat evil! To work for the good of the world! This is the commission given to us by our Father! In the beginning. In the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given dominion over all God had made and sent forth to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with the glory of God. Nothing has changed. God's decision to work through His people remains the same. So you ask what God is doing to defeat evil and relieve suffering in the world? I say look in the mirror! He has put you on this earth to make that happen! He has given you His Spirit to empower you and strengthen you and give you wisdom for the task! He has planted you in your neighborhood. Sent you into your school or workplace. Brought different people into your life and across your path for this very purpose! "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world." (1 John 4:4) Believe this! And go in God's grace, love and power to defeat the powers of darkness and relieve the hurt and suffering of the world!

**October 15, 2018**

# THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

Have you ever wondered what the Kingdom of God is actually like? And how it differs from the kingdoms of this world? In our readings for today, Jesus takes up the subject of the Kingdom and describes it from a number of different angles.

The Kingdom is like a field full of different kinds of soils, some more fruitful than others.
The Kingdom is like a paddock where both wheat and weeds grow up together.
The Kingdom is like the smallest of seeds that blossoms into one of the largest of trees.
The Kingdom is like the little bit of leaven one puts in bread to leaven the whole lump.
The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field.
The Kingdom is like that one pearl of great price.
The Kingdom is like a net that captures all kinds of fish, some good and some bad.

It is striking how different Jesus' kingdom is from the kingdoms of this world. The world's kingdoms value wealth and power and success. They measure themselves according to their size and influence. Their goal is to achieve as much success as possible. To sit atop the rankings. They jockey for position. The compete with one another. They take delight on another's fall even as they scramble for a higher rung on the proverbial ladder.

Sadly, too many churches fall into this trap as well. We value attendance. The size of our annual budgets. The number of people on staff. The beauty and attractiveness of our property and facilities. We jockey for position on Outreach Magazine's Top 100. We seek to expand our brand by planting churches in communities where many other gospel-preaching churches may already exist. We define success by the number of new attendees even though statistics show they are often transfers from the churches around us. So our "success" is another church's "failure." The American church is particularly susceptible to this line of thinking. I heard a pastor recently argue that we should pull back from missions around the world so we could focus on planting churches in America. After all, he said, imagine what God could do with all the resources we have in this country? As if God needs our resources to accomplish His mission.

I will confess my own failings here as well. It is so tempting for me to focus on the crowd that gathers on a Sunday morning. To dwell on how they receive the message I preach and whether or not they are putting it into practice. I spend a lot of energy daydreaming over what God could do with the resources in my little church family and how that would impact not only Parker but the whole world. If I am not careful, my passion to see God awaken every heart in my congregation spills over into a sinful trust in our strength. Our wealth. Our resources.

I needed this reminder today. As my colleagues and I spend time on retreat, planning out the next season of sermons at PEPC. It is good to be reminded that the Kingdom cannot be measured by the number of people who attend. The number of dollars given. Or our ability to expand our programming and update our facility. The Kingdom is measured in much smaller, more subtle ways. It is the man set free from addiction. The abused woman who finds a listening ear. It is a marriage saved by counseling. A child who invites Jesus into their heart. It is a person going on a mission trip for the very first time. Or volunteering to serve in a classroom even though they feel so inadequate to the task. It is men and women stepping forth to lead and to serve in all sorts of ways. This is what the Kingdom is like. It is often hidden. Often under the radar. Often under the surface. It is messy and complex. Never clean or neat or easy. It is often two steps forward, one step back. The people we think have so much potential often are the most resistant and the people we often overlook become the true heroes and heroines of the faith.

In my experience, good soil is always mixed in with concrete, gravel, thorns and thistles. Wheat is always mixed in with weeds. Mustard seeds often get lost in the shuffle. Leaven disappears into the dough. The treasure sometimes stays hidden for years. Finding that one pearl can take decades. Casting a wide net brings in all kinds of fish. Such is life in the Kingdom and thank God it's not up to me to sort it all out.

**October 16, 2018**

# DESPERATION

Readings for the day: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

I have met Legion. Men and women so tormented and oppressed. I have seen them sitting catatonic in the streets of Harar. I have watched them convulse and tremble behind the bars of a prison cell. I have met them in psych wards where they live for their own protection. Sadly, they feel so cut off from community. So isolated and alone. They feel helpless and afraid. They are desperate for freedom.

I have met the woman with the issue of blood. They live all over the developing world. Without access to basic sanitation and medical care, women are often left to fend for themselves. Their menstrual cycles make them feel cursed. Especially when there are problems. They too feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their families. Helpless and afraid. At the mercy of their biology. They are desperate for freedom.

I have walked with countless families through grief. The loss of someone they love. It's especially tragic when they are young. When they have their whole life ahead of them. The loss of children in particular can make or break a person's faith. I have wept with parents at the bedside of a child dying of cancer. I've been in the hospital room when the doctor delivers the terrible news of a rare and terminal illness. These are incredibly painful and difficult spaces. Those living through them often feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their friends. Helpless and afraid. They are desperate for healing.

What I love most about Jesus is His great compassion. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36) One can only imagine the pain and suffering He saw as He surveyed the hundreds, even thousands of people who flocked to hear Him speak. He knows their every need. He knows their every desire. He knows their every heartache and heartbreak. He knows how desperate they are for healing. How desperate they are for freedom. And He loves them. He has compassion on them. He reaches out to them. Demons flee. Diseases are cured. The dead are raised. Everywhere Jesus goes, these miraculous signs accompany Him. Everywhere He goes, the Kingdom comes with power and authority. Everywhere He goes, new life breaks forth.

But the needs are too much even for Jesus. He cannot heal every single person. He cannot cast out every single demon. He cannot sit with every family in their grief. So He sends His disciples. They will be His hands and feet. They will minister in His name and under His authority. They will be His ambassadors, Christ making His appeal to the world through them. Christ healing through them. Christ delivering through them.

Our world is still full of desperation. People feel so harassed and helpless. They wander aimlessly through life like sheep without a shepherd. And the question for the church is this...do we have compassion? Are our hearts tenderized by the needs we see all around us? Do we make the time and take the time to come alongside those in pain? Are we willing to re-orient our priorities? Redirect our resources? Re-order our lives in such a way that we make space to care for the lost and lonely who live all around us? This, friends, is what it means to love and follow Jesus.

**October 17, 2018**

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

Readings for the day: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

What does it mean to be a Christian? Over the years, I've heard a lot of answers to this question. Some think it means they raised their hand and prayed a prayer at some point in their life. Others believe it has to do with the fact they were baptized as an infant. Still others believe it means they go to church every Sunday and pay their tithe. Some of the people I've talked to see it as an inheritance. They were raised by Christian parents so they must be Christian. Others see it as a cultural designation. We live in a Christian nation so we are Christian by default. Like I said, lots of different answers to this all-important question...what does it mean to be a Christian?

Sadly, too many people refuse to look to the Bible for their answer. If they did, they would see Jesus offering a pretty clear definition for what it means to follow Him. First and foremost, you have to have what the ancients might have called "orthopathy" or the "right heart." The people who experienced the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand did not chase Jesus around because they loved Him. No, they wanted their bellies filled again. (A big deal in a 1st century subsistence agricultural economy.) They followed Him for selfish reasons. They wanted their needs met. Their illnesses cured. Their diseases healed. Their wants satisfied. And that's why Jesus tells them He is the bread of life. The food they are seeking is not temporal. Their needs are not just physical. They are spiritual and eternal and only the Christ can satisfy them but they must believe. They must have faith. This is what Jesus means when He talks about feasting on His body and drinking His blood and it was too much for some. They turned away. Even many of His disciples stopped following Him. Why? They did not believe. They did not trust. They could not accept the truth of what Jesus was teaching. They did not have the right heart.

The second thing we learn about following Jesus is that it takes "orthodoxy" or "right teaching." Jesus is who He says He is! He gets to define Himself. He gets to reveal Himself. We don't get to accept parts of Jesus and reject others. We don't get to reduce Jesus down to our size. We don't get to make Him comfortable or safe. Jesus is God. He is Lord over disease. Lord over death. Lord over sin. Lord over evil. Lord over this world and all that is in it. He casts out demons. He heals the sick. He messes with the atomic structure of bread and fish to feed five thousand people! He walks on water. He calms the wind and the waves. He is the bread of life. He is the manna from heaven. He alone has the words of eternal life. All of these different events may seem strung together randomly but they are not! They are designed to give the disciples. Give His followers. Give those who believe and trust in Him a true picture of Himself. Jesus wanted them to understand the true nature of His divinity. He wasn't just another prophet or miracle-worker. He was God Himself. True Christians take Jesus at His Word. They accept Him for who He is. They do not try to replace Him with a Jesus of their own making. Right thinking about Jesus is essential for the Christian.

Finally, there is "orthopraxy" or right practice. True Christians live what they believe. Their works flow from a heart that is full of faith. The disciples believed and were given authority to go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Preach a message of repentance. Heal the sick. Cast out unclean spirits. These are the "right practices" that should mark the life of every believer to a greater or lesser extent depending on where one is on their journey.

As Christians, we do not get to pick and choose. We do not get to claim a right heart and hold to a heretical theology. We do not get to claim a right theology and live a heretical life. We do not get to claim a righteous life and yet cling to a hardened heart. It's an all or nothing deal. Now, are we perfect? Of course not. Is there room to grow in every Christian's life? Absolutely. Is following Christ a journey? Complete with ups and downs? Doubts and fears? Successes and failures? Yes! Yes! And yes! But over the course of time. As days turn to weeks turn to months turn to years, we should be able to see the growth. Our hearts and minds and lives should reflect more and more of Jesus.

**October 18, 2018**

## FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for the day: Matthew 15, Mark 7, 8:1-10

"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." (Matthew 15:18-20)

I hear it all the time. Do what feels good. Do what feels right. Follow your heart. Be true to yourself. These platitudes sound so promising until one actually decides to act on them. If one chooses to follow one's heart, one quickly ends up in a ditch. Why? Our hearts are broken. Our hearts are corrupt. Our hearts are filled with all kinds of evil thoughts and intentions. Evil? Really? Perhaps you think "evil" is too strong of a word. Okay. Try selfish. I think most of us would agree that our natural way of operating is to take care of ourselves first. Make sure our own needs get met first. Fulfill our own desires before we give or serve others. Our culture reinforces this idea. Put yourself first. Take care of yourself. You deserve a break. Make yourself your first priority. Unfortunately, the American church uncritically blesses this mindset as well. I love what a Korean pastor, Jay Kim, recently wrote, "The uniquely American emphasis of the gospel is seeing faith as a means to personal benefit, rather than a sacrificing of personal benefits for eternal rewards."

Jesus is clear. We are NOT the center of the universe. Our hearts are NOT pure. Our hands are NOT clean. Our desires are oriented inward rather than outward and result in a defilement that affects the whole person. This is why behavior management is no substitute for the gospel. We cannot work from the outside in. We must work from the inside out. Our hearts have to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Renewed and restored by the indwelling presence of God Himself. Only then will our lives begin to reflect His true glory. The reality is too many Christians are working far too hard at cleaning the outside of the cup. Making sure they live morally upright lives. They major in the minors. And it ends up crippling our witness.

Christ wants our hearts. He will not settle for less. It doesn't matter if you are a Pharisee. A disciple. Or a Syrophoenician woman. It doesn't matter whether you are sick or well. Free or oppressed. Rich or poor. Christ wants your heart. He wants to transform you from the inside out. He wants your love and devotion far more than your outward obedience to His commands. As good and as holy as His commandments are, they cannot serve as a pathway to righteousness. Only Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And it is only by faith that we can live truly and wholly for Him.

**October 19, 2018**

## REAL LIFE IN GOD' KINGDOM

Readings for the day: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-38, Mark 9:1, Luke 9:18-27

(Inspired by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch and their book, ReJesus)

A man trudges up the dusty road. His feet are tired. His sandals about worn through. His robes are torn in several places. His face is streaked with sweat. His hair is more salt than pepper. He's got scars all over his body. He limps. He's hunched over in chronic pain. His eyes glance up at the sign above the door. An inn. A place to rest his weary bones. He opens the door and walks in. Orders a drink. Orders a bit of food. Finds a place at an open table and waits. Several minutes later, the door opens again. The man at the table waves him over. He comes and sits. Tells the waiter, "I'll have what he's having."

"How are you doing, Paul?" Peter asks. "You look tired."

"I am at that", Paul replies. "I've been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and left for dead. My right arm barely works anymore. My left hip will never be the same. My back aches every morning. I've traveled more miles than I dare to count."

"You definitely have logged some hours, brother. The reports we hear back in Jerusalem about the churches you've planted and the cities you've reached with the gospel are a great encouragement. As are the funds you've raised to help sustain us in our suffering. But how are you doing? How's your heart these days?" Peter asks.

"About the same as yours, I imagine. The Corinthians are fighting among themselves. The Galatians are abandoning the true faith. I am being attacked by fellow Christians. My leadership is being questioned. I fear all this work has been for naught. What about you? How are you feeling these days?" Paul responds.

"Life in Jerusalem is still incredibly hard. We are persecuted by both the Romans and the Jews. Everywhere we go, we have targets on our backs. They kick down the doors where we gather. They drag us before the Sanhedrin. They throw us in jail. You probably heard about James? Herod got hold of him. It was ugly. His death was a huge blow to us all." Peter shares.

"What keeps you going,?" Paul asks. Peter replies, "I keep thinking back to that day when Jesus asked us, 'Who do you say that I am?' I'm not sure where the words came from but almost without thinking I said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!' Jesus told us this revelation did not come from man but from our Father in heaven and He went on to say that He would build His church on the rock of this confession. Initially people thought He might mean me. My name means "pebble" after all! But just look at me! I'm no rock. I'm about as broken and worn down as they come."

"Yeah, and if what I hear is true, you tried to stop Jesus from talking about the cross?" Paul says with a smirk. Peter smiles ruefully. "Not my finest moment." Paul claps Peter on the back. "We've all been there, my friend."

Peter goes on, "You know, in my darkest moments when it seems like I just can't go on, I think of Him. Hanging on that cross. Gasping for breath. Struggling for life. I think of the morning I ran to the tomb and found it empty. I think of Him appearing to me after His resurrection. Forgiving me for abandoning Him and calling me back into ministry. All of my struggles. All of my suffering. All of my pain. All of my heartaches and disappointments. All my fears and failures. It's all been worth it, you know? Just for the sake of knowing and serving Him." Tears start running down Paul's face. He whispers, "I know exactly what you're saying. I wouldn't trade that moment

outside of Damascus for the world. Everything I've done and everywhere I've been since that day has been an absolute privilege. But I have to confess, I sure wish I could have been there with you. To walk with Him and talk with Him." Peter reaches out and grabs his hand. "You are with us now. That's all that matters."

Imagine sitting at the next table, watching this exchange. Watching these two giants of the faith swap stories and encourage each other. Imagine them praying together before they leave, not knowing if this would be the last time they would see each other. Who knows if such a meeting ever took place? What I do know is this...for two thousand years, faithful men and women have taken these words of Jesus to heart. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) They have braved all kinds of dangers. Faced all kinds of persecution. Suffered beyond belief. They have paid the ultimate price in many cases all to bring the gospel to the world. In so doing, they have received a crown of glory not worth comparing to the struggles of this world. They have given up fame and fortune but gained an eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. By their testimony, the church has been founded and established in this world. And the gates of hell don't stand a chance.

**October 20, 2018**

# GREATNESS

Readings for the day: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

"At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4)

We all want to be great. We all want to be known. We all want to be significant. So we chase our dreams. We chase power and wealth and influence and fame. In large or small ways, we all desire success. Achievement. Recognition. We want to be the best. Finish first. Get to the top of whatever mountain we're trying to climb. We want respect. We want the people around us to think highly of us. We want to be able to look in the mirror and be proud of what we see.

The same was true for the disciples. They signed on – or so they thought - to this new kingdom movement. They believed Jesus was the Messiah. They believed He was the Christ. And for them, Jews living in the 2nd Temple period of Israel's history, this could only mean one thing. Jesus would lead a revolution. He would cleanse the Temple. Toss out the religious elites. Overthrow the Romans. Re-establish the throne of David. Win Israel's independence from foreign powers. This is what had happened throughout their history and they wanted in on the ground floor when it happened again. God bringing about deliverance and salvation through His Chosen One.

So they asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" It's a loaded question. Freighted with all kinds of cultural and relational baggage. On a personal level, they are asking for themselves. Which of us is the greatest? Which of us will get to sit at your right hand? On a cultural level, they are asking for discernment to find out who's in and who's out. Who among the crowds that are following them are worthy to be part of this new kingdom? And who do we need to keep out? On a political level, they want to know who will hold the power and positions of influence in this new kingdom? What cabinet positions will we occupy once you've established your rule and reign? They want to know so they can prepare. They want to know so they can start jockeying for position. They're probably looking around at each other, measuring the competition.

Jesus' response had to be mystifying. The humblest are the greatest? The last are the first? The least have the most? We have to become like children to enter in? Remember, in that culture, children were non-persons. More like property. They had no rights. No freedoms. At the same time, children were deeply loved. Showered with affection. They were considered God's greatest blessing for a family. So what is it about children that makes them so great?

First and foremost, trust. Children, especially when very young, find it easy to trust. They accept what their parents say without question. If you tell them the sun will rise at midnight, they will wake up fully expecting it to happen. They believe easily. They are not skeptical. At least not until they get older. They've not had all the life experiences that can make us cynical and bitter. They see the world through rose-colored glasses. They believe the best about those around them. And this is what Jesus wants from His disciples as well.

Second, humility. Little children do not harbor ambition. They do not need to be rich and famous. They do not grasp for power or influence or authority. They are not wrapped up in achievement or success. They are not self-conscious or even self-aware. Self has no place in their thinking at all! I believe it was CS Lewis who once said something like "true humility is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought. Nor is it thinking less

of yourself than you ought. It is simply thinking of your "self" less." This comes naturally to a child and Jesus wants it to come naturally to His disciples.

Third, wonder. Children live with a sense of wonder and awe at the world around them. They love to explore. They love to adventure. They are naturally curious. Naturally inquisitive. They want to know why thinks work they way they do or why things are the way they are. I remember when my four children went through their "why" phase. Every question. Every day. For weeks on end. Why this? Why that? Why? Why? Why? Sure, it got annoying but when I stepped back, I could see the wonder underlying it all. They simply wanted to know more about this grand world in which we live.

There are probably many more lessons we can draw from our passage this morning but I have to believe Jesus – coming off His transfiguration moment – wanted to cement in His disciple's hearts the truth of His Kingdom. It would not be like the kingdoms of this world. It would not be run like the kingdoms of this world. It would not hold to the same values of the kingdoms of this world. It would be radically different. Wholly other. And their entrance into such a kingdom would come only as they left their old lives behind and embraced the new life Jesus offers in Himself.

**October 22, 2018**

# ACCEPTANCE VS. AFFIRMATION

Readings for the day: John 7, 8, 9

"Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:10-11)

We've all probably heard the phrase, "Love the sinner, hate the sin." I don't know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are "sinners" and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it's really hard to do. Separating one's behavior from one's identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it's origin is questionable – it doesn't appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can't wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problems. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that's what Jesus is writing in the dust? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. Perhaps it's because they don't really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

Then Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." He hasn't condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn't condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. "Woman, has no one condemned you?" "No one, Lord." "Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, "Are you really without sin?" To those caught in sin, he says, "I do not condemn you." And to both, he says, "Go and sin no more."

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to a greater end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way – as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

**October 23, 2018**

## LISTENING TO JESUS

Readings for the day: Luke 10, John 10, 11:1-54

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

Noise. There's a lot of it in our lives. From the moment our alarm clocks go off until we finally put down the phone or turn off the television at the end of the night, our lives are full of noise. So many voices. Telling us all kinds of things. Much of it not good for us. The bully at school who tells us we're worthless. The co-worker who's so negative all the time. The spouse who badgers or berates us. The child who screams when they don't get their way. The commercials that tempt us to think life is all about us. The subliminal messages coming through on social media that constantly invite comparison. The news outlets spinning world events to bolster a particular worldview. The proliferation of fake news, gossip, and a rumor mill run wild. And, in the middle of it all, the still small voice of God whispering continually to our hearts.

Can you hear Him? Can you hear His voice? Amidst all the noise and distractions? When was the last time you sat in silence? I mean true silence. No one around. No devices present to distract. No radio. No television. Just you and God sitting in silence together. "My sheep hear my voice…" Perhaps one of the main reasons we struggle so much with our faith is we do not take the time to listen for God's voice. We expect Him to compete with all the other voices in our lives. Shout them down. Yell over the top of them. We expect Him to make Himself known to us but we refuse to create space in our lives for that to happen. Instead, we expect Him to push His way in. Elbow His way to the front of the line. Then and only then will we turn and acknowledge Him.

Jesus doesn't work that way. There's a great story from the Old Testament about a man named Elijah. He went out to meet with God. A great storm whipped up. God wasn't in the storm. A great fire raged. God wasn't in the fire. A great earthquake shook the very ground. God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a still small voice. Elijah covered his head. He knew he was hearing the voice of God. "My sheep hear my voice…" Do you want to hear the voice of God? Make time for solitude and silence in your life.

For me, this often comes at the end of the day. My children are in bed. My wife as well. I sit in my favorite chair in the living room. Nothing is on. I read God's Word. I meditate. I pray. I think back over the events of my day. The people I met. The conversations I had. The work I was able to accomplish. I pay close attention to how I experienced each moment. And I lay those feelings before the Lord. I ponder what's to come the following day. What am I excited about? Nervous about? Who will I be meeting with and how can I serve them? What challenges will I be facing and how do they make me feel? All of these things I simply lay before Lord and ask Him to speak into them. Sometimes He does. Sometimes He simply reaches out and takes my hand. Let's me know He'll be with me no matter what.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. There's nothing more comforting than walking through life with the Good Shepherd at your side.

**October 24, 2018**

# PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Readings for the day: Luke 12-13:30

One of the real benefits of coming to Africa is learning to think in different ways. Ethiopia is an honor-shame culture like much of the rest of the world. What this means is they tend to think collectively instead of individually. Morality is determined relationally rather than internally. The focus is not so much on how to get something right as it is to honor the person and/or community in the process.

The Bible is written in an honor-shame cultural context. It cannot be fully understood apart from this. The stories Jesus tells are less "morality tales" and more about how to honor God and one another through the gospel. The story of the rich fool is a prime example of what I'm talking about. The traditional interpretation is that the man placed his trust in his riches. His sin was to build bigger barns. He was greedy and therefore fell under God's judgment. But a close reading from the honor-shame perspective reveals even deeper truths.

What was the man's primary sin? What was it that would have been obvious to everyone listening to Jesus that day? It was when he said, "I know what I will do…" His refusal to honor the community was his major mistake. Whenever a person had a bumper crop in the 1st century, he would make his way down to the village gate to seek advice from the elders. He would tell of the abundant blessings God had poured out on him and he would ask them what he should do. They would deliberate and discuss but eventually would suggest things like making an extravagant offering to the Lord, throwing a party so the whole village could celebrate, and giving to the poor. The man would then go out and do all these things in an effort to bring honor to his community. If, after giving to God and giving to the poor and throwing a party, he still had too much for his current barns to hold then perhaps it would be time to throw up new barns. Perhaps the whole community would come out to help. And everyone would experience the blessing.

As American Christians, we tend to think far too individualistically and we tend to read the Bible far too individualistically. We turn everything into a personal morality tale and while that isn't all bad, it certainly doesn't get to the heart of the gospel. When Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden, they realized they were naked and immediately felt ashamed. The heart of the story from Genesis 3 onward is of a God who is on a mission to remove our shame. Remove our guilt. Remove our sin. He seeks to cover our shame with His own honor and that's why Jesus tells the stories He does. This is the central message at the heart of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It's the primary driver behind this parable of the rich fool and so many others like it. Jesus takes all His divine honor and glory and gives it away to tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners.

How then do we respond? We respond the way a tax collector named Zaccheus did. He gave away half of his possessions and made restitution to those he had defrauded. We respond the way a prostitute did, breaking a jar of costly ointment – her most prized possession – over Jesus' head in an extravagant act of devotion. We respond the way the first disciples did, leaving everything behind in order to follow Jesus. This is how who have been honored by God seek to honor Him in return.

**October 25, 2018**

## THE LEAST AND THE LOST

Readings for the day: Luke 14-15

Jesus loves the least and the lost. It's why he heals on the Sabbath. Tells stories of feasts where the poor, the blind, the crippled and the lame become guests of honor. It's the king who is rejected by his friends so sends his servants out to the highways and byways to bring in those who are the least worthy of his attention. It's a lost sheep that is found. A lost coin that is rediscovered. And two lost sons who are restored. These are the ways of the Kingdom of God and followers of Jesus will seek to walk in these ways themselves.

Do you love the least and the lost? Or do you instead seek a place of honor and glory for yourself? Are you like the man who went to the banquet and took the seat of highest honor for himself? Are you like the invited guests who made all kinds of excuses as to why they couldn't come or had to delay their attendance at the great wedding feast? Are there things in your life that you love more than Jesus? Including your own family? If so, beware! You are like salt that has lost it's saltiness.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate…even his own life cannot be my disciple."

"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."

"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

These are hard sayings to be sure. They do not make any sense from a human perspective. We cannot imagine why the call to follow Jesus would be so costly. And yet, Jesus clearly leaves us no wiggle room. Why? Is it because Jesus is cruel? Is it because Jesus is capricious? Uncaring? Is it because Jesus is a tyrant? The answer is a clear "NO" to all of these things. It is because Jesus is 110% committed to His mission to reach the least and the lost of our world. Those who live at the bottom of society. Those who struggle and suffer and for whom life is full of pain and heartbreak. God loves them with an everlasting love and His great desire is to see them lifted up. See them blessed. See them healed and made whole.

He has one plan to accomplish this great end. His church. His people. Those who are called by His name and set apart for His purposes. Why must we relinquish all in order to follow Jesus? It is so He can use us as He sees fit. Send us where He needs us. Take our resources and deploy them for His purposes in the world. Our response must be open hands and open hearts. A humble willingness to let God use us as He sees fit. Only then will we find true fulfillment and true joy. Only then will we experience the peace that passes all understanding. Only then will we know the unconditional love and grace of God in our lives.

**October 26, 2018**

# THREADING THE NEEDLE

Readings for the day: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16-18:30

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." (Mark 10:25)

Honestly, I think this is one of the most difficult passages in all the Scriptures. Why? Because I am rich. By the world’s standards. (www.globalrichlist.com) By historical standards. I am one of the richest people to have ever lived on the face of the earth. I am not only in the top 1% but am in the top tenth of a percent of the wealthiest people to have ever walked the planet. So when Jesus says it is harder for a person like me to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it is terrifying. It sounds impossible.

So what’s a person like me to do? Where can I find hope? First and foremost, I find hope in Mark’s version of the story because he includes this wonderful little nugget in verse 21. “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him…” Jesus loved the rich young ruler. He had compassion on the man. He saw the internal struggle in his eyes. Saw how much he wanted to please God and yet saw the hold his riches had over him. Jesus doesn’t hate rich people. Jesus doesn’t hate me. The accumulation of wealth is not, in itself, a barrier to God’s love. And for that I am thankful.

Second, Jesus gives me a practical way forward. "Go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." The path Jesus offers is the path of generosity. Give as much as I can away to those who are less fortunate. Use my wealth to bless others. Hold loosely onto the resources God has entrusted into my hands and let them be the tools God uses to expand His Kingdom in this world. In this way, I will guard my heart from the sin of falling in love with money. Trusting my riches. I cannot serve both God and money so I need to make a choice and I need to make this choice every single day because I live in constant temptation. Loving money more than God puts me in real spiritual danger so heeding Jesus’ command here is vital.

Third, "With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God." God is mighty to save. The least. The lost. The rich. The powerful. There is no one who stands beyond the reach of His grace. Salvation ultimately will not be determined by the amount of money I give but by the grace that is given freely to me in Jesus Christ.

Finally, I need to take these words of Jesus to heart. Let them re-orient my desires. Let them re-order my priorities. Let them re-define success and achievement in my life. “But many who are first will be last, and the last first." Many years ago, I suffered a massive failure. Professionally. Personally. It was traumatic. It almost cost me my marriage and my ministry. Thankfully, God used the trauma of that experience to strip my life down to the studs. The result was a brand new outlook. A deep awareness of my own weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Love of money is one of those. So is success. As a result, I felt God calling me to never ask for another raise and never seek another position professionally but instead to walk with open hands, trusting Him to take care of me. Over the last ten years, God has more than delivered on His promises. My life has been enriched in every way imaginable. And I have learned to live in the overwhelming abundance of His grace.

**October 27, 2018**

## TWO KEY PRINCIPLES

Readings for the day: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-43, 19:1-27

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

I often wonder how different the world would look if followers of Jesus would take just these two verses literally. Can you imagine the impact we would make if we had the courage to serve as the Son of Man served and seek as the Son of Man sought? Perhaps that’s why I love coming to Ethiopia so much. Here I get the opportunity to see this kind of faithfulness in action.

I think of Lydia. A 22 year old woman with two babies who ministers in a Muslim village outside of Dire Dawa. Everyday she travels the streets of her town on foot preaching the gospel in the open air. She suffers verbal and sometimes physical abuse. She has put her life and the lives of her family at risk. But she considers it a privilege to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. God has honored her faithfulness! Street women are coming to faith and leaving behind their former lives of prostitution. Her description of their desperation and the hope they find in Jesus is powerful.

I think of Gedesa. A young man of 25 who is single and serving in among the Muslim and Orthodox in a village 300 kilometers away near Harar. He longs to get married and have a family but has delayed those dreams so he can serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. He gets attacked. Both Muslims and Orthodox are aggressive in their abuse. They disrupt his preaching. They pay his converts to recant. But still he persists. It is inspiring.

I think of Yitsgelu. A Somali man who converted to Christ out of Islam. His family publicly shamed him and drove him from their village. He came to Dire Dawa to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. His denomination sent him to a suburb of the city where he ministers among the Muslims, bringing many to Christ. It is not easy work as they suffer just like he suffered. Their families disown them. Their community abandons them. They often lose their jobs. But God is using Yitsgelu’s own story to bring redemption in the name of Jesus.

These are just a few of the stories I’ve heard this week and there are so many more to share. God is moving in this part of the country. Over the last two years, over 360 churches have been planted and over 219 thousand people have heard the gospel for the first time! As a result, over 14 thousand have given their lives to Christ in an area that is 98% Muslim. All because a few hundred church planters decided to take Jesus seriously. Like the Son of Man, they’ve come to serve the least and seek the lost.

**October 29, 2018**

# ANSWERED PRAYER

Readings for the day: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

“And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Matthew 21:21-22)

I am sure we all have things we’ve prayed over for years. Prayers for loved ones to come to faith. Prayers for those we care about to be healed. Prayers for direction. Wisdom. Guidance on decisions. Prayers for sin to be rooted out of our lives. Prayers for provision. Prayers for protection. Prayers for opportunities. If you are like me, you read a passage like today and you begin to wonder…do I not have enough faith? Is the reason my prayers aren’t being answered my doubts? My fears? My sin?

What does it mean to “have faith?” In my experience, far too many of us equate faith with our feelings. We struggle with faith if we aren’t feeling an emotional high during worship. We struggle with faith if we read the Bible and don’t feel something. We struggle with faith if we pray and don’t sense God’s abiding presence. Still others of us equate faith with belief. Our mental assent to the notion that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe He lived. Died. Rose again. And while these certainly are aspects of faith – because we are to love God with all our hearts and minds – they do not represent the sum total of what Jesus is talking about here when he calls his disciples to “have faith.”

Having faith means placing our trust in the Father’s will. It means surrendering to His ways and His plans. It means setting His desires above our own. It represents a complete and total commitment to God no matter how we may feel or what we may think. Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus had faith. And what marked the faith of Jesus was the fact that He did nothing outside the will of His Father. He only did what His Father willed. Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life like the one He will pray in Gethsemane…not my will but Thine be done? Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life where He asked the Father to let the cup pass Him by? On the surface, it appears the Father didn’t answer those prayers. So does this mean Jesus didn’t have enough faith? No. Quite the opposite. Jesus trusted completely in His Father and was willing to do whatever His Father willed so He relinquished His own will. His own thoughts. His own desires. And the Father used Him to “move mountains into the heart of the sea” as the power of sin was broken and death defeated.

Jesus had faith. And because He had faith, He always…ALWAYS…asked for the Father’s will to be done in His life. When Jesus encourages His disciples that “whatever they ask for” they will receive, He assumes they will be asking for the Father’s will just as He has been asking for the Father’s will throughout the course of His own life and ministry. This is a baseline assumption when it comes to prayer. It is foundational to true Christian prayer. When we come before the Father, we do not come simply to present our requests or ask God to bless our will and our way. We come boldly but humbly before His throne. We come with confidence and a surrendered heart knowing the Father already knows what’s best for us. We come not with clenched fists but with open hands to whatever the Father desires for our lives. We lift our loved ones up to Him, trusting in His gracious election. We lift those we care about up to Him, trusting Him for healing in this life or the next. We pray for His wisdom to understand our circumstances. We ask for His strength to root out sin in our lives, knowing all the while that His grace is sufficient for us and His power is made perfect in our weakness. This is what it means to “have faith” when we pray.

**October 30, 2018**

## LET GOD BE GOD

Readings for the day: Matthew 21:23-46, 22:1-14, Mark 11:27-33, Mark 12:1-12, Luke 20:1-18, John 12:37-50

“Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." (John 12:39-40)

“For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

These are some difficult words to hear. How is it that God would choose some and not others? How is it that God would open the eyes of some and not others? How is it God would regenerate some hearts and not others? How is it that God would actively blind eyes and harden hearts to the message of the gospel? Matthew even takes it a step further. Many are called but few are chosen? Is God playing some cosmic game of “duck, duck, goose?” Is that how salvation works?

I will not pretend to probe the mysteries of divine election in this post. Nor will I seek to untangle the Gordian knot of predestination vs. free will. I imagine that debate will last until Jesus’ return. Perhaps even beyond. It is not given to us to understand these things, only to accept them. And this is where our faith is put to the test. Do we believe God is good? Do we believe God is wise? Do we believe God is true? Do we believe God has a plan? Do we believe God is worthy? Do we believe God is righteous? All these things are called into question the very moment we read verses like these and think to ourselves “this doesn’t seem fair.”

It is a dangerous thing to question the nature and character of God. It is a fearful thing for the clay to say to the Potter, why have you made me thus? It is arrogant to demand God give an account to us or answer to our flawed notions of justice or meet our democratic standards of fairness. This is where growing up in America where our leaders must answer to the will of the people hurts us. Our cultural context works against us as we read. God is no democratically elected leader. He is our King. Our Lord. Our Sovereign. He created the universe and all that is in it. We are dust. We are ashes. We are nothing and it is only because God has decided to set His love on us that we are worth anything at all. It is only because God decided to make us in His image that we have dignity and honor. But these things are not our own! They are conveyed to us by God Himself for His own mysterious purposes.

So what if God – desiring to make known His power and reveal His glory – decided to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor? What if God – desiring to make known His justice and righteousness – raises up some for glory and others for destruction? Does this make God unjust? Does this make God unfair? Does this call into question God’s goodness and righteousness? If we are honest, there can be only one answer. What right do we – created beings one and all – have to question our Creator? As the Apostle Paul says, “What right does the clay have to question the Potter?”

Here is where the rubber meets the road when we talk about surrender. Submission. Sacrifice. We lay it all in His hands. We give it all to Him. He alone is worthy of all glory and honor and power because He stands outside time and space and creation. He is far removed from any of our human notions of justice and righteousness. He does not answer to His creation. Furthermore, humility demands that we accept the fact that He sees far more than any of us do. He has an eternal perspective we cannot grasp. His wisdom is infinite and His knowledge without end. What seems paradoxical to us is logical to Him. What seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense for Him. What seems impossible to us is well within the bounds of His authority and rule and reign. At the end of the day it comes down to this…God is God and we are not. We reject this simple truth at our own peril.

**October 31, 2018**

# PUTTING GOD TO THE TEST

Readings for the day: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35

Let me start by saying God welcomes honest, heart-felt questions. God loves nothing more than comforting His people when they come before Him confused and hurting. Struggling to understand. Trying to make sense of life and tragedy and suffering. He understands our doubts and fears. He can handle our anger and frustration. When we are honestly seeking Him. Honestly asking Him. Honestly and transparently and vulnerably bringing all our insecurities before Him, He gently gathers us in His arms and lets us know it will be okay. He is with us. He is here for us. He will never leave us or forsake us.

However…if we set out to test God. To put Him on the witness stand and demand He answer to our notions of what is right and good. If we put Him on trial and require Him to answer to our human notions of justice. If we doubt His integrity and character and nature. If we push Him and press Him and seek to discredit Him. We are playing a very dangerous game. One that places our eternal souls in jeopardy.

The religious rulers of the day had no interest in following Jesus. Their only aim was to discredit Him before the eyes of the people. They were seeking to trip Him up with their questions. They wanted to make a public spectacle of Him. Humiliate Him in the eyes of the people. Stamp out His ministry and movement and send Him back to Nazareth in disgrace. Their questions are designed to get Him in trouble politically – "is it lawful to pay taxes or not?" Their questions serve as impossible riddles – "a woman married seven times goes to heaven… whose wife will she be?" Their questions present logical impossibilities – "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" But Jesus is not limited to human understanding. His answers reveal a divine wisdom that silences those who would seek to destroy Him. Then Jesus goes on the offensive, exposing their hypocrisy. They are the ones in violation of the Law! They are the ones who lack understanding! They are the ones who play political games! Woe to you scribes and Pharisees! Judgment is coming!

It's sobering to say the least. And it forces us to self-reflection. What lies at the heart of my own questions? An honest desire to understand? Or a selfish desire to justify my own actions? A tender insecurity for which I need God's comfort? Or an arrogant desire to go my own way and do my own thing? A doubt or a fear that keeps me from experiencing the peace that passes all understanding? Or a sinful desire to cling to an idol in my life? What is it that drives my questions? What lies at the heart of my doubts and fears and confusion? Am I putting God on trial or am I truly seeking His will?

**November 1, 2018**

# WAKE UP!

Readings for the day: Matthew 24, 25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

Today Jesus gives us a reality check. In this world, we will suffer. There will be trials. There will be tribulation. The culture will reject God. Nations will defy God. Kings and rulers and authorities. Presidents and Congressional representatives and Supreme Court Justices will go their own way and do what is right in their own eyes. There will be wars. Violence. Natural disasters on a devastating scale. Drought. Famine. Disease will afflict so many. People will love injustice. People will love ungodliness. People will chase unrighteousness. They will call good "evil" and evil "good." And these are just the beginning of the birth pangs of the new age.

In this confusing time, many will claim to speak for Jesus. They will claim to speak for God. They will push their own agendas. They will offer up their own ideas in place of God. They will promote selfishness and pride and narcissism. They will promote unrighteousness and lawlessness and unfettered freedom. They will sound so good that many will be led astray.

There will be abominations of desolation. Incredible acts of self-worship and idolatry that would make the ancient Canaanites blush. Worship will grow cold. Honoring God will become rare as people choose to do what feels good or what seems right in their own eyes. It will be like the days leading up to Noah. The days when the Judges reigned in Israel. Hatred. Rage. Violence. Pain. Suffering. All will become the norm as the world rebels against the authority of God.

Any of this sound familiar? Any of this feel familiar? What's a Christian to do in the midst of it all? Endure to the end. Persevere in their faith. Cling to Jesus. The world will hate us. The world will seek to destroy us. The world will persecute us. Throw us into prison. Torture us and even kill us. They will restrict our rights. They will label preaching the gospel "hate speech." They will make faithfulness to the law of God a hate crime. They will drag us into courts. They will put us on trial. They will do all they can to force us to abandon our faith. Things will get so bad that if they weren't cut short – if God somehow delayed His return – no one would be saved.

But make no mistake…God will return! Things will get so bad even nature itself will feel the effect. The sun will darken. The moon refuse to shine. It will seem like the stars have fallen out of the sky. And just when it seems like we cannot go on, Jesus will appear. He will come on the clouds with great glory and power! A trumpet will sound and the angels will gather His family from the four corners of the earth. We do not know exactly when this day will come but we know it draws ever closer. Seemingly with every single breaking news story! Climate change. Political corruption. Racism and hatred. Economic upheaval globally. The world seemingly stands on the brink. Now more than ever.

So again, what's a Christian to do? Stay wise. Be prepared. Make sure we stay about the work God has assigned to us. Caring for the least among us. The hungry and thirsty. The naked and ashamed. The sick and imprisoned. As we care for them, we care for Jesus. Seek the lost. Fulfill the Great Commission. Take the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation in the world. This is the work the Master has assigned to us and when He comes again, may He find us faithful!

**November 2, 2018**

# BETRAYING JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

Election Day is drawing near and my social media feeds have erupted. The outrage in our country is boiling over. Battle lines are being drawn. Apocalyptic pronouncements are being made. Listening to the rhetoric, it feels like we are engaged in a civil war. And perhaps we are. As I scroll, I find myself thanking God for the diversity of friends He has given me. Friends from across the political spectrum. People of color from all walks of life. Friends who are rich and friends who are poor. Urban friends. Rural friends. Friends who are gay and straight. Most of these friends are Christian. Many, however, are not. And I love them all. But it's hard right now. Those friendships are being tested. The bonds of love are beginning to fray. Political views have become a litmus test for a person's character. Those that fail are not just different. They are evil. They are not just misguided. They are malevolent. They are not just mistaken. They are immoral.

Our politics have taken on a theological edge. Both sides claiming Jesus. Both sides believing He is on their side, defending their cause. Religious wars are always the most brutal because the battle is between good and evil with heaven and hell literally at stake.

But what if Jesus isn't taking sides? What if, instead, Jesus is calling us to take His side? What does that look like, you might ask? It looks like a Table where 12 disciples sit, eating a meal together. James and John are there. Two guys who think they're better than everyone else. Simon the Zealot is there eyeing Levi the tax collector. And Judas. The betrayer. The man who was just paid 30 pieces of silver to hand Jesus over. What a crew! The differences could not be more stark! The divisions more pronounced! And yet what does Jesus do? "He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (John 13:4-5) "He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28) If the Table of Jesus was large enough to include even His betrayer, could not our tables also be set for those who might disagree with us politically?

Does this mean we gloss over or ignore or withdraw from the political debate? Of course not! Jesus wasn't killed for His love. He was killed because He was politically dangerous. We must defend the cause of the widow and orphan, alien and stranger, unborn and oppressed. We must lift up the poor. Come alongside the hurting and the wounded and abused. We must put an end to violence in our local communities. We cannot tolerate corruption or make excuses for the immorality of our leaders. We have to demand more. More from them. More from one another. More from ourselves.

Friends, we betray Jesus when we attempt to co-opt Him for our cause. The reality is all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Even our righteousness is like filthy rags to Him. Only God is holy. Only God is just. Only God is merciful. And faithfulness to God means following His example. Washing the feet of those who disagree. Serving others irrespective of their political beliefs. Loving our enemies, even on Twitter. This is what it means to be on the side of Jesus.

**November 3, 2018**

## THE SUPERNATURAL POWER OF UNITY

Readings for the day: John 14-17

"The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." (John 17:22-23)

There is power in unity. There is power when God's people abide in Him. There is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. This power is not our own. It is a divine power. Tearing down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. Tearing down every dividing wall of hostility that stands between us and God, us and each other. It is the power of salvation for all who believe. It's a power that regenerates hearts. Justifies our very being. Sanctifies our lives. It is a power to make those orphaned by sin into children of the Most High. This is the power of God.

Jesus knew this power. Jesus drew on this power. Jesus understood this power. He lived in close, deep, intimate communion with His Father His entire life and He drew on this power constantly to heal, forgive, cast out demons, calm storms. He drew on this power when He multiplied the loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. He drew on this power when He suffered. Died. And this same power was at work when He was raised from the dead.

This is the power Jesus offers to those who follow Him. Throughout His farewell discourse in John 14-17, Jesus refers constantly to the unity He has with the Father and the unity desires to have with His people.

If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

I will ask the Father, and he will give you…the Spirit of truth…You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 14:7, 10, 16-18, 20, 23, 15:5)

The gift Jesus offers us in Himself is beyond comprehension. He literally offers us the same power that created the universe. The same power that raised the dead. The same power that will one day bring all things together and make all things new. This same power is available to us through our relationship with Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why no weapon that is formed against us can stand! This is why no flaming arrows of the evil one can pierce the shield of faith! This is why we have nothing to fear! Because we abide in the Vine! We stand on the Rock! We drink from fountains of Living Water!

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives. All our thoughts. All our words. All our desires and align them with Jesus. Make His will our own. Allow His Spirit to determine what is True and Noble and Right rather than continuing to do what is right in our own eyes.

As we draw close to Jesus, we will find ourselves drawing close to one another as well. The Body of Christ will discover a collective power in its unity that will make a huge impact on the world. I firmly believe this is the secret to the revival taking place in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti. Over 4,000 churches have been planted. Over 570,000 lost people have been saved. God is changing the landscape in places like Gojo, Dire Dawa, and Borena. He is changing the landscape in Torit, South Sudan and in northern Uganda. He is just getting started in Djibouti and will move into Somalia in the next few years. All because believers in these regions have put aside their differences and come together as one in Christ. Does this mean they agree on everything? Absolutely not! Unity is not the same as unanimity! No, their unity comes from a deeper source. A spiritual source. A well that never runs dry. Their common faith in Christ!

I love the words of Psalm 133. How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil that overflows! Dew that drenches the mountains, bringing new life! There God commands His blessing…life evermore! In these fractured and divided times, the church has a great opportunity to show the world the power of the gospel in our unity with Christ and each other! May we answer the call of Jesus' prayer!

**November 5, 2018**

## THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

Readings for the day: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

There is nothing more revealing about the humanity of Jesus than His time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sorrowful and troubled. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. His anxiety is so high, He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in this moment was the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. The withdrawal of the Father's abiding presence as He begins to take on His shoulders the full weight of human sin. The dark reality of what He is about to suffer hits Him with full force. He begs the Father to take the cup away. But the Father is committed to this course of action. The Cross awaits the Messiah.

The disciples flee. All their hopes are dashed as Jesus commands them to put away their swords. Their secret dreams of an uprising that would overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of God on earth come to an end when Jesus heals the wounded soldier. One can imagine their bitter disappointment when Jesus DOESN'T call on legions of angels to fight at His side. So they abandon Him. They finally see where all this headed and it doesn't look good.

But Peter isn't quite ready to give up. He follows at a distance. Maybe waiting for an 11th hour miracle that would justify the last three years of his life. Has it all been a waste? Have all the sacrifices he's made been for naught? Leaving his business? His home? His family? So he sits in the courtyard of the high priest hoping to hear news of the verdict. A servant girls sees him. He denies knowing Jesus and gruffly moves away to the entrance. She follows. Again, he denies knowing Jesus. A crowd has now gathered. Finally, he lets out a curse and swears he has never been with the man. In that moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Peter sees His Lord on His knees being brutally beaten by the Romans. The religious elite jeering and cursing and spitting on Him. Peter is utterly broken. This is really happening. All hope is truly lost.

I've often wondered what Jesus must have felt in that moment as well. His most faithful disciple. The one He loved perhaps more than any of the others. The man He had poured so much of His life into over the last three years abandoning Him. Betraying Him. Denying Him. Though expected, it must have cut Him deeply. Jesus is now truly all alone. His followers are all gone. The Spirit has withdrawn His presence. The angels are no longer at His side. He must face His suffering alone. He has been forsaken. And this is just the beginning. It is the Father's will that He drink this cup to its dregs in order to save us from our sins.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted...Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 2:17-18, 7:25)

**November 6, 2018**

## VIVA LA REVOLUTION!

Readings for the day: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

Barabbas has always fascinated me. I used to picture him as a common criminal. A wild-eyed murderer with crazy hair. Someone who was probably insane. I could never understand why the people would willingly exchange Jesus for this nut job. Why put a violent criminal back on the streets? Why invite this kind of danger back into the community? Were they truly that angry with Jesus?

But then I began to read a little deeper. Barabbas was not an ordinary criminal. He was a leader of an insurrection. A revolution in the city that threatened to overthrow Rome. As such, he may have been well-known. Famous. Admired for his zeal. Revolutionaries are always popular with the people. Yes, they may be violent. Yes, they may kill for the sake of the cause. But history is written by the victors and one man's murderer is another's freedom fighter.

Furthermore, I believe the people had become that disenchanted with Jesus. We simply cannot overstate their hope that He would be the one to overthrow the Romans. Cleanse the Temple. Purify the priesthood. Get rid of the hated Herodian dynasty. And re-establish the kingdom. Sit on David's throne. Reign and rule over a free, independent, powerful nation of Israel. As such, Jesus' words to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world..." (John 18:36) were brutally disappointing. To adapt that famous line from William Congreve, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman (or a people) scorned." When Jesus failed them, the people turned on Him. Their love turned to hatred. Their devotion to rage. Their fury burned white-hot and, when given an opportunity to exchange Him for another, - a revolutionary who understood their cause – they jumped at the chance.

Sadly, we continue to make the same mistake. We simply cannot seem to put aside our fascination with those who would use the tools of violence and anger and hatred to bring about a revolution. The ends justify the means in our minds. So we attach ourselves to Barabbas' of all stripes only to be let down over and over again. And once the revolutionary fires burn out – as they always do - we find ourselves worse off than before. The darkness creeps in. The despair deepens. Hopelessness settles into our hearts.

When will we understand? When will we grasp the full measure of what Jesus is saying? His Kingdom is not of this world! His ways are not our ways! His thoughts are not our thoughts! Our hope can be built on nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else than Jesus' blood and righteousness! He alone is our firm foundation! He alone is the Rock of our salvation! He alone is our sanctuary and fortress! Our refuge and strength! Our very present help in times of trouble! If we have faith in Him, we will not fear! Though the earth give way. Though the oceans roar. Though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea! Nations rage! The kingdoms of this earth come and go! Only God remains. He will not be moved. He will not slumber or sleep. He is the Lord of hosts. When He utters His voice, the earth melts.

Remember, Jesus could have called down legion upon legion of angels and laid waste to the Roman Empire. He could have called on the Heavenly Host to defeat all those who opposed Him. Not a single lash of the whip would have touched Him. Not a single blow would have landed unless He willed it to be so. Jesus chose to turn the other cheek. To let the violence and rage play itself out on His body. He took every stroke. He endured every blow. He willingly suffered every stripe. So that we might be healed. So death might be defeated. So evil might crushed once and for all. This He did for us. And this He now calls us to do for others. May our engagement in this world look more like Jesus and less like Barabbas.

**November 7, 2018**

## GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for the day: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalms 22

There is nothing beautiful about the Cross. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam – far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. They offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Ontological. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul as well. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. All who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus – fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. And it is good for my soul to sit and ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to sit and reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to sit and contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

**November 8, 2018**

## RESURRECTION

Readings for the day: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

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

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

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

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. (Notice in John 20:20 how they all needed this evidence before believing...not just Thomas.) And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. Then what did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

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

**November 9, 2018**

# CUT TO THE HEART

Readings for the day: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110

There is this great scene in Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C.S. Lewis where Eustace steals a bracelet and turns into a dragon. After initially enjoying the transformation, he soon realizes it is permanent and he is trapped with no hope of escape. He is terrified at the prospect and tries to cut the bracelet off to no avail. Then Aslan appears. The mighty lion who is the Christ-figure in the story. He asks Eustace if he wants to be free. Eustace shakes his head in an emphatic "Yes!" Aslan stretches out his claws and cuts him to the bone. Strips him naked. Lays him bare. The cut is painful. Deep. It goes all the way to the heart. And yet it is necessary for him to be set free.

I'm always reminded of that particular scene when I read the response of the people to Peter's sermon. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were "cut to the heart." The full weight of what they had done to Jesus hit them like a ton of bricks. They were heartbroken. They were devastated. And they asked Peter what they should do. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Repent. Literally an 180 degree turn in your life. A radical re-orientation of your heart away from the Kingdom of Self towards the Kingdom of God. A radical redirection of your desires. Whereas once you were prideful, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, filled with negativity and anger and lusts of all kinds. Those desires are now crucified with Christ and in exchange you receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness and mercy. Repentance means a radical re-evaluation of your priorities. Whereas once focused on safety, security, and chasing personal happiness. Now you lay those aside in favor of generosity, service, and sacrifice for the sake of God's Kingdom. There is no middle ground. No keeping one eye on heaven while fixing the other here on earth. No standing with one foot in the kingdoms of this world and one foot in the Kingdom that is to come. Repentance represents a total commitment. A complete shift in one's allegiances and loyalties.

Baptism. The primary sign of this shift in allegiance takes place in baptism. Baptism is where we publicly declare our faith in Christ and align ourselves with His Kingdom. We proclaim to the world that we are no longer our own. We no longer serve ourselves. We no longer live according to the corrupt values of our sinful culture. We are in Christ. Our lives have now been taken up into His life. Our future is in His hands. Our resources are His to do with as He chooses. We are simply His servants. Sent out in His name to fulfill His purposes in this world.

Gift of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, God doesn't send us alone. He doesn't send us our ill-prepared. He doesn't send us out helpless or hopeless. He Himself goes with us. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes and takes up residence in our hearts. He imparts all the gifts we need to succeed in Christ's service. He strengthens us for every battle. He encourages us in the face of every challenge. He gives us joy in every trial. He grants all the wisdom and understanding we need to make sense of His calling on our lives. The Holy Spirit is quite literally the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Repent. Be baptized. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to respond in faith to the work Christ has done on our behalf. Do you believe?

**November 10, 2018**

## A CHURCH OF SUPERNATURAL POWER

Readings for the day: Acts 5-8

There is a new Reformation taking place. According to scholars like Philip Jenkins, the church of the 21st century will be traditional in its ethics, orthodox in its doctrine, supernatural in its power, and centered in the Global South. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. The growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity change, one will expect the influence of theologians and pastors and ministry leaders from these areas of the world to begin to dominate the landscape. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. It all sounds very "New Testament" to me.

In our readings for today, we see signs and wonders all over the place. From the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit to the healings and casting out of demons by the Apostles at Solomon's Portico. Stephen, a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, performing great wonders and signs as he preaches the gospel. And Philip driving out demons left and right. How awesome must it have been to be part of this movement in its earliest days? To see the miracles taking place. To watch as scores of people get saved on a daily basis. Worship services filled with new believers. Homes filled to overflowing with spiritual seekers. Everyone of one heart and one mind even in the face of persecution.

Why doesn't this happen in America? Why doesn't this happen in our local communities? What are we missing? What we are missing is desperation for God. A hunger and thirst for His righteousness. An overwhelming longing for His Kingdom. Affluence is a spiritual killer. It makes us soft and complacent. We have enough so we don't need God. We have doctors and nurses and medication and treatment so we don't need miraculous healing. We have psychologists and psychiatrists and an abundance of counselors to help us deal with our demons. (I am purposefully being a bit facetious here to make a point. Please don't take these words to mean I don't have the deepest appreciation for those who work in the medical field or am being dismissive of the complexities of mental illness.) We have plenty of food and clean water to drink. Warm homes to sleep in and closets full of clothes. We receive great education at the finest of schools. Our economy is the strongest in the world so everyone can have a job. What do we need God for? This is why Jesus Himself will say it is harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Basically it is impossible because we become so attached to the things of this world. Our primary concern becomes safety and comfort rather than the proclamation of the gospel. Our primary goal becomes taking care of ourselves first or those we love rather than the lost. We start walking by sight rather than by faith so is it really any wonder then that we don't see the signs and wonders and miracles of God?

Thankfully what is impossible for us is more than possible for God! And His great desire is for us to experience all the spiritual blessings He has stored up in heaven for His people. (Eph. 1:3) So the image I want to leave you with is Jesus standing out on the lake, having walked on water. You and I are sitting comfortably in our yachts and Jesus is beckoning to us. Calling us out. Calling us out of our comfort zones. Calling us out of our safe spaces. Calling us to leave behind our wealth and possessions. To come out of the gilded cages we find ourselves trapped in and go to him. Actually walk on water ourselves as we fix our eyes on Him. This is not an easy journey. Almost as soon as we leave the safety of our boats, we start to feel the waves rocking and rolling beneath us. We see the wind kick up and the clouds move in. The temptation is to run back to safety. Run back to what we know. Run back to what is comfortable and normal for us. But Jesus is insistent. He is relentless. His voice booms out over the waters. His voice rises above the storm. "Come to me!" He says. Let go of all you have. Unclench those fists. Relinquish your need for control. Come out to where I am and you will see My signs. My wonders. My miracles. For I am Faithful. I am True. I will not let you sink beneath the waves.

Will you go to Him?

**November 12, 2018**

# GOD HATES RACISM

Readings for the day: Acts 9-11

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Hispanic community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Hispanics who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling – as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, this incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God first gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across racial/ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, think like us. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recitivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you

cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Hispanic friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges they've faced as they transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our racial identities. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palate God used to create human beings in the first place! The goal of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it. Just ask Peter.;-)

**November 13, 2018**

## FIRST MISSIONARIES

Readings for the day: Acts 12-14

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed. Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the "the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!" (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

**November 14, 2018**

## REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for the day: James 1-5

Real life in the real church is messy. The church of Jesus Christ – this side of heaven - is filled with sinful people who bring all kinds of baggage with them. In my experience as a pastor, hurting people tend to hurt people. Those who are in pain want everyone else to feel their pain. Broken people often try to break others without even realizing it. Life in this world is full of suffering. Trauma. Abuse. Heartbreak. We face trials of various kinds. Temptations around every corner. And we bring all that with us when we join a church.

It wasn't much different two thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem as it was just getting started. He lived in a violent, turbulent time. The Jewish people were beginning to rise up against their Roman oppressors. Each rebellious movement was put down with greater force and greater violence. National unrest would finally break out in open war, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Throughout this time period, James pastored the church. He pastored a group of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to live the Jesus Life in the midst of all this uncertainty and conflict. They faced trials and tribulations. They suffered tremendously under the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities. They were persecuted on every side. One would think such hardship would bring them together. Cause them to link arms against their common adversaries. Unfortunately, this was not the case. They gossiped about each other. Showed partiality. Divided themselves along economic lines. Like all of us, they struggled with doubts and fears. They struggled with anger and frustration. Too many of them resisted putting their faith into action. They fought over position and influence and power. They aligned themselves too closely with the world and its corrupt values. Sound familiar at all?

Too often our response as Christians is to leave the church. We get our feelings hurt. We experience deep wounds. We are disappointed. Let down. Expectations go unmet. Rather than humble ourselves before the Lord and engage in the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we simply walk out the door. We think this solves our problem. We think this resolves our pain. But it only compounds our situation. We stall out spiritually. It's like we get stuck in an endless time loop. Never moving on until we actually do what Christ commands which is to leave our gift at the altar and first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. I've seen it so many times and it is heartbreaking.

What's the answer? Follow the biblical guidance from James. Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds. Trust God for wisdom to know how to handle each and every situation. Remain steadfast under trial. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be doers of the Word not just hearers. Show no partiality. Let Christ tame our tongues. Set our minds on heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason and full of mercy. Humble ourselves before the Lord and each other so we will not quarrel or be driven by sinful desire. Live vulnerably before our brothers and sisters so we can receive prayer for healing and strength and be restored gently when we fall into sin. Do these things over the long haul and you will find yourself reflecting more and more the image of Christ. This is what the church ultimately is all about! It is the crucible of our sanctification. The very place where iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens another.

**November 15, 2018**

# JUSTIFIED

Readings for the day: Galatians 1-3

I have often wondered about the Pharisees. Cast as Jesus' enemies throughout the four Gospels, they have been caricatured throughout Christian history in a variety of ways. Theologians have tended to flatten them out. Make them two-dimensional. Convenient straw men to argue the superiority of the gospel. Thankfully, more recent scholarship is treating them with far more respect. We are seeking to understand them on their own terms. See the world through their eyes. Let them speak for themselves. This, in turn, is yielding deeper insights into our understanding of the four Gospels and especially the Pauline Epistles.

Many centuries ago, Martin Luther – an anti-Semite – projected his own insecurities back onto the Pharisees. Because he was consumed with how to get right before God, he assumed the Jews were as well. He perceived their faithfulness to the Law to be a form of legalism. A way of self-justification. He thought wrongly that the Jews kept the Law in order to earn God's love and favor. And this misconception persists to this day in Christian circles.

The Pharisees did not believe keeping the Law would earn them salvation. That's not what "justification" meant within their worldview. For them, justification was "about the whole business of being human; of being Jewish human; of living in a Jewish community; of living in a threatened Jewish community; of living with wisdom, integrity and hope in a threatened Jewish community; of living with zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God within a threatened Jewish community." (NT Wright) Justification, for the Pharisees, was about identity. It was not about going to heaven after one died. It was not about eternal life per se. It was wrapped up and intertwined with what it meant to be God's chosen people in a world full of pagan idolatry. Pharisees believed with all their heart that if one was faithful to Torah, God would resurrect them on the final day, thus "justifying" the way they had lived their lives.

So now imagine you are Saul the Pharisee. Advanced even among his Pharisaical peers. Saul encounters the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus. Immediately he is confronted with the reality that if Yahweh has raised Jesus from the dead – the eschatological hope of every Pharisee - then Jesus must be the Justified One. And if Jesus is justified, then Saul is in real trouble. All his zeal is misdirected! All his ferocious loyalty to Torah is misplaced! Everything he has been taught. Everything he believes. Everything he has given his life to is upside down, turned around, and backwards! Jesus rising from the dead changes everything for Saul/Paul.

"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) Saul, now the Apostle Paul, has undergone a radical transformation. All his hopes which once rested on faithfulness to Torah are transferred to Jesus Christ. To crib the NT Wright quote above...Jesus now shows us what it means to be human. Jesus shows us what it means to be Jewish (expanded now beyond the boundaries of race to include those who are "Jewish" by faith) human. What it means to live in community as God's chosen people. What it means to live with wisdom, integrity and hope when the community is threatened as it always is by the pagan forces of this world. Jesus shows us true faithfulness to Torah, to the covenant, and above all, to Yahweh.

Justification comes then – not through faithfulness to Torah – but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we place our faith in Him, we are justified by His work on our behalf. His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. His sinlessness covering our sin. His righteousness exchanged for our unrighteousness. This is why Paul exclaims in one of the most beautiful passages in all the New Testament, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2:20)

**November 16, 2018**

## FREEDOM AND THE SPIRIT

Readings for the day: Galatians 4-6

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this himself. He had experienced this himself. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drug them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification. How often do we make the same mistake as Christians?

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the sting of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom that is centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit – through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

**November 17, 2018**

# NAVIGATING CONFLICT

Readings for the day: Acts 15 -16

Occasionally I come across people who seem surprised when there is conflict in the church. They have this impression that because we all love Jesus we would never have a difference of opinion. Never have an argument or disagreement. They seem to think "unity" is the same as "unanimity" which simply is not true. From the very beginning, the church has struggled over significant issues. Struggled to come to one mind and one accord on various things. Because we are all sinners, it is not easy to discern the will and call of God.

Today's passage highlights a number of different conflicts. Conflict over circumcision and the role of the Jewish law in a Christian's life. Conflict over restoring an individual who has proved untrustworthy in the past. Conflict over where the Spirit was leading the different evangelism teams to go. Conflict in Philippi over the deliverance of the slave girl. Conflict in prison which results in the conversion of the jailer. It is messy. There is division. The process of discernment often involves trial and error. Mistakes are made. I imagine feelings get hurt. Frustrations mount. But through it all, the Spirit is faithful to make His will known. And the result is the churches are strengthened in their faith and increase in numbers daily as God adds to them those who are being saved.

Is it possible that Acts 15 and 16 are paradigmatic for today? Do they reflect real life in the real church? Should we expect conflict? Expect disagreement? Expect arguments over where to go and what to do and who to involve? And if so, how can we resolve conflict peacefully? In a way that glorifies God and brings honor to His name?

One of the keys to navigating conflict in a godly manner is mutual submission. In Acts 15:1, a question is raised. Is circumcision required for salvation? This is no small matter. It's a question of identity. For centuries, the rite of circumcision has set the Jewish people apart. Marked them as God's chosen people. They have suffered for this belief. Been persecuted for this belief. No matter where they found themselves, they were easily identified by the fact they had been circumcised so there was never any place to run or hide. Since Abraham, circumcision has formed the core part of their shared identity and linked them intimately with the covenant promises of God. Now it is being threatened...what should they do? Paul and Barnabus have strong opinions. Based on what they have seen and experienced, it appears the Holy Spirit is moving among the Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who are not circumcised. Why add to what the Spirit is doing? There is quite a bit of dissension and debate. So they decide to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles to make their case. Again, there is much debate. Strong opinions being offered on all sides. Finally, Peter stands up. Shares his heart. Shares his experience. Once again, Paul and Barnabus share about the signs and wonders they have seen in their travels. James calls for a decision and the council decides to let circumcision be a secondary matter. Non-essential when it comes to salvation.

This has huge implications and it is notable that their conclusion "seemed good to the apostles, elders, and the whole church." Though the issue will continue to come up throughout the rest of the book of Acts, this moment represents a turning point. A general willingness of all parties to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Another aspect that's highlighted is their ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials when it comes to the gospel. Again, just because a compromise was reached doesn't mean everyone agreed. Unity is not the same as unanimity. I imagine quite a few of the Pharisees who had come to faith walked away with serious reservations. But they set those reservations aside for the sake of the unity of the church. They recognized the danger of division and how much harm would come should the church fracture over this issue. They made sure to focus on the essentials – not getting mixed up in idolatry, sexual immorality, and maintaining purity which are all more matters of the heart - rather than force Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christian.

Would that modern-day Christians were able to do the same! Instead of fighting over secondary matters like baptismal practices, worship styles, spiritual gifts, etc., can we not exercise mutual forbearance and submission and keep the main thing the main thing? Rather than pull up stakes the moment we disagree with the preacher or the elder board, can we not put aside our differences for the sake of the unity of the church? Rather than bounce the moment we are disappointed or let down, can we not obey the gospel's call to forgive and reconcile? Unity does not mean unanimity so we should never expect we will always agree. The key to doing life together is navigating conflict in a way that honors God and keeps Christ at the center.

**November 19, 2018**

# FAITH ON TRIAL

Readings for the day: Acts 17-18:1-18

One of the more common misunderstandings in Acts is Paul's appearance before the Areopagus in Athens. Because of Luke's editorial comment, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21); there is this assumption that Paul was appearing before a kind of debate society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. New Testament scholar, NT Wright, points out in his most recent biography of the Apostle Paul that the "Areopagus" was actually the Athenian Supreme Court. Paul was being charged as a "preacher of foreign divinities" which is actually the same charge that condemned Socrates. As such, Paul had a lot more at stake than winning an argument. His life was on the line. In a very real sense, the validity of the Christian faith was on the line as well.

Paul's defense of his faith is brilliant. Marks him as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the ancient world. He truly belongs in the same pantheon as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23) Paul understands that God has revealed Himself in all kinds of ways. As pagan as the Athenians were, one thing that could be affirmed was their desire for God. They built all kinds of shrines to all kinds of false gods and while this practice was idolatrous, Paul was able to see past the surface to the deeper reality of their spiritual hunger. He plays on this spiritual hunger by affirming their search and uses it as a springboard to present the gospel. He even goes on to quote their own poets back to them, demonstrating how widely read and engaged he was with Hellenistic culture. This is remarkable for a former Pharisee and deeply instructive for us.

It is so easy in our world to fall into the trap of fundamentalism. Believing our way is the only way and any deviation represents a departure from truth. Fundamentalism infects both progressives and conservatives. It seems to touch ever debate these days whether the issue is race, sexuality, gender, abortion, etc. We cast these conversations in sharp binaries. We demand grace and nuance for our position but refuse to extend that same courtesy out to others. We spend so much of our time and energy dissecting every single tweet, FB post, or IG story in an effort to uncover deception. We assume the worst about the motivations of our opponents. We seem to feed off the negative energy.

You might have heard the saying – oft attributed to Benjamin Franklin – that a "half-truth is a great lie." You might even agree with such a statement. However, there is a flip side. A half-truth does contain half a truth. And in our rush to point out the "lie" we often miss the opportunity to affirm what may be true and noble and right. This is especially important when engaging seekers. Those engaged in an authentic search for God. They have legitimate questions. Important concerns that need to be heard. Doubts and fears that need to be expressed and taken seriously. Not dismissed. Not diminished. Paul affirms what he can about the Athenians. He affirms their religious hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Paul sees the half-truth reflected in their shrine to the "unknown god" and he makes Him known to them. Even though he is on trial for his life, Paul is so confident in Christ that he finds a way past self-defense and instead uses his time on the witness stand to share Jesus.

Every day our faith is put on trial. By the people we meet, work, and interact with on a regular basis. They ask all kinds of questions. Make all kinds of assumptions. Issue all kinds of statements. As Christians, we can spend our time and energy deconstructing everything they have to say. Pointing out the intellectual and spiritual inconsistencies. We can focus on winning the argument or we can focus on winning the person's heart. Asking good clarifying questions. Honoring what we can about their beliefs. Pointing out where their truth may unwittingly intersect with the Truth of the gospel. Because our confidence flows from Christ, we don't have to take things personal. Don't have to be defensive. Don't have to feel threatened. We are at peace because we know Jesus has overcome the world and is making Himself known.

**November 20, 2018**

## TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Readings for the day: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

"For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8)

I cannot imagine a greater compliment than to be told that my witness had "sounded forth" throughout the region I live and my faith in God had "gone forth everywhere" so that the need for evangelism ceased. And yet this is exactly what happened through the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) traveled through their city on their way to Athens. They stopped and peached for three consecutive Saturdays on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Jews and Greeks and several leading women came to faith as the Word came in power and authority and conviction. However, some disbelieved and they stirred up a mob to attack Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they attacked Jason and a few others. Dragging them out of their homes into the streets. They brought them before the city authorities with the hope they would be charged with treason for proclaiming a king other than Caesar but Jason paid off the officials and they were released. They then helped Paul and Silas escape during the night. This is the affliction Paul is referencing in his letter to them. But despite the persecution, they held onto to their joy in the Holy Spirit and clearly remained steadfast in their faith to the point that their reputation had spread thus making a return trip from Paul unnecessary.

I love how the crowd puts it in Acts 17:6, "These men have turned the world upside down..." Would that we would live such gospel-centered lives that we too might be accused of such a thing! Turning the world upside down is exactly what the gospel does. It completely reorders all we love. It redirects all our thoughts and desires. It reorients all our priorities. The things we used to hold dear no longer have much of a hold on us. The idols we cling to so tightly become empty and worthless. All our pride and achievement and cast down before the throne of Jesus. All our wealth and privilege and influence and power pales in comparison to the riches and authority Christ offers us in Himself. Our concern for our reputation and the esteem of others diminishes as our fear of God increases. This is what happens when we come to Christ. He fills us with His love. His affections. His joy. His peace. His righteousness. As these things begin to flow in and through our lives, we are transformed. We are renewed. We are set free. And because we have been set free, this world no longer has anything for us. No longer has any leverage over us. No longer can threaten to undo us. For we live for Christ and if we die, we gain!

So what does this all mean for you today? How are you turning the world upside down at your work or school? In your home or neighborhood? As you gather around your table with friends and family for Thanksgiving, what will the conversation sound like? Will the people you spend time feel blessed for having been with you? Will they hear and experience the love of Jesus through you? Will you set the example for those who do not yet believe through your sacrifice and willingness to serve?

**November 21, 2018**

## WITH GOD'S HELP

Readings for the day: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

"To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power..." (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own will-power. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as secular motivational talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life.

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It's not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.
In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God's Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives – home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone. The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God's help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

**November 22, 2018**

# THE SOCIAL/POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for the day: Acts 18:19-28, 19:1-41

Happy Thanksgiving! As many gather around tables for food and fellowship today, there are certain subjects bound to be off-limits. Politics. Religion. Many others. Probably for good reason!:-) No one wants to be "that" guy or gal who spoils the meal by creating division.

I often hear the same sentiment expressed in church circles. Why can't the preacher just stick to the gospel? Why does he or she have to bring politics into the equation? Or social justice? Or economics? As my southern friends used to say, "Stick to preachin'! Stay away from meddlin'!" The problem with this approach is clear when you read passages like the one for today. We've already seen how the early Christians were accused of "turning the world upside down" with their preaching of the gospel. It is impossible to separate the preaching of the gospel from the implications of the gospel. Preaching Jesus by definition challenges our notions of justice, power, social class, economics, etc. because He Himself challenged those same things through His preaching and ministry.

Ephesus was one of the great cities of Asia Minor in the 1st century. A commercial trading center. A major port. In the early second century, the great library of Celsus was built here, housing over 12,000 scrolls and putting Ephesus on the map alongside Alexandria as a center of learning. It had amphitheater that held over 25,000 spectators. But perhaps the greatest draw was the famed Temple of Artemis. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Pilgrims came from all over to pay their respects to the great goddess. As a result, tradesmen and craftsmen made a lot of money supporting the cult by selling idols and little shrines for the people to carry home with them. Enter the Apostle Paul. He comes preaching a gospel of a God not made with human hands. A God who cannot be represented by idols here on earth. A God who is the maker of heaven and earth. A God greater than Artemis (the moon goddess) and many of her former adherents came to faith. Sales drop. Profits crumble. Money is lost. A riot ensues as the entire economic structure of the city is now in danger.

Such accusations are nothing new to Paul. He's already been accused of preaching a "king other than Caesar." Already been accused of treason and sedition. Already been accused of upending entire social systems and ways of life. Already been accused of blasphemy by his fellow Jews. No wonder he'll remark to his Corinthians friends, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies." (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) Paul understands to preach the gospel places one at odds with the social systems of this world. The economic systems of this world. The political systems of this world. The gospel is the good news of another Kingdom. A Kingdom that is in this world but not of this world. A Kingdom ruled from a heavenly throne not an earthly one. A Kingdom driven by eternal values not temporal ones. A Kingdom that is pure and noble and righteous. Unwilling to compromise with the sinful and broken ways of this world. So one cannot preach without meddlin' in politics, social systems, economics, and justice. The gospel cannot be privatized. Jesus will not rest until He is Lord over every facet of human existence. Until every knee will bow in heaven. On earth. Under the earth. And every tongue confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

**November 23, 2018**

## "REAL, REAL CHURCH"

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 1-4

I woke up this morning to a tweet storm. A post was put out by someone I follow describing how thankful he is for the church he serves as pastor. In it, he declares, "I pastor a church, not a Twitter following. A real real church in Missouri...for 37 years. We have all kinds of people—from newborn to 99, Trumpers and progressives, ICE officers and undocumented immigrants (for real). What we have in common is JESUS...and a culture of kindness." The response was sadly predictable. Many of my progressive friends were quick to pounce. How could he allow Trump supporters in his church? How could he tolerate ICE officers? As the rhetoric heated up, he was accused of fostering an environment of abuse, racism, fascism, concentration camps, and supporting the American Gestapo. Many pledged to stop following him for His obviously white, privileged perspective. Conservatives weren't any easier on him. How could he give sanctuary to illegal immigrants? Clearly he was more about social justice than the gospel! Was he for open borders? The destruction of the American way of life? Isn't this what happens when the purity of the gospel is compromised for the sake of cultural accommodation? It was swift and brutal and it exposes a heretical reality at the heart of the American church. We simply do not believe Jesus is strong enough to hold the center. Though we claim to believe Jesus' sacrifice was enough to tear down the dividing wall of hostility between us and God, we do not believe it is enough to tear down the walls that divide us from one another.

Paul clearly believed Jesus was enough. "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." (1 Corinthians 1:2) This is an extraordinary statement in light of what's about to come. In this first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul will confront divisions and factions. He will confront sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, and idolatry. He will confront the abuse of spiritual gifts and the self-righteous pride of the Corinthians who lived with power and privilege and wealth. As Paul's own rhetoric heats up – he pulls no punches throughout - it is easy to lose sight of Paul's fundamental belief that despite all their problems. Despite all their foolishness and sin. Despite all their deep-seated divisions and factions. Paul believed with all his heart that they were sanctified in Jesus Christ. Called to be saints together in one body, one local church, as a witness to the world of the unconditional love and grace of Jesus.

Is Jesus enough? Does His unconditional love exert enough centrifugal force on our lives to keep us together? Or does His grace fall flat in the face of the powerful cultural forces that swirl all around us? What does it mean to be part of the "real, real church?" Does it mean we only gather with people who look like us? Think like us? Spend money like us? Vote like us? Or does Jesus push us out of our homogeneous spaces? Is it possible to be part of a local community of believers who come from all walks of life? All kinds of backgrounds? Different ethnicities? Different social classes and tax brackets? Is it possible to honor one another in those differences by sitting down together? Listening to one another? Seeking to walk in one another's shoes rather than be so eager to condemn? Give one another the benefit of the doubt before rushing to judgment? Grant one another the grace to grow rather than be so quick to cut them off?

Clearly division is nothing new in the church. Jesus himself counted tax collectors and zealots among his closest friends. Paul was planting churches were Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free came together in Christ. Their social, economic, ethnic, and political differences could not be more stark. And yet they found a way to do life together. Found a way to process through all their mutual frustrations. Found a way to forgive and reconcile and walk together in humility. It was never easy. Never neat and tidy. It required daily death to self and yet it was these fledgling communities of faith that would eventually change the world.

How could this happen? A relentless focus on Christ. Paul describes it in all kinds of ways...

Christ is the power and wisdom of God
Christ is our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption
Christ is our sure foundation
Christ is all things to us and for us
Paul also exposes the folly of the ways of this world...

The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.
God chooses the foolish to shame the wise.
God chooses the weak to shame the strong.
God chooses what is lowly and despised in this world to shame the proud.
Ultimately, then, God leaves us no other options but to trust Christ. To cling to Christ. To follow Christ. Without Him, the center of our life together cannot hold. Without Him, the foundation of our life together will crumble. Without Him, the forces that threaten to tear us apart will be too great to resist. Unless Christ holds us together, we will fall apart. Unless Christ holds the world together, it will plunge into chaos and ruin. Death and sin and evil will have their way. Christ truly is our only hope.

**November 24, 2018**

## LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 5-8

Homer's Iliad. The poetry of Sappho and Ovid. Pindar's Odes. Plato's Symposium. The Sacred Band of Thebes. Horace's Odes. Without a doubt the Greek and Roman world was a highly eroticized one. Sexuality in all its forms was celebrated and embraced. Men were encouraged to build homoerotic relationships with young protégés. Homosexuality and lesbianism was known and commonly practiced. Temple prostitution was normalized as farmers slept with high priestesses to ensure the fertility of their crops for the coming year. Sexual promiscuity and adultery were not seen as taboo. Sexuality was a widespread theme permeating art, comedy, poetry, and philosophy. Sex was even used to bond men together in some of the great militaries of the period.

By contrast, Jews and Christians practiced sexual restraint. They saw sex as a sacred act that bonded one man with one woman for a lifetime. Created to symbolize the "one flesh" God intended for man and woman to experience with each other, Jews and Christians maintained a healthy respect for its power. This is why they established strong taboos against any sexual activity outside the bonds of covenant marriage. They recognized that sex was not purely physical but bonded people emotionally and spiritually as well. To disregard the depth of the sexual experience or share it with more than one partner was to commit a sin against one's own body which itself was a temple of the Holy Spirit. Sexual promiscuity was therefore intimately tied to ritual purity which is why transgressions took on a more serious tone.

The Apostle Paul was steeped in the Judeo-Christian world of sexual restraint. The Corinthian Christians were coming out of the Greco-Roman culture of sexual promiscuity. You can easily see where these two worlds would clash. Paul confronts the Corinthian believers with some of his strongest language yet. Calling for the excommunication of a man who slept with his father's wife. Commanding the Corinthians not to associate with the sexually immoral. Most certainly they should avail themselves of the temple prostitutes and local fertility cults! At the same time, husbands should not deprive their wives of sex nor should wives do the same to their husbands. Celibacy is not God's design for marriage. I truly see this as Paul at his pastoral best. Applying the gospel to the complex social and cultural realities that existed in this particular part of the world.

So what about us? Do these same principles hold true for us today? Absolutely. The Bible is univocal from Old to New Testaments about the sanctity of the sexual relationship. It is to be shared between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage over the course of a lifetime. Certainly one could point to deviations from this pattern throughout the Scriptures like the polygamy of the patriarchs. But those exceptions only serve to prove the rule. As Christians, we are called to sexual purity. We are called to sexual holiness. We are called to honor the sexual act as one of God's great gifts and thereby exercise it under His divine authority. We are witnessing one of the greatest moral shifts in history. Western culture is becoming increasing hyper-sexualized as it reverts back to pagan, Greco-Roman sexual norms. Sexual promiscuity has been on the rise since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960's. Serial divorce is rampant. Same-sex relationships are celebrated. The concept of "throuples" is quickly being embraced as definitions of marriage shift and change. The impact of all this rapid change is devastating. Sexually transmitted disease. Unwanted pregnancies. Broken relationships. The objectification of the human body. Pornography. Harassment. Abuse. Violence. Depression. Anxiety. Fear. These are a lot of the reasons the Greco-Roman world embraced the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic in the first place! They could clearly see the positive impact on families and communities who committed to practicing Biblical sexual restraint. Sadly, our world has no such examples as Christians themselves do not seem committed to practicing sexual purity.

As our world rapidly plunges into sexual chaos, it has become imperative for Christians to follow Paul's words to the Thessalonians, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5) Lust is defined biblically as those emotions/passions that drive one to behavior outside the will of God. In the area of sexuality this means any sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. It is true that most human beings experience sexual desires that tempt them to act outside this bond. Heterosexuals, bi-sexuals, and homosexuals alike all suffer from the same disordered loves. These have been present within us since birth but they are a result of the Fall not the good and perfect creation of God. They contradict what God has clearly revealed in His Word and therefore the only appropriate response is self-denial not self-indulgence. Surely this is what Paul means when he writes, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

**November 26, 2018**

# WAIVING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 9-11

As Americans, we believe every human being is endowed with inalienable rights. Among these are a right to life. A right to liberty. A right to pursue happiness. These rights are embodied in our Constitution. They are explored in further detail in our Bill of Rights. Indeed, once could say our entire legal code is an attempt to flesh out how we define our "rights." We have "bills of rights" for taxpayers, patients, students, etc. When we arrest people for crimes, the first thing we do is apprise them of their rights. We advocate in the global community for the enforcement of human rights and we often take action if we feel such rights are violated. Most of our hottest political debates center around what we perceive to be our "rights." The right to life vs. the right to choose. The right to bear arms vs. the right to keep our children safe. The right to defend our borders vs. the human rights of immigrants/refugees seeking asylum from extreme poverty and violence in their home countries. Even on an individual level, we cling to our "rights" and react strongly if we feel they are being infringed upon or violated.

The Apostle Paul could not be more different. Because he believes with all his heart in the saving grace of Christ, he willingly surrenders all his rights for the greater glory of the gospel. Paul has every "right" to assert his authority as an apostle. Every "right" to get married. Every "right" to work for a living. Indeed, he has every "right" to make his living off the gospel just like the Levitical priests. Paul has every "right" to eat or drink whatever he wants since God has set aside the kosher food laws of the Old Testament. He has every "right" to circumcise or no circumcise, depending on the situation. If Paul were to really assert his "rights", he could claim privilege as a Jew among Jews, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Phil. 3:4-6) But Paul is more than willing to relinquish any and all of his rights...why? Because "he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ." (Philippians 3:8)

Part and parcel of becoming a Christian means waiving whatever rights we believe we are entitled to as human beings, American citizens, you name it. We have to be willing to lay these things down for the greater privilege of serving Christ. Christ demands total and complete allegiance. He will not allow our "rights" to get in the way of His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom. Not even those most fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does this mean Christians can never be happy? Never be safe? Never be free? Of course not. What it means is that even these things that we hold so dear cannot get in the way of the gospel. As Paul writes, "we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ." (1 Corinthians 9:12)

Ultimately, "rights" have to do with identity. Wherever we ground our identity, we will guard and protect those rights fiercely. Think about the culture wars that are currently raging and what that reveals about where so many find their identity and thus their "rights" as individuals. Gender. Sexuality. Race. Political affiliation. National citizenship. Economic status. Educational level. All of these things become part of our identity. Some we are born with. Some we achieve over the course of our lives. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the even greater privilege of becoming His disciple! Once our identity is grounded in Him, we realize all the "rights" we've been clinging to are rubbish compared to the magnificence of His amazing grace. This, in turn, gives us unbelievable freedom. I love how Paul puts it, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I

became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Friends, what "rights" have you been holding onto? What privileges have you been clinging to? What parts of your identity still need to be surrendered to Jesus? Let go. Open your hands. Open your heart and experience anew the freedom that comes only from the gospel.

**November 27, 2018**

## NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE LOCAL CHURCH

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 12-14

Irenaus. Origen. Cyprian. Cyril of Jerusalem. Ambrose. Augustine. All of them believed in the doctrine of Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus - "There is no salvation outside the church." This idea, of course, doesn't sit well with us. We are highly individualistic. Suspicious of outside authority. Resistant to authentic community. Distrusting of institutions. We prefer to be more gnostic when it comes to our relationship to the church. We much prefer to describe our relationship to the church in generalities and abstractions. We'll say things like, "I don't need to be part of a local church." "I'm a member of the universal church and that's enough." "I can worship and serve God just fine on my own." For a lot of us, these are not simply flippant comments. They are rooted in very real hurt. Very real pain. Very real betrayal that we've experienced at the hands of a local church. Perhaps it was a priest or pastor who abused us. The legalistic and pharisaical environment we grew up in. Maybe the church failed us in our hour of greatest need. Or maybe our protests truly are simply culturally conditioned. We reject the church for her hypocrisy. Reject the church for her bigotry. Reject the church for her outdated morality. Whatever our issues, too many of us keep the local church at arm's length.

Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus. There is no salvation outside the church. Would it surprise to know that the Apostle Paul believed this? Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

There are several key ideas to ponder and pray over from this passage...

The Spirit of God makes us all one in Christ Jesus. Unity is not homogeneity. Unity is not unanimity. Unity is not about the erasure of our social, racial/ethnic, or economic distinctions. It is the submission of those things to the greater identity we share in Christ.

The local church is like a body. It has hands and feet. Eyes and ears. Head. Heart. Muscles. Organs. Bones. Each member of a local church is created and equipped by God to play a particular role. No role more or less important than the other. But not all roles are the same. A body is not made up of all feet. Or all hands. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of smell? God has ordained that all the members of the local church working together make up the one body of Christ.

The local church has many parts. We are NOT a church of one! We CANNOT be the church on our own. We cannot say to our brothers and sisters, "I have no need of you." That would be like cutting off your hand or tearing out your eye. There are parts of the body that are weaker. Parts of the body that are stronger. Parts of the body that are younger. Parts of the body that are older. Parts of the body that are richer. Parts that are

poorer. Parts that are white. Parts black. Parts brown. Parts more educated. Parts less educated. Not all parts are the same. Not all are gifted in the same way. But all are necessary. All are equally important. All have value in God's sight.

We are a part of the body of Christ and individually members of it. There is no salvation outside the church because there is no identity outside the church. Our love for God gets expressed in our love for one another. Our unity together reflects the unity of the Godhead itself. To keep the church at arm's length. To never commit oneself to a local body of believers. To try and do the Christian life on our own is oxymoronic. It doesn't make any sense and it certainly isn't biblical.

I know we live in a time where we feel pulled in a lot of different directions. We have a lot of things competing for our time, attention, and resources. Furthermore, we tend to take a consumeristic approach to the local church and judge it by it's ability to entertain us or hold our attention. As soon as life in the local church gets hard, we tend to bail. As soon as we feel let down or disappointed, we leave. Such immature behavior only stunts our spiritual growth and prevents us from experiencing the fullness of God's grace and love. The next time you think to yourself - "I don't need to go to church" or "Maybe it's time for me to find a new church" or "I'm done with church" - take a moment and read through 1 Corinthians 13. It was not written for weddings! It was written for the local church. You cannot love Jesus without loving His bride, friends. And love is defined, not as a feeling, but a conscious decision to bear all things, believe all things, endure all things just as Christ did for us.

**November 28, 2018**

# THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY

Readings for the day: 1 Corinthians 15-16

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anywhere close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

**November 30, 2018**

# RECONCILIATION

Readings for yesterday: 2 Corinthians 1-4

Readings for the day: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Racial/ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. All of it taking on a religious fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable "news" organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I've had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt. Rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person's character. Impugning motives. Words like "betrayal" and "wounded" and "abuse" get thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person's trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person's past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to "regard no one according to the flesh", meaning we no longer let a person's political, social, sexual, or racial/ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn't mean we try to "erase" their uniqueness. This doesn't mean we try to "whitewash" or "homogenize" everyone. This doesn't mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How weak! How stupid! How insipid! Only a white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that's partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a

maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their “record of wrongs” and marriages are renewed. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God’s message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

**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 heartbreaking 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. S 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 13-16

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 farse 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 to 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 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 spent 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 intepretive 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 discover. 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 it's 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 illumines 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 premillenialist" 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 incompletion." 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 it's 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 Janiero. 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 resolutations. 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.