BIBLE IN A YEAR

BIBLE, FOLLOWING JESUS, DISCIPLESHIP

2019

STUDY AND COMMENTARY

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BY

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FROM "THE INTERSECTION"©

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June 17, 2019 GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY
Readings for today: 1 Kings 18, Acts 11, Psalms 135, Proverbs 17:12-13

June 18, 2019 HEARING GOD'S VOICE
Readings for today: 1 Kings 19, Acts 12:1-23, Psalms 136, Proverbs 17:14-15

June 19, 2019 MISSION
Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21, Acts 12:24-13:15, Psalms 137, Proverbs 17:16

June 20, 2019 BEDROCK FAITH
Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, Acts 13:16-41, Psalms 138, Proverbs 17:17-18

June 21, 2019 COMMUNION WITH GOD
Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-2, Acts 13:42-14:7, Psalms 139, Proverbs 17:19-21

June 22, 2019 ANSWERED PRAYERS
Readings for today: 2 Kings 3:1-4:17, Acts 14:8-28, Psalms 140, Proverbs 17:22

June 23 2019 CONFLICT
Readings for today: 2 Kings 4:18-5:27, Acts 15:1-35, Psalms 141, Proverbs 17:23

June 24, 2019 OPEN OUR EYES
Readings for today: 2 Kings 6-7, Acts 15:36-16:15, Psalms 142, Proverbs 17:24-25

June 25, 2019 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE
Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:1-9:13, Acts 16:16-40, Psalms 143, Proverbs 17:26

June 26, 2019 EVANGELISM
Readings for today: 2 Kings 9:14-10:31, Acts 17, Psalms 144, Proverbs 17:27-28

June 27, 2019 HIGH PLACES
Readings for today: 2 Kings 10:32-12:21, Acts 18:1-22, Psalms 145, Proverbs 18:1

June 28, 2019 THE STEADFAST LOVE OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 13-14, Acts 18:23-19:12, Psalms 146, Proverbs 18:2-3

June 29, 2019 A SOCIAL/POLITICAL GOSPEL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 15-16, Acts 19: 13-41, Psalms 147, Proverbs 18:4-5

June 30, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 17:1-18:12, Acts 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 18:6-7

JULY

July 1, 2019 THE DANGERS OF IDOLATRY

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, Acts 21:1-17, Psalms 149, Proverbs 18:8

July 2, 2019 LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20:1-22:2, Acts 21:18-36, Psalms 150, Proverbs 18:9-10

July 3, 2019 WALKING IN THE COUNSEL OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22:3-23:30, Acts 21:37-22:16, Psalms 1, Proverbs 18:11-12

July 4, 2019 A BLESSED NATION

Readings for today: 2 Kings 23:31-25:30, Acts 22:17-23:10, Psalms 2, Proverbs 18:13

July 5, 2019 GOD'S SALVATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalms 3, Proverbs 18:14-15

July 6, 2019 PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24, Psalms 4, Proverbs 18:16-18

July 7, 2019 THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25, Psalms 5, Proverbs 18:19

July 8, 2019 GODLY SORROW

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:18-6:81, Acts 26, Psalms 6, Proverbs 18:20-21

July 9, 2019 ROOTLESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-8, Acts 27:1-20, Psalms 7, Proverbs 18:22

July 10, 2019 EPITAPH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 9-10, Acts 27:21-44, Psalms 8, Proverbs 18:23-24

July 11, 2019 COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

July 12, 2019 THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17, Romans 1:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 19:4-5

July 13, 2019 WORSHIP

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36, Romans 1:18-32, Psalms 10:1-15, Proverbs 19:6-7

July 14, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17, Romans 2:1-24, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 19:8-9

July 15, 2019 TRANSFORMATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 19-21, Romans 2:25-3:8, Psalms 11, Proverbs 19:10-12

July 16, 2019 LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 22-23, Romans 3:9-31, Psalms 12, Proverbs 19:13-14

July 17, 2019 TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11, Romans 4:1-12, Psalms 13, Proverbs 19:15-16

July 18, 2019 NATIONAL SUFFERING

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34, Romans 4:13-5:5, Psalms 14, Proverbs 19:17

July 19, 2019 TRUE FINANCIAL PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 28-29, Romans 5:6-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 19:18-19

July 20, 2019 TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 1-3, Romans 6, Psalms 16, Proverbs 19:20-21

July 21, 2019 GOD IS GOOD

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11, Romans 7:1-13, Psalms 17, Proverbs 19:22-23

July 22, 2019 PRAYING FOR REVIVAL

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10, Romans 7:14-8:8, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 19:24-25

July 23, 2019 SUFFERING

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19, Romans 8:9-25, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 19:26

July 24, 2019 WHAT'S THE POINT OF CHURCH?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 11-13, Romans 8:26-39, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 19:27-29

July 25, 2019 ELECTION

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 14-16, Romans 9:1-24, Psalms 19, Proverbs 20:1

July 26, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 17-18, Romans 9:25-10:13, Psalms 20, Proverbs 20:2-3

July 27, 2019 SINGING OUR FAITH

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 19-20, Romans 10:14-11:12, Psalms 21, Proverbs 20:4-6

July 28, 2019 ECHOES IN ETERNITY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 21-23, Romans 11:13-36, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 20:7

July 29, 2019 CONFORM VS. TRANSFORM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 24-25, Romans 12, Psalms 22:19-31, Proverbs 20:8-10

July 30, 2019 FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 26-28, Romans 13, Psalms 23, Proverbs 20:11

July 31, 2019 SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 29, Romans 14, Psalms 24, Proverbs 20:12

AUGUST

August 1, 2019 THE DANGER OF EXPEDIENCY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 30-31, Romans 15:1-22, Psalms 25:1-15, Proverbs 20:13-15

August 2, 2019 KINGDOM-WORK REQUIRES TEAMWORK

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13, Romans 15:23-16:9, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 20:16-18

August 3, 2019 CAN JESUS HOLD THE CENTER?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33, Romans 16:10-27, Psalms 26, Proverbs 20:19

August 4 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 35-36, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 20:20-21

August 5, 2019 DIVINE FOOLISHNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 20:22-23

August 6, 2019 REBUILDING

Readings for today: Ezra 3:1-4:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4, Psalms 28, Proverbs 20:24-25

August 7, 2019 CULT OF CELEBRITY

Readings for today: Ezra 4:24-6:22, 1 Corinthians 3:5-23, Psalms 29, Proverbs 20:26-27

August 8, 2019 TRUE GREATNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 7:1-8:20, 1 Corinthians 4, Psalms 30, Proverbs 20:28-30

August 9, 2019 CULTURAL BLINDERS

Readings for today: Ezra 8:21-9:15, 1 Corinthians 5, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 21:1-2

August 10, 2019 BOUGHT WITH A PRICE

Readings for today: Ezra 10, 1 Corinthians 6, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 21:3

August 11, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

August 12, 2019 THE HARD WORK OF PRAYER

Readings for today: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

August 13, 2019 RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5:14-7:72, 1 Corinthians 8, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 21:8-10

August 14, 2019 REHEARSING OUR STORY

Readings for today: Nehemiah 7:73-9:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 21:11-12

August 15, 2019 ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 9:22-10:39, 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 21:13

August 16, 2019 PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26, 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 21:14-16

August 17, 2019 CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 21:17-18

August 18, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Esther 1-3, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 21:19-20

August 19, 2019 DIVINE REVERSALS

Readings for today: Esther 4-7, 1 Corinthians 12:1-26, Psalms 36, Proverbs 21:21-22

August 20, 2019 LOVE

Readings for today: Esther 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 21:23-24

August 21, 2019 WHY DO THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER?

Readings for today: Job 1-3, 1 Corinthians 14:1-17, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 21:25-26

August 22, 2019 SPEAKING OUT OF TURN

Readings for today: Job 4-7, 1 Corinthians 14:18-40, Psalms 37:30-40, Proverbs 21:27

August 23, 2019 ABANDONED BY GOD

Readings for today: Job 8-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28, Psalms 38, Proverbs 21:28-29

August 24, 2019 ARGUING WITH GOD

Readings for today: Job 12-15, 1 Corinthians 15:29-58, Psalms 39, Proverbs 21:30-31

August 25, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Job 16-19, 1 Corinthians 16, Psalms 40, Proverbs 22:1

August 26, 2019 THE COMFORT OF GOD

Readings for today: Job 20-22, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 22:2-4

August 27, 2019 FAITH VS. FEELINGS

Readings for today: Job 23-27, 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11, Psalms 41, Proverbs 22:5-6

August 28, 2019 SEARCHING FOR WISDOM

Readings for today: Job 28-30, 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, Psalms 42, Proverbs 22:7

August 29, 2019 GLORY

Readings for today: Job 31-33, 2 Corinthians 3, Psalms 43, Proverbs 22:8-9

August 30, 2019 JARS OF CLAY

Readings for today: Job 34-36, 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 22:10-12

August 31, 2019 GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Job 37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 22:13

SEPTEMBER

September 1, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Job 40-42, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Psalms 45, Proverbs 22:14

September 2, 2019 CHASING THE WIND

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-3, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalms 46, Proverbs 22:15

September 3, 2019 HARD-WIRED FOR CONNECTION

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 4-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:7, Psalms 47, Proverbs 22:16

September 4, 2019 TRUE REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

September 5, 2019 FINDING TRUE JOY

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Psalms 49, Proverbs 22:20-21

September 6, 2019 SEX AND GOD

Readings for today: Song of Songs 1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, Psalms 50, Proverbs 22:22-23

September 7, 2019 DEATH-DEFYING LOVE

Readings for today: Song of Songs 5-8, 2 Corinthians 9, Psalms 51, Proverbs 22:24-25

September 8, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 1-2, 2 Corinthians 10, Psalms 52, Proverbs 22:26-27

September 9, 2019 FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: Isaiah 3-5, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, Psalms 53, Proverbs 22:28-29

September 10, 2019 PROPHETIC SIGNS

Readings for today: Isaiah 6-7, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Psalms 54, Proverbs 23:1-3

September 11, 2019 FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Isaiah 8-9, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Psalms 55, Proverbs 23:4-5

September 12, 2019 THE SALVATION OF GOD

Readings for today: Isaiah 10-11, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, Psalms 56, Proverbs 23:6-8

September 13, 2019 PRIDE COMES BEFORE THE FALL

Readings for today: Isaiah 12-14, 2 Corinthians 13:1-13, Psalms 57, Proverbs 23:9-11

September 14, 2019 HONOR AND SHAME
Readings for today: Isaiah 15-18, Galatians 1, Psalms 58, Proverbs 23:12

September 15, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 19-21, Galatians 2:1-16, Psalms 59, Proverbs 23:13-14

September 16, 2019 JUSTIFICATION
Readings for today: Isaiah 22-24, Galatians 2:17-3:9, Psalms 60, Proverbs 23:15-16

September 17, 2019 ON THAT DAY…
Readings for today: Isaiah 25:1-28:13, Galatians 3:10-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 23:17-18

September 18, 2019 DEALING WITH DEATH
Readings for today: Isaiah 28:14-30:11, Galatians 3:23-4:31, Psalms 62, Proverbs 23:19-21

September 19, 2019 TRUE FREEDOM
Readings for today: Isaiah 30:12-33:9, Galatians 5:1-12, Psalms 63, Proverbs 23:22

September 20, 2019 GOD IS OUR STABILITY
Readings for today: Isaiah 33:10-36:22, Galatians 5:13-25, Psalms 64, Proverbs 23:23

September 21, 2019 THE FOLLY OF FALSE GODS
Readings for today: Isaiah 37-38, Galatians 6, Psalms 65, Proverbs 23:24

September 22, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 39:1-41:16, Ephesians 1, Psalms 66, Proverbs 23:25-28

September 23, 2019 HE WILL TAKE YOU BY THE HAND…
Readings for today: Isaiah 41:17-43:13, Ephesians 2, Psalms 67, Proverbs 23:29-35

September 24, 2019 CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.
Readings for today: Isaiah 43:14-45:10, Ephesians 3, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 24:1-2

September 25, 2019 TROPHIES OF GRACE
Readings for today: Isaiah 45:11-48:11, Ephesians 4:1-16, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 24:3-4

September 26, 2019 GOD IS OUR HELP
Readings for today: Isaiah 48:12-50:11, Ephesians 4:17-32, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 24:5-6

September 27, 2019 SUFFERING SERVANT
Readings for today: Isaiah 51-53, Ephesians 5, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 24:7

September 28, 2019 SPIRITUAL BATTLE
Readings for today: Isaiah 54:1-57:14, Ephesians 6, Psalms 70, Proverbs 24:8

September 29, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 57:15-59:21, Philippians 1:1-26, Psalms 71, Proverbs 24:9-10

September 30, 2019 WHAT THIS WORLD NEEDS...
Readings for today: Isaiah 60:1-62:5, Philippians 1:27-2:18, Psalms 72, Proverbs 24:11-12

OCTOBER

October 1, 2019 MIND OF CHRIST
Readings for today: Isaiah 62:6-65:25, Philippians 2:19-3:3, Psalms 73, Proverbs 24:13-14

October 2, 2019 HUMILITY
Readings for today: Isaiah 66, Philippians 3:4-21, Psalms 74, Proverbs 24:15-16

October 3, 2019 THE PATHOS OF GOD
Readings for today: Jeremiah 1:1-2:30, Philippians 4, Psalms 75, Proverbs 24:17-20

October 4, 2019 PRAYER
Readings for today: Jeremiah 2:31-4:18, Colossians 1:1-17, Psalms 76, Proverbs 24:21-22

October 5, 2019 THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST
Readings for today: Jeremiah 4:19-6:15, Colossians 1:18-29, Psalms 77, Proverbs 24:23-25

October 6, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for Today: Jeremiah 6:16-8:7, Colossians 2:8-23, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 24:26

October 7, 2019 THE GRIEF OF GOD
Readings for today: Jeremiah 8:8-9:26, Colossians 3:1-17, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 24:27

October 8, 2019 WORDS MATTER
Readings for today: Jeremiah 10-11, Colossians 3:18-4:18, Psalms 78:56-72, Proverbs 24:28-29

October 9, 2019 GREAT EXPECTATIONS
Readings for today: Jeremiah 12:1-14:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8, Psalms 79, Proverbs 24:30-34

October 10, 2019 MYTH BUSTING
Readings for today: Jeremiah 14:11-16:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-3:13, Psalms 80, Proverbs 25:1-5

October 11, 2019 FOLLOW YOUR HEART?
Readings for today: Jeremiah 6:16-18:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:3, Psalms 81, Proverbs 25:6-8

October 12, 2019 AT WAR WITH GOD
Readings for today: Jeremiah 19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-28, Psalms 82, Proverbs 25:9-10

October 13, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for today: Jeremiah 22:1-23:20, 2 Thessalonians 1, Psalms 83, Proverbs 25:11-14

October 14, 2019 FALSE PROPHETS
Readings for today: Jeremiah 23:21-25:38, 2 Thessalonians 2, Psalms 84, Proverbs 25:15

October 15, 2019 WITH GOD'S HELP
Readings for today: Jeremiah 26-27, 2 Thessalonians 3, Psalms 85, Proverbs 25:16

October 16, 2019 FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU….
Readings for today: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

October 17, 2019 POLITICAL PRAYER
Readings for today: Jeremiah 30:1-31:26, 1 Timothy 2, Psalms 87, Proverbs 25:18-19

October 18, 2019 NEW COVENANT
Readings for today: Jeremiah 31:27-32:44, 1 Timothy 3, Psalms 88, Proverbs 25:20-22

October 19, 2019 AMAZING GRACE
Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-34, 1 Timothy 4, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 25:23-24

October 20, 2019 READINGS FOR THE DAY
Readings for today: Jeremiah 35-36, 1 Timothy 5, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 25:25-27

October 21, 2019 REJECTING GOD'S WORD
Readings for today: Jeremiah 37-38, 1 Timothy 6, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 25:28

October 22, 2019 EMOTIONAL POWER
Readings for today: Jeremiah 39-41, 2 Timothy 1, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 26:1-2

October 23, 2019 GOSPEL HOPE
Readings for today: Jeremiah 42:1-44:23, 2 Timothy 2:1-21, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 26:3-5

October 24, 2019 THE KINGDOM OF GOD
Readings for today: Jeremiah 44:24-47:7, 2 Timothy 2:22-3:17, Psalms 94, Proverbs 26:6-8

October 25, 2019 GOD-BREATHED
Readings for today: Jeremiah 48:1-49:22, 2 Timothy 4, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 26:9-12

October 26, 2019 GOD'S WAR WITH EVIL
Readings for today: Jeremiah 49:23-50:46, Titus 1, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 26:13-16

October 27, 2019 I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE
Readings for today: Jeremiah 51:44-52, Titus 3, Psalms 100, Proverbs 26:18-19

October 29, 2019 LAMENT
Readings for today: Lamentations 1-2, Philemon, Psalms 101, Proverbs 26:20

October 30, 2019 GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IS GREAT
Readings for today: Lamentations 3, Hebrews 1, Psalms 102, Proverbs 26:21-22

October 31, 2019 JESUS IS GREATER
Readings for today: Lamentations 4-5, Hebrews 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 26:23

NOVEMBER

November 1, 2019 CALLING
Readings for today: Ezekiel 1:1-3:15, Hebrews 3, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 26:24-26

November 2, 2019 PREACHING
Readings for today: Ezekiel 3:16-6:14, Hebrews 4, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 26:27

November 4, 2019 IMPECCABILITY
Readings for today: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 5, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 26:28

November 5, 2019 ILLUSION OF CONTROL
Readings for today: Ezekiel 10-11, Hebrews 6, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 27:1-2

November 6, 2019 LIVING THE GOSPEL
Readings for today: Ezekiel 12:1-14:11, Hebrews 7:1-17, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 27:3

November 7, 2019 THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST
Readings for today: Ezekiel 14:12-16:41, Hebrews 7:18-28, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 27:4-6

November 8, 2019 EVANGELISM
Readings for today: Ezekiel 16:42-17:24, Hebrews 8, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 27:7-9

November 9, 2019 A LIFE GOD HONORS
Readings for today: Ezekiel 18-19, Hebrews 9:1-10, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 27:10

November 10, 2019 SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY
Readings for today: Ezekiel 20, Hebrews 9:11-28, Psalms 107, Proverbs 27:11

November 11, 2019 CHRIST, OUR GREAT SAVIOR
Readings for today: Ezekiel 23, Hebrews 10:18-39, Psalms 109, Proverbs 27:13

November 12, 2019 BY FAITH
Readings for today: Ezekiel 24-26, Hebrews 11:1-16, Psalms 110, Proverbs 27:14

November 13, 2019 PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS
Readings for today: Ezekiel 27-28, Hebrews 11:17-31, Psalms 111, Proverbs 27:15-16

November 14, 2019 OF WHOM THE WORLD IS UNWORTHY…
Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-30, Hebrews 11:32-12:13, Psalms 112, Proverbs 27:17

November 15, 2019 WHY BE HOLY?
Readings for today: Ezekiel 31-32, Hebrews 12:14-29, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 27:18-20

November 16, 2019 GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN OF SALVATION
Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-34, Hebrews 13, Psalms 115, Proverbs 27:21-22

November 17, 2019 SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY
Readings for today: Ezekiel 35-36, James 1:1-18, Psalms 116, Proverbs 27:23-27

November 18, 2019 DRY BONES

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, James 1:19-2:17, Psalms 117, Proverbs 28:1

November 19, 2019 TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: Ezekiel 39:1-40:27, James 2:18-3:18, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 28:2

November 20, 2019 AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 40:28-41:26, James 4, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 28:3-5

November 21, 2019 LOVING THE LAW OF GOD

Readings for today: Ezekiel 42-43, James 5, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 28:6-7

November 22, 2019 PERSECUTION

Readings for today: Ezekiel 44:1-45:12, 1 Peter 1:1-12, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 28:8-10

November 23, 2019 LIFE REVOLVES AROUND WORSHIP

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45:13-46:24, 1 Peter 1:13-2:10, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 28:11

November 24, 2019 SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 47-48, 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 28:12-13

November 25, 2019 LIVING A GODLY LIFE IN AN UNGODLY WORLD

Readings for today: Daniel 1:1-2:23, 1 Peter 3:8-4:6, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 28:14

November 26, 2019 HUMILITY

Readings for today: Daniel 2:24-3:30, 1 Peter 4:7-5:14, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 28:15-16

November 27, 2019 PRAY FOR OUR POLITICAL LEADERS

Readings for today: Daniel 4, 2 Peter 1, Psalms 119:97-112, Proverbs 28:17-18

November 28, 2019 THANKSGIVING

Readings for today: Daniel 5, 2 Peter 2, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 28:19-20

November 29, 2019 HOW LONG O LORD?

Readings for today: Daniel 6, 2 Peter 3, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 28:21-22

November 30, 2019 TRANSPARENCY

Readings for today: Daniel 7, 1 John 1, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 28:23-24

DECEMBER

December 1 , 2019 SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Daniel 8, 1 John 2:1-17, Psalms 120, Proverbs 28:25-26

December 2, 2019 ANCIENT OF DAYS

Readings for today: Daniel 9:1-11:1, 1 John 2:18-3:6, Psalms 121, Proverbs 28:27-28

December 3, 2019 DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for today: Daniel 11:2-35, 1 John 3:7-24, Psalms 122, Proverbs 29:1

December 4, 2019 DISCERNMENT

Readings for today: Daniel 11:36-12:13, 1 John 4, Psalms 123, Proverbs 29:2-4

December 5, 2019 MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE?

Readings for today: Hosea 1-3, 1 John 5, Psalms 124, Proverbs 29:5-8

December 6, 2019 FACE TO FACE

Readings for today: Hosea 4-5, 2 John 1, Psalms 125, Proverbs 29:9-11

December 7, 2019 TAKING SIN SERIOUSLY

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9, 3 John 1, Psalms 126, Proverbs 29:12-14

December 8, 2019 SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14, Jude 1, Psalms 127, Proverbs 29:15-17

December 9, 2019 REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 1, Psalms 128, Proverbs 29:18

December 10, 2019 GOD'S JUSTICE

Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 2:1-17, Psalms 129, Proverbs 29:19-20

December 11, 2019 LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN…

Readings for today: Amos 4-6, Revelation 2:18-3:6, Psalms 130, Proverbs 29:21-22

December 12, 2019 PSALMS OF ASCENT

Readings for today: Amos 7-9, Revelation 3:7-22, Psalms 131, Proverbs 29:23

December 13, 2019 THE WAY OF JESUS

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Revelation 4, Psalms 132, Proverbs 29:24-25

December 14, 2019 DYING TO SELF

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4, Revelation 5, Psalms 133, Proverbs 29:26-27

December 15, 2019 SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Micah 1-4, Revelation 6, Psalms 134, Proverbs 30:1-4

December 16, 2019 GOD'S EVERLASTING ARMS

Readings for today: Micah 5-7, Revelation 7, Psalms 135, Proverbs 30:5-6

December 17, 2019 TWO-FACED GOD
Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Revelation 8, Psalms 136, Proverbs 30:7-9

December 18, 2019 IS GOD ENOUGH?
Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3, Revelation 9, Psalms 137, Proverbs 30:10

December 19, 2019 THE CHALLENGE OF REVELATION
Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3, Revelation 10, Psalms 138, Proverbs 30:11-14

December 20, 2019 CREATED FOR WORSHIP
Readings for today: Haggai 1-2, Revelation 11, Psalms 139, Proverbs 30:15-16

December 21, 2019 UNDERSTANDING REVELATION
Readings for today: Zechariah 1, Revelation 12, Psalms 140, Proverbs 30:17

December 22, 2019 SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY
Readings for today: Zechariah 2-3, Revelation 13, Psalms 141, Proverbs 30:18-20

December 23, 2019 SEALED AND SET APART
Readings for today: Zechariah 4-5, Revelation 14, Psalms 142, Proverbs 30:21-23

December 24, 2019 CHRISTMAS EVE
Readings for today: Zechariah 6-7, Revelation 15, Psalms 143, Proverbs 30:24-28

December 25, 2019 CHRISTMAS
Readings for today: Zechariah 8, Revelation 16, Psalms 144, Proverbs 30:29-31

December 26, 2019 SONGS OF PRAISE
Readings for today: Zechariah 9, Revelation 17, Psalms 145, Proverbs 30:32

December 27, 2019 RESOLUTIONS
Readings for today: Zechariah 10-11, Revelation 18, Psalms 146, Proverbs 30:33

December 28, 2019 FORWARD LOOK
Readings for today: Zechariah 12-13, Revelation 19, Psalms 147, Proverbs 31:1-7

December 29, 2019 SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY
Readings for today: Zechariah 14, Revelation 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 31:8-9

December 30, 2019 NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH
Readings for today: Malachi 1-2, Revelation 21, Psalms 149, Proverbs 31:10-24

December 31, 2019 MARANATHA!
Readings for today: Malachi 3-4, Revelation 22, Psalms 150, Proverbs 31:25-31

January 1, 2019

HUMAN DIGNITY

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2, Matthew 1-2:12, Psalms 1, Proverbs 1:1-6

Imago Dei. The image of God. In the beginning, God created human beings in His image. Male and female He created them. Made to be like Him. Made to reflect His glory. Made to be loved by Him. Out of the dust, He fashioned us. He breathed into our lungs His very breath. His very Spirit. It was not good for us to be alone so He made us a partner. A helpmate. The formation of community. The very first relationship. So intimate was this relationship between man and woman, humanity and God, that they were naked and unashamed.

What a beautiful picture of the innate worth and dignity given to every single human being! This passage forms the foundation of our modern day understanding of universal human rights. It's why we naturally resist - Christian or not - the Darwinian "classification" of human beings. It's why "de-humanization" in whatever form is so horrifying. One of the worst things we can do from a biblical perspective is treat another human being, another divine image-bearer, as somehow less than what they are.

I remember fighting this battle when I served as a prison chaplain. New Jersey State Prison is the maximum security facility for the state. Death row used to be housed there. It's where they send the worst kind of criminals. When I was there, 60% of the inmates were serving sentences for murder of one degree or another. The rest had committed some form of violent crime. I believe one of the reasons my ministry was so effective over the two years I was there is because I treated the men with dignity and respect. I honored them as "image-bearers" and they, in turn, honored me. I stayed in touch with many of the men over the years since I left and it has been a joy to watch them grow and change and, in some cases, re-enter society.

Sadly, treating others with dignity and respect is something that escapes our culture. We engage in "de-humanizing" talk on a daily basis. Turn on cable television. Listen to people talk at your local bar or coffee shop. Scroll through your Twitter feed. It's brutal. Leaders in every sector of society seem to be getting in on the act. Politics. Education. Business. Even the church. We demonize. We character assassinate. We seek to tear down those who disagree with us. Those who think differently than us. Those who come from different countries, different ethnicities, different sexual orientations, you name it. We marginalize and ostracize and persecute and the results are devastating. Depression. Despair. Pain. Suffering. Violence. Even death.

Here's the first hard biblical truth...every single human being is made in the image of God and is loved unconditionally by God. Every single human being is worthy of dignity and respect. Every human being is made for relationship and community. To hate another human being is to hate someone God loves. To treat another human being with disrespect is to disrespect someone God has formed and fashioned with His own hands. To isolate another human being from relationship or ostracize them from community is to place them in a condition God Himself refused to do. "It is not good for man to be alone..."

Does this mean we simply remain passive in the face of evil? No. Does it mean we let people walk all over us? Absolutely not. Does it mean we can't set boundaries on unhealthy people? Of course it doesn't. What it means is that even in the worst of situations. When we are confronting an abuser or someone who has committed an act of violence against us or those we love. When a police officer exercises force to protect us or our military men and women fight an enemy in some faraway land. When someone hurts our feelings or betrays our trust. Even in these situations, we refuse to let anger or revenge or hatred drive us to "de-humanizing" words or actions. We refuse to diminish the image of God in that other person or persons. We ask God to give us the strength to see them as He sees them and to treat them as His justice and righteousness demands.

As you make your New Year's Resolutions, let me suggest one that could be a game-changer. Resolve to treat everyone you meet and interact with socially, professionally, personally, even on social media as an image-bearer of God. Someone endowed with divine worth and dignity. Someone who is beloved by God Himself. You will be amazed at how this transforms your perspective and brings blessing into your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-4, Matthew 2:13-3:6, Psalms 2:1-12, Proverbs 1:7-9

January 2, 2019

SHAME

Readings for today: Genesis 3-4, Matthew 2:13-3:6, Psalms 2, Proverbs 1:7-9

Do you remember the first time you experienced shame? Psychologists consider it one of our deepest, most primal emotions. It arises internally and is reinforced externally from the time we are very young. It is an important emotion. Those who are incapable of experiencing shame are often socio or psychopathic. Their inability to feel this emotion cripples them in significant ways. On the flip side, many experience excessive feelings of shame which can be just as crippling. How have you dealt with shame? Do you bury it? Deny it? Medicate it? Try to find ways to numb it? This, of course, forms the bedrock of the research Brene Brown has become famous for. Her initial TED talk on shame went viral and still remains one of the most popular. She's written several New York Times' bestsellers on the subject as well so clearly there is a hunger in our culture for healthy ways of dealing with our deep-seated shame.

Where does shame come from? Psychologists have puzzled over this for decades. The Bible, however, is clear. Shame is the first emotion human beings feel in the wake of their sin. Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit. They break God's command. They disobey and rebel, all in an attempt to become like God. What initially tastes so sweet turns bitter in the stomach as their eyes are opened to what they have just done. They experience shame and their first instinct is to cover up. Hide their nakedness. From each other. From God. "Where are you?" God calls out. As if He doesn't already know. Adam and Eve feel exposed. They don't feel safe. So they play the blame game. The woman caused me to eat! The serpent tricked me! Careful readers will take note how they try to turn this back on God. As if it were His fault for creating woman and the serpent or even putting the tree there in the first place.

God is gracious, however. He doesn't want them to live forever in their shame. So He makes them clothes to cover their nakedness and He banishes them from paradise lest they stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life. But the cycle of shame continues. Cain's "face falls" when his offering is not accepted. This is a very Middle Eastern way of saying Cain was ashamed. His shame eventually led to violence as he kills his own brother in cold blood. The murder of his brother leads to more shame when he's confronted by God. "My punishment is greater than I can bear..." Once again, God is gracious and places a special mark on Cain to protect him. Shame is not just an Old Testament idea. It was shame that caused Herod to lash out and kill all the infants in and around Bethlehem. Embarrassed by the betrayal of the wise men, he commits infanticide. It was shame that drove the people to John the Baptist where they repented and confessed their sins and were baptized. It is the lack of shame on the part of the nations that the Psalmist calling attention to when he encourages them serve the Lord with fear and trembling. Thankfully, God extends grace once again as the nations are encouraged to find refuge in Him.

"Where are you?" The question God first asked Adam and Eve in the Garden persists to this day. It comes to each of us and meets us right where we are in life. It comes as an invitation. A scary one to be sure! It is the invitation to be vulnerable. Exposed. Naked before the Lord. To confess our sins and let Him into the deepest recesses of our being. The dark places we all have in our hearts where we bury those things that cause us the greatest shame. God wants into those places. He wants to shed the light of His grace into the darkness of our hearts so that we may finally experience true healing. True peace. And rest securely in His unconditional love. He wants us to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is nothing that can separate us from Him which is why He sent His only Son into the world. On the cross, Jesus bore not just our sin but our shame as well. He endured utter and complete humiliation so we would not have to. This, friends, is the great news of the gospel! The good news that was preached to Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and all their descendants even to you and me today. Believe it! Embrace it! Accept God's invitation! Kiss the Son and be set free from your shame!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 5-7, Matthew 3:7-4:11, Psalms 3, Proverbs 1:10-19

January 3, 2019

THE DESCENT OF MAN

Readings for today: Genesis 5-7, Matthew 3:7-4:11, Psalm 3, Proverbs 1:10-19

In 1871, Charles Darwin published the culmination of his life's work. Titled The Descent of Man , it applied general evolutionary theory to human beings. Human beings, Darwin argues, are "descended" from more primitive life forms and subject to natural selection much like every other lifeform in the world. Of course, "Descent" is somewhat of a double entendre because Darwin's theory also levels the playing field between human beings and the rest of the animal world. We are not special. We are not set apart. We certainly are not made in the image of God, have no divine mandate, and therefore no kind of ascendant status over the rest of creation. Though there is some debate about Darwin's own views, his theory has been used to justify all kinds of evil. Racism. Eugenics. Social Darwinism and the Final Solution. If humanity is not set apart by God. If humanity is not special in any way. If humanity is just another animal species than we are NOT endowed with any inalienable rights and therefore might makes right. Natural selection is just. It's survival of the fittest and only the strongest survive.

Strangely enough, the Bible also talks about the "Descent of Man." Not in terms of biological evolution but in terms of moral devolution. We will see this story set on repeat throughout the Scriptures. God makes a covenant with a human family. The descendants of that particular human family become morally compromised over time. Their corruption eventually becomes so great that God responds with righteous anger and judgment. God then starts over with a new covenant with a new human family and the cycle begins anew. Some might argue this calls God's judgment into question. Why do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result? Isn't that the definition of insanity? This is not, of course, the argument the Bible makes. The point the Bible sets out to prove is the utter futility of humanity. Humanity is, simply put - a lost cause. Sin corrupts everything it touches. Infecting every heart. Polluting every mind. Silencing every soul. There is no hope for us unless God Himself decides to intervene.

Thankfully this is exactly what God does. The Bible is a record of God's interventions in human history over time. He intervened with Adam and Eve, clothing them in an act of grace before sending them out of the Garden into a world ruined by sin. As the generations that come after them descend into further chaos, devolving to the point where God Himself grieves over what He has made, He intervenes yet again. He starts over by delivering Noah and his family from the flood. One can only imagine what it must have been like for Noah as he watched the world around him drown. I cannot fathom the pain and suffering he must have witnessed. But that is nothing compared to the pain God experienced as He watched His good creation drown in evil and sin. Grieving over what He made, He makes the terrible decision to cleanse the world by destroying it.

Fast forward thousands of years. The world is still writhing in pain. Still ravaged by sin. Still drowning in evil. God's heart continues to break. He grieves over what He has made and He makes the terrible decision to send His Beloved Son into the world to cleanse it once and for all. Jesus appears before his cousin John to be baptized. All of the Old Testament prophecies are coming to fulfillment. Jesus will be destroyed so the world can be saved. Jesus will suffer so you and I can be set free. Jesus will drown in order to rescue all of creation. This is the good news of the gospel, friends!

I know the world around us suffers. There is injustice. There is pain. There is heartache and heartbreak. Hatred, evil, and sin still seemingly run amuck. Human systems cannot stem the tide. Human beings cannot save the day. Our only hope is God. And thankfully, He is eternally faithful. Place your trust in Him and you will never be put to shame!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-10, Matthew 4:12-25, Psalm 4, Proverbs 1:20-23

January 4, 2019

CREATION MANDATE

Readings for today: Genesis 8-10, Matthew 4:12-25, Psalms 4, Proverbs 1:20-23

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything...And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it." (Genesis 9:1-3, 7)

As I've mentioned before, we will see a pattern repeat itself throughout the Bible. Humanity is lifted up by God. Loved by God. Blessed by God. God covenants with them to be their God and they to be His people. We saw this happen with Adam and Eve. We saw this happen with Seth. We see this happening with Noah and his family. We will see it with Abram and Sarai and the rest of the patriarchs/matriarchs. We will see it with Moses and Joshua. Samuel and David. Finally, we will see this pattern find it's completion and fulfillment in Jesus Himself. God continuing to pursue His people throughout history. However, despite God's faithfulness, humanity remains faithless. We abandon Him. We abandon His ways. We rebel against His laws. We reject His will. Our lives descend into chaos and pain and death. Thus the need for covenant renewal.

The words above from Genesis 9 should sound familiar. They are a restatement of the creation mandate God first gave Adam and Eve in Genesis 1. "And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth...Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day." (Genesis 1:28-31) This is God's will for all humanity. He creates us so we will be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with His image. His glory. His love. His grace. His purpose for our lives is dominion. He has given the entire earth over to our care. Every plant. Every tree. Every animal. Every bird. Every fish. And this is very good in God's eyes.

The problem, of course, is we are such terrible stewards. We exploit the earth for its resources. We consume far more than we need or could ever want. We over-indulge. We are gluttonous. We are drunkards. We are wasteful. And this is no politically liberal diatribe. Facts are facts. We use and abuse the earth to satisfy our every desire. Look at the amount of trash in our oceans. Look at the amount of waste in our landfills. Look at the obesity rates in our country or the rates of addiction. Think about your own life and how this manifests itself. Where do you over-indulge? Where do you drink or eat or use energy to excess? Consider a personal audit of your finances and your time and your talent...how much of it is being spent on you or your family? And how much of it is being directed outward towards the planet God has entrusted into your care? Towards others who are in need? Towards God and His ministry in the world?

Creation care is a divine mandate. We should be concerned about our footprint on the earth. We should be concerned about climate change and how much of it is man-made. We should be constantly seeking renewable and sustainable ways to use energy. We should consider our rate of consumption. Not because we are being forced to culturally. Not because we align with some kind of political party or another. Not because ranchers and farmers and oil and gas folks are evil. They are not. No, we engage on these issues because we are Christians and God has given us dominion. Furthermore, we know God expects us to exercise that dominion unselfishly, for the good of the world He loves so much. In this way, we are actually practicing for heaven. We are getting prepared for glory. For when the new heavens and new earth come, the creation mandate will be renewed once again and we will be sent out to care for all God has made for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 11-13:4, Matthew 5:1-26, Psalms 5, Proverbs 1:24-28

January 5, 2019

THE PRIDE OF HUMANITY

Readings for today: Genesis 11-13:4, Matthew 5:1-26, Psalms 5, Proverbs 1:24-28

"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." (Genesis 11:4)

It makes perfect sense. The children and grandchildren and other descendants of Noah walked off the ark into a strange, new world. A world that had radically changed. A world that must have seemed so foreign. Everything they once knew was gone. All the cities. All the towns. All the villages. All the fields. All the forests. Everything had died. Everything was ruined. It would now be their task to rebuild. To restore. To make the earth fruitful again. God had given them a clear command. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. That all sounds well and good until you're actually faced with the prospect of hiking over the next hill into the unknown. Much easier to stay together. Much easier to stay comfortable. Much easier to stay safe.
Why build a tower that stretches to the heavens? Because no matter how far afield I go, I can look back and still see it standing in the distance. It becomes a sort of "North Star" for me, always leading me home. Always giving me a sense of safety and security. We don't like being "off the map." We don't like being "off the grid." We don't like being in places that are unfamiliar. And yet, the call of God still remains. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth.

What was the mistake of Noah's descendants? Why did God bring judgment on them and confuse their languages? Two things. First, they wanted to make a name for themselves. This is the same mistake Adam and Eve made. It's the same lie from the devil that we've been falling for ever since that first encounter in the Garden. We can be like God. We can do what is right in our own eyes. In our pride, we continue to reject God's will and His ways and the result of our sin is always judgment. For God is eternally faithful and He will not allow our sin to stand. Second, they were directly disobeying God. He had clearly told them to fill the earth. They stayed together. They refused to scatter. They refused to bring restoration back to an earth ruined by the flood. And yet, this is what they were made for! This is what they were saved for! To be God's agents of blessing as they exercised godly dominion over all He has made.

Think about your own life. How often do we choose safety and security over God? How often do we seek to make a name for ourselves rather than lift up the Name that is above every other name? Look at your calendars. Look at your budget. Look at your relationships. Are you fulfilling God's mandate? Are you fruitful for the Lord? Are you multiplying yourself by sharing the good news and bringing others to Christ? Are you filling the earth with God's blessing as you give and serve in His Name? Or are you spending your money and your time and your energy on yourself? Your family? Your children? Those you love? Those who speak your language? Those with whom you are most comfortable? God has called you to more than this. God has a greater plan for your life than safety and security. God wants you to be part of His great renewal project! He wants you to be part of His great redemption plan! His design is for you to place all your resources. All your time. All your energy at His disposal for the salvation of the world. Does that include your family and friends? Of course. Is it limited to your family and friends? Of course not.
God's Word to you today is this...break out of your holy huddle! Give generously of your time, energy, attention, and wealth for the building up of God's Kingdom! Be fruitful! Multiply! Fill the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 13:5-15:21, Matthew 5:27-48, Psalms 6, Proverbs 1:29-33

January 6, 2019

THE STAKES ARE ETERNAL

Readings for today: Genesis 13:5-15:21, Matthew 5:27-48, Psalms 6, Proverbs 1:29-33

Getting a late start today. Might be a pattern on Sundays so let me apologize in advance. Today's reading includes one of the most profound scenes in all of Scripture. God has made a promise to Abram. He will have a son. Even in his old age. His family would eventually grow so numerous, they would outnumber the stars in the sky. This is heady stuff for an octogenarian ancient near east patriarch with no children of his own. But Abram believes God. He is fully confident God is able to do what He has promised. And because Abram has faith, it is credited to him as righteousness.

God, however, isn't done. He seals His covenant with an elaborate ritual. Abram is to get a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon. He cuts them in half - except for the birds - and lays them opposite each other in a line. This creates an aisle of sorts down the center. The vultures swoop in, attracted by all the blood, but Abram drives them off. Eventually the sun sets and Abram falls asleep. In the darkness, this marvelous thing takes place. A smoking fire pot and flaming torch pass through the pieces. God manifesting Himself as light in the darkness. He comes to Abram who remains asleep, essentially sealing His promise with an oath. If God were to ever break covenant with Abram, He would become like the pieces of the animals on the ground. If God were to ever fail to uphold his covenant, He would have to die.

This is remarkable for several reasons. First of all, in the ancient near east it is always the lesser party who walks through the pieces. It is Abram who should be putting his life on the line. Second, this covenant ceremony is completely one-sided. Abram is asleep! No matter what Abram does, God is binding Himself to him and his descendants forever. Third, by choosing to walk through the pieces, God essentially is telling Abram He will cease to exist should any of His promises fail. This is a foreshadowing of what will take place on the Cross where God does indeed make Himself like the animals on the ground. His body broken. His blood shed. All for you. All for me. There literally is no story like this in any other religion on earth. No other religious faith believes in a God who is so radically faithful. This is what sets our God apart. And we love Him for it.

Fast forward a few thousand years. The Apostle Paul is preaching the gospel all over the Mediterranean. Gentiles are coming to faith in huge numbers and he's trying to process the fact that the Holy Spirit is being poured out on non-Jews. He turns back to this story. He realizes that the children God promises to Abram are not just flesh and blood but children by faith. Abram's descendants do indeed outnumber the starts in the sky because literally billions of people down throughout history have placed their faith in the God of Abram who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 16-18:15, Matthew 6:1-24, Psalms 7, Proverbs 2:1-5

January 7, 2019

THE GOD WHO SEES

Readings for today: Genesis 16-18:15, Matthew 6:1-24, Psalms 7, Proverbs 2:1-5

It is both comforting and convicting to know we've caught God's attention. He is faithful. Eternally so. His eyes never leave us. His presence never forsakes us. He is with us when we wake. He is with us when we sleep. He is with us at work, at school, at home. There is never a moment that escapes His glance. Never a time when our thoughts or actions are hidden from His sight.

This is incredibly encouraging when we are suffering like Hagar. A woman who gets caught up in a power struggle between her master and mistress. A woman who's marginalized. Mistreated. Abused. She runs into the wilderness, fearing for her life. She doesn't know where she is going only that she cannot remain in Sarai's household. She is pregnant. Alone. Afraid. But God is with her. He sees her. He meets her along the way. Meets her in the wilderness. Meets her in her desperation. And He gives her a promise. Her son will grow strong and powerful. He will eventually break free from the bonds of slavery. God will bless him.

This reminder is incredibly convicting when we are engaged in sin like Sarai. A woman struggling with her own fears and failures and shame. She lashes out. She mistreats Hagar though she was the one who put her in this position in the first place. She lashes out at her husband who had agreed to the plan. She even laughs at God when He suggests she will bear a son within a year.

The same God who sees our pain is the same God who sees our sin and thankfully, He meets us with grace. Perhaps you find yourself in pain today. You are suffering. Struggling. The new year has not gotten off to a great start. You feel accused. You feel mistreated. Everything in you wants to run. Get away from it all. Take comfort in the fact that God sees what you are going through and He will look after you as surely as He looked after Hagar. Perhaps you find yourself locked in sin. Thoughts. Attitudes. Actions that you know do not line up with God's Word. You've been battling these demons for years or maybe you've simply been content to live in sin. Be warned! God will not be mocked! And He sees everything you do. What you believe to be hidden. What you believe to be secret. The work you've done to fool everyone around you is not unknown to God. He sees it all and He is actively at work to bring you to repentance.

Grace is truly a double-edged sword. It hits us where it hurts and it brings both comfort and conviction. Will you receive the grace of God today? Will you turn and meet the gaze of the "God who sees?" The God is faithful to look after us in our sin and in our suffering?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 18:16-19:38, Matthew 6:25-7:14, Psalms 8, Proverbs 2:6-15

January 8, 2019

PRIORITIES

Readings for today: Genesis 18:16-19:38, Matthew 6:25-7:14, Psalms 8, Proverbs 2:6-15

I spend a lot of my week meeting with people over a cup of coffee or glass of wine. We talk about family. We talk about jobs. We talk about school. We talk about the future. We talk about the past. We talk about success. We talk about failure. We talk about life. in almost every case, the conversation eventually comes around to balance. How do we balance all the priorities we have in life? Many of the people I meet with are hard chargers. They have worked hard. Achieved much. They have spouses and children who they love dearly. But they're struggling because there never seems to be enough time to get everything done. And that doesn't feel good. So again, how to balance everything?

I used to believe in balance myself. I tried for years to balance my time with my wife, my four kids, my church family, my mission commitments, seminary teaching, etc. It was exhausting. Thankfully, God sent an older, wiser mentor into my life who shared with me some of the best advice I've ever received. "Balance is bogus, Doug." Balance is bogus? What was this guy talking about? Everyone talks about balance! The whole self-help section at the bookstore is all about balance! But something in what he said struck a chord so I listened. "Balance is bogus because it is impossible – even unfaithful - to try to give everything in your life equal time. If you strive for balance, you will feel like you are always falling short in every area." That's exactly how I felt! "The key", he argued, "is to put Christ at the center of everything you do." Put Christ at the center of your marriage. Christ at the center of your relationship with your children. Christ at the center of your professional life. "If you do that, you will find yourself becoming fully present to everyone and in everything."

This is what I believe Jesus meant when he said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the rest will be added to you." (Matthew 6:33) If we put Christ at the center of every relationship and every task, we will find ourselves less distracted. Less tempted to multi-task. And the people we are with will feel more valued. The time spent more fruitful. This results in greater efficiency as the quality of our time/work increases. With this increase in quality comes a corresponding decrease in a need for quantity. We will spend less time in some areas which frees up more time for other priorities. It really becomes a virtuous cycle which deepens every relationship and results in greater impact.

One quick personal example. When I got to Princeton, I was deeply insecure. I didn't feel I belonged. I wasn't worthy of admission to such a prestigious place. Certainly not with my 2.3 GPA from college! HA! So I worked my tail off that first semester. Studied every night. Studied every weekend. Poured all kinds of time and energy and effort into school. My wife felt neglected. I struggled to spend time with my eight month old daughter. It was a rough three months and I didn't have much to show for it because my grades were average at best. Then I went on Christmas break. Fought with God a bit. Asked Him why He sent me to seminary if it was going to be so difficult. He responded. Challenged me to re-examine my priorities. Follow Matthew 6:33. Put Him to the test. Long story short, I did. I went back for the 2nd semester and only gave Princeton two nights a week and one day on the weekend. The rest of the time I dedicated to family and to ministry in the local church. My grades shot through the roof. My family and I made some great friendships and had some great adventures. The church we served flourished. I even got to volunteer as a chaplain at the maximum security prison. It was one of the best three years of our lives.

Ever since that experience I have found that when I truly prioritize my life around the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, blessing follows. My life becomes rich and full and deeply meaningful. It's not always easy but it is always significant because I know the Lord is with me. I trust my labor is not in vain. Friends, what priorities are you pursuing in your life right now? How are you putting Christ at the center? Reading the Bible every day is a great first step! Worshiping God each week is another great step! Asking God to help you find Him at the center of everything you're involved in is another way to put Matt. 6:33 into practice. Let me encourage you to re-examine your priorities through the lens of Christ. Look at your world through His eyes and then align your life to what you see.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 7:15-29, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 2:16-22

January 9, 2019

FEAR VS. FAITH

Readings for today: Genesis 20-22, Matthew 7:15-29, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 2:16-22

Fear is a powerful motivator. Often driving us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. Make choices out of desperation rather than faith. Fear drove Sarah to mistreat Hagar and eventually cast her out of the house with her son Ishmael. Fear drove Lot's daughters to commit incest with their father. Fear drove Abraham to lie about his relationship with his his wife. Fear drives a lot of things in our lives as well. I imagine if we sat and reflected for a moment, we can all think back to choices we've made that we regret that were driven by similar fears.

One of the most famous stories in all of Scripture is the sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the subject of amazing artwork throughout the centuries. It has influenced the plot lines of famous works of literature. There is just something deeply (and darkly) 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. In our minds eye, we can see them climbing the mountain together. Abraham with the fire and knife. Isaac carrying the wood. Along the way, Isaac poignantly questions his father, "My father!" And Abraham said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." You can almost imagine Abraham answering Isaac with tears in his eyes. They get to the top of the mountain. Abraham builds an altar. Binds his own son. Lays him down. Raises the knife. And that's when God steps in. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

I've often wondered what kind of impact this experience would have had on Abraham and Isaac? What impact would this have on their relationship? How often in the years ahead did they look back and reflect on this moment? Did Abraham ever feel the need to ask for forgiveness? Would that have been enough to address the trauma Isaac would have felt? And yet, even their special father/son relationship was not as important to Abraham as his relationship with God. He believed God. He trusted God. He had faith in God. The writer of Hebrews, as he looked back on this story and reflected on Abraham's faith, says Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb. 11:19) No matter what, Abraham knew God had promised him a son. He knew Isaac was that son. He knew the future rested on this son. And he trusted God even when it seemed like His commands put all that at risk.

Some might argue this whole scene makes God into a monster. What kind of God demands human sacrifice? Christians know it's simply foreshadowing. Fast forward a few thousand years and we have another Father and Son having this same conversation in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Son asking the Father if this is truly what the Father commands. If there can't be another way. One can almost see the Father answer His Son. His only Son. The Son whom He loves with tears in His eyes. So Jesus takes up the cross. Climbs the SAME exact mountain Abraham and Isaac did so many centuries before. Is laid on the altar. The Father raises His Hand – there is no ram to take Jesus' place - and takes His Son's life. All to save humanity from our sin. From our fear.

What are you afraid of today? What's driving the choices you make? Is it fear of what others might say? Fear of facing the consequences of your actions? Fear of losing something you love? Have faith, friends! Believe in God! Trust God! Honor God! Look to the Cross and consider the great love He has for you! As you fix your eyes on Jesus, you will feel the fears that so often drive us loosening their grip and giving way to faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 23-24:51, Matthew 8:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 3:1-6

January 10, 2019

DESIRING GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 23-24:51, Matthew 8:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 3:1-6

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." (Proverbs 3:5) This may be one of the hardest things for me to do. Trust in the Lord with all of my mind? Check. I love the life of the mind. I love to learn. Love to read. Love to reflect on the Word of God. Trust in the Lord with all of my strength? Check. I work hard to align my outward life with God's laws. I believe His ways are the best ways to live. I have no doubt a life lived according to His Word is a truly blessed life. Now please understand I am not perfect in either of these areas. I am as much a sinner as the next person. But where I really struggle is to love God with all my heart. To desire God from the depths of my being.

We are all creatures of desire. Driven more by emotion than we care to admit. We may think we are primarily rational creatures. Products of a Cartesian worldview whose foundation was built on the axiom, "I think therefore I am" but this is a lie. We mainly live in the back of the brain stem. We react. We respond. Love. Hate. Fear. Lust. Primal emotions seated in the most reptilian section of our brains. We meet someone for the first time and feel attraction. We see an image on television and experience hate. We scroll through our Twitter feed and our blood pressure rises. The world encourages us to get in touch with our emotions. To embrace them. To let them define who we are. The problems with this approach are legion. Rates of depression, self-harm, and suicide are now at historic levels and rising. The amount of vitriol on cable television and social media is overwhelming. The casual way we treat our relationships is tearing the social fabric of our lives apart. People feel more isolated than ever which leads to more pain. As they experience more pain, they isolate further. It's a vicious cycle with no end in sight.

For most of my life I have believed the answer lies in the transformation of the mind. Behavioral change flowing from new thought processes we begin in our brains and are held accountable to through relationship. What I am learning is that this approach often fails because it doesn't touch the heart. One cannot change one's desires simply by thinking/wishing them away. One cannot change one's desires through self-discipline. No matter how much we may white-knuckle our sobriety, we simply are not strong enough to resist so we succumb. We give in. And the shame we experience only reinforces and compounds our sin.

So what's the answer? Are we left at the mercy of our desires? Are we doomed to ride the roller coaster of our emotions forever? No. The answer is to "trust God with all your heart." To fan the flames of your affections for God. To invest in your relationship with Him through prayer, meditation on Scripture, worship, and mission. Like any relationship, love must be cultivated. Love must be intentionally nurtured. It doesn't grow in healthy ways on its own and you will not fall more deeply in love with God unless you spend time with Him. As your love for God grows, you will find the other loves of your life reordered. The attractions of your life will begin to change. They will be shaped more and more by God's desires than your own. In short, you will experience transformation.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24:52-26:16, Matthew 8:18-34, Psalms 10, Proverbs 3:7-8

January 11, 2019

WALKING WITH WISDOM

Readings for today: Genesis 24:52-26:16, Matthew 8:18-34, Psalms 10, Proverbs 3:7-8

"Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones." (Proverbs 3:7-8)

I think the biggest part of my job as a pastor is helping people learn to walk with wisdom. True wisdom. Godly wisdom. Wisdom that finds it's source in the fear of the Lord. Too many of us walk according to our own wisdom. We do what is right in our own eyes. We think we know what's best for us. We do not. The evidence is legion. We are so prone to self-destruction. So prone to self-condemnation. So prone to self-promotion. We are so prone to self...

This is not new. Hopefully, as you read the story of the patriarchs and matriarchs, you can see how they struggled to walk with wisdom as well. Noah got drunk. Lot chose the wrong neighborhood in which to live. Abraham lied about his relationship with his wife. TWICE! And Isaac makes the same mistake. Things do not get much better. Rebekah is a schemer and teaches her son Jacob all too well. Joseph is arrogant. Moses is insecure. Miriam jealous. The list goes on and on. The men and women of the Bible are just as broken as we are and just as prone to act in their own self-interest. This has been our problem since the beginning. We prefer our own wisdom to God's.

Proverbs, however, teaches us a different path. Fear the Lord. Turn from evil. Walk in God's wisdom and you will find the healing and refreshment your heart is longing for. How many of us woke up tired this morning? Exhausted by the race we are running? How many of us barely got any sleep last night because of the pain we're carrying? How many of us find ourselves making the same mistake over and over again? Trapped in the same endless loop? How many of us feel depressed? Isolated? All alone? How many of us walk with fear and shame on a daily basis? How many of us – if we're honest - know our ways are not God's ways and our thoughts are not God's thoughts? And what does it come as such a shock to us when the houses we build on sand crumble at the first sign of storm? Why do we keep playing this game? Why are we so bound and determined to do things our own way? Why do we keep putting "Self" at the center of our lives in place of God?

God wants to heal your pain. God wants to mend your broken heart. God wants to restore the ruins of your life and lift you out of your shame. God has told you there is nothing that will ever come between you and His love. He has set you free in Christ from all judgment and condemnation. He offers you forgiveness and unending grace. His love is steadfast, true, loyal, and unconditional. Trust the Lord! Trust He knows what's best for you! Trust His Word! Trust what He tells you! Trust His love! He will never leave you or forsake you! Turn from evil. Turn from sin. Turn from self. Turn to Christ! Take His yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 26:17-27:46, Matthew 9:1-17, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 3:9-10

January 12, 2019

REFLECTION

Readings for today: Genesis 26:17-27:46, Matthew 9:1-17, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 3:9-10

Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Rebekah. Jacob. Leah. Rachel. These are the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. Men and women we look up to. Examples of faith. Paragons of virtue. Inspiration for millions. Then we actually sit down and read their stories. The bubble bursts. The image shatters. Off the pedestal they fall. Their families are dysfunctional. Full of deceit and greed and a lust for power. Their relationships are broken. Brother against brother. Wives against husbands. Homes in disarray. Reading their stories causes all kinds of questions, doubts, even fears to arise in our hearts. Who are these people? What's wrong with them? Why do they make such poor choices? Why does God use them? Why are they God's chosen people and not someone else? We find ourselves sympathizing with underdogs like Hagar, Ishmael, and Esau. What did they do wrong? Why weren't they chosen?

Reading the Bible is hard. Reflecting on the Bible even harder. The reality is we all want to keep these stories at arm's length. We want to externalize these people as if they are not us. As if we do not make the same mistakes every single day. As if our culture is any less evil and immoral. As one friend of mine pointed out recently, moms and dads in our city sell their kids into slavery every single day. We just don't want to see it. (She works with this population and is an expert in her field.) As much as we look back and want to judge the men and women we read about in the Scriptures, we are no different. We are just as sinful. Just as prideful. Just as prone to jockeying for power, influence, and control. Our relationships are just as broken. We too struggle to forgive. Struggle to reconcile. Struggle to not seek vengeance when we are hurt.

What makes the Bible so hard to read is that it holds a mirror up to our souls. It exposes our depravity even as it tells us stories of the depravity of the mothers and fathers of our faith. It forces us to come to grips with the fact that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory and none of us is clean. This drives us to our knees where we do NOT want to be. It drives us to submission. Drives us to surrender. Our only hope is grace. The grace of God. The love of God. The decision God makes to reach down and save us. We don't like being at the mercy of God. We don't like being reminded we are not in control of our own destiny. We don't like the idea that our salvation depends on God's sovereign choice alone not some fundamental principle of fairness.

Prayerful reflection on these stories is not complete until we turn our questions inward. Who am I? What's wrong with me? Where do I struggle with sin? Why do I make such poor choices? Part of this process is allowing the Bible to interrogate us as much as we are interrogating it. Allowing the Word of God to question us as much as we may question it. This is the dialogue God seeks with us when we read His Word. What is God after? Submission. Surrender. He wants us to finally bow before Him and open our hands and hearts to receive His grace. Just like Abraham. Sarah. Isaac. Rebekah. Jacob. Leah. Rachel. This is what set them apart. Their faith. Their fundamental belief that God was able to do all He had promised. May you walk in that same faith today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 28-29, Matthew 9:18-38, Psalm 11, Proverbs 3:11-12

January 13, 2019

DO YOU BELIEVE?

Readings for today: Genesis 28-29, Matthew 9:18-38, Psalm 11, Proverbs 3:11-12

This morning I had the opportunity to preach at a sister church. A church who is in a significant time of transition. They are about to embark on a search for a new senior pastor which will usher in a new season of ministry. It's been four years since they had strong, consistent pastoral leadership. Their beloved pastor was called to a different church. They went through one search but that particular pastor only stayed two years and had a very rocky tenure. Many people left. The church began to struggle. Fear and anxiety settled in. But in the last eighteen months, they have begun to recover. They have strong, godly leaders who have stepped forward. Their staff is exceptional. Their elders seek the mind of Christ. I left deeply impressed by their heart for Jesus and for their community. I know they are in great hands.

One of the things we talked about today was how to walk by faith. Faith tends to be a nebulous term in our culture. Even when you talk to Christians, it seems very hard to define. Some see faith as an intellectual assent to a set of ideas. Others see faith as blind and uncritical. Still others view faith as an emotion we feel. Tingles running down our spine. Warm feelings filling our heart. That kind of thing. Jesus defines it much differently. In Matthew 9, Jesus performs a series of miraculous healings. A young woman is raised from the dead. Another woman is healed from a chronic menstrual disorder. Two blind men receive back their sight and a mute man is given the ability to speak. In the middle of all this action, Jesus poses this question to the blind men when they ask for mercy, "Do you believe I am able to do this?" They do. Jesus stretches out his hand to heal.

There are more than a few definitions of faith in the Bible but this is one of my favorite. Faith is being fully convinced God is able to do what He has promised. Faith is not blind. Faith is not wishful thinking. Faith is not intellectual assent. It is walking. Acting. Moving in full confidence that God is able to do what He says He will do. Jesus asks the blind men if they believe He is able. The blind men believe and they are healed. They place their trust in Christ no matter the outcome. Is Jesus able? Yes, He is. Will Jesus always heal? Not necessarily. Does that mean we somehow lack faith? Absolutely not! Faith is not trusting in a particular outcome but trusting in the One who can do all things according to His perfect will.

We talked about the faith of Abram this morning at the church where I preached. Abram is the perfect example of faith not because he was perfect or always got things right. He clearly did not! But Abram believed God. Abram was fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised. He trusted God to lead him to the Promised Land. Trusted God to give him a son. Trusted God to bless him, make his name great, and make his descendants a great nation. All of which God accomplished and more. Abram saw all this before it happened. He believed it before it came to pass. He trusted it enough to turn his entire life upside down.

What about you? Do you believe God? Do you believe He is able to do what He has promised? Do you believe God for your marriage? For your children? For your job? For your future? For your finances? Do you trust God enough to let Him run your life? Are you willing to submit to Him and take a Sabbath? One day out of every seven to rest? Are you willing to submit to Him and give generously and sacrificially and regularly to the Lord...no strings attached? Are you willing to submit to Him and let go of the sinful pleasures you secretly delight in on a daily basis? This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to faith, friends. Do you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 30-31:16, Matthew 10:1-23, Psalms 12, Proverbs 3:13-15

January 14, 2019

GOSPEL = POWER

Readings for today: Genesis 30-31:16, Matthew 10:1-23, Psalms 12, Proverbs 3:13-15

"And Jesus called to him his twelve disciples and gave them power over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction." (Matthew 10:1)

The gospel is not an idea. Not a philosophy. Not a moral code. It is quite literally the power of God. To receive the gospel is to receive this power. To believe the gospel is to be filled with this power. To lay hold of the gospel is to lay hold of this power. The power of God fills the life of every believer, granting us authority and dominion over all God has made. Jesus gave power to His disciples. As they went out proclaiming the gospel, they would cast out demons. Heal disease. Raise the dead. These signs and wonders would serve to authenticate the message they were preaching.

I have seen this in action. The church in Africa is growing at an exponential rate. The preaching of the gospel is accompanied by signs and wonders. The church planters we support are filled with power as they go forth. They cast out demons. They heal disease. They raise the dead. They survive beatings, stonings, stabbing, shootings, and miraculously recover. I have personally witnessed miraculous healings. I have personally witnessed resurrection. I have personally seen demonic spirits get cast out. To see the power of God in action is awe-inspiring to say the least. It brings me to my knees.

How do we access such power? By keeping the first and greatest commandment. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The more we love God, the more we serve God. The more we serve God, the more He equips us with power for that service. The more we sacrifice for God, the more He provides for us. The more we relinquish to God, the more He is able to use us. The secret to the power of the early disciples or modern-day African church planters or persecuted believers in China is their whole-hearted devotion to Christ. They do not try to live a double life. They do not try to have their cake and eat it too. They understand that holding onto the things of this world while laying hold of the world to come will only pull them apart. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot live with a foot in both Kingdoms. You either give yourself fully over to Christ and die to self or you hold onto "Self" and lose your grip on Christ. There is no neutral ground here.

So that brings up a really hard question we all have to face...if we are not experiencing the power and presence of Christ in our lives then it is highly likely we have allowed some other "love" to gain a foothold. It could be a relationship we can't live without. A lifestyle we refuse to relinquish. A preferred future we can't let go of. A dream we won't let die. It could be a sin we've allowed to enslave us. A lie we start to believe. How does one discern? How do we know? Engage in some healthy, prayerful self-reflection. Look at the life of Christ. What about Him do you find unattractive or unrealistic? Is there anything about what He teaches or how He lived that you find yourself resisting? When you hear His words and see His love, do you find yourself dis-believing on some level? Do you trust the lies of your own heart over the truth Jesus preaches?

This is where the rubber meets the road in the Christian life. Following Jesus is a lifelong struggle to crucify the flesh with all its sinful desires and allow the Holy Spirit to align us more with Christ. It is a long obedience in the same direction. A marathon not a sprint. It forces us to constantly grapple with our greatest enemy...Self. But here's the good news! The more the "self" dies, the more the power of God manifests itself in our lives. The more the power of God manifests itself, the more the "self" dies. This is the promise of the gospel and it lies within reach of every single person who calls on the name of the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 31:17-32:12, Matthew 10:24-11:6, Psalms 13, Proverbs 3:16-18

January 15, 2019

RECKONING

Readings for today: Genesis 31:17-32:12, Matthew 10:24-11:6, Psalms 13, Proverbs 3:16-18

There comes a time in every person's life when their sin catches up to them. The bill for their mistakes and misdeeds finally comes due. You cannot run forever. You cannot hide forever. You cannot escape from your past. It must be faced. Jacob had spent his entire life scheming to get ahead. A master manipulator, he had robbed his brother of his birthright. Robbed Laban of his flocks and herds. Done everything in his power to get ahead. Secure his own future. He even tried to "deal" with God. "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Genesis 28:20-22)

Now Jacob's caught between a rock and a hard place. He's burned his bridges with Laban so he can't go back. The stone they set up serves as a constant reminder of his past sins. He is afraid to go forward. His past is coming back to haunt him. Esau, his brother, is on his way with four hundred men. Doesn't sound like he's forgotten everything that happened all those years ago. Jacob is stuck. He's out of options. No more games. No more cards to play. He's got to face the music. (That's a whole lot of cliches...) God has him right where He wants him.

God is sovereign. He orchestrates all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Jacob has been called. Jacob is loved. Jacob is about to meet God face to face. Unbeknownst to Jacob, God has been looking forward to this moment. God has been planning for this moment. God has brought Jacob to this point because God wants to do something in Jacob's life that will change him forever. But Jacob has to be broken. Jacob must be forced to submit. Jacob must be brought to the end of himself and meet God on His terms.

How many of us are facing a similar situation? We've schemed and manipulated our way as far as we can go. We've accumulated wealth and possessions along the way but it has come at no small cost. We've left some bodies in our wake. We've damaged our own souls in the process. All of us know what this feels like. It's the way we shade the truth just a bit to come out ahead. The way we take credit for someone else's work. The way we tell our stories as if we were the hero. It's the way we orchestrate life, primarily for our own benefit. We probably have even tried to bargain with God. None of us are clean. All of us have a little Jacob in us. And most, if not all of us, will face a reckoning. A moment in time when the house of cards we've built comes crashing down. Our marriage fails. Our business crumbles. Our creditors come calling. Our kids call us out. We come face to face with the consequences of our addictions.

The great news is God is waiting for us there. He is waiting for us in that space. Waiting to meet us face to face. Deal with us mano y mano. He has been patiently waiting. Patiently working. Patiently bringing us to this point where have no other choice but to surrender. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. It's also the best thing for us. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop pretending. Turn and face your fear. Turn and face your God. Let Him transform your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 32:13-34:31, Matthew 11:7-30, Psalms 14, Proverbs 3:19-20

January 16, 2019

BROKEN

Readings for today: Genesis 32:13-34:31, Matthew 11:7-30, Psalms 14, Proverbs 3:19-20

One of the things I love most about God is His willingness to wrestle with us. His willingness to get down in the mud with us. He is not afraid to get his hands dirty. Not afraid to engage us in the deepest, darkest places of our hearts. Not afraid of our outbursts of anger. Not afraid of our doubts and questions. We can bring all this to God. Meet Him unafraid and unashamed and struggle with Him over His sovereign will for our lives. God is not after robots. He is not after automatons. He doesn't want uncritical, unthinking obedience. He wants our hearts. He wants our souls. He wants our bodies. He wants our minds. He wants all of us. Every part of us must eventually surrender to Him. And that's a fight because our sinful nature pushes back.

My mother would tell you I've always been independent. Even as a child. I didn't like to cuddle. Didn't like to be held. I would push back against her when she would try to wrap me up in her arms. When I got older and headed off for my first day of school, I shed no tears. Just got out of the car and walked towards the school no looking back. The other day, she and I had breakfast together. We talked about how I am still pretty independent. She loves me. She's proud of me. She'd love for me to need her for something. Anything. I do the same thing with God if I am honest. I push back. I don't like to be wrapped up in His arms. I want to be independent. Do my own thing. I don't want to need Him. I like to pretend like I have it all together. Like I'm good on my own. It's all a lie of course. I do need God. I do need my mom. I am not an independent creature. It is not good for me to be alone.

It's taken some hard experiences for me to learn this about myself. Experiences that almost cost me everything and everyone I hold dear. Like Jacob, I know what it's like to wrestle with God all night. I've been there and done that. I've battled Him. I've fought with Him. I've watched the sun rise and set only to do it all over again. This was my life in the fall of 2009. I averaged 2-3 hours of sleep a night for a few months. God and I went to war over my life. My family. My ministry. My future. Finally, there came a point where He simply broke me. He broke my heart. He broke my spirit. He broke my pride. And while the pain was intense and real, there was relief as well. A profound sense of freedom flooded my being. I've never been the same since.

Where have you wrestled like Jacob? Where are you wrestling like Jacob? Where are you mad at God? Frustrated with God? Upset with God? What questions do you have for Him? Doubts? Fears that need to be expressed? Where are you resisting Him? Pushing back against His will? Struggling to accept His sovereign plan? Today's passage invites you into the ring! To grapple with God honestly! God's a big boy! He can handle everything you throw at Him and more! Let your guard down and lay it all out before your Lord. Fight Him until you break before His relentless love and grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 35-36, Matthew 12:1-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 3:21-26

January 17, 2019

CHARMED LIVES?

Readings for today: Genesis 35-36, Matthew 12:1-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 3:21-26

When I first became a Christian and started reading the Bible, I made the false assumption that the men and women of the Bible lived charmed lives. Once they came to faith everything was good. They grew healthy and wealthy and happy and nothing bad ever happened to them because the Lord was on their side. This reading became deeply problematic for me for a couple of reasons. First, it certainly didn't square with my own life experience. I found myself frequently struggling with hardship and pain. Second, the more I read and the more closely I read, I realized these men and women were just as messed up as I was!

For example, Jacob wrestles with God. Fights with Him all night and as dawn breaks, obtains a blessing. Gets a new name. Essentially a new future. One would think Jacob would walk faithfully from this point forward having had this intense, face to face encounter with God. Not so! Jacob again lies to his brother Esau. He actually never shows up in Seir as he promised. Jacob refuses to demand justice for his daughter's honor thereby opening the door for his sons to take matters into their own hands. Jacob lives in fear of the tribal nations that surround them. Even his journey to Bethel seems fraught with danger. Finally, grief hits him hard as he loses his beloved wife Rachel in childbirth and his father soon after. Life in the ancient near east was not easy. Even for a man who walked with God.

Over and over again, the Bible declares God is with His people. God protects His people. God guards the lives of His people. God blesses His people. How can this be true when we read about such tragedy in the life of Jacob? Or we experience similar tragedy and heartache in our own lives? The answer – if we have the ears to hear - is that we, like Jacob, are simply sojourners in this world. We are just passing through. And while it is true that God gives us a home. God gives us a name. God blesses us to be a blessing. It is also equally true that health and wealth and happiness are not going to be found this side of heaven. We may experience these things for a season. Perhaps even a long season. But death comes for us all. Poverty comes for us all because we can't take anything with us. Sadness and grief find us as we face our own mortality or the mortality of those we love.

Strangely enough, we all know this isn't right. Even the ardent atheist experiences death as a violation of sorts. It's why so much work is being put into longevity projects. Billions being spent to find the "aging gene" in order to turn it off. We want to live forever. We know we should live forever. It's a primal instinct embedded deep within us. We were made to be fruitful. To multiply. To fill the earth. This is the creation mandate and we see it renewed here in Jacob – now Israel's - life. "And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body." (Genesis 35:11) This mandate transcends our lives on earth. It follows us into eternity. It gets passed down through the generations. It will not end even when Christ returns.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 37-38, Matthew 12:22-45, Psalms 16, Proverbs 3:27-32

January 18, 2019

THE COUNSEL OF GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 37-38, Matthew 12:22-45, Psalms 16, Proverbs 3:27-32

"I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken." (Psalms 16:7-8)

How do I hear the voice of God? It's one of the most common and heartfelt questions I get asked. I hear from older men and women who've been in church all their lives. I hear from young men and women who are just getting started. I hear it from students and children who want to know if God is real. I hear it from those in crisis who cry out in desperation. I hear it from the proud who think God needs to prove Himself to them. I hear it from the humble who just wish God would show up for them. People from all walks of life and backgrounds and experiences. All wanting the same thing. All wanting to hear the counsel of God.

David heard from God. A man after God's own heart, David seemingly enjoyed a special relationship with the Lord. He spoke to Him frequently and God answered. Their conversations form so much of the content of the book of the Bible we call the Psalms. They are hymns of praise. Hymns of thanksgiving. Hymns of lament. Hymns proclaiming the goodness and glory of God. Hymns plumbing the depths of human suffering and pain. The full range of emotion is present in these words as David calls out to God.

What does it look like for you to call out for God? And are you willing to wait for Him to answer? To train your ears to hear and your heart to understand His voice? Part of the reason David enjoyed such an intimate relationship with God is because of the time he spent in God's presence in prayer and worship. David loved to worship. He danced before the Lord. Sang before the Lord. Offered sacrifices before the Lord. David loved to talk to God. One gets the sense he prayed for hours on end. As a result, when God answered David, he was prepared to hear. He recognized God's voice. Among all the other voices clamoring for attention in his life, David could tune in to what God was saying. God was David's counsel because David made an intentional effort to always set the Lord before him. To fix his eyes on God. Keep Him at his right hand. Lean on Him in times of trouble. Seek Him in times of confusion. Cry out to Him in times of pain.

Do you set the Lord always before you? What does your devotional life look like? How regular is it? Do you take your time or do you rush through? Do you read the Scriptures reflectively or are they just words on a page? When you pray, do you do all the talking? Do you make any space for listening? When times of trial and temptation come, do you lean on Him for support? Or do you believe you have it all handled? This is where the rubber meets the road when it comes our experience of God. We have to enter His presence with a sense of expectation that He is actually there to meet with us. Waiting for us. And that He has some things to say. We do this every day. Every week. Every month. Over a number of years and our ability to discern God's voice will grow. Our hearts and minds will be tuned in and we will find uninterrupted communion with God.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 39-41:16, Matthew 12:46-13:23, Psalms 17, Proverbs 3:33-35

January 19, 2019

LIFE WITH GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 39-41:16, Matthew 12:46-13:23, Psalms 17, Proverbs 3:33-35

Over and over again we read how the Lord was with Joseph. He was with him at the heights of his success. He was with him in the depths of his failures. With him when he was rapidly climbing in favor. With him when he was falsely accused and imprisoned. No matter where Joseph went, God was at his side. How do we know? Because of the fruit his life produced. Joseph was a humble man. He submitted his life to God's will. He walked in God's ways. He refused to let bitterness or anger or fear get the best of him. Whatever others may intend for evil, Joseph knew God could turn to good if he would trust Him. Joseph's life is a model of faithfulness. A model of humility. A model of walking with open hands and an open heart to however the Lord would choose to work. Joseph's steps were determined for him. He did not choose to go to Egypt. Did not choose to be part of Potipher's house. Did not choose to be thrown in prison. Did not choose to serve Pharaoh. Joseph, like Daniel after him, simply chose to grow where he was planted. Like the seed that fell on good soil, his life bore thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold for the Lord. And the result was the blessing of a pagan nation.

I am sure Joseph had his moments. Perhaps he cried out like the Psalmist to God for vindication. Cried out for justice. Cried out for peace. I am sure Joseph spent many a dark night in the prison cell asking God why this had happened. Reflecting what God wanted to teach him. I am sure Joseph's faith was put to the test by his experiences and yet through it all, Joseph chooses the path of faithfulness. The path of trust. Come hell or high water, Joseph throws his lot in with God. It's a powerful testimony.

What about us? What does our life look like when we experience the ups and downs? When we are attacked and falsely accused? When the people around us. The people who are supposed to love us intend evil and seek to harm us. What happens then? How do we respond? So often, I find myself reacting in one of two ways. I lash out. I go on the attack. I violently defend myself if necessary. Or I run. I curl up in the fetal position. I let my fears get the best of me and I try to hide. Neither approach is gospel-centered. Neither approach is faithful. God calls us to place our trust in Him. To seek our approval in Him. To place our faith in His will and His way and ultimately, His vindication. To walk with the Lord means blooming where He plants us. Blessing the people He has placed around us be they Christian or pagan. We walk in His ways on the mountaintop when things are going great and in the valley when things are hard. We accept both good and evil from his hands like Job. As we do so, God produces in us a great harvest of righteousness.

So where does life find you today? And where are you placing your trust? Is it in your circumstances? In the people around you and their opinions of you? Is it being shaped by your successes or failures? Or is your hope in God? Like the Psalmist, do you find your satisfaction in being with Him? "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness." (Psalms 17:15)

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41:17-42:17, Matthew 13: 24-46, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 4:1-6

January 20, 2019

THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for today: Genesis 41:17-42:17, Matthew 13: 24-46, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 4:1-6

I spent the week in Orlando with some great friends. Colleagues who serve churches much like my own. We get together a couple of times of year to share, encourage, challenge, and pray for each other. Some of them are experiencing a season of blessing. Their church is growing. Programs are being launched. Buildings are being built. The lost are being saved. Others are experiencing a season of struggle. Money is tight. Programs are suffering. Attendance has dropped. Their church is in conflict. Life in the church is never easy. Not over the long haul. Not if one makes the commitment to put down roots in a local community. Churches are full both the lost and the saved. Sinners and saints. Lukewarm Christians and those who are on fire for the Lord. It's a volatile mix. One spark can blow it all up.

This is why I find such comfort in the words of Jesus. "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, "Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." (Matthew 13:24-30) Why are these words comforting? Because they remind me of the reality of life in the Kingdom this side of heaven. It is not pure. It is not holy. We will not all be on the same page or in the same place spiritually. We will frustrate each other. We will hurt each other. We will disappoint each other. We will let each other down. Such is life in the real church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that if our "ideal" of community ever got in the way of "real" community then it's a sure sign we've created an idol. I see this taking place all over the church today. A lot of people talk about their desire for "authenticity" but when you dig a little deeper what you find is they want people to be authentically just like them. They are unwilling to let the other person be authentically "other" because that requires hard work. Emotional investment. Active listening. Wrestling with differences. I saw this in Mobile, AL at the church I served when we had a young African-American become a member. One of our older members pulled me aside. "Blacks and whites don't worship together", she said. Rather than get angry with her or dismiss her. The young man and I engaged her. I sat down with her and took her through the Scriptures. The young man loved her and treated her with respect. The result was a radical transformation in this woman's heart. She had grown up with segregation. It was all she knew and her worldview was being challenged by the gospel. Thankfully, the young man could see that and ministered to her even though it was difficult. When he went to seminary a few years later, this woman became one of his financial supporters and prayer partners. It was awesome to witness!

The church is God's field. Planted with both wheat and weeds. None of us know who is who. None of us can see what's happening in the human heart. Many who appear outwardly Christian may just be going through the motions. Others who appear to be struggling with the faith may be deeply faithful. All we can do is love each other like Jesus. Unconditionally. Relentlessly. Steadfastly. Loyally. Even recklessly at times. As we do this over the long haul. Weeks. Months. Years. Generations. God's promise is we will be shaped and formed in ways we cannot begin to imagine. We will be washed and sanctified and prepared for glory. Embrace the journey, friends. Embrace the struggle. Embrace the community where God has planted you and let Him bring the increase in your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 42:18-43:34, Matthew 13:47-14:12, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 4:7-10

January 21, 2019

THE LIFE WE'VE ALWAYS WANTED

Readings for today: Genesis 42:18-43:34, Matthew 13:47-14:12, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 4:7-10

Ultimately, there are two ways to live. You can live honestly. Openly. Transparently. Vulnerably. Daily practicing unconditional love and forgiveness and reconciliation. The result being a life of peace. A life of deep joy. A life of gracious self-acceptance because you have nothing to hide. Nothing to fear. Nothing to protect. No false self to prop up. Or you can live dishonestly. Secretively. Opaquely. Guarding your heart against any pain and suffering. You can love conditionally. Forgive selectively. Refuse to reconcile. The result is a life of guilt. A life of fleeting joy. A life of self-regret because you have lots to hide. Lots to fear and be anxious about. Self-protection becomes your highest aim because the image you project to the world has to be carefully curated for self-promotion.

Sadly, the majority of the people who live with us and among us and around us choose the latter of the two scenarios. Recently, I read an editorial from a major news outlet extolling the virtues of cutting people out of one's life. The premise from the author was that her life was better without her mother. DNA doesn't matter. Biological connections simply aren't worth it. We should discard anyone in our lives who we deem to be "toxic." Now are there scenarios where estrangement needs to happen? Of course. Some people are so abusive - verbally, emotionally, physically, spiritually - that we need to cut them off. But such tragedies are never to be celebrated. Another editorial I read attempted to normalize the mutilation of the body. Still a third attempted to normalize sexual relationships between adults and minors. The brokenness of our world is legion. It is breathtaking in scope and heartbreaking in depth. And it leads in a direct line to the rise of suicide, depression, anxiety-disorders, opioid and other drug abuse, alcoholism, sexual addiction, etc. The fruit of our lives is rotten. We know it. So we medicate it.

The Joseph narrative reveals a similar dynamic. As a young man, Joseph was an insufferable fool. The favored son of an aging father from his beloved wife, he was given all kinds of privilege and power in the family. Resentment grew to the point where his own brothers wanted to kill him. After throwing him in a pit, they made the fateful decision to sell him into slavery instead so they could turn a profit. This tragic act will haunt them for the rest of their lives. Fast forward a few decades. Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. He has saved the nation from a devastating famine and now the whole world comes to humble itself before him. His own brothers make the journey and he immediately recognizes them. But he too is suspicious. Why are they here? What do they want? Most importantly, do they regret the decision they made all those years ago? So he puts them to the test. They believe they're being punished for the sins of their past. The pain is real. It extends back to Jacob, their father, who has to undergo the pain of letting his youngest son – the only son he has left from the wife he loved - go to Egypt with no guarantee he'll return. Reuben attempts to assuage his father's concern. "Kill my two sons if I don't return with Benjamin." What kind of monster would Jacob have to be to kill his own grandchildren? The dysfunction here is real.

We all live dysfunctional lives to some extent. We all find ourselves living on the spectrum between the two poles I outlined above. I imagine most of us have days when we are honest and open and transparent and real. I imagine we also have days when we are guarded, dishonest, and secretive. I imagine most of us have days when we are able to love unconditionally. Forgive generously. Reconcile freely. And I imagine we have days when love is difficult. Forgiveness a pipe dream. Reconciliation beyond us. The goal of the Christian life is to surrender more and more each day to the Holy Spirit and let Him move us closer to the abundant life God promises us and away from the self-centered life we naturally choose. It's not easy. Our bodies, minds, and emotions often rebel. The act of submission is a courageous choice we all have to make in a world that will never celebrate following Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 14:13-36, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 4:11-13

January 22, 2019

PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Genesis 44-45, Matthew 14:13-36, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 4:11-13

Perspective: Joseph looking back over the course of his life. All he's endured. The trials and tribulations. Betrayed by his brothers. Sold into slavery. Falsely accused and imprisoned. Given position and power in a great empire. All of it by God's hand. All of it to fulfill God's plan. What was intended for evil, God intended for good and many were saved.

Perspective: Jesus looks out on a crowd. They are hungry. They are thirsty. They were sick. He had compassion. He saw them through His Father's eyes. He miraculously fed them from five loaves and two fishes. He brought healing and wholeness. He showed them the Kingdom. They were more than satisfied.

Perspective: Jesus is walking across the water to a boat in the middle of a fierce storm. The wind and the waves are tossing the little craft back and forth. The men on board are afraid for their lives. Jesus tells them not to be calm. To keep their eyes on him. One of them, Peter, asks to go to Jesus. Jesus invites him out onto the water. He finds himself walking but soon the fear sets in. The waves are too much. The wind too strong. His faith fails and he begins to sink. Jesus reaches down and rescues him and then settles the storm with a word as he gets into the boat.

Perspective: David composing a Psalm of praise for his salvation from King Saul. He's been on the run for a very long time. He's barely escaped death more than once. Through no fault of his own, he's become the king's enemy. But God is with him. God has granted him the victory.

Joseph. David. Peter. The crowds following Jesus. They are all very much alike. They come to God with their needs. Their wants. Their desires. Their hopes. Their dreams. But their horizons are too small. As is often the case, they look at things from a worldly perspective. Their faith fails. What they need is God's perspective. They need to take a step back and see things through God's eyes. Understand God is at work even in the darkest and hardest of times. Trust His faithfulness. Trust His love. Trust His grace.

Where do you need God's perspective today? Are you overwhelmed by the challenges you face? Anxious and afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Are you bound by your past? The abuse you suffered? The pain you endured? Have you been falsely accused? Falsely imprisoned? Falsely cut out of the life of someone you love? Is the house of cards you've built starting to come down around you? Look to Christ! Lift your eyes above the hills! Above the wind and the waves! Above the storm that rages all around you! Place your hope and trust in God and He will see you through!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 46-47, Matthew 15:1-28, Psalms 19, Proverbs 4:14-19

January 23, 2019

THE WAYS OF GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 46-47, Matthew 15:1-28, Psalms 19, Proverbs 4:14-19

"Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." (Matthew 15:14)

This verse seems so apropos in our world today where godly leadership is in such short supply. Our political leaders are easy targets, of course. Their hypocrisy is obvious. Their decisions are mostly self-serving. They seem to love self-promotion. They routinely place party loyalty above the collective good of the nation. Godly principles are sacrificed on the altar of expediency. But before we rush to cast the first stone, let's be honest and acknowledge we are not much different. The decisions we make on a daily basis in our homes, schools, businesses and churches are often guided by selfish desires. We are not immune from the temptation to compromise our godly character for the sake of material gain. The rise of social media gives us all a platform to self-promote. We routinely place loyalty to ourselves above the common good. We are all blind if we're honest.

God's Word is given to us as a gift to open our eyes. To help us see the poverty of our condition. To help us come to grips with the depravity of our hearts. Without Christ, we are all wicked, stumbling about in the deep darkness. With Christ, we are made righteous. Our hearts yearn for God. We want to walk in His ways and allow His commands to guide our lives. As we pursue Christ, our righteousness begins to shine like the dawn and as we grow in Christ, the light of our lives shines brighter and brighter with each passing year. I love how Proverbs 4 put it, "But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble." (Proverbs 4:18-19)

Why read the Bible? Why pick up this dusty old book? Why does it continue to be the most translated, most purchased, and most treasured book of all time? Because there is something hardwired deep into our souls that knows the truth. "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb..." (Psalms 19:7-10) The single most important thing you can do for your own spiritual growth is to meditate on God's Word. To reflect daily and prayerfully on what He has to say. To absorb what God has to say about life. About our world. About love. About grace. About righteousness and holiness and what it means to live for Him. There simply is no substitute. No shortcut. No other way to truly know the Lord than to read His Word over and over again.

I love how the Psalmist concludes his song of praise. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalms 19:14) Open our eyes that we may see the glories of your Word, Father! Lead us in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake! Let our light shine like the dawn in our darkened world that many will see and believe Your Truth today!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 48-49, Matthew 15:29-16:12, Psalms 20, Proverbs 4:20-27

January 24, 2019

THE BLESSING

Readings for today: Genesis 48-49, Matthew 15:29-16:12, Psalms 20, Proverbs 4:20-27

One could argue the main theme of the book of Genesis is blessing. From the opening pages of Scripture, it is clear God desires to bless His people. He blessed Adam and Eve. He blessed Noah and his family. He blessed Abraham and Sarah. Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob, Leah and Rachel. Joseph and Asenath. None of these people were perfect. None of them did anything to merit God's blessing. In fact, they were often disobedient and sinful and prideful and rebellious. Cain kills Abel. Noah gets drunk and curses his grandson. Abraham lies about his relationship with Sarah. Sarah gets impatient with God's promise and gives Abraham her servant. The consequences of these actions are significant. Each of the characters in the Genesis story face hardship and suffering. They know pain intimately. But God never abandons them. He continues to walk with them and bless them as their hearts return to Him.

God is not the only one who blesses. We bless as well. In chapter 49 of Genesis, Jacob calls his sons to his deathbed. He is fulfilling his patriarchal duty to pass on the blessings of his fathers. This blessing has to do with power and position within the growing family. It has to do with how the inheritance will be divided and who will lead after Jacob has gone. The blessing carries what passes for legal weight in an ancient near east context. Much like English common law, it is more unwritten than written and it will determine the future for each young man and their descendants.

Rueben is deposed as firstborn for sexual immorality. Simeon and Levi for their unrestrained rage and violence that put the family at risk. Judah will now become the leader after Jacob dies and his line will reign and rule over all of Israel. Zebulun will become a tribe of merchants and traders. Issachar will serve his brothers well. From Dan will come the judges. Spiritual leaders for Israel in the time before the kings. Not much is said about Gad, Asher, and Naphtali but the implication of blessing is clear. Special treatment is reserved for Jacob's favored son, Joseph, for all he has endured. And Jacob ends his blessing by calling into question the character of his youngest son Benjamin. Again, these are not just words. With these words would come a certain amount of wealth and possessions. A certain amount of power and authority. A certain position within the family structure and hierarchy. To top things off, these words carry prophetic overtones as well. Even though Jacob's eyes are failing, he's sees the future for each of his boys laid out before him.

Think about the power of blessing in your own life. What kind of blessing – if any - did you receive from your mom or dad? What kind of blessing has come down your family line as a result of the faithfulness of a forefather or mother? How intentional are you as a parent about blessing your own children? Have you shared with them what you see in their future? One of the things I encourage those who are in hospice care to do is call their children and grandchildren and pass on a blessing. It is a powerful testimony that can last for generations. Of course, blessings are not just reserved for those we love. How do you bless your co-workers or classmates? How do you bless your friends and neighbors? How do you bless your brothers and sisters in Christ in your church family? How do you bless even your enemies and those who sin against you? Remember, God's blessings in no way are dependent on the actions of sinful humanity. They are a product of His grace. The same should be true for us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 50, Exodus 1-2:10, Matthew 16:13-17:9, Psalms 21, Proverbs 5:1-6

January 25, 2019

EVERYDAY HEROISM

Readings for today: Genesis 50, Exodus 1-2:10, Matthew 16:13-17:9, Psalms 21, Proverbs 5:1-6

"Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." (Exodus 1:8) One of the darkest chapters in Israel's history begins with these ominous words. A new Pharaoh has risen. One who did not know Joseph. One who had forgotten what God had done for Egypt through Joseph. One who saw Joseph's descendants as a threat to his power. One can understand his trepidation. A foreign people living on the eastern edge of the Nile delta who have multiplied exceedingly over the generations and grown strong. They worship a strange god you do not know. They have strange customs you do not follow. They speak a foreign language you do not understand. It is easy to understand the source of this new Pharaoh's fear.

So he takes action. He enslaves them. Subjects them to abuse, harsh treatment, and a lifetime of hard labor. But the more they oppressed the Israelites, the more numerous and powerful they became. Anxious about the potential of an uprising, Pharaoh calls for draconian population control. He orders the midwives to kill every male child that is born. In this way, he hopes to reduce their numbers to a more manageable size. But the midwives courageously defy the king. Denying themselves, they save the male children from death. It's an incredible act of faith.

Shiprah and Puah. Their names are important. Two ordinary women engaged in an ordinary profession. There is nothing remarkable about them. Nothing special or unique. They have no biblical training. No seminary degree. They come from no special lineage and carry no family name. We do not know their tribe or their background. We simply know their names. Their occupation. And the one thing that does set them apart...their fear of God. These two women pave the way for Israel's deliverer, Moses, to be born. They make it possible for God's salvation to come. Through their act of selfless obedience, they create the conditions for what will become the seminal event in Judaism. The Exodus. Without them, there is no Charleton Heston. :-) No Ten Commandments. No Moses. Without them, there is no parting of the Red Sea or journey to the Promised Land. Without them, the Hebrews eventually die out. Cease to exist. The covenant God made with Abraham would be broken and all of salvation history go defunct. All because two women decided to obey God and perform their professional duties faithfully under threat of death.

Do you think about your profession in this way? Do you connect what you do with what you believe? Is God on your radar screen as you go about your day to day activities? It's amazing how often God uses the ordinary and mundane to accomplish His purposes. In my experience, it is not the pastors and church leaders who move the dial of the Kingdom but the faithful man or woman who often goes unnoticed. They spend their days working at their job. Caring for their families. Praying and studying the Bible. And eternity moves at the sound of their voice. The wheel of God's salvation history turns by their hand. It's truly amazing. What could God do with an accountant? A truck driver? A fast food worker? A sanitation engineer? What could God do with a doctor? A lawyer? A university professor? What could God do with a teacher? A mother? A father? A friend? The answer is...everything. Anything. God uses those who are available and humble and willing. Does that describe you?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 2:11-3:22, Matthew 17:10-27, Psalms 22, Proverbs 5:7-14

January 26, 2019

GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for today: Exodus 2:11-3:22, Matthew 17:10-27, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 5:7-14

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalms 22:1)

Many will recognize these words as the ones Jesus utters while hanging on the cross. It is the cry of dereliction. The Son of God actually becoming sin for us. Taking on all the collective guilt of the human race – past, present, and future. In that moment, the Father turns His face away from His Son. The Spirit is withdrawn. The Son hangs alone. Abandoned. Forsaken. He literally is in hell.

What many don't realize is Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. A common practice among God's people for centuries. Whenever we do not have the words to express our pain, we turn to the Psalms. There we find the words we do not have and we pray with the saints who have gone before us. Jesus takes up this time-honored practice in His own suffering. In His moment of greatest agony and despair, these words are wrenched from the depths of His soul. Why have you forsaken me? I cry out by day but you do not answer me. I am scorned by man and despised by the people. I am poured out like water and my bones are out of joint. Though the Gospel writers only place the first words of Psalm 22 on the lips of Jesus, it is highly likely Jesus recited this whole Psalm as He died. For it is not simply a Psalm of lament but a Psalm of hope as well! "O Lord, my help, come quickly to my aid...Deliver my soul from the sword...Save me from the mouth of the lion...For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him...All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you." (Psalms 22:19-21, 24, 27) Yes, even in His darkest moment, Jesus placed His trust in His Heavenly Father.

What about us? The language of Psalm 22 authorizes deep lament. It honors our grief. It gives voice to our pain. God is not afraid of our suffering. God does not turn His back on us when we hurt. He wants us to bring all our heartaches and heartbreaks before Him. Lay them at His feet. Share with Him our deepest fears and darkest doubts. He does not shy away from our cries of dereliction. Instead, He meets us there. He waits for us at rock bottom. When our strength finally fails and our hope is gone. In the darkest moments of our lives, God is with us.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 4-5:21, Matthew 18:1-20, Psalm 22:19-31, Proverbs 5:15-21

January 27, 2019

EXCUSES

Readings for today: Exodus 4-5:21, Matthew 18:1-20, Psalm 22:19-31, Proverbs 5:15-21

Excuses. We all have them. We all have reasons why things have not gone the way we want. Why we can't live up to our responsibilities. Can't keep our promises. Can't fulfill our obligations. We make excuses in our marriages and families. We make excuses at work and at school. We even make excuses for why we cannot worship God in the way He deserves and the way He demands. We have all kinds of reasons. Some of them are good reasons. Some of them are bad reasons. Some of them have nothing to do with the matter at hand.

Maybe you didn't realize it but some of our greatest heroes/heroines of the faith also made excuses. Take Moses for example. I get it. He's eighty years old. He's built a life in Midian. He's gotten married. He has children. He has a thriving business. It's a lot to give up to go back to a country where he's wanted for murder. It's a lot to go back to a people who've already rejected his leadership. He doesn't think they'll believe him when he claims to speak for God. He doesn't think they'll listen when he describes his burning bush experience. Besides, he's not a great speaker anyway. He's not confident. Not good in front of people. He stutters. He stammers. He has a hard time making his point. He's frankly not what you'd expect in a strong charismatic leader.

Even the best of us make excuses. Thankfully, God doesn't take them seriously. Thankfully, God blows right past all our reasons for why this or that won't work. Why this or that plan will fail. Why we are not the right man or woman for the job. He gives us signs to encourage our faint hearts. A staff that turns into a snake. A hand that becomes leprous and is made clean. Water turning to blood as it's poured on the ground. An unexpected phone call from a friend. A fresh Word from Scripture. An answer to prayer. A surprise gift. All of these signs are from the Lord that we can indeed do what He's asking us to do...if we have the eyes to see and the hearts to understand them as such. Furthermore, He reminds us who gave us our gifts and talents in the first place! "Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak." (Exodus 4:11-12) God is not limited by our lack of ability or confidence. The One who made us will equip us for every good work. Finally, God sends others to help us out along the way. For every Moses, there is an Aaron. For every Paul, there is a Barnabus. This is how God works. Always in community. Always through relationships. No man or woman is an island. The Christian life is not meant to be lived alone.

So what excuses have you been making? What's been holding you back from serving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? What's keeping you from community? Is it fear? Is it failure? Is it brokenness? Is it is in? Have you been hurt? Wounded? Are you too old? Too young? Too busy? God has a plan for your life. God wants to use you for His Kingdom purposes in this world. God has blessed you to be a blessing. Stop making excuses and place your trust in God. The One who calls you will provide you with everything you need to accomplish His work.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 5:22-7:25, Matthew 18:21-19:12, Psalms 23, Proverbs 5:22-23

January 28, 2019

GOD ISN'T FAIR

Readings for today: Exodus 5:22-7:25, Matthew 18:21-19:12, Psalms 23, Proverbs 5:22-23

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.

"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." (Ex. 7:3)

"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. (Remember, Pharaoh was worshiped as a god by his people.) 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. A God who will tolerate no rivals. No equals. 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 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 whomever 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 8-9, Matthew 19:13-30, Psalms 24, Proverbs 6:1-5

January 29, 2019

HEAVENLY TREASURE

Readings for today: Exodus 8-9, Matthew 19:13-30, Psalms 24, Proverbs 6:1-5

“What good deed must I do to earn eternal life?” Such a good question. Such a common question. One I find a lot of people asking in my line of work. Have I done enough? Have I been good enough? Will my life be weighed in the scales and found wanting? Will St. Peter open the gates to me? I cannot tell you how many times I have had this conversation with someone who is near death. Lying on their deathbed, they so often want to know if they’ve done enough to earn their way into heaven.

It makes me sad but I get it. We’ve been raised in a culture of self-sufficiency. The great American myth is the Horacio Alger story. The rags to riches account of a young man who works hard to improve his lot in life. We talk about pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. No such thing as a free lunch. We assume that if we work hard over a long period of time, we will be successful. But then reality hits us in the face. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, “It’s all right to tell a man to lift himself by his own bootstraps, but it is a cruel just to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps.” Life has a way of creating obstacles for us. Especially if we are economically disadvantaged or belong to a minority group. And this truth points us to the even deeper reality that we are all - black, white, rich, poor, gay, straight, trans, cis - spiritually dead. How can one keep the commandments as Jesus suggests when one’s heart is corrupted by sin?

It’s easy to think that what Jesus is proposing here is strict adherence to the Ten Commandments. He’s not. Pay close attention to how he responds to the young man. “You’ve kept the commandments? All of them since your youth? Let’s put that to the test shall we? Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor.” The clear implication is that if the young man had indeed been keeping the commandments since his youth, his heart would be so deeply in love with God he’d have no problem letting go of all his material possessions. Furthermore, he would surely recognize the Author of those Ten Commandments when He stood in front of him and would give ANYTHING to follow Him! Sadly, he does not thus betraying where his true loyalties lie. He doesn’t love God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength. He’s been fooling himself all along. And therefore eternal life will remain out of reach.

This is shocking news to the disciples. “Who then can be saved if not this rich young man who’s done everything right his whole life?” It’s not about how our life appears on the outside but what’s on the inside that counts. It’s what we do but what we love that matters most. Do we love God? If so, we will joyfully leave “houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands” in Jesus’ name. Are we storing up treasure in heaven? Then we will gladly relinquish our wealth and possessions in Jesus’ name. Are we seeking God’s Kingdom? Then we will be more than willing to sacrifice our political, cultural, and social power/influence in Jesus’ name. Only when our hearts are oriented towards heaven. Oriented towards the Kingdom. Oriented towards Jesus, will we receive the gift He has promised. Eternal life.

Is this possible for us to achieve? Can we lay hold of faith like we do our bootstraps? No, we cannot. All we can do is open our hearts to Jesus. Receive the Holy Spirit and let Him do the work of regeneration that we are unable to do. "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 10:1-12:13, Matthew 20:1-28, Psalms 25, Proverbs 6:12-15

January 30, 2019

IS GOD A COMMUNIST?

Readings for today: Exodus 10:1-12:13, Matthew 20:1-28, Psalms 25, Proverbs 6:12-15

It just doesn't seem fair. To pay laborers who work all day the same wage as those who show up at the 11th hour. I am pretty confident if I were one of the people the master hired at dawn. If I worked all day in the hot sun. If I were tired and weary and worn out from picking grapes and pruning vines. I would be resentful of those who came later in the day. I would assume the master would make things "right" and pay me according to what I deserve. And at the end of the day, when the wages were being handed out and I saw the master hand a denarius to those who came at the very end, I am sure I would expect some kind of bonus. The fact that the master pays me the same as he does all the rest would make me angry too.

It feels like communism. Making sure everyone gets paid the same regardless of the disparity in how much they worked. It feels like the current political debates that seek to move us towards a more European socialist model of government. Free healthcare. Free college. And everyone getting a living wage regardless of how hard they work. Perhaps this is the next logical step for a generation who always got a participation trophy. Where everyone needed the same affirmation lest we make people feel bad. If you are like me, this kind of thinking is frustrating. In the "real world" there are winners and losers. Social Darwinism is a real thing. People are not all the same. They do not have the same gifts and talents and abilities. They do not have the same work ethic. They do not have the same opportunities. Some face more barriers than others. Some have more advantages than others. This is just life. So the story Jesus tells about paying those who worked for one hour the same as those who slaved all day just doesn't sit well.

Grace never sits well. Not with me. Not with anyone. That's really the heart of this story. It has less to do with economics or the rights of workers and employers and a whole lot more to do with the extravagant grace of God. God chooses to reward those who are late to the party as much as He chooses to reward those who are already in. Grace is the currency of God's Kingdom. It has this leveling effect. Through grace, the first become last. No longer defined by their achievements and success. Through grace, the last become first. No longer defined by their failures and shame. Greatness in the Kingdom is defined by those who selflessly serve. Those who courageously follow the example of the Master who did not come to be served by to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.

Grace shifts our perspective. Rather than be frustrated that the workers who came at the 11th hour were paid as much as those who came in the first hour, grace causes us to rejoice that everyone got the chance to work at all! No one was left out! No one was left standing in the marketplace to go hungry! No one had to go home and tell their wives and children they couldn't find a job! Grace celebrates the incredible generosity of the Master who extravagantly gives to all in need! This isn't about communism, socialism, capitalism, or any other "isms" you can think of! When Jesus comes again to establish His reign and rule on the earth, all the "isms" of this world will perish. They are corrupt man-made systems not fit for the glory of the coming Kingdom of God. No, God's Kingdom runs on grace. It's sustained by grace. It's powered by grace. And the great news is this...grace is a renewable, sustainable, clean source of energy that will last for all eternity!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 12:14-13:16, Matthew 20:29-21:22, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 6:12-15

January 31, 2019

ROCK BOTTOM

Readings for today: Exodus 12:14-13:16, Matthew 20:29-21:22, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 6:12-15

Have you ever felt like you've hit rock bottom? You've exhausted all your resources. Worn out all your connections. Come to the end of all your strength. You have no moves left to make. No options left to consider. All the doors seem closed. Strangely enough, it's a good place to be. When we finally come to the end of ourselves, we are ready to turn to God.

Pharaoh hit rock bottom. He stood by and watched as plague after plague devastated his country. He hardened his heart when the Nile turned to blood. He steeled his resolve when the flies, frogs, and locusts swarmed. He refused to yield in the face of fiery hail and a three-day eclipse of the sun. Finally, the firstborn in every single home in Egypt are killed in a single night. The cries of grief and pain rise up throughout the land. The angel of death even visits the palace. His own child dies in his arms. He finally breaks. He relents and lets God's people go.

Where were you when you hit rock bottom? What did it look like? How did it feel? I've hit rock bottom multiple times in my life. The first was on the campus of the University of Colorado. I was drinking too much. Skipping class. Flushing my tuition down the toilet. Rock bottom came in the form of a letter from the school letting me know I would not be invited back for the fall semester. I had flunked out. I was a failure. All my hopes and dreams came crashing down around me. I broke. I relented. I surrendered to God.

I hit rock bottom a second time in Sun Prairie, WI. I went there to plant a church. I had everything I needed. Plenty of money. A new, rapidly growing community. A vision and a heart to reach lost people. But I got crossways with the board. Sharp disagreements theologically and methodologically doomed the work from the start. I did not respond well. I fell into a depression. I turned inward. I withdrew. The church plant imploded. I was a failure. All my hopes and dreams came crashing down again. I broke. I relented. I surrendered to God.

I don't know where life finds you today. Perhaps you feel like you're approaching rock bottom. Perhaps you feel like you're already there. Maybe you feel like you've been there a long time and can't seem to find your way out. My encouragement? Let your heart break. Let go of your will and your way. Surrender to God.

God loves it when we hit rock bottom. In fact, I believe that's where God likes to hang out. He loves to meet us in those spaces where we feel so overwhelmed. So helpless. So hopeless. So lost and alone. It is there that God does His best work. It is there that we are at our most humble. Most open. Most willing to obey. Don't make the same mistake I made or the same mistake Pharaoh made. Don't harden your heart. Don't steel your resolve. Don't tighten your grip. Let go and let God. He stands ready to help those who turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 13:17-15:18, Matthew 21:23-46, Psalms 26, Proverbs 6:16-19

February 1, 2019

THE POWER OF DISBELIEF

Readings for today: Exodus 13:17-15:18, Matthew 21:23-46, Psalms 26, Proverbs 6:16-19

Human beings seem naturally wired for disbelief. No matter what God does, it's never enough. Plagues in Egypt? Deliverance from slavery? Parting the Red Sea? Why is it so hard for us to believe? So hard for us to trust? Sure, we get that initial bounce when we experience a miracle. There's that initial rush of adrenaline as we realize we've come face to face with God. In Exodus 14:31, the Bible says, "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." But as we shall see, their belief will soon fade in the days ahead. Eventually the spiritual high wears off and they will revert to form.

We are no different. How many of us can point to moments in our lives when God showed up in power? Experiences we had where God drew very near? Perhaps it was at the deathbed of a loved one or the birth of a child. Perhaps we sensed God's presence as we hiked through the mountains or fished our favorite stream. Perhaps God met us in worship or on a spiritual retreat. Maybe we've even experienced a true miracle in our lives. In those moments, we find the hair on the back of our necks standing straight up. Shivers go up and down our spine. And that's when it hits us...we've just been touched by God.

Why don't these moments last? Why do they seem to have so little staying power? Why are we so quick to forget? So quick to revert back to form? The Bible answer this question. We are sinners. We have a hard time walking by faith. Our hearts naturally inclined towards disbelief.

I have several friends who want to believe. They wish they could believe. They love the gospel but it just sounds too good to be true. They've had moments in their lives where God showed up. Moments where they experienced God's presence. Moments where God revealed Himself in a powerful way. But it's never enough. They always want more. More proof. More evidence. They demand God meet them on their terms. I get it. I feel that same pull myself.

What is faith? According to Hebrews 11:1, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." According to Romans 4:21, faith is being "fully convinced that God is able to do what he's promised." Faith is not based on human logic. It is not dependent on human emotion. It is not grounded in human experience. It is not easy. It is not simple. It is not blind. It is a trust that God is who He says He is and will be faithful to do what He promises He will do.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 15:19-17:7, Matthew 22:1-33, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 6:20-26

February 2, 2019

NO FEAR

Readings for today: Exodus 15:19-17:7, Matthew 22:1-33, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 6:20-26

Many years ago, I had the pleasure of hearing a representative from International Justice Mission speak at a conference. If you are not familiar with this organization, they are the gold standard when it comes to combating human slave trafficking around the world. They work with local governments to pass legislation outlawing the practice of slavery. They conduct raids all over the world to expose corruption and set people free. They bring international pressure to bear to hold countries accountable for what happens within their borders. On this particular occasion, the woman representing IJM was sharing the story of a raid they conducted of a brothel where young women were being forced to engage in prostitution. Enticed by the promise of work, they had left the protection of home and family. Once they crossed the border into a new country, they became vulnerable and exposed. Traffickers picked them up and locked them in rooms. They were drugged. They were beaten. They were given barely enough food to survive. When IJM raided the building, they found the following words scratched by hand on the wall of one particular young woman...

"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalms 27:1)

What a powerful testimony! This young woman came from a Christian home. Though she had endured unspeakable suffering, her faith never failed. She clung to Christ as a drowning person clings to a life raft. One can only imagine the number of prayers she prayed. The amount of tears she shed. The trauma she experienced. How many dark nights did she endure? How many times did she despair and lose all hope of being saved? How hard was it for her to scratch out those words with her fingernails? Harder still for her to believe as days turned to weeks turned to months with no salvation seemingly in sight? And yet, God heard her prayers. He sent IJM in to deliver her from her torment.

What are you most afraid of in life? What keeps you up at night? What fears haunt you as you sleep? Do you believe God is your light? Your salvation? The stronghold of your life? When your enemies attack you. When you feel like everything is crashing down around you. Though you live in constant conflict. Do you lean on the strength of Christ? Do you keep your eyes fixed on the Lord and persist in prayer? Have you felt the Lord's protection? Sensed Him hiding you in His shelter? Concealing you in His tent? Lifting you high upon a rock? From where has God's help come? From family? Friends? Your brothers and sisters in Christ? In what form did God's help come? Was it an encouraging word? An unexpected financial blessing? A helping hand?

God promises to walk with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. He promises He will be with us no matter what trials or temptations we may face. He promises to sit with us in our suffering. Wipe the tears from our eyes. Strengthen us so that we may endure the tests this life so often brings. No matter where you find yourself today, trust the promise of God. He will never leave you or forsake you! He will never abandon you or let you go! He is faithful! He is your light and your salvation! Do not be afraid!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 17:8-19:15, Matthew 22:34-23:12, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 6:27-35

February 3, 2019

We Need Each Other

Readings for today: Exodus 17:8-19:15, Matthew 22:34-23:12, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 6:27-35

No man or woman is an island. No one ever goes it alone. We all need community. We all need relationships. We all need help from time to time. I remember talking to a very wealthy man in New York City. He had made his fortune in commercial real estate. He was generous to a fault, endowing chairs at Ohio State and Princeton Seminary. He was gifted. He worked hard. He built his business piece by piece over a number of years. Many believed he was a genius. Many believed his legendary work ethic was the secret to his success. But when I spoke with him and asked him how he got to where he was in life, his answer was simple. “I had help along the way.”

Moses is one of the greatest leaders in all the Bible. He had confronted Pharaoh. He had leveled plagues on an entire nation. Parted the Red Sea. Made water come from a rock. But even he grew tired in the midst of a battle and needed help to lead his people to victory. Thankfully, Aaron and Hur were there to steady his hands. Moses was the great Law-giver. The author of Torah. He was known for his wisdom and understanding. After all, he spoke directly to God. But even he couldn’t handle all the requests for arbitration and judgment. His plate was too full. He needed help. Thankfully, Jethro was there to guide him.

We live in a culture that idolizes the individual. The man or woman who overcomes. The man or woman who does it all. The man or woman who not climbs the corporate ladder but also is a great spouse, raises great kids, and still finds time to hit the gym. The pace we’re setting is impossible to keep. We all need help.

In the beginning, God said, “It is not good for man to be alone...I will make a helper fit for him.” We all need helpers along the way. People whom God sends into our lives to get us to that next step. It may be a mentor. A spiritual director. A counselor. A life coach. A pastor. A friend. It may be a business associate. A social connection. A classmate from school. These people have a way of lifting our arms when we’re tired. Encouraging us when we’re down. Taking some of the burden off our shoulders. They are trustworthy. Faithful. True. To ignore them is to reject the very help God sends us in our hour of need.

Where do you need help today? What are you working on that could benefit from the assistance of those around you? What keeps you from asking? We were not meant to do this life alone. We were not wired to do our work alone. We were not meant to live as if we were an island. God has made helpers suitable for us. Chances are, they are already present in our lives. Ask God to show you who they are and invite them in. You’ll be glad you did!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 19:16-21:21, Matthew 23:13-39, Psalms 28, Proverbs 7:1-5

February 4, 2019

IDOLATRY

Readings for today: Exodus 19:16-21:21, Matthew 23:13-39, Psalms 28, Proverbs 7:1-5

Reformation theologian and pastor, John Calvin, once wrote, “The human mind is a perpetual forge of idols...The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity; as it labours under dullness, nay, is sunk in the grossest ignorance, it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God. To these evils another is added. The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the idol, and the hand gives it birth.” (Institutes of the Christian Religion 1.11.8) Humanity has always had an “idol problem.” Everyone across the spiritual spectrum - pagan to atheist - falls prey to the temptation to reduce God down to size. Remake Him after our image so we can understand Him and ultimately, control Him. Pagans craft totems and little statues. They try to control God through magical incantations and sacrifices. Atheists demand God meet their standard of proof. They try to control God by subjecting Him to modern notions of scientific method and reproducing His miracles in a lab. New Agers keep God at arm’s length by blurring the lines between Creator and creature. They try to control God by sending happy thoughts out into the universe and keeping karma. Christians are no different. We do all we can to avoid the real Jesus. We much prefer a Jesus who looks like us and acts like us. A Jesus who only affirms and never confronts. And we try to control Him by offering Him only a part of our lives. Throwing Him a bone with our occasional worship. And cherry-picking our favorite Scriptures.

That’s why I love the words from Exodus today. God pulls no punches. He reminds us of the unbridgeable gulf that exists between us. We are not God. We are not even little gods. We are broken, sinful, finite human beings. We have no idea who we’re dealing with when it comes to God and that’s why God prohibits us from making idols or touching His altar with any of our tools. Because we invariably will get it wrong. Even our best attempts will fall short. We simply have not grasped the fullness of God’s glory and splendor and majesty. The heavens themselves can only “reflect” the glory of God. Creation itself cannot contain God much less anything we build with our own hands.

And that’s why God’s words here are so important. They should make us tremble. Drive us to our knees. Humble us before Him. “I am the Lord your God.” Do not worship any other gods. Do not try to remake Me in your image. Do not take My name in vain. “I am the Lord your God.” Live according to My commands. Value what I value. Love what I love. Do not murder. Do not engage in sexual immorality. Do not lie. Do not covet. “I am the Lord your God.” I have hardwired you for both work and rest. Keep the Sabbath day holy. I am the Lord your God. I have made you for relationship. Honor your father and mother. Treasure your family. These commands are not given to restrict us but to teach us how to truly live in right relationship with God and each other. Rather than resist God’s commands, embrace them. Rather than reduce God, let Him lift you up. Rather than settle for false gods and idols of your own making, humble yourself before the True and Living God. For as Calvin points out, “The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly.” All one has to do is look around at the evil and suffering and pain in our world to see the devastating impact of the idols we worship. The gods of violence and death run rampant and we continue to worship at their altars. The gods of sexual immorality, unfettered greed, and deceit dominate and we continue to bow down before them. We are slaves to our basest desires which is why so many are turning to drugs, alcohol, and other things to numb their despair. To quote atheist Yuval Harari, “Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don’t know what they want?” (Sapiens)

God created us for more. He created us in His image. For His purposes. To reflect His glory in the world. Don’t settle for anything less than God Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 21:23-23:13, Matthew 24:1-28, Psalms 29, Proverbs 7:6-23

February 5, 2019

DIVINE MANDATE

Readings for today: Exodus 21:23-23:13, Matthew 24:1-28, Psalms 29, Proverbs 7:6-23

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." (Matthew 24:14)

From the beginning, God's plan has been to fill the earth with His glory. It was the mandate He first gave Adam and Eve in the Garden. It is why He saved Noah from the flood. It is the reason He chose Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And it was His heart for His people Israel. However, we human beings have this innate tendency to resist God's will. We want to live our own lives. We want to control our own destinies. We prefer safety and comfort and this keeps us from being fruitful, multiplying, and filling the earth with the gospel.

Jesus came to renew God's mandate. The Great Commission is not new, friends. Jesus' goal is the same as His Father's! He came to fill the earth with the glory of God! He came to do what we could not! He was the faithful Israelite! The Second Adam! The One who perfectly fulfilled His Father's will. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus accomplished all His Father desired. And Christians have been following in His footsteps ever since. Taking the good news of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to every corner of the earth. Proclaiming to the whole world the testimony of Jesus Christ. Making disciples of all nations through baptism and the teaching of God's righteous commands. This is why we were created! This is why we were redeemed! This is the whole purpose and plan of God for our dead and dying world.

God's heart is for lost people. He longs to see everyone saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. His love for the world is what drove Him to send His only begotten Son. Sacrifice Him on our behalf on the cross. And raise Him from the dead. These are the lengths God was willing to go to save us. What lengths are we willing to go to save others? Christians have the heart of God. Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we long for lost people to be saved. We do not condemn those who do not know Jesus, we love them and serve them and witness to them of the glories of the gospel. We pray for the lost people in our lives. We look for opportunities to invite them into fellowship with God's church. We sacrifice to spend time with them so that they may come to know what we've come to know...the love of God.

Friends, loving those whom God loves means loving lost people no matter where they may be found. At home. Across the street. In class. At work. Across the country. Across the globe. Reaching them is a mandate. A divine calling. It's a responsibility given to all of us. None of us is exempt. It doesn't matter if you are an extrovert or introvert or what your number may be on the enneagram. God's plan is for you to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 23:14-25:40, Matthew 24:29-51, Psalms 30, Proverbs 7:24-27

February 6, 2019

CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Readings for today: Exodus 23:14-25:40, Matthew 24:29-51, Psalms 30, Proverbs 7:24-27

Practice makes perfect. How many times did I have a coach who used that line? I hated practice. Saw it as a necessary evil. Something to be endured until game day. Over time, I matured. I grew up. I began to realize the importance of practice. Daily rhythms that make us who we are as people. So I go to the gym most days. I engage in the same routines to build muscle and endurance and keep my body in shape. I read regularly. I engage my mind in daily routines to build memory and stay sharp. I practice spiritual disciplines of prayer and reflection on Scripture every single day so I can build my relationship with God. I worship every week so I can grow deep with a community of other believers. I go to Africa twice a year so I can humbly learn at the feet of some of the best Christians I know. Practice makes perfect and I am being perfected by the Spirit as I engage in these things.

Throughout the Old Testament, God sets up certain practices for His people. He requires them to keep certain feasts. Three times a year they are to appear before the Lord. The Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates their deliverance from Egypt. The Feast of Harvest celebrates God's provision as Israel brings their firstfruits to the Lord. The Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles) marks the end of the agricultural year for Israel and they would mark the occasion by coming before the Lord and live in tents for a week to remember their wilderness journey. On the face of it, these practices can seem arbitrary or even unnecessary. Do we really have to go up to the Temple? Can't we worship God in our own community? In our own homes? Why do we need to go live in a tent for a week? Why do we need to give God all our firstfruits? Won't He understand if we fudge a little or keep some back for ourselves? After all, God wants us to take care of ourselves, right?

Wrong. God ordains certain practices because of the way He created us. We become what we practice. We are creatures of habit. We follow rituals and routines in order to be successful and make our way in the world. God knows this about us. He shaped and formed us in this way. And that's why, from the beginning of Scripture, God sets up certain routines to help us connect with Him. Six days shall you work and on the seventh you shall rest. Six years shall you work the ground but on the seventh you shall leave your fields fallow. Three times a year you shall leave your work and your home and present yourself before the Lord. Every week you will gather with the people of your community in worship. Every day you shall spend time in prayer and meditating on My Word. These rhythms are divinely appointed for our good. They are designed to make us in the likeness of Christ.

Building a deep relationship with God is never accidental. It doesn't happen randomly or haphazardly or only when we can spare the time. It requires intentionality. It requires daily spiritual practices that direct our attention away from "self" and towards God. This is not easy work because our natural orientation is inward. Our natural way of thinking is self-centered. Our natural desires are self-serving. If we're honest, most of our daily practices only reinforce this sinful way of thinking. Everything we do from the way we eat to the way we drink to the way we exercise to the way we spend our time and money is designed primarily for our personal pleasure and happiness. Such has always been the case which is why God lays down these commandments about Sabbath and sacred festivals and feast days. He is attempting to draw our attention heavenward. To get us to focus on Him.

What routines have you built into your life to help you connect with God? What rhythms do you keep that connect you to God's people? Jesus Himself says the first and second great commandments are to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. We need both the vertical as well as horizontal relationships in our lives. Left on our own, we will disconnect from God and disconnect from one another. So again, what spiritual practices are you engaging in to keep you from falling away from the Lord?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 26-27, Matthew 25:1-30, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 8:1-11

February 7, 2019

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Readings for today: Exodus 26-27, Matthew 25:1-30, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 8:1-11

“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.” (Exodus 24:9-11)

It’s a powerful scene. Moses and the leadership of Israel going up the mountain to meet with God. The plain sense of the text suggests they actually enter heaven. They see God face to face. I try to imagine what that journey must have been like. One moment they are climbing over rocks and boulders and the next they’re walking on sapphire pavement. One moment they are surrounded by smoke and fire and a great cloud and the next they can see for what feels like miles. One moment they’re weary and tired and struggling for breath and the next they’re sitting down at God’s table to eat and drink.

Then they come down and construction on the Tabernacle begins. This will become the place where God will meet with His people. Tabernacle. Altar. Courts. Lamps and lampstands. Curtains. Even the vestments of Aaron and his sons who will minister before the Lord. All have their antecedents in heaven. All are copied from the heavenly Tabernacle where Moses and the elders had just met with God. All are attempts to approximate what they had just seen and experienced.

Furthermore, they build at God’s direction and command. Stop and think for a minute...the Living God who rules and reigns over the universe desires to create a space to meet with His people face to face. Amazing! God claiming physical space on the earth which will be His space. Sacred space. Heavenly space. To enter this space is to enter heaven itself. To enter this space is to enter the presence of God in a very tangible, concrete way. How gracious is our God to condescend to us in this way!

In churches all over the world, believers pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray on a weekly basis. We pray many things in that prayer but one of the lines says this, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” When we pray this prayer, we are asking God to make His dwelling among us. We are asking His Kingdom to invade our space. To invade our world. To claim the earth as His own. In a very real way, the church itself is to be a little taste of the Kingdom in this world. A colony of heaven in a culture of death. Believers who pray for God’s will to be done on earth, pray with the awareness that this begins in each individual’s life. As we surrender and submit our will to God, we become living tabernacles of the Holy Spirit. God making Himself known through us to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 28, Matthew 25:31-26:13, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 8:12-13

February 8, 2019

TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

Readings for today: Exodus 28, Matthew 25:31-26:13, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 8:12-13

I love today's reading from Matthew 25. I love how the righteous and unrighteous appear before the judgment seat of Christ. I love the vision of Jesus coming with his angels to reign and rule over the earth. My heart longs for the day when all evil and suffering and pain and death will perish and eternal life will begin in earnest.

On that day, I want to be counted among the righteous. I want to be set at God's right hand. I want to inherit the Kingdom prepared for me from before the foundations of the world. So what will that take? At first glance, it seems like a whole lot of work! :-) Feeding the hungry. Making sure thirsty are refreshed. Clothing the naked. Visiting the sick. Spending time with those who are incarcerated. Welcoming the immigrant or stranger. If I'm not careful, this will become a "to-do" list as I seek to work my way towards salvation. A standard I have to meet in order to be declared righteous in God's sight. But a careful reading reveals something much different.

"Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?" (Matthew 25:37-39) This is the mark of true righteousness. It is never self-conscious. Never self-promoting. Never self-centered. The righteous who cry out to Jesus seem utterly unaware of how much they've been serving the Lord. They are not trying to follow some road map to heaven. They are not trying to earn their salvation. They are simply living from a deep relationship with Christ. Their love for the least and lost in the world is the natural outgrowth of their faith.

The gospel transforms us from the inside out. It starts in our hearts and extends to our hands and feet. It is subconscious more than conscious. It is instinctive. Intuitive. Innate. When your heart has been changed by Jesus, you cannot help yourself but love what He loves and serve those He serves. As you ponder and pray over these verses today, ask yourself the following questions, "Do I find myself naturally doing the things listed in this passage? Is my heart broken for the same things that break God's heart? Do I live generously? Open-handedly? Always looking for opportunities to serve the least and lost in our world?" If so, if these things come more and more naturally to you with each passing year, then be assured you are in Christ. You have an inheritance waiting for you from the Lord Himself.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 29:1-30:10, Matthew 26:14-46, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 8:14-26

February 9, 2019

KNOWING GOD

Readings for today: Exodus 29:1-30:10, Matthew 26:14-46, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 8:14-26

God wants to be known. Think about that for a moment. God wants to be known. The Creator of the universe wants His creation to know Him and love Him and serve Him. The One who stands outside time and space. Infinite and glorious beyond measure. Omnipotent. Omniscient. Omnipresent. Majestic. Splendid. Dwelling in unapproachable light. This same God wants a relationship with you. With me. With every single human being on the face of the earth. The billions who've been born and will be born.

When we read the latter part of the Exodus story and it starts talking about curtains and tableware and altars and tents, it's easy to lose sight of the main point. When we get into Leviticus and we start reading about all these archaic laws governing what we eat and what we wear, it's easy to get lost in the minutiae. When we find ourselves in Numbers with its talk of so many silver plates and so many sacrificial oxen and its census of each tribe, it's easy to get lost in the weeds. The main point of all this work is to prepare a place where God can actually, physically, tangibly, concretely meet with His people. Where they can approach Him. Speak with Him. Interact with Him. Receive from Him all the blessings He has stored up for His chosen people. Listen again to these words from Exodus 29:45-46, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God."

God wants to be known. He wants us to understand His heart. His character. His nature. His great desire is for us to spend eternity probing the mystery of who He is. Getting to know Him better and better with each passing age. Plumbing the depths of His being so that we can understand more fully what it means to be made in His image. To bear His likeness. This is God's great design. This is how He set up creation. This world – this universe even - is to be His Temple. The place where His glory dwells. We will serve as His priests, exercising and extending His dominion over all He has made. This is why God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt and it is why Jesus will deliver His people from slavery to sin.

God wants to be known. It's why He sent His Son into the world. So we could touch Him. Hear His voice. See Him with our own eyes. God now has a face. God now has a body. God has a name and it is Jesus. Jesus came to make God known. Jesus came to reveal God in all His fullness. There is no part of God that is not revealed in Christ. No hidden God behind the Christ. God is Jesus. Jesus is God. And every time we take part in the meal Jesus Himself instituted, we are reminded who this God is and what He's all about. He is the God who dwells with us. He is the God who delivers us from evil. He is the God who saves us from our sin. He is not just a god, He is our God.

Do you know this God? I mean, really know Him? Is He your God? Is He the Lord and Savior of your life? Have you experienced His saving grace in your life? Friend, you don't have to wait. God wants you to know Him and all He requires is for you to confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead. Do this and you will be saved. You will become part of God's chosen people. He will be your God and you will be His child.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 30:11-31:18, Matthew 26:47-68, Psalms 32, Proverbs 8:27-32

February 10, 2019

CONFESSION

Readings for today: Exodus 30:11-31:18, Matthew 26:47-68, Psalms 32, Proverbs 8:27-32

We live in a world of affirmation. A world where every feeling. Every emotion. Every desire is something to be celebrated and embraced as long as it doesn't hurt ourselves or others. We are deeply passionate creatures. Driven by primal forces too deep for us to understand. We do not question. We do not think. We do not evaluate whether these desires are good or bad. We simply engage them. We satisfy them. We believe this is the only path to true happiness.

The Bible cuts against the grain of our current cultural experience. It calls us to submit every desire and take every thought captive to Christ. It teaches us how to live for God and not for Self. It speaks directly against the prevailing wisdom of our world. It forces us to come to grips with the depravity and corruption of our hearts.

It calls us to confession. To acknowledgment before God of our sin. To agreement with God regarding our unrighteousness. But we resist His will and His way. We choose our own path which leads to self-destruction. "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." (Psalms 32:3-4) Whether we keep silent before the Lord or we spit in His face, the outcome is the same. Pain. Suffering. Heartache. Heartbreak. Our bones waste away. Our strength dries up. Our lives do not reflect the glory God intended.

Confession is hard because it requires submission. Surrender to a will that is greater than our own. It requires us to bow the knee before God and accept His Lordship over our lives. This is why the Psalmist uses the image of a stubborn mule to make his point. "Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you." (Psalms 32:9) Yes, we are all stubborn asses before the Lord. We all struggle to accept His leading and guiding. We all want to go our own way.

But what happens when do finally surrender to Him? What happens when we do finally humble ourselves and confess our sin? God forgives. God showers us with grace. We no longer have to hide or pretend or put on a good face. We no longer are slaves to fear. We no longer are slaves to our own desires. We can live beyond ourselves. We become a blessing to others. God's steadfast love surrounds us. He becomes our hiding place. A refuge in times of trouble.

Does regular confession mean we will never go through hard times? No. It simply means we will experience the abiding presence of Christ all along. Because we've agreed with Him and acknowledged Him and humbly submitted to Him, He will become our strength and our shield. The world is wrong, friends. Desperately wrong. And we all know it. We can all feel it in our bones. We know deep down that everyone living for themselves. Everyone chasing that which makes them happy. Everyone seeking to fulfill their own desires leads only to pain and suffering. So repent. Confess your sin. Exchange the affirmation you crave for the acceptance God offers in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 32-33, Matthew 26:69-27:14, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 8:33-36

February 11, 2019

WAITING

Readings for today: Exodus 32-33, Matthew 26:69-27:14, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 8:33-36

“Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors.” (Proverbs 8:34)

Listening. Watching. Waiting. Three essential ingredients to a deep and vibrant relationship with God. But they do not come naturally. I am much more apt to speak rather than listen. Much more apt to take action rather than sit back and watch. Much more apt to jump in and get involved rather than wait for the right time. I am an impatient man. I do not like waiting in lines. Waiting in traffic. Waiting for much of anything.

Listening, watching, and waiting on God has always been a challenge for me. My prayers tend to be monologues. My time with Him can turn into a spiritual “to-do” list. Read your Bible. Journal. Pray. Wash. Rinse. Repeat. Historically, I’ve spent so little time in silence before the Lord. So little time waiting for Him to speak. I am always in a rush. Always in a hurry. Always on to the next thing.

I think this is why Israel made the golden calf. A careful reading of the text reveals their impatience. Moses had been gone a long time. For all they knew, he could have perished on the mountain. They grew impatient. They grew restless. They wanted to get on with it. Lay hold of all God had promised. They wanted to worship. To celebrate their deliverance. Their motives were not all bad. They simply wanted it to happen on their timeline rather than God’s. So they turned to Aaron and asked him to get a move on. Aaron was anxious as well. So rather than lead, he followed. He gave into the people’s demands, making an idol for them to worship. A tangible God they could see and feel. This is always the lure of idolatry. We create a god we can control. A god we can understand. A god who operates according to our schedule.

It is easy to read this story and criticize the Israelites. How foolish of them to worship a golden calf! As if we are any better. Sure, our idols are not made of gold or silver but they are no less real. We worship all sorts of things. A cursory glance at our checkbook or schedule reveals all we need to know about our true priorities. Our struggle to simply sit in God’s presence each day to listen, watch, and wait shows us the depths of our impatience. We want God to fit into our lives. We’ll give Him the gaps in our schedules. We’ll give Him the leftovers of our resources. We’ll throw Him a bone every now and then just to cover our bases.

But God will not be mocked. As quick as we are to turn away, God is equally quick to judge. To discipline. Moses eventually does come down the mountain. He smashes the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. He grinds the golden calf to dust, mixes it with water, and makes everyone drink. He confronts Aaron. He puts down a rebellion. And then he prays for the people, asking God for forgiveness.

There are consequences when we fail to listen and watch and wait for God. How many times has our impatience cost us? How many times have we gone off half-cocked? Or rushed into a situation we did not understand? How many times have we made a decision we later regretted because we didn’t take the time to get all the information we needed? Blessed indeed is the one who patiently listens to God’s voice. Watches at God’s gate. Waits beside His doors. How different would the Exodus story have been if the people of God had simply waited for Moses to come down before taking action? How different would your life or my life be if we simply waited for God to speak before taking action?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 34:1-35:9, Matthew 27:15-31, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 9:1-6

February 12, 2019

WHO IS GOD?

Readings for today: Exodus 34:1-35:9, Matthew 27:15-31, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 9:1-6

Today's reading is one of the most significant in all of Scripture. Moses appearing before God yet again on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses receiving the Ten Commandments yet again as God turns aside his wrath and renews His covenant. Moses getting a chance to see the Lord as He descends in a cloud and hear His voice declare, "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) You see, God isn't interested in simply giving us a set of laws to follow. He wants to be known. He reveals the depths of His nature and character here. He is not just any god. He's not like the gods of the Canaanites, so capricious and arbitrary. No, our God is merciful and gracious. He is slow to anger. He abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation, forgiving all iniquity and sin, while at the same time exercising His righteous judgment on the guilty. He is a God of justice as well as grace. A God of holiness as well as love. And He shares all this with us so we can have a relationship with Him.

What is Moses' response to the divine revelation? "And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped." (Exodus 34:8) He falls on his face before the Lord. He averts his eyes. He trembles in astonishment and awe at what he's just seen and heard. The God of the universe leaves His throne room in heaven to be with us. The Creator desires a relationship with His creation. The Maker of all things descends to meet with us, speak with us, and show us His glory. There simply are no words so Moses worships.

Fast forward hundreds of years. This same God who revealed Himself to Moses on Sinai. The same God who would meet with Israel in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The same God who led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This same God is born in a peasant home in a backwater town in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. Laid in a manger. Worshiped by foreigners and shepherds and the poor of the village. He attracts the riffraff and the outcast. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He keeps company with all kinds of strange people, even embracing Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus is merciful and gracious. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation even though His own creation turns on Him and kills Him. He forgives all iniquity and sin. He takes on the righteous judgment of the Father, perfectly fulfilling the justice of God. And He does all this so we can have a relationship with Him.

So what is our response? Do we bow our heads in worship? Do we fall on our faces before the Cross? Do we avert our eyes? Tremble in astonishment and awe at everything we've just seen and heard? Friends, Jesus came to give us life. Eternal life. And what is eternal life? The Apostle John tells us in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Do you know Jesus? Do you have a deep, intimate relationship with God? Or do you just know about Him? Heard the rumors? The gossip? Do you keep Him at arm's length? Follow Him from a distance? God longs to draw you close. God longs to embrace you as His son or daughter. God longs for you to know His great love. Open your arms. Open your hearts. Receive Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 25:10-36:38, Matthew 27:32-66, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 9:7-8

February 13, 2019

GOD IS ON THE LOOSE!

Readings for today: Exodus 35:10-36:38, Matthew 27:32-66, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 9:7-8

A professor of mine in seminary once shared a story with us about a Bible study he led on the Gospel of Matthew. For many months, they walked through the gospel verse by verse. Most of the people in the room were adults who came eager to learn but there was one young teenager who basically fell asleep each class. His mom made him come each week so he would slouch in his chair in the back of the class totally disengaged. Or so it appeared. As they neared the end of the class, my professor was describing what happened at the death of Jesus. In particular, he wanted to know what people thought the significance was of the Temple curtain ripping in two. Most of the discussion centered on the traditional interpretation that the death of Jesus gives us free access to God. It was at this point that my professor noticed the young man sitting up in his chair with his hand raised. He called on him and asked him what he thought. The young man said, "I think you have it all wrong. I think the Temple curtain tearing in two means God now has free access to us. All the barriers have come down. God's now on the loose...and the world will never be the same." Amazing.

The death of Jesus changes everything. Not only is the Temple curtain torn in two but the earth itself shakes. Rocks shatter. The sun goes dark. Tombs open. The dead rise. The natural order of things is turned upside down. Things will never again be the same. And this makes perfect sense when one steps back to think about it. The death of Jesus represents the final payment for human sin. Jesus made atonement for the sins of the entire world according to 1 John 2:2. His suffering satisfies the wrath and judgment of God that had been building since the Fall. Now that the perfect Lamb of God was slain, a new situation is created. A new opportunity. A new creation. With the advent of the new creation, we should expect the old creation to react violently as it enters its death throes. Thus, the signs and wonders that accompany Jesus' last breath.

What is our response to the universe-altering, world-changing, history-transforming death of Jesus? Hopefully we, like the Roman centurion, respond in faith. "Truly this was the Son of God!" We look in awe and wonder at what God has done. The Creator dying for His creation. The Lord giving up His very life for His servants. God sacrificing everything to save those whom He so dearly loves.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 37-38, Matthew 28, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 9:9-10

February 14, 2019

GREAT COMMISSION

Readings for today: Exodus 37-38, Matthew 28, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 9:9-10

Anyone who knows me knows I love the mission of God. I love the global vision of the Kingdom. I love the picture Revelation paints of every tribe, tongue, and nation worshiping God around His throne. I love the commission God has given us to make disciples. To baptize. To teach. To obey. From the moment Jesus confronted me on the campus of the University of Colorado in Boulder, I have been passionate about sharing the good news of the gospel with everyone I meet.

Some have told me this is a special gift but they are wrong. This is a command given to the church. To everyone who calls on the name of Jesus. Mission is not something the church does. Mission is who the church is. It is our identity. It is our DNA. It is why we exist. The primary vehicle for the spread of the good news of the gospel in the world is the local church. Local bodies of believers who faithfully and joyfully obey the command to share Jesus with everyone in their community. This is the church's "great commission." It is our great privilege and honor to serve as heralds of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And to this great end we direct all our energy, time, and resources so that when we go before the Lord at the end of our lives, He will say, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

There is no high like sharing Jesus. Recently, a friend of mine was playing in a pool tournament with her unchurched friends. She is training to be a Stephen's Minister so was taking time after her match to study. Her friends started asking her about what she was doing. She told them about the call on her life to walk with hurting people and bring the comfort of Christ. One of them shared about a friend they had who was currently in the hospital. After listening to a bit of this person's story, my friend felt this overwhelming urge to go and visit and pray with her. She talked to me after worship. Asked for some tips on how to begin the conversation. She shared her fear about walking in on someone she didn't know. Would it be weird? Would it be awkward? What if she's asleep or in a procedure? We talked through all the scenarios, prayed together, and off she went. When she got to the room and knocked on the door, the woman looked her and said, "God sent you, didn't he?" WOW! Before she could introduce herself or say a word, God had already prepared this woman for this divine appointment! They talked and prayed and as she was leaving, the woman's boyfriend said, "Welcome to the family." How awesome is God?

Of course, my friend could barely contain herself! She was so filled with joy! Here she had taken a huge step of faith and God met her in a powerful way! This is what happens when we obey the Great Commission. Not that it always works out like this or is well-received. Sometimes we share and it's tough. People resist or react negatively. But even in those moments there is a peace that passes all understanding that guards our hearts and gives us the satisfaction of knowing we have obeyed our Lord and Savior. Friends, God's plan from creation has been to fill the earth with His divine glory! This is why He made us in His image and gave us dominion over all He has made! Be fruitful! Multiply! Share Christ! Make disciples of everyone you meet! Do not rest until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 39-40, Mark 1:1-28, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 9:11-12

February 15, 2019

IS GOD A DIVA?

Readings for today: Exodus 39-40, Mark 1:1-28, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 9:11-12

I grabbed a beer with a good friend yesterday. A master craftsman with an eye for detail. He's been reading the Bible in a Year with us and was struck by God's concern for the seemingly minute details of the Tabernacle. God planned this thing down to the cubit. He is passionate about every aspect of this dwelling. He wants only the best material. Only the best metal. Only the best yarn. He will accept only the best sacrifices. All this led my friend to a great question, "Is God a diva?"

I love it. We live in a world where people make all kinds of obnoxious demands. We often hear about celebrities attaching specific riders to their contracts requiring green M&M's, vanilla-scented candles, and bottled water chilled to a certain degree in their dressing rooms. We gag at the amount of pork our politicians fight over before they vote up or down on a bill. We're stunned by the amount of pomp and circumstance that goes into a royal wedding. And most of us know that deep down, given the right set of circumstances, we'd probably do the same. We're not immune from the feelings of entitlement that go along with wealth, power, and privilege.

So what's up with God? Is He insecure? Does He feel the need to prove Himself to us? Does He have a taste for the finer things of life? And what's up with the way He treats His people. Almost like they are slaves. Almost like they are possessions. Almost like they have no rights of their own. Is God a diva?

The very fact that we all ask this question betrays our deep biological connection to the first Adam. His original sin is hardwired into our DNA. We believe we are like God. We believe we are God's equal. God's peer. We believe we can question God. Doubt God. Push back on God. We believe we have a right to demand God submit to our human notions of fairness and justice. We believe God's answerable to us on some level. So when we read about all the gold and all the bronze and all the expensive dyes and ointments and incense that must be prepared before we can appropriately worship God, we get skeptical. Is all this really necessary? Can't we cut a corner here or there? Get by on less? Can't we keep some of this for ourselves? Wouldn't it make life easier? Isn't that what God really wants?

We are fools. We have no idea who we are dealing with. We have no conception of the immense gap that exists between humanity and God. God is NOT like us. God is wholly other. He is beyond any horizon we can possibly conceive. He is greater than anything we can possibly imagine. As high as the heavens are above the earth so are His thoughts higher than our thoughts. His ways higher than our ways. Most of all, God is holy. He is sinless. He is perfection. He created everything that was, is, and will be. He owns it all. He reigns sovereign over all. All of it made according to His will and for His good pleasure. Who are we to question God? Who are we to demand anything from God? Who are we to compare God to some human standard? If God chooses to pile up all the wealth of the entire earth in once place and set His throne upon it, who are we to protest? It is all His to begin with! If God chooses to use His people as He sees fit to accomplish His purposes in this world, who are we to argue? We would not exist without God!

The truly amazing thing about this whole section in Exodus is the mind-blowing miracle of God preparing to make His dwelling place among His people. It should bring us to our knees in awe and wonder. Our jaws should drop. Our minds should be blown. Our hearts filled with the conviction that overcame the prophet Isaiah when he had his vision of the Temple. God Himself has come to live with us. God Himself has come to walk by our side. God Himself has come to speak with us face to face. He has made a way where there would otherwise be no way. How great is our God!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 1-3, Mark 1:29-45, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 9:13-18

February 16, 2019

HOW TO READ LEVITICUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 1-3, Mark 1:29-45, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 9:13-18

Today we come to everyone's favorite book of the Bible...Leviticus. This is usually where well-intentioned Bible reading plans go to die. The laws seem archaic at best. They deal with issues we have little to no familiarity with as 21st century postmodern Christians living in the wealthiest nation the world has ever seen. The cultural distance is extreme and difficult to overcome. The minutiae wears down even the most faithful reader. We see little to no relevance for our lives.

And yet, Leviticus is God's Word as much as the Pauline Epistles. The laws contained in this book are as divinely inspired as the red sections of the gospels. Reading them devotionally helps shape our hearts as much as the language of the Psalms. So how can we read in such a way that we profit from spending devotional time in this book?

Two keys principles...
First, keep in mind there are three different kinds of laws listed here. There are the ceremonial laws that governed worship. Sacrifices. Personal hygiene. Disease. Particularly focused on ritual purity, these laws were designed to create the conditions where holiness could flourish so the people could come before their Holy God without fear. Second, there are the civil laws that governed the nation of Israel. Tithing. Inheritance. Sentencing guidelines. These laws were necessary to maintain order in society, create revenue for the national government, and promote social welfare. Third, there is the moral law governing behavior. Exemplified by the Ten Commandments, these laws were designed to teach us righteousness and many of the laws governing violence, sexuality, lying, honoring parents, and Sabbath regulations were created to embed this moral law in everyday life.

The second principle to remember is that Levitical law served three overarching purposes. First, as I just mentioned above, it was given to us by God to teach us righteousness. Righteousness is not a relative category. It is not something we create for ourselves. God sets a standard for righteousness that we, as His creation, are bound to follow. The Law is this standard. Second, the Law was given to restrain evil. Because we live in a society based on the principles of proportional justice, we fail to see how radical "an eye for an eye" truly was in ancient near east culture. Setting limits or restraints on vengeance was a massive leap forward for human society and while not necessarily unique to Israel, it did set them apart. The punishment must fit the crime and be serious enough to act as a deterrent to potential future crimes. Third, and most importantly, the Law was given to teach us our need for a Savior. We cannot keep the Law. We cannot achieve righteousness on our own. Our sinful nature rebels against God's commands and, if we're totally honest, we find ourselves violating them on a daily basis. The Law acts as a mirror of sorts to show us the true condition of our souls. Not to make us despair but to bring us to a point where we'll cry out to God! The Law ultimately humbles us. Brings us to our knees. Breaks our stubborn pride. It paves the way for Jesus.

As you read through Leviticus over the next several days, keep these things in mind lest you get lost the weeds of this important book. Put yourself in the place of an ancient Israelite living in abject poverty in a subsistence agrarian economy where the most important daily task is to secure enough food for you and your family. Imagine yourself living in a village with one to two hundred of your relatives. Raising kids together. Doing life together. Learning to survive together. Imagine going up to Jerusalem a few times a year to worship and the preparations you have to make for that particular journey. Then think about your own life. Do you live with the same intentionality? What would it look like if you did?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 4-5, Mark 2:13-3:6, Psalms 36, Proverbs 10:1-2

February 17, 2019

LIVING INTENTIONALLY

Readings for today: Leviticus 4-5, Mark 2:13-3:6, Psalms 36, Proverbs 10:1-2

If I were ever to preach a sermon series (watch out PEPC!) on Leviticus, it would be titled "Living Intentionally." I mean, if nothing else, you have to admire the integrity of the sacrificial system. It makes a certain kind of sense. God is perfectly holy. God is perfectly just. God is perfectly righteous. And this perfect God desires to dwell with His people. There's only one problem. Sin. Human beings are not holy. Not just. Not righteous therefore they cannot enter into the presence of God. Something therefore must be done to purify them before the Lord. They need a substitute. Someone or something to take their place. Pay the price God's justice demands. Make satisfaction for their sin. So God institutes a system whereby sins are paid for in blood. The blood of specific animals for specific sins. The result is a purified people who can now live in relationship with a perfectly pure God.

Sadly, when we read this book, all we see are rules and regulations. Archaic laws governing strange behavior. We find them ridiculous. Dated. Certainly not binding or even relevant in a post-resurrection context where Christ has set us free from the demands of the Law. Of course, honesty demands that we acknowledge our innate hatred of any restrictions. We do not like to be told what to do or how to do it. We are Americans. Born to be free. Born with incredible privilege and opportunity. The very idea that someone - even God Himself - could demand anything from us is laughable. "I couldn't believe in a God who..." As if God needs our belief? As if God should have to work to recruit us for His team? As if God has to prove Himself to us? It's absurd.

Furthermore, all one has to do is take a look at the state of the world around us and we can easily see what a mess we've made of things. We are not good people. We are not smart people. We are not intentional people. We are driven by desire. Our passions get the best of us. Our emotions often override any kind of rational thought. I love how Yuval Harari – himself an atheist Jew - put it in His bestselling book, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind , "Despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles – but nobody knows where we're going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?" Scary, isn't it? And right on point.

So what do we do? How shall we live? Is there another way? The Psalmist paints the big picture that Leviticus works out in detail. "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated...Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings." (Psalms 36:1-2, 5-7) We have a choice. We can depend on ourselves or we can depend on God. We can trust ourselves or we can trust God. We can keep going down the paths we've created for ourselves or we can walk in the paths of the Lord. Does that mean we have to keep Levitical Law? Of course not. (See yesterday's post) But it does mean we have to take God far more seriously and obey God far more faithfully than we currently do. In short, we have to live with godly intentionality.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 6:1-7:27, Mark 3:7-30, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 10:3-4

February 18, 2019

LORD, LIAR, LUNATIC

Readings for today: Leviticus 6:1-7:27, Mark 3:7-30, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 10:3-4

C.S. Lewis once made this observation regarding Jesus. Either He is who He says He is - God incarnate - or He is the most evil man in history or He's completely insane. You don't really have any other choices. Now many will say Jesus is a good teacher but Lewis points out that this "good teacher" made all kinds of claims to be divine. Asked people to place their trust and hopes in Him. Demanded they leave their homes and livelihoods to follow Him. Required them to die to prove their faith in Him. Cast in this light, Jesus sounds more like a "cult leader" along the lines of Jim Jones or David Koresh. If Jesus is not God then He must be evil or insane or both. And certainly his contemporaries thought so. His own family thought He was crazy and sought "to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind." (Mark 3:21) The religious leaders were convinced He was evil. Possessed by the devil himself. "The scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons." (Mark 3:22)

So what do you believe? As Jesus will ask His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" What do you do with Jesus' teachings? No one I know believes they are the ramblings of an insane man. No credible scholar or philosopher has anything but the highest praise for the ethics of Jesus. What do you do with Jesus' miracles? No one I know believes his acts of compassion on the poor, the leper, the outcast, and sinner mask a much deeper evil. In fact, Jesus' example is often rightfully cited in support of social justice. What do you do with Jesus' death and resurrection? Why is it we're still talking about this guy after two thousand years? Certainly many other would-be messiahs were also crucified or executed in those days. Why does the name of Jesus still carry such freight while the names of these other revolutionaries have been forgotten? What keeps Jesus from being consigned to the dustbin of history?

Lewis rightfully points out that everything rides on what you believe about Jesus. If Jesus is who He says He is then this requires a radical re-orientation of our lives. We must seek to live as Jesus lived. Walk as Jesus walked. Love as Jesus loved. We must place our trust in Him. Accept Him as Lord and Savior. Allow His life to become the center of our lives. Define success the way He defined it. Use our time, talent, and treasure to serve His purposes. In short, it's as if the center of our solar system changes. Instead of life revolving around me, it must revolve around Him. Instead of focusing on how the moon (life) rotates around the earth (Self), we have to focus on how the earth (Self) rotates around the sun (Jesus). How is your life – family, work, friendships, school, vacation, leisure - revolving around Jesus?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 7:28-9:6, Mark 3:31-4:25, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 10:5

February 19, 2019

MYSTERY

Readings for today: Leviticus 7:28-9:6, Mark 3:31-4:25, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 10:5

Many years ago, a team of Jehovah's Witnesses came knocking on my door. I love theological conversation so I invited them in. We spoke for a great while about the differences between my faith and their faith. They do not believe in the Trinity. They reject the divinity of Jesus Christ. They believe He is "a god" but not "God." They do not understand why the One God would reveal Himself in Three Persons or how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human at the same time. It doesn't make sense. It's a paradox. And they clearly didn't like it. After talking in circles for a while about these deep mysteries of our faith, one of them finally got a little frustrated and said to me, "How can you be so content with mystery?" What a great question!

In Mark 4:11-12, Jesus tells His disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that "they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven." He is quoting the prophet Isaiah and recalling a time in Israelite history when they hardened their hearts to God's Word. In response, God hardened them even further by sending a prophet who would seemingly speak God's truth in riddles. Now I know that seems unfair. Like God is somehow withholding the means of salvation from His people. But this is simply not the case. The people of God had already rejected the clear teaching of God that came down from Mt. Sinai. Again, their hearts were hardened in unbelief and disobedience. God, in His righteous judgment, simply steps back and says, "Thy will be done." And eventually the northern Kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the nation of Assyria. In the same way, Jesus looks out on the crowds who follow Him. They love His miracles. Love His teaching. Love the way He goes after the Pharisees. But they are spiritually blind. They do not believe. They had hardened their hearts and rejected God's Word. So Jesus teaches them in parables. He, being God, simply steps back and says, "Thy will be done." And the result is judgment.

Why does God do all this? Why is He so mysterious at times? Why does Jesus play things so close to the vest? He is acting according to His plan which He initiated from before the foundations of the world. Jesus is headed to the cross. He is going to let the judgment Israel deserved fall on Himself. He will bear God's wrath. He will take the punishment. He will sacrifice Himself in our place. This is the great messianic secret. God sending His Only Son to die so the world might be saved. No one expected this. No one believed it even when Jesus made it very clear. They couldn't fathom how the death of their Messiah would accomplish God's will. They hardened their hearts to this truth and Jesus hardens them even further by teaching in parables. He must be thoroughly despised and rejected by humanity if He is to fulfill His prophetic call.

People still harden their hearts today. They refuse to accept the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection. Christ was crucified publicly. His death is a matter of historical record. Christ was raised publicly. He appeared to hundreds of witnesses in bodily form. He ate with them. Drank with them. He touched them. He spoke with them. No other adequate explanation has been given for the empty tomb and yet we still refuse to believe. We cannot accept the mystery of Christ's atoning death and resurrection. It is beyond our understanding. And that's why the writer of Hebrews will say, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." Repent and believe. Embrace the mystery of who God is and how He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 9:7-10:20, Mark 4:26-5:20, Psalm 37:30-40, Proverbs 10:6-7

February 20, 2019

DEMON POSSESSION

Readings for today: Leviticus 9:7-10:20, Mark 4:26-5:20, Psalm 37:30-40, Proverbs 10:6-7

I met a man once who claimed to be possessed by demons. I was serving as a prison chaplain at New Jersey State Prison at the time. The man shared his story with me as I walked the tiers one day. He was a satanist. He had been baptized in blood. He had participated in several ritual killings over the years and had been sentenced to life without parole. He heard voices. Especially at night. Telling him to harm himself. The walls felt like they were closing in on him and he wanted out. He was scared. And he wanted to know if I could help.

I've always believed demon possession was a real thing. But it existed for me more as an abstract concept than a concrete reality. Meeting this man made it real. As I listened to him describe in detail his life as a satanist, it became obvious he had suffered tremendous emotional and spiritual trauma. He would need a lot of help from a variety of different sources to recover. It would be a very long road. He and I read the story from Mark 5 together. He could identify with the man living among the tombs. A man who cried out and cut himself and fought the voices inside his head. A man who was cut off from community. Cut off from any relationships. A man who was all alone. Anxious. Afraid. We talked about what it would be like for him to meet Jesus. To sit at His feet. To listen to His voice. To believe in His name. To be set free. We had several meetings unpacking this story together. Slowly but surely he began to believe. Began to see himself differently. Began to experience the freedom Jesus offers. He also began working with a psychologist and processing his emotional trauma. It wasn't easy. There were a lot of setbacks. I remember the one of the biggest barriers for him was baptism. After he gave his life to Christ, he knew he needed to be baptized but struggled with the memories it evoked. He had almost drowned in his satanic baptism as they purposefully used the experience to traumatize him. Eventually, he was able to take that step and the freedom he experienced was profound and life-changing.

One of the greatest tricks the devil has ever pulled is to convince the world he doesn't exist. Especially the post-Enlightenment, materialistic western world in which we live in the United States. Life consists of several dimensions. Physical. Emotional. Intellectual. Spiritual. Jesus calls us to integrate each of these dimensions wholistically under His Lordship. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The enemy seeks to dis-integrate our lives. Set these dimensions in opposition to one another. Pit our feelings against our bodies. Our bodies against our minds. Our minds against our spirits. The result is chaos. Personally. Relationally. Communally. Thankfully, Jesus isn't afraid to enter the chaos of our lives. He alone can calm the storm. He alone can settle our souls. He alone can set us free.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 11-12, Mark 5:21-43, Psalms 38, Proverbs 10:8-9

February 21, 2019

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Leviticus 11-12, Mark 5:21-43, Psalms 38, Proverbs 10:8-9

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.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 13, Mark 6:1-29, Psalms 39, Proverbs 10:10

February 22, 2019

CHURCH "SUCCESS???"

Readings for today: Leviticus 13, Mark 6:1-29, Psalms 39, Proverbs 10:10

"And Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." (Mark 6:7-13)

I cannot begin to count the number of conferences I get invited to each year promising the latest and greatest techniques to help my church reach our community. Leaders from the most successful churches - (Read: largest in weekly attendance) - keynote session after session letting you in on the secret to their success. Vision. Mission. Philosophy. Core values. Strategy. Frankly, it all sounds very corporate to me. I used to attend faithfully. Every year I would make my way to one conference or another searching for new ideas on how to jump start my church. Every year I would return home with books, CD's, podcasts, and all sorts of other material to help me in my quest. Every year I would become disillusioned and disappointed as my new ideas failed one after the other. Eventually, I burned out on conferences and instead turned back to Scripture.

It is striking to see the difference between the Jesus way and the way of the American church in the 21st century. Jesus simply sends his disciples out two by two into towns and villages all over Galilee. They take nothing for their journey. No fundraising. No denominational support. No purchasing of property or building of buildings. They literally take what they have on their backs and go. When they arrive at their destination, they pay attention to how they are received. If they are not received well or the gospel is rejected, they move on. If they are received, they stay and minister. By faith, they preach. By faith, they pray. By faith, they cast out demons and heal the sick. And God provides miraculously for them along the way.

Many call the way of Jesus unrealistic. It doesn't fit our cultural context. We have needs that must be met. Plans that must be made. Strategies that must be developed. Vision that must be cast. I think God chuckles at our futile efforts. Dick Halverson, long-time chaplain for the US Senate, once remarked, "In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women centering on the living Christ. Then the church moved to Greece, where it became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome, where it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe where it became a culture, and, finally, it moved to America where it became an enterprise." Sadly, his words still ring true. Why is the church struggling in America? Why are we losing the cultural battle? Why are so many people leaving the church? Because we refuse to listen to Jesus. We refuse to align our ways to His ways. Our hearts with His heart.

A friend of mine asked me the other day, "Why is the church failing?" "It's not", I replied. Look around the world. The church is exploding in Africa and Latin America and Asia. It's growing in the Global South and the Far East. It's thriving under persecution. It's multiplying under political and social oppression. It's tearing down the gates of hell in all sorts of places. "Why not here then?" He asked. Great question. The answer is simple. We will not follow the Jesus Way. We continue to abandon the Jesus Truth. So we cannot expect to receive the Jesus Life. The church in America must repent of her sinful obsession with corporate success and instead humble herself at the feet of Her Lord, letting Him guide and direct our steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 14, Mark 6:30-56, Psalms 40:1-10, Proverbs 10:11-12

February 23, 2019

LEVITICUS AND JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 14, Mark 6:30-56, Psalms 40:1-10, Proverbs 10:11-12
Someone posed a great question from our readings today. Why do Leviticus and Jesus seem so opposed to one another? Especially in their treatment of lepers? In Leviticus, they are considered outcasts. Separated from their community. They are to live in isolation or with others who share their disease. They are not welcome in the Temple. Not welcome in the market. Not welcome in people's homes. If they do experience healing, the rituals are elaborate for restoration and, knowing how human beings tend to work, they probably still carried the stigma the rest of their lives. Contrast all this with Jesus who welcomed lepers. Healed them. Purified them. Touched them. Embraced them. Jesus restored them to community with a word. It all seems so contradictory unless you take a step back and remember the bigger picture.

This world is not our home. This world is broken and ruined by the Fall. This world is corrupt and full of sin. It manifests itself in all kinds of ways, disease and death among them. All of us suffer in this world. All of us are subject to its limitations. God's world (heaven) is not like this world. God's world is whole and perfect. God's world is pure and holy. God's world is righteous and just. Sin and evil do not exist there so there is no suffering, no crying, no pain. Adam's fateful decision to rebel against God ruptured the connection between our world and God's world. Severed it completely. Without God, we would have been set adrift for all eternity. No hope of salvation. God, however, loves our world as much as He loves His own. So He bridges the gulf. He keeps the lines of communication open. He gives Moses a plan for a Tabernacle. A place where He will meet with His people. However, God is holy and cannot tolerate unholiness, impurity, or sin in His presence. So the Israelites are given laws in order to keep them pure before God. These laws are given to govern them in a world that his hostile to holiness. Hostile to purity. Hostile to God. A world in rebellion. These laws are not ends in themselves. Living by them is not the goal. They point beyond themselves to the greater reality which is God Himself. This is why David says, "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required...I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." (Psalms 40:6, 8) David understands the sacrifices, while good, serve a bigger purpose. They should draw us close to God. They should give us a heart for God. We can never confuse the ends and the means. The same is true for the laws concerning lepers. Yes, leprosy made one impure. Yes, impurity separated you from worship and from community. At the same time, God's people should extend compassion and care for the lepers in their midst. Provide for them as they suffered in their disease. Rejoice when they were healed and restored. This would serve as a sign that God's world was breaking into our world through the medium of His chosen people!

Sadly, Israel failed in this mission. Their own sin got in the way. They could follow all the laws perfectly but their hearts were still corrupt. So God sends Jesus. The living embodiment of God's world now coming to live in our world. Jesus brings with Him all God's holiness. All God's purity. All God's wisdom and power and authority because He is God incarnate! God has nothing to fear from our world. There is nothing in this world that can possibly hurt Him or harm Him or make Him impure in any way. So Jesus touches lepers and makes them clean. Jesus heals disease. Drives out demons. Raises the dead. All of these things are signs that God's world has now entered our world. The infinite now occupies the finite. The holy confronts the unholy. The pure overcomes the impure. Sin and evil are put to flight whenever Jesus shows up on the scene. Our world reacts violently to this invasion. Responds by seeking to sever the connection between our world and God's world once again. Kill Jesus and we'll finally be free! Free of God's reign! Free of God's rule! Free to do as we please! So we hang Jesus on a cross. We commit the greatest sin in human history. Deicide...we murder God. But God's world is not like our world. God's life is not subject to death. So He rises from the grave and now the connection between our world and God's world is made permanent. Sealed by the blood of God's own Son. No longer will this world be adrift. No longer will sin hold sway. No longer will death and disease have the final word. No longer will impurity separate us from God. Because of what Christ accomplished, all things are made new. All sin is atoned for. Death has been defeated. And we are free to live in this world as citizens of God's world, embracing the "lepers" wherever they may be found.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 15:1-16:28, Mark 7:1-23, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 10:13-14

February 24, 2019

INSIDE OUT

Readings for today: Leviticus 15:1-16:28, Mark 7:1-23, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 10:13-14

“And Jesus said to them, "Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." (Mark 7:18-23)

How does transformation happen? From the outside in? Or the inside out? Human beings seem naturally inclined to believe the former. If we just enact the right laws. If we just enforce the right rules. If we just require the right behavior then we can achieve a more equal society. If we can just reform the system. Depose corrupt officials. Replace those in power then we will have life, liberty, and justice for all. Of course it never does work out that way. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. As soon as anyone achieves a certain level of power, privilege, and wealth; they soon find themselves doing all they can to protect it. Preserve it. Use it for their own benefit. Human beings simply cannot transform themselves. No matter how hard we try, we simply cannot work our way to righteousness.

Jesus shows us a different way. According to Him, the problem lies within. His diagnosis is a broken heart. Our thoughts, attitudes, feelings, and actions are merely symptoms of a deeper, more pervasive disease. Our hearts are corrupt. They are full of all kinds of evil thoughts. Lust. Covetousness. Jealousy. Anger. These things are always lurking beneath the surface waiting for the right moment to emerge. The only hope we have is a heart transplant. We need Jesus to remove our hearts of stone and replace them with hearts of flesh. Hearts sensitive to the things of God. Hearts purified by the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. Once our hearts have been healed then we can go to work on the rest. Without this heart transplant, we will always be fighting a losing battle against ourselves.

Of course, we cannot force transformation. We cannot legislate saving faith. People are free to make their own decisions as to what they believe. This is why we must get on our knees and pray. Pray for God to move. Pray for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on all flesh. Pray for revival across our nation and our world. Only God can bring about the transformation we all need and want. Only God can bring justice and righteousness to the earth. Only God can renew and restore all creation. May each of us pray fervently for God to do His work in our hearts and in the hearts of those we love that might become the people He created us to be.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 16:29-18:30, Mark 7:24-8:10, Psalms 41, Proverbs 10:15-16

February 25, 2019

SEXUAL RESTRAINT

Readings for today: Leviticus 16:29-18:30, Mark 7:24-8:10, Psalms 41, Proverbs 10:15-16

One of the hallmarks of the Judeo-Christian faith is its sexual ethic. From the opening pages of Genesis, God makes clear His design for sexuality. It is to be enjoyed within the boundaries of covenant marriage between one man and one woman. The physical act of sex is one sign among many of the "oneness" God created us to reflect as His image-bearers. Though it is often claimed otherwise, Jesus Christ affirms God's design in Matthew 19:4-6 as does the Apostle Paul throughout his letters. This ethic is consistently portrayed throughout Scripture as the norm. The pattern. The paradigm for godly human relationships. Are there examples where God's design is not followed? Absolutely. Polygamy, adultery, incest, rape, etc. all make their appearance in the Scriptures, many them being committed by God's people. However, at no time does God affirm them as acceptable alternatives to His design.

The sexual drive of human beings is a powerful force. Almost impossible to resist. God knows this because He created it in the first place. Corrupted by the Fall, it leads to all kinds of self-destructive behaviors. Just look at the Canaanites as an example. Their culture was rife with sexual immorality. The fertility rites of their religion were essentially large scale sexual orgies in which the priests and priestesses had sex with multiple men and women. They also might re-enact Baal's copulation with cows or offer their children as sacrifices. They communed with the dead by having sex with their closest living relative. All this in an effort to ensure the harvest for the coming year. Archaeological evidence suggests most Canaanites lived in fear of their priests. Marriages and families were torn apart and the unwanted children of these annual unions were often slaughtered on altars to Baal or Dagon. Sexually transmitted disease was likely epidemic; rape was perhaps as common as it is in the worst of today's war-ravaged nations. It is against this horrific backdrop that God issues the laws concerning sexual behavior in Leviticus 18.

Sadly, humanity refuses to listen. Sexual restraint is considered antiquated at best, bigoted at worst. Even the suggestion that sexuality be reserved for covenant marriage between a man and a woman is considered hate speech in some circles. Human beings desire sexual freedom above everything else but what have we gained? Shattered relationships. Rampant sexual abuse. A rise in sexually transmitted disease. Thousands of unwanted pregnancies. Does any of this give us pause? Cause us to stop and reflect that maybe our way is not the best way? No. Instead, we seek ways to make sex "safer." We ignore the emotional toll it takes in a person's life. We kill our babies in the name of "choice" because we don't want to face the very real consequences of our actions. Far from making progress, we have simply reverted to type. We are no different, and certainly no better, than the ancient Canaanites!

There is only one way to experience true sexual freedom and that is to live within the restraints God has set up. They are for our good. For our protection. They are designed to help us flourish as human beings and experience the depths of intimacy. There is nothing like giving one's whole self – body, mind, and soul - to a member of the opposite sex within the sacred covenant of marriage. It is designed to be a reflection of the unity God desires to have with His people. Some will argue this isn't fair because not everyone can get married. Not everyone experiences heterosexual desire. Not everyone is able to find their soulmate. I understand and I grieve. It is a tender subject for me personally as I walk alongside those I love. Our world is truly broken. Our sexual desires are disordered, misdirected, and all jumbled up. All of us look forward to the Day when God makes all things new and sets all things right. On that Day, marriage will cease to exist according to Jesus because we will enjoy perfect intimacy with Him and with one another. No one will be left out. But until that Day comes, we must submit our sexuality to God. We must embrace God's design. Sexual faithfulness within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman or sexual faithfulness in celibacy as a single person.

I know that last statement sounds scary and again, unfair. It feels like God is robbing many of us of something very special. Unrequited sexual desire can lead to a sense of existential loneliness which is painful and all to real to so many in our world today. Depression, despair, and suicide haunt our loved ones who are struggling. This is

where we must cling to the sufficiency of Christ. He is more than enough to meet all of our needs. He is faithful to comfort us in the midst of our grief. He gives us the strength to follow His commands. He recognizes we will suffer in this life and He promises He will make it up to us in the world to come. Furthermore, Christ does not leave us alone or adrift. He gives us the gift of His church. A family. A community of believers to fill the empty void in our hearts. Now I get the church is all kinds of messed up. The sexual abuse propagated by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike is terrifying and traumatic. But that's not every church. In fact, it's not even most churches. Most churches are like families where people from all walks of life can connect and find community.

Friends, if you are struggling to submit your sexuality – in whatever form – to Jesus, I want you to know you are not alone. I am here for you. PEPC is here for you. If you live out of state or out of the country, chances are there is a church nearby where you can go and find hope. You will be accepted for who you are. Given the space to wrestle with temptation in an authentic way. You will find a safe space to express your doubts, fears, and anxiety. Most of all, you will be challenged to fix your eyes on Christ and find your deepest satisfaction and fulfillment in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 19:1-20:21, Mark 8:11-38, Psalms 42, Proverbs 10:17

February 26, 2019

THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for today: Leviticus 19:1-20:21, Mark 8:11-38, Psalms 42, Proverbs 10:17

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!

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 20:22-22:16, Mark 9:1-29, Psalms 43, Proverbs 10:18

February 27, 2019

THIN SPACES

Readings for today: Leviticus 20:22-22:16, Mark 9:1-29, Psalms 43, Proverbs 10:18

Years ago, I encountered the idea of a "thin space." A place where the veil between this world and the next becomes permeable, even translucent. All of a sudden, we can see into God's world from our world. The dimensions of heaven and earth merge and intersect. It is the space of miracles. The space where the divine meets the mundane face to face.

I believe the Bible records such a space when it describes what happens on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus has just given his disciples a promise. Some of them will not taste death until they get to see the Kingdom of God come in power. Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain. Once they arrive on the summit, Jesus is "transfigured" before them, meaning He appears to them in all His divine glory. His robes become radiant, taking on an intensity never before seen on earth. Elijah and Moses, the greatest of the Old Testament saints, appear beside Him. They begin to converse. A cloud overshadows them and a voice thunders from the atmosphere surrounding them, "This is my Beloved Son, listen to Him." They fall on their faces in reverent fear.

Where is heaven? Is it up in the sky somewhere? Perhaps deep into outer space? The famous Russian cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, was asked if he found God when he went to into space. No, he replied. I searched and searched but He was not there. Heaven is not a physical place residing somewhere out there in the farthest reaches of our universe. It lies in another dimension altogether. "Heaven" and "Earth" are simply different names to two different dimensions of Life. Death is the gateway between them. The dimension of heaven exists all around us all the time. In fact, the very word translated "heaven" in the Scriptures can also mean "atmosphere." That's how I prefer to think about it. We are immersed in it even though we cannot see it. God speaks to us from the air surrounding us. The saints who have gone before us are constantly moving in and among us. All of them waiting for the day when God finally brings these two dimensions together once and for all.

Perhaps the most common "thin space" I encounter is the one surrounding the death bed of those we love. Whenever a person crosses from this dimension of life into the next, they are never alone. They pass from the arms of those they love into the arms of Jesus. It's a sacred moment. Many years ago, my mother was caring for her parents as they lay dying. My grandmother was suffering from end stage dementia. She had literally been catatonic for years. Never spoke a word. Never responded to anyone's voice. She just lay curled up in the fetal position in her bed. As the end drew near, the people with her were startled to see her sit straight up, hold out her arms, and exclaim, "I see angels." Then she passed. That's a thin space.

What about you? Where have you encountered "thin spaces" in your life? For instance, did you know that when you received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, you were given the gift of the Holy Spirit? That's right! At salvation, the Third Person of the Trinity comes to take up residence in our hearts! This means Christians are literally walking, talking "thin spaces", mediating Christ wherever we go! In whatever we do! Through whatever we say! Think of everyone you will encounter today. How can you let Christ who lives in you speak through you to their hearts? How can you be the "thin space" through which God speaks and draws others to Himself?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 22:17-23:44, Mark 9:30-10:12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 10:19

February 28, 2019

SABBATH

Readings for today: Leviticus 22:17-23:44, Mark 9:30-10:12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 10:19

The first feast of the Lord listed in Leviticus 23 is the Sabbath. One day a week set aside for rest. Hardwired into creation itself, the Sabbath may be the most important and most neglected spiritual discipline of our time. The world runs 24/7. The ubiquity of social media creates an expectation that we must be "on" all the time. Most of us feel like we can't get away from our work even for an hour much less an entire day. As rates of anxiety and depression rise, accompanied by self-destructive coping mechanisms of self-harm, addiction, and suicide; one must ask the question, is it time to re-commit ourselves to a weekly Sabbath?

I keep a Sabbath. Every Monday I purposefully set aside all my work. I do not answer email. I do not answer phone calls. I do not respond to texts. I am adding a social media fast as well starting this week. I spend time in worship. I spend time talking to my accountability partner of almost twenty years. I spend time reading, resting, relaxing. I go to the gym. I spend time with my kids when they get home from school. We do not schedule any events on Monday evenings if at all possible. This weekly rhythm acts as a "speed bump" in my life, slowing me down on a regular basis.

Are there times when I violate my Sabbath? Yes. If I fail to be diligent and get all my work done in the previous six days. If I'm working on a big project or taking on a new role. If I'm under a significant deadline. However, I try to build in extra rest after those seasons come to an end so I dial life back to a sustainable pace.

My life is busy. I have four teenage children who deserve my time and attention and love. I serve as the senior pastor for a Kingdom-minded church in a community with many needs. I serve as an adjunct professor teaching graduate students about evangelism and mission two semesters every year. I serve as a board member for a growing mission organization that's doing amazing work in the Horn of Africa. I've been given opportunities to serve at different levels of my denomination. It's a rich and full and beautiful life. Without a Sabbath, I would quickly burn out.

I know your life is busy as well. Work. Family. School. Church. Kid's activities. I am sure you feel like you barely get through each day. Let me encourage you to master your schedule. To wrest control of your life from the enemy who wants to drive you to exhaustion and burnout. Set aside one day out of every week for Sabbath rest. Turn off your phone. Fast from social media. Create a "no-tech" zone in your life for just 24 hours. Rest. Relax. Take a walk with those you love. Worship. Spend uninterrupted time with God. Let Him renew and restore you for the week ahead. There is no "one" way to keep a Sabbath. The only guidance Scripture gives is worship and rest. Gather with God's people to give Him the praise He is due and then do whatever you need to do to relax and let your mind and body recover. Keep the Sabbath day, my friends. Your very life depends on it.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 24:1-25:46, Mark 10:13-31, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 10:20-21

March 1, 2019

RICH YOUNG RULER

Readings for today: Leviticus 24:1-25:46, Mark 10:13-31, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 10:20-21

The story of the rich young ruler is one of the more well-known in the gospels. Jesus is traveling up to Jerusalem, preparing to lay down His life for the sins of the world. Along the way, a young man approaches Him with urgent question..."What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with the typical Jewish answer. "Keep the commandments." The young man gets excited. "I've kept them all since my youth." Jesus looks him with love in His eyes. He knows what's coming. Knows He's about to expose the idolatry of the young man's heart. "Go. Sell all you have. Give it to the poor. And come follow Me." The young man turns away.

There are so many dynamics in play here. The longing of the young man for eternal life. The tender love of Jesus as He looks into the young man's heart. The faithfulness of the young man as he sought to honor God by keeping all the commandments. The challenge and invitation Jesus offers the young man. The deep sorrow he feels as he turns away.

I find these same dynamics in play in my own heart on a regular basis. I too long for eternal life. I wonder at times if I have done enough. I question my own faithfulness. Thankfully, I have also experienced the tender love of Jesus as He ministers to my heart. Assures me of His forgiveness and grace. Reminds me my salvation doesn't rest on my work. I too have sought to keep God's commandments. To live faithfully according to His Word. And I have felt the bite of Jesus' challenge to give all I have away for the sake of the gospel.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Try reading it again but slowly. Savor every word. Ponder every question. Reflect on every statement. Allow God's Word to sink deep into your soul. Do you feel the urgency of the young man's initial question? The pride of knowing you live faithfully according to God's Will? The sorrow of the young man's rejection? Have you experienced the tenderness of Jesus? Do you know you are the object of His unfailing love? Have you found the courage to walk by faith, sell all you have, and follow Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 25:47-27:13, Mark 10:32-52, Psalms 45, Proverbs 10:22

March 2, 2019

CONSEQUENCES

Readings for today: Leviticus 25:47-27:13, Mark 10:32-52, Psalms 45, Proverbs 10:22

I grew up in a home where good behavior was rewarded and bad behavior punished. There were consequences to one's actions. Positive. Negative. Otherwise. It is tempting to read Leviticus 26 and assume the Kingdom of God works much the same. Follow God's rules and you will be blessed. Ignore God's rules and you will be cursed. Obey God and it will go well with you. Disobey God and life will get hard. The text itself promises rain, good harvests, great victories, and the abiding presence of God to those who are faithful and it warns those who are unfaithful of famine, drought, defeat, and abandonment.

There is a branch of Christianity that makes much of verses like these. They promise health and wealth to those who have enough faith. They encourage people to put God to the test. To use their obedience to get what they want from God. When things don't go well, they blame the victim. They tell people they obviously haven't been obedient enough. They don't have enough faith. They tolerate too much sin in their lives. It's a toxic version of the Christian faith.

So what can we draw from verses like these? They seem so clear. Their promises so sure. Like every passage in Scripture, we have to read them against the backdrop of the larger story. The covenant of works was first established with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were given clear instructions, a law to follow, and the promise of paradise. However, they disobeyed. In their disobedience, the very ground began to reject them. All the curses listed in Leviticus 26 came to pass as humanity was exiled from Eden into a now broken, hostile, and sinful world. From this point forward, life would be chaotic and unstable. One could do all the right things but still experience the curse. One could do all the wrong things and seemingly receive the blessing. The world turned upside down.

Only God can make things right again and thankfully, He establishes the covenant of grace. Established on His unconditional love and predestined according to His sovereign will, God reaches out to humanity. He clothes Adam and Eve after their sin. He saves Noah and his family from the flood. He taps Abram and Sarai on the shoulder in Ur. None of these people are perfect. None of them are able to keep the Law or earn the blessings promised in Leviticus 26. But all of them walk with God. Their hearts are hungry for more of His glory. More of His presence. More of His love. They want nothing more than to serve Him faithfully all of their lives. Sin prevents them from being able to do this perfectly but it never stops them in their tracks. Even more important, sin presents no barrier for God. He reaches out to them in spite of their sin. In the midst of their disobedience. In the face of their rebellion and He grants them grace. He rejoices with them when the rains come and harvests are good and their enemies are put to flight. He grieves with them when they face drought, famine, disease, and death. No matter where they go or what they do, God is with them.

God is with you, friends! He promises never to leave you or forsake you! He is with you when you wake. With you when you sleep. With you when you work. With you when you play. There is never a moment when you are alone. This is great news! God loves us so much and continues to show us grace even in our sin.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 27:14-34, Numbers 1, Mark 11:1-26, Psalms 46, Proverbs 10:23

March 3, 2019

9/11

Readings for today: Leviticus 27:14-34, Numbers 1, Mark 11:1-26, Psalms 46, Proverbs 10:23

I once knew a man who was serving as a pastor in New York City when the towers fell. His church was located on Fifth Avenue just a few miles north of the World Trade Center in mid-town Manhattan. On the day when the planes hit the towers, Manhattan was in chaos. Billows of ash and smoke filled the streets. Police sirens filled the air as first responders rushed to the scene. People were terrified and running scared. My friend was in his office that day. He heard the commotion. He looked out his window and saw what was happening. He threw on his clergy robe and ran out into the streets to bring as many people as possible into his sanctuary. Hundreds of people filled the space. Weeping. Covered head to toe in ash. Most in shock over what they had just witnessed. They did not know each other. They had been brought together by great tragedy. And in the midst of the gathering, my friend got up to speak.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress...Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress." (Psalms 46:1-7, 10-11)

After the service, many people approached my friend asking for the source of his comforting words. Was it some famous poet? Philosopher? Some eastern mystic or guru? They were surprised to hear these words came from the Bible. In the weeks and months ahead, many of those same people would return to the church to seek comfort. It became a safe space for them to process their pain. Many of them received Christ and began a new walk of faith. It was a powerful example of the Living Word of God in action. God drawing His people to Himself in the midst of a national tragedy.

God is still a refuge and strength to those who seek Him. A very present help in trouble. Those who love God do not need fear though the earth gives way or the mountains crumble into the heart of the sea. We do not fear because we see the river that flows in the midst of the city of God. A river whose streams make glad the heart of God. Because God is with us, we shall not be moved for to live is Christ and to die is gain. So let the nations rage. Let the kingdoms of this world totter. The Lord of hosts is with us, friends! The God of Jacob is our refuge!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 2-3, Mark 11:27-12:17, Psalms 47, Proverbs 10:24-25

March 4, 2019

PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Numbers 2-3, Mark 11:27-12:17, Psalms 47, Proverbs 10:24-25

Yesterday I had the pleasure of worshiping alongside a beautiful little four year old in our church family. She had wandered from her dad and ended up in the seat next to me where she could watch her mom lead us in singing. She was fascinated watching her. She tried to copy her motions. Tried to sing some of the words. Finally, her desire to be with her mom got the best of her and she started shuffling slowly but surely towards the platform. With each step, she looked back waiting to see how I would respond. I simply smiled and waved. She kept going. She got to the first step and turned around. Suddenly she became very aware of the whole congregation. She paused and started to lay down. That's when dad stepped in.

It's a precious story. One that teaches us about the power of perspective. The little girl held a limited view of what her mom was actually doing until she got to the platform and her eyes were opened to the hundreds of people in the room following her mom's lead. In our reading for today, Jesus shares a parable that's intended to broaden our perspective as well. You and I have such a limited view of the world. We tend to focus on what's right in front of us and fail to grasp the bigger picture. We are trapped within the time/space continuum and are forced to take life as it comes. We do not have the capacity to grasp the infinite with our finite minds. So Jesus reminds us what God's been up to all along.

A man planted a vineyard. Protected it with a wall and a tower. Made it productive with a wine press. He entrusted it to some tenants and then departed. Sound familiar? In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Light and darkness. Sun, moon, stars, and planets. Water and land. Trees, bushes, and flowers. Animals, fish, birds, and insects. God made them all. Placed them on this earth. And then entrusted it to our care. To the creature He made in His own image. Humanity was given this one charge. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Exercise dominion over all I have made. Sadly, the tenants rebelled. They beat and killed the servants who were sent to check in on them. Finally, the vineyard owner sent his son. Surely they will recognize him when he comes! They do indeed and they murder him in cold blood, thinking if they get rid of the heir, they will inherit the vineyard. Humanity rebelled against God. Went their own way. Chose their own destiny. The result has been thousands of years of pain and suffering, exploitation and abuse, violence and death. God hates what He sees. Hates what's happening to His world. So He sends prophet after prophet to remind humanity of her high calling. But humanity rejects and beats and even kills the prophets. So God - in the ultimate act of love and mercy and grace - sends His Son. Surely they will listen to Him! It's not to be. Humanity takes Jesus and hangs Him on a cross, thinking if we get rid of the heir we can establish our reign and rule on the earth. What will happen to those tenants when the owner finally comes? What will happen to humanity when God finally comes? Judgment. Punishment. Eternal death.

How do you make sense of the world around you? Do you look at things from God's perspective or do you trust only what your eyes can see? What your hands can touch? What your senses can perceive? Friends, it is so easy to lose sight of who truly owns the world. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of believing we are the center of the universe. Yes, God loves us but not in a sentimental, sappy, enabling kind of way. His love is fierce and loyal and jealous. He will brook no rivals. He will not compete with the things of this world for your attention. He will not allow you to persist in sin or call good "evil" or evil "good." God defines the reality into which we must fit...not the other way around. And He disciplines those He loves, constantly making and remaking us into the image of Christ.

No matter what you may be going through in your life right now – good, bad, or ugly – ask God to help you see your life through His eyes. Ask Him to give you His perspective and rejoice in how He uses even the hardest of trials to make you into the image of His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 4-5, Mark 12:18-37, Psalms 48, Proverbs 10:26

March 5, 2019

PROXIMITY

Readings for today: Numbers 4-5, Mark 12:18-37, Psalms 48, Proverbs 10:26

It's amazing how history repeats itself. I meet so many people who have the same exact question as the scribe who approached Jesus in today's reading. "Which commandment is the most important of all?" It's a loaded question for sure. I often have to dig deeper to get the heart of why they're asking. Is it because they're trying to find a loophole? A godly excuse to go on living as they did before they met Christ? Is it because they're new to the whole Christian thing and honestly do not know? Is it because their heart has been pierced with repentance and they want to please God? There are all kinds of reasons people ask this question and their answers reveal their proximity to the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is the Kingdom and His answer reflects the truth of who He is. "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31) There is no hesitation. No confusion. Jesus quotes the famous Shema which is the heartbeat of the Jewish faith and then ties it to the love of neighbor. It's a beautifully distilled picture of God's heart for His people. It's what all the rules and regulations from Leviticus and Numbers point to and find their fulfillment in. What God desires more than anything else is a relationship with His people. He loves them and He longs to see His love returned.

The scribe understands this as well. Listen to his response which Jesus affirms. "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mark 12:32-33) He gets it. An expert in the Law, he doesn't confuse the Law with God. Doesn't confuse keeping the Law with a relationship with God. He understands that everything he's been taught. Everything he's dedicated his life to as a legal expert. Everything he teaches others under his authority points beyond itself to this one great truth...love God with all you are and all you have and love your neighbor as yourself.

There's a part of me that thinks we should simply preach this passage over and over again. For until we master it – or it masters us - we cannot go any further. All the theology and Bible study and mission trips and tithing and praying won't matter if we have not grasped what it means to love God with all our heart and mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the foundation for all the rest. This is the core of what we believe. It is essential to who we are as Christians. Now, will we ever arrive? Will we ever do this perfectly? Of course not. Let's not let our imperfections give us an excuse to dodge the issue. Despite our sinful condition, loving God and loving neighbor should be our all-consuming passion. It should be the first thing we think of every morning as we wake and the last thing we think of before we go to sleep. How can I love God more? How can I love my neighbor more? How can I so rest in Christ that these desires naturally arise from a heart that's been regenerated by the Holy Spirit? These are the thoughts that should occupy our minds far more than the mundane challenges we face every day. Friends, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:1-3)

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 6-7, Mark 12:38-13:13, Psalms 49, Proverbs 10:27-28

March 6, 2019

THE BIBLE'S PRAYERBOOK

Readings for today: Numbers 6-7, Mark 12:38-13:13, Psalms 49, Proverbs 10:27-28

When I read through the Psalms I try to imagine what the composer must be experiencing. What is he referencing when he says, ""But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me." (Psalms 49:15) 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 8-9. Mark 13:14-37, Psalms 50, Proverbs 10:29-30

March 7, 2019

A HOLY PRIESTHOOD

Readings for today: Numbers 8-9. Mark 13:14-37, Psalms 50, Proverbs 10:29-30

“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine...For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel. Instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, and I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the people of Israel, to do the service for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting and to make atonement for the people of Israel, that there may be no plague among the people of Israel when the people of Israel come near the sanctuary." (Numbers 8:14, 16-19)

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?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 10-11:23, Mark 14:1-21, Psalms 51, Proverbs 10:31-32

March 8, 2019

THE BURDEN OF LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Numbers 10-11:23, Mark 14:1-21, Psalms 51, Proverbs 10:31-32

A few days ago, an old article began reappearing in my Twitter feed. Written for Forbes, it lists the nine toughest leadership roles in our culture today. Pastors come in at #5. “Being a pastor is like death by a thousand paper cuts....You’re scrutinized and criticized from top to bottom, stem to stern. You work for an invisible, perfect Boss, and you’re supposed to lead a ragtag gaggle of volunteers towards God's coming future. It's like herding cats, but harder.” Now I am not sure my job is any harder than anyone else’s but I do sympathize with the sentiments of the article. Leadership is hard. The burden is heavy. The struggle is real. No matter what sphere of life you are called to lead in – and I truly believe all of us are “leaders” in one sphere or another - it comes with a lot of stress. How one responds to the stress often determines the success or failure of the leader.

Moses felt the stress of leadership. Listen to what he says to the Lord after what seems like the umpteenth time the people of Israel complained. "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness." (Numbers 11:11-15) Think about all Moses had accomplished up to this point. At eighty years of age, he had returned to Egypt where he was wanted for murder to confront Pharoah. After levying plague after plague, he successfully secured freedom for the people of Israel. He leads them out with great wealth and possessions. He parts the Red Sea. Feeds them in the wilderness. Brings water from a rock. He performs miracle after miracle and yet Israel remains so ungrateful. They continue to grumble and complain. At the first sign of hardship, they start whining about going back to Egypt. They criticize and attack his leadership. They come after his family. They question his ability. Can you imagine how frustrating this must have been?

So Moses asks God to kill him. He’s tired. He’s weary. He’s depressed. He’s anxious. He’s come to the end of himself. He’s on empty. He’s got nothing left. Ever felt like that? Interestingly enough, the toughest job Forbes lists in its article is parenting. Staying at home to raise the kids. Anyone who’s ever been a parent knows the struggle of watching your kids grow up. The joy and the sorrow. The excitement and the anxiety. The pride and the fear. It’s quite a roller coaster. Moses sees himself as a kind of parent to Israel. Like God put him in charge of raising hundreds of thousands of children. Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Did I nurse them as they grew? How am I going to feed them? How am I going to provide for them? How am I going to raise them to maturity? The burden is simply too great so he cries out in anguish and despair.

Look at how God responds. “Then the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.” (Numbers 11:16-17) God doesn’t leave Moses alone. He provides friends and colleagues to share the load. It is not up to Moses to do this on his own. This project doesn’t rise or fall with Moses. Seventy elders are raised up by God to help lead and guide the people. They are filled with the same Spirit. They are given some of the same gifts. They will lighten the load.

Why is leadership so hard? Because we too often go it alone. I’ve known too many pastors who crash and burn because they have no friends. No colleagues to share their burdens with. I’ve known too many moms and dads who refuse to let others come alongside them and help. I’ve known too many business leaders who think their

business cannot survive without them. Too many teachers who believe the success or failure of each child rests on them.

Friends, leadership is a gift to be shared. I know I would not be where I am today without a phenomenal wife who stands by my side. Four great kids who are learning to take responsibility for themselves. Elders in our church who prayerfully seek the mind of Christ and are eager to share the burden. A staff team that truly loves and supports one another. It is awesome. Who has God put in your life to share the load? Who has God raised up to carry the burden with you? Don't be afraid to ask God for help! Ask Him to do for you what He did for Moses.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 11:24-13, Mark 14:22-52, Psalms 52, Proverbs 11:1-3

March 9, 2019

OUT OF THE BOX

Readings for today: Numbers 11:24-13, Mark 14:22-52, Psalms 52, Proverbs 11:1-3

God's ways are not our ways. Just as soon as we try to squeeze God into some kind of box, He breaks out. 70 elders are raised up to help lead the nation. They gather at the sanctuary to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is poured out and shockingly, two men who remained in the camp start to prophesy. Joshua, jealous for his mentor Moses, wants to stop them but Moses recognizes God cannot be confined to Joshua's box. Israel receives the Law of God forbidding intermarriage with those who are not part of God's people. Miriam and Aaron want to apply God's law to Moses' marriage. They believe his marriage to a Cushite woman disqualifies him on some level from being the supreme leader of Israel. But God reminds them He will not be confined to their box. "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth...And God said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord." (Numbers 12:3, 6, 8) Twelve spies are sent into the Promised Land. They find it to be a good land. A fruitful land. A blessed land. Flowing in milk and honey. It is everything God promised. But there is a problem. "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are...The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. 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." (Numbers 13:31-33) In their fear, they take their eyes off of God. Despite all the miracles they've seen and experienced, they still put God in a box.

How often do we make the same mistake? How much do we limit God through our disbelief? How many times do we stick God in a box? Maybe it's our theology. We believe more in our theological system than we do in Christ. Maybe it's our culture. We believe more in our cultural understandings of the gospel than we do in the gospel itself. Maybe it's our human frailty. We trust more in our own wisdom and strength than we do in God.

This is deeply challenging and deeply practical. The other day, I spent time with several middle and high school boys. We talked about how Jesus requires us to sacrifice everything in order to follow Him. Our wealth. Our gifts and talents and abilities. Our success. Our future. Everything that we have and all that we are is to be surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. In return, Jesus offers us eternal life. Abundant life. Kingdom life. Life so precious and beautiful and glorious, it absolutely dwarfs whatever we may experience in this world. But we live in this world. And the expectations of this world too often frame how we understand God. So we have to fight to stay focused on Jesus. To see the world through His eyes. To let His expectations shape our expectations and His promises shape our understanding of life, the world, and our future.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14:1-15:16, Mark 14:53-72, Psalms 53, Proverbs 11:4

March 10, 2019

MISSING A DAY

Readings for today: Numbers 14:1-15:16, Mark 14:53-72, Psalms 53, Proverbs 11:4

So I missed a day. The combination of Daylight Savings, traveling to Portland, speaking at a missions conference, and returning home for a sermon planning retreat left me no time to sit quietly with the Lord and reflect on His Word. Some days are like that, aren't they? You wake up late. Rush to get the kids dressed and off to school. Barely get to work on time. You're already behind. You cruise throughout your day, knocking stuff off your list. You pick the kids up after school. Take them to practice. Hit fast food along the way because you're going to be at the dance studio or baseball diamond all afternoon and evening. They do their homework in the car. You finally get home and you're exhausted. It's called life. And we live it with the pedal down most of the time.

Here's the thing to remember. God is with you. Every step of the way. He's with you as you rush to get ready in the morning. He's in the car as you drive your kids to school or commute to work. He's there at the office waiting for you. He's guiding your hands throughout the day. He loves watching your children do what they love after school. He's giving them wisdom as they do their homework. He's there when your head hits the pillow at night. Missing a day in your Bible reading or falling behind in your Bible in a Year reading plan has no bearing on His love for you. He is a good Father. He sees your life and understands the pressure you're under. He's not trying to add one more thing to your already overloaded schedule.

So yesterday was crazy for me. But I've learned over the years how to tune my heart into God no matter what I may be engaged in. Yes, I didn't get to my reading but I did sense God's abiding presence in everything I said and did. I had a fantastic time at Portland Christian Center with some friends who have become very dear to me. Preaching at their missions conference was one of the great blessings of my life. I loved meeting their missionaries and encouraging them. Loved spending time with spiritual mentors like Ray and Linda Noah. Loved connecting with my wife as I sat in the lounge at the airport waiting for my flight. Loved re-connecting with Pastor Gary and Pastor Matt at the airport before being heading up the mountain for our retreat. Throughout it all, God ministered to my heart. Encouraged my soul. Stirred an even greater passion in me for what He's doing in the world. This is the fruit of a strong devotional life and I hope you sense something similar being born in your own life as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 15:17-16:40, Mark 15, Psalms 54, Proverbs 11:5-6

March 11, 2019

REFUSING TO ACCEPT OUR PLACE

Readings for today: Numbers 15:17-16:40, Mark 15, Psalms 54, Proverbs 11:5-6

Today's reading strikes a chord every time I come across it. "They assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" (Numbers 16:3) I resonate with the sons of Korah. I tend to agree with their complaint. I too want to believe that every single human being is equal in the eyes of the Lord and worthy of serving in His presence. I've been raised in a democracy after all and trained from birth to believe one can achieve anything if they just set their minds to it.

This is part of what makes the Bible so challenging. There is a significant cultural gap between the ancient near east culture of Israel and the 21st century United States. Israel was no democracy. God Himself was her king. As such, He held the power of life and death in His hands. He decided who got to serve and what role they would play. Moses was God's appointed leader. Aaron was God's appointed priest. The rest of the Levites each had their appointed role as well. But it was clear they were not satisfied. They too aspired to the priesthood. They too aspired to lead.

Theologian Sally McFague has persuasively argued that sin is the refusal to accept our place. From the very beginning, the reach of human beings has always exceeded their grasp. Adam and Eve were not content with their role in the Garden of Eden so they ate the fruit in order to become like God. The people who built the Tower of Babel sought to make a name for themselves on the earth. The pagan nations of the earth created their own gods who they could manipulate and control. This has always been the case with human beings and Israel is no different. The families of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram all wanted more so they rebelled against God's ordained leadership and suffered the consequences. Their supernatural death served as a stark warning to all of Israel of the cost of rebelling against God.

It's a scary story. It's not one we read our children at bedtime. But it is worth pondering and praying over. Our sinful hearts are naturally wired to rebel against God. We are naturally inclined towards sin and evil. We naturally refuse to accept our place in God's created order. Jesus shows us a different way. He shows us the path of true obedience as He accepts His Father's will and submits to death on a cross. It's a beautiful picture of faithfulness that results in the salvation of all who believe.

Salvation comes to those who submit their lives to Christ. To those who accept His Lordship over their lives. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. Jesus is indeed enthroned on the praises of His people but He does not maintain His Lordship by popular vote. He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords and one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess – whether they want to or not - that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 16:41-18:32, Mark 16, Psalms 55, Proverbs 11:7

March 12, 2019

SIGNS AND WONDERS

Readings for today: Numbers 16:41-18:32, Mark 16, Psalms 55, Proverbs 11:7

One of the things we hear about when we go to Africa are all the signs and wonders God is accomplishing through His people. Healings. Casting out demons. Miraculous deliverance from those who are trying to kill them. These stories are incredibly common where we go in Ethiopia and it makes me think immediately of the Great Commission from the Gospel of Mark.

"And Jesus said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:15-18)

As westerners, we have a hard time with miracles. We tend to doubt they actually exist. We look for more natural explanations. Why did Aaron's rod bud? Why did the early Christians or those in the developing world seem to have the ability to cast out demons? Heal the sick? Speak in tongues? Tred on serpents and scorpions without being injured? We want to know if these things are real or if these other Christians are gifted with some special ability not accessible to us?

However interesting these questions may be, they are not the main ones we should be asking. God gives signs and wonders – in whatever form - to authenticate His message to us. They are not ends in themselves but serve to confirm what God has already said. Why did Aaron's rod bud? God was confirming his leadership publicly in front of all of Israel. Why did the early Christians have the ability to cast out demons, heal the sick, and speak in tongues? God was confirming the truth of the gospel in front of both the Jewish and pagan world. What is the primary sign for us today? The Bible. It is a miracle all its own. 66 books written over several centuries by different authors all declaring the same message. God confirming what He has to say through His Word to His people.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 19-20, Luke 1:1-25, Psalms 56, Proverbs 11:8

March 13, 2019

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Readings for today: Numbers 19-20, Luke 1:1-25, Psalms 56, Proverbs 11:8

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:13-17)

John the Baptist is one of the most remarkable figures in all the Bible. Miraculously conceived. Filled by the Holy Spirit while he was still in the womb. Nazarite from birth. From the beginning, John was destined for greatness. It was his special calling to prepare the way for the Lord. To make ready the people for Jesus. To turn the hearts of the children of Israel back to Yahweh. John was Elijah reborn. He had the same spirit. The same power. He spoke with the same authority. And the people came to him in droves.

John was very popular in his day. His fame grew to the point where he caught the eye of Herod and the other ruling elite. The crowds he drew were large. The message he preached strong. At the height of his influence, John baptizes even Jesus Himself. This represents the turning point in his ministry. From this point forward he would decrease while Jesus increased. His own disciples would leave him to follow Jesus. One might think John would grow jealous or anxious or frustrated. Not so. John knew his role. John understood his place. It would be his particular glory to build up a ministry so that he might hand it off to Jesus.

John's story is a powerful one for us preachers. We spend our lives ministering to the congregations God places under our care. We pour our hearts into growing our churches deep and wide. We reach the lost. We disciple believers. We engage in God's mission both domestically and abroad. However, as our ministry influence grows so does our pride. We start to believe our own hype. We start to believe we play some kind of indispensable role in God's Kingdom. And when called to hand our ministries off to someone else – be it another leader or successor - we often struggle. Our pride gets in the way. I've seen it happen time and time again. I've experienced it in my own heart as well.

Reflecting on John the Baptist is good for me. I know my gifts pale in comparison to him. I know my calling is to the ordinary whereas his was to the extraordinary. Certainly, no one would ever mistake me for Elijah! ;-) Many years ago, God spoke three words to me very clearly in a time of prayer. These three words have become the foundation of my life and ministry. They are three words I repeat to myself almost every day as I serve the Lord.

Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. First, God wants me to labor in obscurity. To be content in the field where He's planted me. To not seek greener pastures than the ones He's provided. Second, God wants me to embrace anonymity. At the end of the day I want Jesus' name to be famous. As the arc of my career comes to a close, I hope to retire as the church janitor. That would be a truly glorious end to my ministry. Third, pursue insignificance. The true measure of a pastor is not in the crowds she can draw. It's not the influence he wields. It's not the buildings she builds or the number of ministries he launches. It's her deep love and devotion to God. It's his willingness to perform the most menial of tasks in service to Christ. This is my heart. This is my calling. This is what I learn from John the Baptist.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21:1-22:20, Luke 1:26-56, Psalms 57:1-11, Proverbs 11:9-11

March 14, 2019

THE HUMILITY OF MARY

Readings for today: Numbers 21:1-22:20, Luke 1:26-56, Psalms 57:1-11, Proverbs 11:9-11

Mary is one of the most remarkable people in history. Chosen by God to bear the Savior of the world, this young teenage girl humbly accepts God's call on her life. No fighting. No resisting. No arguing. She simply says, "I am the Lord's servant." Would that we all could exhibit the humility of Mary!

Humanity's major problem has always been pride. Fundamentally, we want to be gods. We want to be in charge of our lives. We hate submission. We despise humility. We scoff at the meek. From the moment we come out of the womb, we are already at war with any kind of authority in our lives.

Mary understands her place. She understands her life is not her own. She is the clay and God is the potter. So when Gabriel brings her the news of what's about to take place inside her womb, she embraces her call. When her cousin Elizabeth prophetically confirms the good news of her pregnancy, she rejoices. Her Magnificat is considered to be one of the greatest pieces of ancient poetry/verse ever written.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." (Luke 1:46-55)

I love the notes she hits. God's faithfulness. God's blessing. God's mercy. God's glory. God's holiness. God's strength. God's honor. This is a hymn of praise to God for all He has done not only for her but for her people Israel. She understands this is not about her...this is about the salvation of the world. This is about God fulfilling His promises. Ancient prophecies now coming true. Mary sees all this and is thankful she gets to play her part in God's great salvation story.

Mary trusts God with her life. She trusts God with her future. This pregnancy puts everything at risk for her. Joseph is considering divorce. Her family would be utterly ashamed. Her community scandalized. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo would have destroyed her reputation. She is literally staring death in the face as a pregnant, unwed mother with a scarlet letter branded across her chest. Still she believes. Still she submits. Still she trusts.

What about us? Do we see the world as Mary sees it? Do we see our lives as Mary saw hers? God has placed a call on each one of us. Every single person is called to play their part in the Kingdom of God. We are put here on this earth to be God's instruments. To be used as He so chooses. Humility means accepting and embracing God's absolute authority over every facet of our lives. It means rejoicing at the idea that He would choose us to accomplish His divine plan. This is the truth that formed the bedrock of Mary's life. Does it form yours?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 22:21-23:30, Luke 1:57-80, Psalms 58, Proverbs 11:12-13

March 15, 2019

HONEST PRAYER

Readings for today: Numbers 22:21-23:30, Luke 1:57-80, Psalms 58, Proverbs 11:12-13

How do you pray? With eyes closed, hands folded, head bowed? Do you follow a formula like the Lord's Prayer? Do you ever worry about saying the wrong thing? Are you afraid to offend God? Afraid to express your true emotions before Him? Do your prayers every look like those of the Psalmist?

"Do you indeed decree what is right, you gods? Do you judge the children of man uprightly? No, in your hearts you devise wrongs; your hands deal out violence on earth. The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies. They have venom like the venom of a serpent, like the deaf adder that stops its ear, so that it does not hear the voice of charmers or of the cunning enchanter. 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. Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns, whether green or ablaze, may he sweep them away! 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 58:1-11)

The prayers God loves the most are the prayers that come from the heart. The prayers that seem wrenched from the depths of our souls. The prayers that express our deepest longings. Our greatest fears. Our sharpest pains. All our hopes and dreams. When you read the Psalms, you are reading the prayerbook of the Bible. You are reading a record of the written prayers the people of God have been praying for centuries. They often include anger and rage. They often call for vengeance and the death of enemies. And these things run so counter to the gospel.

How should we read the Psalms? My encouragement is to read them less as ethical instructions and more as an invitation to be honest before God. To bring all your emotions and feelings and reactions before the Lord and lay them at His feet. God is a big boy. He can handle whatever you throw at Him. He is not afraid of your feelings and He is not easily offended. His love for you is truly unconditional and there is no condemnation in His presence. There is only grace and mercy and righteousness and peace. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever so you can count on Him to always be faithful. His promises are sure. His love is eternal. Trust Him enough to be honest with Him in prayer.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 24-25, Luke 2:1-35, Psalms 59, Proverbs 11:14

March 16, 2019

GOD AND BAAL

Readings for today: Numbers 24-25, Luke 2:1-35, Psalms 59, Proverbs 11:14

One cannot read too far into the Scriptures before encountering a false god named Baal. Baal was a Canaanite god worshiped in many different ways by many different tribes. Baal is typically understood to be the storm god. The god of weather and fertility. In an agrarian culture, one can easily see how such a god would gain ascendance and become the primary object of worship along with his divine consort, Astarte. Worshiping Baal involved ritual sex. Priests and priestesses would copulate with worshipers who came to make offerings at the shrine. On high holy days, the community would gather and engage in large-scale orgies as they sought to commune with Baal. Some Baal cults went to the extreme often sacrificing children or worshiping their own excrement. Yes, you read that last part right. Their worship literally involved the uncovering of the rectum - the most shameful part of the human body according to the Jews due to its almost permanent state of uncleanliness - and depositing their waste on the altar. Such was life under the cult of Baal-Peor.

Baal-Peor literally means “Lord of the open holes” or Lord of the rectum according to Jewish sources. Their worship was the very definition of ritual uncleanliness. The very antithesis of Israelite worship. God hates Baal worship. Hates it for what it represents. Hates what it does to His divine-image bearers. Hates how it de-humanizes and demeans. He is disgusted by it. Offended by it. So when His own people - the people He miraculously saved and sustained - begin to worship Baal-Peor, He responds with swift, righteous judgment. A plague is unleashed. Perhaps originating from the very waste the Moabites worshiped, killing 24,000 Israelites. Things would have been much worse except for Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, who takes up a spear and kills an Israelite man and Moabite woman as they engaged in ritual sex in front of Moses and the gathered congregation at the entrance of the Tabernacle itself!

This incident at Peor is so horrifying, it becomes a watchword for future generations of Israelites. It will be used as a metaphor in both the Psalms and prophetic literature to describe extreme acts of unfaithfulness on the part of God’s people.

Sadly, Baal worship is experiencing a revival. Perhaps not in the extreme form represented by Baal-Peor but certainly in the sexual liberties of 21st century American culture. Sex has become a god in our world. Lust has been mainstreamed. Altars to Eros have been erected all over and command millions of worshipers. Sexual restraint is considered unholy. The denial of sexual desire almost criminal. Speaking out against the god of sex blasphemous. Baal has even ensnared millions of Christians as well. Pornography. Sexual promiscuity. Adultery. Homosexuality. Serial divorce. You name it, the American church has condoned it. And where has it led us? Broken marriages. Abortion. Abuse. Sexually transmitted disease. Broken families and broken relationships. The consequences are legion.

Against this rising tide of paganism stands Jesus. He affirms God’s design for holy sexuality within the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. He speaks out against the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes. He calls for sexual restraint in His Sermon on the Mount. He sets us free from the enslaving power of sexual desire and He offers us the far more fulfilling life of holiness instead.

Are you struggling with sexual temptation in your life? Have you experienced sexual brokenness and shame? Do you feel enslaved to your sexual desires? Jesus offers you freedom. Jesus offers forgiveness. Our faith in Jesus gives us the power to live a holy life and experience the joy that comes from submitting our sexual desires to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 26:1-51, Luke 2:36-52, Psalms 60, Proverbs 11:15

March 17, 2019

GROWING IN WISDOM AND STATURE

Readings for today: Numbers 26:1-51, Luke 2:36-52, Psalms 60, Proverbs 11:15

What are your impressions of Jesus? Can you imagine Him as a baby in Mary's arms? As a toddler in Joseph's carpentry shop? Running around with the other boys in Nazareth? Do you think He ever felt awkward? This sense that He was not like the rest? I imagine Jesus did. I imagine He felt set apart from a very early age.

Many myths and stories have been told about the so-called "lost years" of Jesus. The years of Jesus' childhood that none of the gospel writers bother to write down. Some say Jesus went to study with the gurus of India. Some say He spent His time with the Essenes and His cousin John. Still others believe He traveled to England with Joseph of Arimethea. All of these theories are completely bogus of course. Tales spun to satisfy a curiosity that simply will not accept the truth. Jesus lived a very ordinary life as the oldest son of Joseph and Mary. He apprenticed in His father's carpentry business. He studied Torah with the rabbi's. He simply "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)

Of course, there were glimpses of the extraordinary in Jesus' life. Like the time at the Temple when He was twelve years old. Joseph and Mary make their annual trek to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. After the celebration is over, they begin to make their way home. Since villages all tended to travel together, they assumed Jesus was with their group. However, after they get a day's journey out, they realize Jesus is not with them and they panic. They rush back to Jerusalem. Search the city for three whole days 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. Jesus responds by humbling himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Meanwhile Mary adds this event to the list she's treasuring in her heart. Angelic visitations. Miraculous conception. Awe-inspiring birth. Shepherds, wise men, and others worshiping her little boy. Old Simeon proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. 84 year old Anna saying the most amazing things. Surely Mary must have seen something special in Jesus. Something she did not see in her other children. And now this latest episode where her twelve year old son, displaying a wisdom beyond His years, amazing the teachers of the law in the Temple with His understanding. What a privilege to have a front row seat to all that God was doing in and through Jesus. To watch Him grow in wisdom and stature and favor with both God and man. Mary could not have been more proud.

So let me ask you this question...is Jesus growing on you? Do you find yourself trusting in His wisdom? Trusting in His strength? Is Jesus "increasing" in your eyes? Has He found favor with you like He has for so many billions throughout the world today?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 26:52-28:15, Luke 3:1-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 11:16-17

March 18, 2019

BIBLICAL FEMINISM

Readings for today: Numbers 26:52-28:15, Luke 3:1-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 11:16-17

Today's reading includes a remarkable story. Five women appear before the gathered leadership of Israel at the Tabernacle to present one of the earliest recorded lawsuits in history. Their claim? Their father died without a male heir which means his inheritance is now in jeopardy. He was not part of the rebellion of Korah so they have legitimate standing to bring his case before the Lord. And they ask Moses to grant them their father's property rights so they can preserve the family line.

I cannot imagine the courage this course of action must have taken. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah knew very well that women did not have any rights in the ancient near east. Not in Israel and certainly not in the nations that surrounded them. Women were considered property in that time. Not even counted as human beings. At the death of their father or brothers or husbands, they were not entitled to any inheritance and were often left destitute. Fast forward a few centuries and we will see this scene play itself out in the book of Ruth where Naomi loses not only her husband but also her two sons, leaving her to fend for herself.

So imagine you are one of these five women. Raised to believe you have no rights. Your primary value is to bear sons to your future husband so his family line can be preserved. Now imagine making the decision to approach Moses and the gathered leadership of Israel in front of the Tabernacle itself to present your case. You know what you are about to do has never been done. You know what you are about to ask for has never happened before. You know there's a good chance your petition will fail but you courageously step forward anyway. You argue persuasively for the preservation of your father's inheritance and you make the audacious claim to be counted among your father's brothers.

I would have loved to see the look on Moses' face. Was it shock? Confusion? Did he smile at the women's boldness? There is no indication in the text one way or another. What we do know is Moses recuses himself and takes their petition to the Lord. This, in itself, is a strong affirmation of the women. And then there is the response from God. I have to believe their courage brought a smile to His face and He issues a new law for Israel. From this point forward, "If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter." (Numbers 27:8) A statute still used today as legal precedent by the American Bar Association.

The Bible is a history of God's interactions with many different human cultures. Human culture, by definition, is always corrupt and unjust. God is at work constantly bending the arc of human history towards justice. Towards righteousness. Here is a clear case where God honors the rights of women, granting them a unique status when compared to other ancient near east societies. There is a direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and Deborah who served as judge and spiritual leader for all of Israel. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the female disciples who gathered round Jesus and remained faithful to Him even to the end when all the other male disciples had long since fled. A direct line between the daughters of Zelophehad and the women Paul affirms like Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia who was "excellent among the apostles." God is still doing this work today as women continue to be affirmed as strong and gifted leaders across all sectors of human society.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 28:16-29:40, Luke 3:23-38, Psalms 62, Proverbs 11:18-19

March 19, 2019

THE POWER OF SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Readings for today: Numbers 28:16-29:40, Luke 3:23-38, Psalms 62, Proverbs 11:18-19

I am learning how to pray. For almost twenty-five years, I've been following the same prayer routine. I make lists. I journal. I read devotional books. I listen to music. All in a monumental effort to stay focused as I talk to God. It's been hard. There are so many things on my mind. My wife. My children. My family. My friends. The needs of my church family. Missionaries I love serving overseas. The problems in our country today. My thoughts go a million different directions so prayer is hard for me. Always has been.

Last fall, I was interviewing an Ethiopian pastor. He's probably twenty years old. Maybe a 7th grade education. He's risking his life to bring the gospel to a village almost one hundred kilometers from his home. I asked him how he prayed. He talked about his walks to and from the village where he serves. He talked about the silence. The solitude. And how God speaks to him during his travel time. I cannot imagine the burdens this man carries. Burdens for his family. His friends. The people he serves. The poverty they live with every day. The struggle for food and water and medical care. And yet prayer is as natural to him as breathing.

So I asked this man to teach me to pray. He encouraged me to spend far less time on my lists. Stop the journaling. Put aside the books. Turn off the music. He encouraged me to rise early before the sun comes up and just sit silently with God. Let my thoughts run loose until they run out of steam. Sit in solitude until the voices in my head subside enough for me to hear the still, small voice of God.

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken. How long will all of you attack a man to batter him, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence? They only plan to thrust him down from his high position. They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse. For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." (Psalms 62:1-8)

So I am learning to pray. Since my trip to Ethiopia last fall, I have been rising early. Getting up before the sun. Praying over my family before I leave the house. Heading up to the church where I sit silently in the sanctuary with my Lord. I let my thoughts go. I've learned to stop trying so hard to focus. After about thirty to forty-five minutes, I find my mind starts to clear. God starts to speak. Scripture begins to fill my head and heart. And I begin to walk the pews. Praying over each seat. Praying over the people who sit in those seats every Sunday. (Yes, I know our "seating chart..." ha!) Praying through the Scriptures God has brought to mind. The peace that comes over me is profound. It carries me through the rest of my day.

What does your prayer life look like? Is it hard for you like it is for me? Does it look like that of the Psalmist? Or my Ethiopian friend? Or does your prayer life look more like what mine has been? What would it look like to truly engage God on His terms? To wait for Him in silence and solitude? Does that even seem possible in the midst of your busy life? Let me encourage you to start small. Five or ten minutes in the morning before anyone gets up. At night after everyone goes to bed. Perhaps on your lunch break. Stay away from your tech. Put aside any distractions. Just you and God. Spend as much time as you need before Him until your mind clears, your heart calms, and you begin to hear His voice.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 30-31, Luke 4:1-30, Psalms 63, Proverbs 11:20-21

March 20, 2019

HOLY WAR

Readings for today: Numbers 30-31, Luke 4:1-30, Psalms 63, Proverbs 11:20-21

Crusades. Holy War. Jihad. Violence sanctioned by God Himself. In Numbers 31, God directs Moses and Israel to attack Midian. “Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterward you shall be gathered to your people.” Who was Midian and what had they done to Israel to cause judgment to fall on them in such an extreme fashion?

Midian was a son of Abraham and his servant Keturah. While Abraham was still living, he sent Midian away so that there would be no competition for Isaac’s inheritance. Midian presumably thrived over the years becoming a great tribal nation. Abraham’s great-grandson Joseph was sold to Midianite traders as they made their way to Egypt. Moses fled to Midian to escape Egyptian justice and actually married a Midianite woman. As Moses learned to lead the nation of Israel, he leaned on his father-in-law, a Midianite priest, for advice but Israel’s close association with Midian would come back to haunt them as they began to intermarry with them and co-mingle their worship practices. This results in judgment as God pours out His wrath on Israel through a plague which is only stopped when Phinehas kills Cozbi, daughter of a Midianite chief named Zur, and her husband Zimri who was the son of a Simeonite chief. Furthermore, the Midianites had allied themselves with the Moabites, setting themselves in opposition to Israel, and called on one of their prophets - Balaam - to come and curse the people of God.

You may remember the 2nd Commandment. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,” (Exodus 20:4-5) God is jealous for HIs divine Name. Jealous for His divine Glory. Jealous for His relationship with His people. He makes clear over and over again throughout the Scriptures that He will brook no rivals. So when Israel begins to worship the Midianite gods, God takes action. He calls for holy war. He commands His people to attack Midian and “execute the Lord’s vengeance.” Israel is successful. They kill all the males that come against them. They take the women and children hostage. They plunder their possessions. Then they go one step further. As an act of ritual purity, they kill all the male children and any women who is not a virgin. It is brutal. It is horrifying. It is judgment.

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn’t square with our culturally notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how our God could ever act in such ways. This is where we come face to face with God’s holiness. God’s righteousness. God’s justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He will not let it go. He will not overlook our sin. He will not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. Repentance is the only appropriate response of the creature when confronted by the Creator and this is the lesson we must all take away. God will not be mocked. Not back then. Not now. Not in the future. God is a God of love and mercy and grace but He is also a God of holiness and righteousness and justice. He is quick to forgive the sin of those who repent but He is also faithful to judge those who persist in their rebellion. Humble yourself before the Lord before it is too late.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 32:1-33:39, Luke 4:31-44, Psalms 64, Proverbs 11:22

March 21, 2019

COVENANT COMMUNITY

Readings for today: Numbers 32:1-33:39, Luke 4:31-5:11, Psalms 64, Proverbs 11:22

There is a difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract is ultimately self-centered. You enter into a relationship in order to get your needs met. You agree with another party to serve them so long as they agree to serve you. As soon as they fail or fall down on the job, the contact is broken and you are set free from any obligations. A covenant is different. It is ultimately "other-centered." Yes, there is still an agreement between two parties. Yes, the agreement involves both parties getting their needs met. But it recognizes that failure is part of life. People are not perfect. Expectations are not always met. People's feelings do get hurt. Covenants, however, cannot be broken. Forgiveness and grace are extended and reconciliation pursued instead of simply walking away.

The people of Israel have made it. They are on the cusp of the Promised Land. Two of the tribes – Reuben and Gad - want to settle down in the land they've just conquered. This puts the covenant relationship of the people of God to the test. If they hold to a contractual understanding of community then Reuben and Gad have no incentive to go further. Their needs are met. They've received their inheritance. They can build their cities and feed their livestock and plant their fields and raise their families. They can walk away. But Moses reminds them their relationship runs much deeper. They are part of the covenant people of God. As such, their work isn't done until all the tribes come into their own. This isn't about them. They are not the center of the universe. They cannot use the other tribes to serve their own purposes. The other tribes sacrificed a great deal to help them claim their territory and now it is their turn to do the same. Furthermore, there are dire consequences associated with breaking the covenant. The previous generation wandered for forty years under the judgment of God for failing to keep their covenant promises. Would this generation make the same mistake?

Tragically, we live in a narcissistic age. The spirit of the age is selfishness. Self-esteem. Self-care. Self-help. Self-centeredness is the rule rather than the exception. As such, all our relationships are fundamentally contractual in nature. As soon as we are let down. As soon as we are disappointed. As soon as our expectations are not met. As soon as we get bored. We break fellowship. We walk away. The results are devastating. Fruitful partnerships dissolve. Successful businesses fail. Loving marriages end in divorce. Churches split. It's heartbreaking.

The spirit of our age infects everyone. None of us are immune. I cannot tell you how many parents I've talked to who have switched their kids from school to school or team to team because their child experiences disappointment. I cannot tell you how many people I've talked to who jump from church to church because they aren't "getting fed", their needs aren't "getting met", or they've been disappointed and let down. I cannot tell you the number of couples I've counseled who tell me they've fallen "out of love" or the spark has "gone out" or they have irreconcilable differences and are getting divorced...again.

The heart of the gospel is the covenant God makes with us to be our God no matter what. To be our God no matter how many times we fail or let Him down. God is faithful. Period. Nothing can separate us from His love and He wants us to exhibit the same kind of covenant commitment in our relationships with one another. Frankly, this is why we take vows when we join a church. To remind ourselves that we need each other. To remind ourselves that we are committed to each other. Through thick and thin. In good times and in bad. For better or for worse. We are all part of the same family and as such need to stick it out even when things get hard. There's only one way this works. Grace. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. The gospel given concrete expression in each of our lives. The reality is you will only experience the grace and forgiveness of God as you extend grace and forgiveness to others. These two are inexorably tied together. They cannot be experienced independent of one another. If you cannot find it in your heart to forgive those who hurt you. If you cannot find it in your heart to extend grace to those who disappoint you or let you down. If you would rather walk away than reconcile then you are committing the grave sin of breaking a covenant relationship and you will fall under God's judgment. He will discipline you until the covenant is restored for this is His will for your life and mine.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 33:40-35:34, Luke 5:12-28, Psalms 65, Proverbs 11:23

March 22, 2019

THE DEPENDENCE OF JESUS

Readings for today: Numbers 33:40-35:34, Luke 5:12-28, Psalms 65, Proverbs 11:23

Who is Jesus? Who do you understand Him to be? A Superman? Some kind of Marvel character? A human being endowed with extraordinary powers? Do you see Him as divine? God clothing Himself in human flesh much like you or I put on a suit or a dress in the morning? Is He an enlightened human being? A great moral teacher? A magician who performed magic tricks of healing?

There's a great line in verse 17 of our reading today. "The power of the Lord was with Him to heal." Wait a minute. Are you suggesting there might be a time when the power of the Lord was NOT with Him to heal? Are you suggesting that there might be times when Jesus didn't have all the power and authority in heaven and on earth to command legions of angels? Are you suggesting that Jesus – the very Son of God, the 2nd member of the Trinity - somehow had given up His divine prerogatives and powers when He became a human being?

Yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting. Furthermore, it's not me who suggests it but Scripture itself. In Philippians 2:7, the Apostle Paul writes, "Jesus emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." What did Jesus empty Himself of? All His divine rights. All His divine power. All His divine glory. He put all that aside. Gave it all up in order to become a human being. To be born in the likeness of men and women.

Jesus was made like us in every way according to Hebrews 2:17. He lived a life like ours. He died a death like ours. He united Himself to us so that He might raise us to new life with Him. So what does this mean? It means Jesus – like you and me - had to learn obedience. "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered." He had to learn how to depend on His Father for all things. This was the source of His temptation in the wilderness. To break His dependence on His Father and provide for Himself. Protect Himself. Promote Himself. The perfection of Jesus isn't so much that He followed the Law perfectly - although He absolutely did - it was that He lived in complete and utter dependence on the Father. He truly walked by faith and not by sight. So when Jesus stretched out His hand to heal, He was depending on His Father to provide the power. When Jesus confronted and cast out demons, He was depending on His Father to give Him the authority. When Jesus suffered on the cross, He cried out because for the first time His connection to His Father was broken. Through it all Jesus remained truly God and yet became truly human. This is the mystery of the Incarnation.

What does all this mean? Jesus Himself told His disciples, "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) Greater works? Than Jesus? Are you kidding me? Surely Jesus isn't serious? Friends, the gospel is the power of God for all who believe. Trusting in the power of the gospel means learning to live as Jesus lived...in complete and utter dependence on the Father. To let your life become a conduit of grace and mercy and forgiveness and reconciliation. To let your life become the channel through which the love of God flows. This was the secret to Jesus' life here on earth. It is why He was able to heal. Why He was able to cast out demons. Why He was able to confront powers and principalities. Why He was able to completely free from the cares and worries of this world.

Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus believed His Father would provide all He needed in this life and the next. Jesus had faith His Father was with Him every moment of every day. Those who follow Jesus. Those who believe in Him. Those who place their trust in Him. Those who actively seek to align their lives with His life will experience many of the same things Jesus experienced. They will share in both His glory and His suffering. Why? Because this is God's plan to save the world. To use us as His instruments to bring peace and healing and hope to a world that lives in darkness and despair.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Luke 5:29-6:11, Psalms 66, Proverbs 11:24-26

March 23, 2019

THE BROKEN HEART OF GOD

Readings for today: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Luke 5:29-6:11, Psalms 66, Proverbs 11:24-26

Today's Psalm speaks deeply to my heart. "Bless our God, O peoples; let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept our soul among the living and has not let our feet slip." I love God. I love to praise God. I have dedicated my life to God. My life is rich and full and blessed as a result. I can look back on my life and see where God has helped me. Delivered me. Saved me. Strengthened me. I can see where He's comforted me. Protected me. Healed me. Sustained me. Like the Psalmist I bless my God for these things.

However, the Psalmist goes on. What is he blessing and praising God for? Trial. Struggle. Suffering. "For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water..." Do I praise God in the midst of the storm? Do I bless God when the cares and worries of this world seem overwhelming? Do I give thanks for the suffering? I wish I could say I do. When I reflect on my life there is a lot of pain and heartbreak. I have taken a lot of shots over the years. Suffered many wounds. I live in pain. There is no balm for what I feel. No pill I can take that will make it all go away. My soul aches and there is no cure.

I have asked God, "Why?" Why do I feel this way? Why can I not escape the pain? Why do I have to suffer so? His answer is always the same. "You asked me to break your heart with the things that break my heart. To give you eyes to see the world as I see it. I am answering your prayer. I am giving you my heart and it is a broken one. Broken for the sin and suffering and pain of the world." So I am learning to give God praise. To bless God, as the Psalmist does, for the trials. "Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance...Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!" (Psalms 66:8-12, 16-20)

The call to suffering is real, friends, for all who follow Christ. It is a call to self-denial. A call to crucifixion. A call to compassion which literally means "to suffer with." We suffer as God suffers not for ourselves but for the sake of those we love. Those we live among. Those we encounter in our world. And the promise of the gospel is this...if we suffer with Christ, we will receive His glory. If we join Christ in His death, we will surely be joined to Him in resurrection. If we share in the sufferings of Christ, we will also share in His comfort. So praise Him, friends! Praise Christ! Bless Christ! Honor Christ! He is with you!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 2-3, Luke 6:12-38, Psalms 67, Proverbs 11:27

March 24, 2019

THE LORD'S PRAYER LIFE

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 2-3, Luke 6:12-38, Psalms 67, Proverbs 11:27

"In these days Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12)

Passages like this have been an enigma to me for most of my life. I learned to pray with my mother. When I would grow up, we would pray every night before bed. "Now I lay me down to sleep..." It was the same prayer followed by the same requests for family and friends. What it lacked in depth, it more than made up in creating a discipline that continues to this day. As I grew older, I layered in the Lord's Prayer that I memorized in church. Eventually, I grew more comfortable so my prayers became more conversational. I would tell God all my fears. All my struggles. All my heartaches. Even though I wasn't sure He was listening, I still kept up the habit. Then I came to faith in Christ. All of a sudden "prayer" took on a whole new meaning.

I fell in love with prayer. I treasured my time with God. I looked forward to spending time with Him. He became the first thought when I woke up and the last thought before I went to sleep. Even so, praying all night? Not in my wheelhouse. In fact, anything longer than ten or fifteen minutes was a stretch. Most of the time I would just fall asleep. So I've always felt a little guilty when I come across this verse and others like it.

But then, in 2009, I faced the greatest crisis of my life. My marriage was struggling. My relationships with my kids were strained. My work was cratering. I was depressed and anxious and afraid. I couldn't sleep. I would stay up most nights pacing the floor. And in those moments, I turned to prayer. I cried out to God. I searched the Scriptures. I began to intentionally listen for the first time in my life and God answered. He confronted my sin. He assured me of His forgiveness and grace. And He directed me to the changes I needed to make in my life. My marriage began to get better. My relationships with my children improved. I received clear guidance to resign my job. God began to heal my heart. But I still wasn't getting much sleep so I kept on praying. Now my prayers were for the future. Where would we go? What would we do? How would I provide for my family? For three straight months I averaged about two to three hours of sleep a night. But again, God was faithful to meet me there. In the darkness. In the silence. In the middle of the night with only the Bible for company.

It was a powerful time for me and it taught me something about Jesus' prayer life. Praying all night was not necessarily Jesus' regular practice. That would be impossible. Jesus was fully human and needed rest. But when Jesus faced a difficult situation. When Jesus needed guidance. When Jesus was choosing the Twelve or dealing with the emotions of His imminent execution, He spent the night in prayer. He turned to His Heavenly Father for strength and wisdom.

Most of us are carrying a heavy load. We are stressed. We are struggling. We are depressed. We are afraid. We are anxious. Many of the people I meet with tell me they have a hard time sleeping. But rather than turn to prayer, they turn to their technology. They scroll Twitter or Instagram. For hours. And never receive a bit of comfort. If anything, it only adds to their stress. Eventually, their mental health is impacted. Studies show a direct correlation between the amount of time we spend on social media and the high rates of depression in our society. So let me offer a radical suggestion. Instead of turning on your phone, go to your Heavenly Father in prayer. Talk to Him. Spend time with Him. Get your Bible out and sit in His Presence. Listen for His voice. Let His Spirit minister to you as only He can. In this way, you will find yourself praying like Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4, Luke 6:30-7:10, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 11:28

March 25, 2019

MOSES' FINAL SERMON

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4, Luke 6:30-7:10, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 11:28

Congratulations! You have made it through what some consider to be one of the toughest stretches in all the Bible. Leviticus. Numbers. These are challenging books to be sure. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 5-6, Luke 7:11-35, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 11:29-31

March 26, 2019

ALIGNMENT

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 5-6, Luke 7:11-35, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 11:29-31

Many years ago, I had a lawnmower that went out of alignment. I think it happened when I mowed my yard during the cleanup after a hurricane. I was mulching all the downed branches and leaves when I hit a stump buried in the grass. The blade immediately stuck. The torque wrenched something deep inside the engine. From that moment forward, a shimmy began to develop. It was out of alignment. I did get two more years out of that lawnmower before it literally fell apart on me as I was mowing one day. The shimmy had loosened almost every screw holding the engine together and they all fell out at once.

You and I were made to live for God. We were saved by God. Delivered by God. Chosen by God. He created us. He shaped and formed us in our mother's wombs. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by God's own hands. As such, He knows what's best for us. He knows what leads to human flourishing and fulfillment. He knows what makes us tick and how we can find the deepest satisfaction in life. This is why He tells us, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) It's why He gives us the Ten Commandments. It's why He revealed Himself to His people at Horeb and it's why He still reveals Himself to us today. It's why He's so passionate about us teaching His ways to our children and our children's children. Because God wants them to know what they were made for as well.

Why do you think God gets so angry when we chase after other gods? Why is God so direct with us about true worship? Because God knows at the root of idolatry lies a heart that is out of alignment. And if we choose to live out of alignment with God's purposes and God's will for very long, something deep within us will begin to shake. A shimmy will develop that eventually will break loose. Our lives will be disrupted. We will literally fall apart because we are not in sync with our Creator. Over and over again, God promises that those who rebel against Him will eventually fall. Those who refuse to acknowledge Him will eventually be put to shame. Those who challenge His authority will eventually be defeated. God is a jealous God and He will not allow His creatures to live out of alignment with His will.

I know that sounds harsh so let me put it another way. A more relational way. God will not allow the creatures He made in His own image to live out of alignment with His love. You see, His love and His will are the same. There is no difference between the two. The commandments of God are not arbitrary but designed specifically to teach us how to love God and each other. They are the concrete examples of what it means to walk in God's love. They are not a list of demands you have to fulfill to earn God's love. They are not a set of steps you have to take in order to gain God's love. They are the fullest expression of how we live for God. They help align our hearts with God's heart and the more we find ourselves loving God's commands, the more we'll find ourselves walking in God's love. Where do you need to ask God to align your heart today?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 7-8, Luke 7:36-8:3, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 12:1

March 27, 2019

THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 7-8, Luke 7:36-8:3, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 12:1

One of the things I love most about God is His great faithfulness. God always delivers on His promises. God always keeps His Word. God will never abandon His people. As I've mentioned before, Deuteronomy is Moses' last sermon to Israel. He has led these people for decades. They've seen incredible miracles. They've experienced hardship and suffering. Now they stand on the cusp of the Promised Land. They can look over the Jordan River and see the land God has given them. But they also know the land isn't empty. There are rival nations already living there. Pagan tribes who engage in all kinds of detestable worship practices. Driving them out will not be easy. It will require a long season of sustained warfare that will test their faith in God.

So Moses reminds them of all God has done. Reminds them of why they were chosen in the first place. I love his words. "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," (Deuteronomy 7:6-9) God tends to stand on the side of the weak. The oppressed. The enslaved. He takes the side of the poor, the outcast, the sinner. He did not choose Egypt or Assyria or Babylon or any of the other far more powerful Ancient Near East empires. He chose Israel. He was faithful to the oath He swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He refused to abandon His people to a life of slavery and death.

God is faithful. He keeps the covenant. He is steadfast in His love. He is the guarantor of our relationship. Why can we count on God? Why can we trust God? Why can we believe God? Because He is faithful. To Himself. Faithful to His own character and nature. God never changes. He is who He says He is. That is why His name is "I am who I am." Friends, no matter where life finds you today, God is faithful. He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you for He is faithful.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 9-10, Luke 8:4-21, Psalms 69:19-36, proverbs 12:2-3

March 28, 2019

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 9-10, Luke 8:4-21, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 12:2-3

"When the humble see their salvation they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive." (Psalms 69:32)

The great faithfulness of God should elicit humility in our hearts. When we come face to face with God's greatness. God's righteousness. God's holiness. God's unconditional love and grace. We should fall to our knees in gratitude and thanksgiving. We know ourselves. We know our sins. We know we are not perfect. We know our struggles. We know what we've suffered. We know the choices we make. We know the ways we've treated others or failed to reach out to those in need. We are a broken people. Our history is a tragic one.

God's Word is clear. It is not because of our righteousness that God saves. It's not because of our goodness that God delivers. It is not because we are better than anyone else that God reaches down to us. God's love comes to us in the depths of the darkness of our condition and lights the way. God's grace is unmerited. It cannot be earned or achieved no matter how hard we work. It cannot be bought no matter how much we give. God's favor is not something we can ever lay hold of in our own strength no matter how hard we try. It simply comes to us as an act of unconditional love.

This was true for Israel as much as it is true for us. Not your righteousness. Not your righteousness. Not your righteousness. Over and over again like a refrain. God making it clear He is not acting on their behalf because they are good. In fact, it's the opposite. They are stubborn and sinful and prone to wander. Just like us. No, God acts purely out of love and this should humble us deeply. It should set us free to be honest with ourselves and one another. To acknowledge our fears and our failures. To be transparent about our doubts and struggles and heartaches. Our relationship with God through Christ provides a secure foundation on which we can build our broken lives.

Pride lies at the root of every sin. Pride warps our view of ourselves and others. Warps our view of the world around us. Makes us think wrong is right and right is wrong. Pride makes us think down is up and up is down. Pride exchanges the truth of God for a lie and we see the results all around us. Our world is suffering. Depression. Anxiety. Fear. Suicide. Substance abuse. Divorce. Sexual promiscuity is destroying relationships as well as contributing to the rise of STD's. It's like humanity has made a covenant with death. This is breaks God's heart. It is not what He intends. So He reaches down to save us from ourselves. Lift us out of the holes we dig for ourselves. Set us free from the prison we find ourselves in. Praise be to God for His great faithfulness and love!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 11-12, Luke 8:22-39, Psalms 70, Proverbs 12:4

March 29, 2019

WHAT HAS THE LORD DONE FOR YOU?

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 11-12, Luke 8:22-39, Psalms 70, Proverbs 12:4

I love today's reading. I have met men like the one Jesus encountered in the tombs. They are outcast. They are isolated. They are alone. They have no friends. They have no hope. They hear all kinds of voices. Their lives are a train wreck. Often addicted, they use drugs or alcohol or both just to get some peace and quiet. The demons they face may be emotional, mental, and/or spiritual. Their challenges are so great, no one wants anything to do with them. They often end up in prison. That's where I encountered them. And their plight is heartbreaking.

The man Jesus meets is tormented. Naked. Alone. Starving. Living in ritual impurity among the dead. He might as well be dead himself. He has no hope. No future. No peace. However, for some reason unknown to Luke, this man goes to the shore side on this particular day at this particular time and meets Jesus as He steps out onto the sand. The demons within him recoil in fear as they recognize the Son of God. They know they have no power over this man. All their fear tactics will not sway Jesus from His mission to set yet another captive free. Jesus casts them out. They flee into a herd of pigs. Chaos ensues. The pigs stampede into the lake and drown. This draws a crowd. The people come out from the city to see what the commotion is all about and they are shocked to see the man sitting next to Jesus in his right mind. Rather than rejoice, this scares them to death. What can this mean? What has just happened? What's next? They ask Jesus to leave. The man wants to follow Him. Jesus instead sends him back to his city. Back to his town. Back to his village. Back to his family. Back to his community with these words, "Return to your home and declare how much God has done for you." (Interestingly enough, Mark's gospel tells the story of what happens when Jesus makes a second visit to this same region. Rather than run from Jesus in fear, the people respond in faith. This man's witness clearly has changed the region.)

Telling others about Jesus is not complicated. It's simply telling your story and making sure people know what part Jesus has to play in it. I remember sitting with an atheist friend of mine. He and I first met in a coffee shop outside Madison, WI. He and his wife had just had twins and we bonded over the shared experience. Our relationship began when I asked him to share his story which he was more than happy to do. After he got done, he turned the tables on me and asked me to share my story. Well...I can't share my story without talking about how Jesus met me as a college student and changed the trajectory of my life forever. As our friendship blossomed, he kept coming back wanting to hear more about Jesus. It was a beautiful thing.

What has the Lord done for you? And do you share it regularly and often with others? What miracles has God worked in your life? Do you let the people around you know? What blessings has God bestowed on you? Do you publicly give Him the credit? What testimony has God given you? Do you tell it to those you meet? Let me encourage to start. Talk to your neighbors. Your friends. Your co-workers. Take someone out for coffee. Grab a drink to share. Let them know what God has done and then watch God use your story to change their story all for His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 13-15, Luke 8:40-9:6, Psalms 71, Proverbs 12:5-7

March 30, 2019

WALK BY FAITH

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 13-15, Luke 8:40-9:6, Psalms 71, Proverbs 12:5-7

“And he called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. And he said to them, "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them." And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere.” (Luke 9:1-6)

It’s fascinating to read this passage as I board a plane to Ethiopia to train church planters. The men and women I have the privilege of spending time with over the next two weeks actually take this verse literally. They exhibit power and authority over demons. They cure disease. They heal. They raise the dead in some cases. I have seen it with my own eyes. Most of all, they proclaim the Kingdom of God in the villages where they go and plant churches by the hundreds if not thousands. It’s truly amazing. They have no money. No possessions. So they can take nothing for their journey. They go to villages where they have no family or friends or social contacts. They count on the hospitality of the town for provision. It is not always easy. They are often persecuted. Beaten. Attacked. Threatened. They are going to villages where the gospel has never been heard. Almost all of them carry scars. Some of them even die for their faith. Through it all, God is at work. He is changing entire nations.

It’s humbling and convicting to ponder what a verse like this looks for my own life. I gave my life to Christ over twenty-five years ago. Committed myself to His service. I’ve been in pastoral ministry for almost twenty years now and have made sacrifices along the way. My family has lived on public assistance. We’ve struggled to make ends meet. Relied on the hospitality and generosity of the congregations we’ve served. It has not been easy. But I have never faced persecution. Never been attacked for my faith. Never felt threatened. I’ve also never healed anyone. Never cast out a demon. Never cured any disease. I have preached the Kingdom of God faithfully over the years all over the United States. God has used what meager gifts I have to offer to change lives and grow His Kingdom.

Sometimes we can get caught up wondering why the supernatural doesn’t happen as often in the US as it does overseas. Part of it is because we are bored with the miracles that happen all around us everyday. Doctors and nurses who perform incredible acts of healing. Psychologists and psychiatrists who treat mental health. Local church pastors who cast out more demons than they know simply by walking with people through the ups and downs of life. Familiarity breeds contempt. However, another part has to do with our struggle to walk by faith. We’ve been given so much. Most of us have access to resources that most of the rest of the world can only dream of. And as Jesus said, “It is harder for a rich man to get into heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle.” We place our trust in ourselves. In our ability to provide. In our plans and strategies. We would never go on a journey with no staff, bag, bread, or money. We would never leave our luggage at home. We would never show up unannounced in a new village. These things just don’t fit our paradigm. And perhaps that’s why we don’t see the miracles.

I always learn so much from my Ethiopian brothers and sisters. I am confident this trip will be no different. I am always asking God to show me what the next step is for my life and my ministry in Parker, CO. Walking by faith in America is different than walking by faith in Africa. But the same God is at work in both places. Where do you need to start walking by faith in your life today?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 16-17, Luke 9:7-27, Psalms 72, Proverbs 12:8-9

March 31, 2019

REMEMBERING AND REJOICING

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-17, Luke 9:7-27, Psalms 72, Proverbs 12:8-9

"You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes." (Exodus 16:12)

How do you feel when you reflect on the Law of God? Do you feel frustrated? Resentful? Upset? Do you feel like your freedom is being impinged? God is being arbitrary? Do you feel the Law is bigoted? Outdated? Immoral even?

I think about all the rules and regulations Israel was commanded to follow. Rules regarding their clothes. What they could eat or drink. How they should spend their time. When they could do business and when they had to close up shop. I imagine it was tempting for them to think of these laws as limiting. Restrictive. Capricious. As if God was setting out to take all the fun out of their lives. But then Moses reminds them of whence they came. They were slaves in Egypt. They came from nothing. They had nothing. They were nothing. Until God found them. Until God saved them. Until God delivered them and made them His own. Gave them His name. Chose them out of all the people on the face of the earth to reflect His glory. To be a holy nation. A royal priesthood.

God's Law is not arbitrary or random or designed to take the fun out of life. It serves to remind us who we are and, more importantly, whose we are. We belong to God. He delivered us from slavery to sin. He lifted us up out of the pit and the miry clay. He put a new song in our hearts. The song of the redeemed. He gave us a new identity as His child. He adopted us into His family. He gives us the gift of eternal life. God didn't have to do any of these things. It would have been perfectly just to let us die in our sin. But God is merciful. God is gracious. God is faithful. He desires to save not destroy.

Whenever we are tempted to question the commandments of God. Whenever we are tempted to push back on God's standard for holiness. Whenever we are tempted to doubt the wisdom and knowledge and motivations of God. Whenever we are tempted to rebel, throw them off, go our own way. It is important to remember where we came from. Who we were without Christ. Who we would be without Christ. Where we would be without His love and compassion. Our eternal destiny absent His gift of eternal life. Remember and rejoice, friends! God loves you! God saved you! God delivered you! Joyfully follow Him! Joyfully pursue holiness! Joyfully embrace the life God's calling you to lead so you can be the person He created and redeemed you to be!

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

April 1, 2019

MOUNTAINTOPS AND VALLEYS

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

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

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

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

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

April 2, 2019

THE PLENTIFUL HARVEST

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 3, 2019

MERCY NOT SACRIFICE

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

“But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13)
The Old Testament is full of passages illustrating God’s concern for justice and holiness and purity. His judgment often seems harsh and unforgiving. And yet there is great mercy as well. Imagine a society where people truly cared for the poor? Intentionally harvested in such a way that it left gleanings for those who did not own fields? Protected slaves and women and children? Imagine a society where profit was not the goal but care for our neighbor? Imagine a society where justice was defined by how we treated the immigrant, refugee, orphan or widow? You actually don’t have to imagine it because this is the society God ordained for Israel. This was the heart of the Law. To create heaven on earth. To set Israel up as a light unto the nations. An example for all humanity to follow. Listen to just a smattering of verses from our reading today.
“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.”
"You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.”
"If you go into your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor's standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor's standing grain.”
“And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord your God.”

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.”
"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge...”

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

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

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

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

April 4, 2019

OFFERINGS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 5, 2019

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 6, 2019

HYPOCRISY

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

"Beware the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy." - Jesus

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

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

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

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

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

April 7, 2019

BLASPHEMY

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 8, 2019

GODLY RESPONSIBILITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 9, 2019

NONE LIKE GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 10, 2019

EAT THIS BOOK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 11, 2019

SHARING THE STORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 12, 2019

THE LORD'S SIDE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 13, 2019

THE SCANDALOUS NATURE OF GRACE

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 14, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

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

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

April 15, 2019

JIHAD IN THE BIBLE

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

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

Herem. A notoriously difficult Hebrew word to translate. Roughly it means 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. And we want God to be this kind of God. We NEED God to be this kind of God! How else will things be made right? How else will judgment come on 20th century evils like Nazism, Stalinism, or the killing fields of Pol Pot? Don't we demand God to be a God of justice when faced with these atrocities? Didn't we, on some level, consider ourselves to be acting on God's behalf...in service to His righteous cause...when we stormed the beaches of Normandy? Or defeated the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union? Were not those actions a form of jihad? Holy war against an unholy enemy?

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

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

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

April 16, 2019

PRAYER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 17, 2019

THE THING WE LACK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 18, 2019

WHAT YOU DO WITH YOUR MINA MATTERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 19, 2019

HOLY WEEK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 20, 2019

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 21, 2019

RESURRECTION

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

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

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

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

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

April 22, 2019

EASTER BLUES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 23, 2019

LIVING WITH THE END IN MIND

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 24, 2019

DEEPER PRAYERS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 25, 2019

LIFE IS STRUGGLE

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

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

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

April 26, 2019

THAT LOOK….

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 27, 2019

THE ART OF SELF-FORGETFULNESS

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 28, 2019

PEOPLE OF THE RESURRECTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 29, 2019

THE WAY OF DEATH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 30, 2019

JEPHTHAH'S SACRIFICE

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

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

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

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, one key to understanding is Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." Everyone in the ancient near east believed in the gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. Make the right sacrifices and you were awarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. Make the wrong sacrifices and your deity would turn his face from you, resulting in defeat. 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?

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

May 1, 2019

DESIRE

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

Samson is a cautionary tale. He is a man ruled by his appetites. Driven by his desires. An addict enslaved to the basest of emotions. His life is a study in contrasts. Miraculously conceived. Set apart from birth as a Nazarite. (No wine, cutting of the hair, or touching of dead bodies) He single-handedly delivers Israel from their enemies. At the same time, he despises his birthright. He intermarries with Philistines and sleeps with prostitutes. He eats honey from the carcass of a lion he's killed. He tells Delilah (yet another Philistine) the supposed secret of his strength and she cuts his hair. He is imprisoned and tortured by exacts vengeance on his enemies in one final act of martyrdom.

I have met Samson. Many times. I cannot tell you the number of people I have counseled over the years in my office who seemingly cannot control their desires. Sexual appetites. Drug and alcohol addiction. Co-dependence. Suicidal ideation. It's heartbreaking. These are gifted people who have been blessed in every measure by God. They have families. They have friends. They have careers. They make good money and experience professional success. But their inner lives are a mess. Their souls are in turmoil. They feel trapped and enslaved and ruled by their passions. They buy into the lie that they were "made" this way and therefore have no choice. And it cripples them.

I have met Samson. Every time I look in the mirror I am reminded I too was once driven by sinful desire. Enslaved to the flesh as the Apostle Paul might put it. Sexual desire drove me to pornography. My drinking habits bordered on alcohol addiction. I've struggled with depression and despair in my life. It's been hard. At the same time, I'm blessed with an amazing family. A godly wife and four kids I love with all my heart. I've got great friends. A career I absolutely love. But my inner life has been a mess. I've too often believed the lie that I am at the mercy of what I feel. That I have no choice. Thankfully, I've received great counsel and a lot of therapy over the years. Mentors, counselors, friends who acted as a spiritual and emotional guides to help bring peace to my soul.

Here's the truth of the gospel...you have been set free! For freedom Christ has set you free so do not submit again to a yoke of slavery! Do not turn back to your former ways! Do not believe the lie that you are at the mercy of what you feel. You are not defined by your desires. You are not a slave to your emotions. Love the Lord with all your heart! Submit your desires to Him! Allow His Spirit to sanctify your emotions and your feelings. Keep in step with the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. In fact, you will find yourself beginning to desire what God desires. Holiness. Purity. Grace. Mercy. Compassion. These things flow from a heart surrendered to God.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 15-16, John 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 14:17-19

May 2, 2019

MEDITATING ON TRUTH

Readings for today: Judges 15-16, John 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 14:17-19

My wife and I were sitting down for dinner last week when one of our daughters came downstairs. She was in the middle of her homework. There were still dishes to do. A floor to sweep and mop. A lunch to be made. A room to clean. And it was getting late. She was tired. Frustrated. Upset. And I could tell by the look on her face that her internal critic was in overdrive. Telling her all kinds of lies. “You can’t get it all done.” “You are so far behind.” “You will flunk your assignment.” “You’ll never finish.” As we talked, her emotions escalated. Her voice raised. Tears came to her eyes. Her body language more animated. Now I will confess I used to escalate with her. I used to get angry. I too believed lies. “She’s just being disobedient.” “She’s trying to avoid work.” “She’s just wasting time.” My voice would raise. My body language would become animated. And we’d end up in a shouting match that just wrecked her spirit.

Meditating on Psalms like the one we read today have been so helpful. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's...The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. 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. As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; he flourishes like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children...” (Psalms 103:2-5, 8-17) You see, if God is merciful and gracious. If He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. If He does not deal with me according to my sin. If He removes my sin as far as the east is from the west or as high as the heavens are above the earth. How can I do the same for the people in my life? I know their frames. I know they are dust just like me. I know they are fragile and anxious and afraid. So how can I encourage and bless? How can I crown them with steadfast love and mercy? How can I satisfy them with good so their strength is renewed?

So rather than yell, I simply held out my arms to my daughter. She resisted at first. I actually had to chase her around the kitchen for a full five minutes or so before she relented. She was so upset the last thing she wanted was a hug. But eventually she gave in. As I held her, her tears dried up. Her heart rate slowed down. You could feel her body relax. We started talking through everything she had to do. We identified the lies she was telling herself and I reminded her of the truth. “You have plenty of time.” “You are more than capable.” “Your mom and I are here to help.” She wrapped everything up in no time and was able to relax before bed.

Such a beautiful moment. And if I - a sinful, broken dad - can bless my children, how much more our Heavenly Father? I don’t know about you but I too often believe the lies. How can God forgive me? How can God love me? Where is God when I hurt? He must not care about my suffering? Psalm 103 teaches us the truth. Our Father forgives all our iniquity. He heals all our diseases. He lavishes all blessings on us. He removes our sin as far as the east is from the west and His steadfast love never fails. He is merciful. Gracious. Good. Compassionate. When we are anxious and afraid and find our emotions amping up, He simply holds out His arms to us. Inviting us into His embrace so He can give us peace.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 17-18, John 3:1-21, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 14:20-21

May 3, 2019

IDENTITY

Readings for today: Judges 17-18, John 3:1-21, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 14:20-21

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3)

Our culture is obsessed with identity. Gay, straight, bi. Black, brown, white. Republican, Democrat. Socialist, Libertarian. Male, female, tran. Boomer, Gen X, Millennial. Abled, disabled. Rich, middle class, poor. Religious. Non-religious. Everyone wanting to be part of a tribe. Part of a group. Part of a community who understands their needs. Everyone wants to be affirmed and accepted. Everyone wants to be validated and embraced. Of course, there's nothing wrong with these desires. Human beings have an existential fear of loneliness that is hardwired into the deepest parts of our souls. We were not made to be alone. In fact, part and parcel of being made in the image of God means being made in the image of our Creator who exists eternally in community in Himself.

Enter Nicodemus. A man who belonged to the tribe of the Pharisees. A leader among the Jews. A man who identified clearly with his people and his faith. But something is missing which is why he finds himself coming to Jesus. He's nervous. He's anxious. He's afraid. He doesn't want to cross his tribe. He doesn't want to put his reputation at risk so he comes to Jesus at night. Under the cover of darkness. He wants to get in and out unseen. But Jesus – as he so often does - cuts right to the heart of his problem. It's one of identity.

"You must be born again." What a statement! You must ground your identity in Christ alone. You must take on a new name. Belong to a new family. One defined by love and devotion to God. It's not new. It's really the only way we can live out the first and second great commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. The only way this happens is if we are first born again. Born to new life. Born to a new identity as a child of God.

But how can we be born again? How can we lay hold of our new identity in Christ? By faith. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:16-18) We cannot make this happen on our own. We cannot climb back into our mother's womb. And thankfully we don't have to! All we have to do is believe. Receive the gift of God's only begotten Son. Trust He came not to condemn but to save.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-20, John 3:22-4:3, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 14:22-24

May 4, 2019

HEART OF DARKNESS

Readings for today: Judges 19-20, John 3:22-4:3, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 14:22-24

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)

So where can we find hope? Where can we find light in the midst of our darkness? Only in Jesus. On the cross, Jesus embraced our darkness. On the cross, Jesus walked into the valley of the shadow. On the cross, Jesus let evil have it's day. The murder of God is the most horrific act in human history and it is worth our reflection. Reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. Reflect on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. Reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. Reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from evil.

But make sure to 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 21-Ruth 1, John 4:4-42, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 14:25

May 5, 2019

RUTH

Readings for today: Judges 21-Ruth 1, John 4:4-42, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 14:25

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. God using ordinary people to accomplish His extraordinary plans in a culture seemingly hell-bent on ruin. God is faithful and He has promised to the moral arc of this universe towards His Kingdom. Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: Ruth 2-4, John 4:43-54, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 14:26-27

May 6, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Ruth 2-4, John 4:43-54, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 14:26-27

Readings for Tomorrow: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:21, John 5:1-23, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 14:28-29

May 7, 2019

SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1:1-2:21, John 5:1-23, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 14:28-29

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.

Admittedly, we are bleeding into tomorrow's reading a bit but it's worth getting the whole narrative in front of us. "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."

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 2:22-4:22, John 5:24-47, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 14:30-31

May 8, 2019

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 2:22-4:22, John 5:24-47, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 14:30-31

It's been a very long day. Filled with lots of conversations, text messages, and emails regarding the latest school shooting in our area. Parents. Teenagers. Families. All reaching out. All needing comfort. All needing hope. And I have to admit, I don't have much to offer. I am tired. Tired of the shootings. Tired of domestic terrorism. Tired of the senselessness of it all. Our culture has made a pact with death and we are reaping the whirlwind. Our obsession with violence too often ending in self-destruction. When will the cycle end?

We have to come to grips with reality. The violence we are experiencing is a symptom of a deeper disease. One that has taken root in every human heart. We are sinful. We are selfish. We are narcissistic. Driven by our basest desires, we no longer seem able to moderate our reactions. Instead we give them full rein. We vent. We emote. We perpetuate hate. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire exacerbating our worst tendencies. Disconnected from authentic relationships. Lonely and isolated. We feel we have no outlet other than unbridled rage. "If we're going down, we're going to take as many with us as possible." Some of us do it with words. Others with guns. Either way, the root of the problem remains the same. A heart tormented by pain and suffering. Wracked by shame and guilt. Numb to the humanity of others.

What happens when we use the very freedoms that make our nation great to indulge the very worst parts of our sinful nature? Freedom of speech used to defend the spread of hate, misinformation, and fake news. Freedom of expression used to defend the graphic depiction of violence in video games, television, and movies. Freedom of assembly used to defend the lunatic fringe. All the while, media outlets make millions fanning the flames of our national discontent. Can we really be surprised when angry, abused, bullied, and neglected adolescents/adults become emotionally unhinged, get their hands on easily obtainable firearms, and shoot up a school? I know, I know. "Guns don't kill people...people kill people." However, this seems dangerously naive sentiment in a culture where mental health issues continue to rise at an extraordinary rate and we consistently demonstrate an inability to mature or show any kind of capacity for emotional restraint.

It's time for a reality check. A national conversation around not just human rights but human responsibilities. A national commitment to the ethics of Jesus which involves self-denial for the sake of others, sacrifice for the greater good, and a dedication to the golden rule. Though all may not accept Christ's divinity or believe in His name unto salvation; surely we can all agree practicing the way of Jesus would lead to a more just and gracious society? And we don't need a theocracy to achieve it. Simply a willingness to be held to a higher standard personally, professionally, and politically.

Sadly, our situation is not new. It is as old as Cain and Abel. There is a violent streak that runs through the heart of every human society which is why God sent His one and only Son. He sent Jesus to give us hope. He sent Jesus to give us peace. He sent Jesus to bring heaven to earth. Even in the midst of the violence and corruption of Eli's time, we read these prophetic words about the coming of the Messiah, "And I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever." (1 Samuel 2:35) Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 5-7, John 6:1-21, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 14:32-33

May 9, 2019

THE DANGER OF FALSE GODS

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 5-7, John 6:1-21, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 14:32-33

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.

Enter the church of Jesus Christ. Sent by God to bring our world back. To remind humanity of her most sacred calling. To have no other gods before God. To worship no idols. To honor God's name and keep the Sabbath holy. To love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century is called to lead during a very challenging time. Persecution is on the rise across the globe while here in America the church is in steep decline as it struggles against the increasing secularism of our culture. Pastors are failing morally. Sexual abuse and financial infidelity seem rampant. Heresies like prosperity preaching bring shame to the name of Jesus. It does feel like we are facing a steep, uphill battle. Perhaps you even feel like all hope is lost. But God isn't finished! The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe! Of all who place their trust in Christ! And the church is being sent out as lambs amidst the wolves to call people back to God. To stand up against the principalities and powers and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. We are being sent to challenge the people of our world to put aside all the false gods and goddesses that only deal in suffering and death. To cleanse themselves of false worship and re-commit their lives to Christ. As we do this, we can be confident. For we know we worship the only true and living God. All the false gods will bow before Him just as Dagon did that day in the temple. There is no weapon that's formed against us that can stand for greater is He that is in us than is in the world!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 8-9, John 6:22-42, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 14:34-35

May 10, 2019

NATIONAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 8-9, John 6:22-42, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 14:34-35

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." (Proverbs 14:34)

Yesterday I had the privilege of attending the Colorado Prayer Luncheon and hearing from Governor Polis, Mayor Hancock, and others discuss the state of politics at national, regional, and local levels. It was a particularly insightful and poignant conversation especially in the wake of tragic shooting at the STEM school in Highlands Ranch. Everyone seems to be asking the same question. How in the world can this be happening in our country? How is this the new "normal" for our children? And how should we, as leaders, respond? Of course there will be the standard calls from both the right and the left to either arm or disarm. If only our teachers carried in schools then our children would be safe. If only we banned automatic weapons then our children would be safe. Each side will entrench and do their level best to legislate their agenda but neither side will be successful. Why? Because we keep focusing on the symptoms rather than the disease. We struggle to have any kind of honest, respectful national debate on the issue of gun control and instead allow the extremes on either side to devolve the debate.

It's not just gun control. The same is true on issues of race, wealth, criminal justice, etc. Because each political party employs a scorched earth approach hell-bent on the denial of any victories to their political rivals, we cannot come together. When was the last time a political leader on either side actually acknowledged their political rival had a good point? A good idea? A good policy initiative? When was the last time our political leaders tried to authentically share the credit rather than hoard it for themselves? It simply doesn't happen as both sides do all they can to defend the indefensible in their own tribe while ruthlessly seeking to drag down their enemies. This naked pursuit of political power at all costs is slowly eroding the social fabric of our nation. And things are picking up steam. I have had people leave my church over politics. I have seen friendships end over politics. Businesses suffer because of our "call-out" culture that makes party loyalty/tribal identity a litmus test for every relationship in life. It's getting harder and harder to imagine a shared future.

Does the Bible offer any guidance? Yes. The wisdom of Solomon. We must return to righteousness. We must re-establish a strong moral foundation. We must engage in a respectful conversation around national values and we must – we absolutely must - demand more from our leaders. Righteousness exalts a nation. Righteousness forms the bedrock on which strong nations are built. A shared sense of righteousness helps us discern right from wrong, evil from good.

What would happen if our national charter proclaimed, "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of righteousness" rather than the pursuit of personal happiness? What might change if we chose righteousness over selfishness? Righteousness over bitterness? Righteousness over outrage and anger? Righteousness over sin? Righteousness demands we look over our history as a nation and acknowledge our sins. The massacre of First Nation people. The systematic enslavement of an entire race of people. The subjugation of women and abuse of children. The rapacious greed that drives economic inequality. Righteousness also demands we acknowledge our virtues. The establishment of a government by the people for the people. The establishment of equal rights – even if harder won for certain groups - is a miraculous anomaly in human history. Wealth creation that has lifted billions around the world out of life-threatening poverty. And, of course, the incredible sacrifice of a generation as they fought to free the world from tyranny.

Righteousness demands we acknowledge every human being is made in the image of God. Righteousness demands we refuse the temptation to demonize and dehumanize those with whom we disagree. Righteousness demands we think the best of one another rather than the worst. Righteousness demands we actively and empathetically listen to one another and honor our different life experiences. Righteousness demands those who are blessed seek to bless others. Those who have seek to lift up those who have not. Those who have "made it"

turn around and offer their hands to those still slugging it out. Righteousness means we refuse to take up the tools of oppression or seek vengeance or try to tear others down. Righteousness exalts a nation.

I truly believe we occupy more common ground than we imagine. I truly believe there is more that holds us together than drives us apart. I truly believe we hold some truths to be self-evident and we are working hard to make those truths even more self-evident. I truly believe the road to righteousness is messy and long and hard. But I also believe it is worth every effort. And I believe pursuing righteousness is essential for the follower of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 10-11, John 6:43-71, Psalms 107, Proverbs 15:1-3

May 11, 2019

THE BREAD OF LIFE

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 10-11, John 6:43-71, Psalms 107, Proverbs 15:1-3

John 6 challenges us. Challenges us to think about why we seek Jesus. Is it for the signs and wonders? The miracles He can perform? Is it because of His blessings? The eschatological rewards we will one day receive? Is Jesus just a means for us to accomplish our own ends? Fulfill our own desires? The people had experienced a great miracle. Five thousand of them had been fed by a few loaves and a few fish. They had eaten their fill which was no small thing in a 1st century agrarian economy. And they're probably thinking to themselves, "If we follow this man, we will never grow hungry again."

But is that why we seek Jesus? To satisfy our physical needs? "Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." (John 6:27) Yes, Jesus! That's what we want! Help us understand! What does it mean to do the works of God that He might be pleased with us and give us the food that never perishes? "Believe in Me." Jesus responds. "What sign will you perform that we may see and believe?" You can almost see Jesus shake His head. Really? Did I not just multiply loaves and fishes and feed five thousand? Was that not enough? Of course, it's never enough for us. We always want more. Always need more. Always seek yet another sign. Another confirmation that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He will do.

Jesus says, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." (John 6:35, 47-51)

In other words, "You aren't getting it. You're missing the point. This isn't about the manna you ate in the wilderness during the Exodus journey. That manna may have sustained but it could not save. This is about the true bread the Father is offering you from heaven. The bread that not only sustains but saves you eternally. I am the living bread. Believe in Me! Feast on Me! Trust Me and you will live forever." Essentially what Jesus is telling them is He is the sign. He is the wonder. He is the miracle of God come down from heaven so that all who believe might have eternal life.

We get so caught up trying to meet our own needs. We focus so much on our own desires. We work so hard for selfish gain. But we all know we can't take this stuff with us. We all know there are no storage units in heaven to store our stuff. No moving van to pack us up for glory. Naked we came into this world and naked we shall depart. As much as we achieve in this world, it will be forgotten. As much as we accumulate in this world, it will fall to dust. The only thing that endures is our faith in Christ. The only thing that is eternal is our belief in Him. The only thing that matters is that we trust Him and surrender to Him and let Him meet our needs according to His will and perfect plan.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 12-13, John 7:1-30, Psalms 108, Proverbs 15:4

May 12, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Samuel 12-13, John 7:1-30, Psalms 108, Proverbs 15:4

Readings for Tomorrow: 1 Samuel 14, John 7:31-53, Psalms 109, Proverbs 15:5-7

May 13, 2019

DISCERNMENT

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 14, John 7:31-53, Psalms 109, Proverbs 15:5-7

One of the most important gifts we can exercise is an ability to discern between right and wrong. Good and evil. God's will and our own will. Saul is now king over Israel. He is the man God is going to use to deliver His people. He is a strong man. A valiant man. Sadly, he is not a wise man. He makes rash decisions. He takes vows in the name of the Lord that come back to haunt him. He is often his own worst enemy.

In today's reading, Jonathan wins a great victory for Israel. He and his armor bearer undertake a dangerous, potentially even suicidal, mission. They invade the camp of the Philistines. They kill twenty men and the result is chaos. The Philistine army starts panicking and racing in every direction. Saul sees the confusion and takes advantage of it. He marshals the rest of his army and sends them after the Philistines. God gives them a great victory. However, in his zeal, Saul issues an edict that no Israelite shall eat until their defeat of the Philistines is complete. The battle is hard. The fighting is fierce. God's people grow faint. In the midst of it all, Jonathan – who didn't know about his father's command - eats a some honey and it strengthens him. He openly questions his father's wisdom. The people follow his example, slaughtering animals for a feast. The news gets back to Saul. He interprets their actions as sin. He attempts to talk to the Lord who remains silent through the whole episode. In response to God's silence, Saul casts lots to determine who has broken his command. It's Jonathan. In his foolishness, he decides to kill him but the people of God stand in his way.

The whole story is a mess. It's a confusing jumble and hard to follow. And it points to what happens when human beings take matters into their own hands. When we fail to discern the difference between God's will and our own. How often do we make this mistake? How many times over the course of my life have I pursued something out of pride or selfish desire, foolishly assuming it to be God's will? How often have I grown impatient and rushed into a decision I later regretted? If I am completely honest, there have even been times in my life where I chased something I knew to be sin but did it anyway, hypocritically asking God for forgiveness in advance.

How do we discern the will of God? First, we have to know God's Word. We have to know God's law. We have to commit ourselves to obedience to His commands. It is NEVER God's will that you disobey Him. It is NEVER God's will that you live out of alignment with Jesus. Second, we have to ask God for wisdom. The wisdom to follow Jesus. He promises in James 1:5 to give this wisdom generously to all who ask. So we pray in faith, trusting God to keep His promises. Finally, we learn through constant, daily practice to discern the difference between good and evil. Right and wrong. God's will and our will. There is a process of trial and error here as we get better at listening to God's voice above our own or the voices in our world.

I love what Hebrews 5:12-14 says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." Discernment rests on our ability to become "skilled in righteousness" or skilled in God's ways. If we walk in His love. If we obey His commands. If we submit our lives to Him, we can know the will of God for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 15-16, John 8:1-20, Psalms 110, Proverbs 15:8-10

May 14, 2019

SIN OF PRESUMPTION

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 15-16, John 8:1-20, Psalms 110, Proverbs 15:8-10

"For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has also rejected you from being king." (1 Samuel 15:23)

"I cannot believe in a God like that." "Surely God wants me to have fun?" "God can't be that picky, can He?" "Man, it sure seems like God has an ego." I cannot tell you the number of times I've heard fellow Christians say these things and others like them. Typically, these comments come when Christians run smack up against a command of God they do not want to follow. They feel like God is out to get them. Out to steal their joy. Out to squash all their fun. So they presume upon His grace. They presume upon His merciful character. They go their own way. Do their own thing. And when the consequences come, they get angry or confused or blame God.

Sadly, too many people who call themselves Christians are biblically illiterate. They don't even know God's commands much less follow them. They find worship boring and pointless. Reading the Bible a chore. Prayer a waste of time. They live their lives any way they wish. They seek the fulfillment of their own desires. Spend their money primarily on themselves and their families. Use their time selfishly rather than seek to serve those around them. All the while believing they are loved by God. Forgiven by God. Blessed by God.

Saul presumed upon God's grace as well. He followed God's command and attacked the Amalekites. He defeated them and won a great victory for the Lord. However, he didn't follow God's commands. He spared the life of the king and kept the best of the spoil for a sacrifice. Now I can already hear the protests. Wasn't his heart in the right place? Wasn't his intent - if misguided - still pretty good? It's not like he was trying to enrich himself? The answer to these questions is an unequivocal "no!" What God wants is our complete and full obedience. He wants us to follow His ways not create our own. He wants us to love Him with all our hearts. Show Him our full devotion. And Saul, by choosing to do things his way rather than God's, lost his kingdom. He presumed. And in his presumption was destroyed.

This is a sobering story for us all. How often do we presume on God's grace? How often do we take God for granted? The first commandment is to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. To love Him with all that we are. To put Him first. What does this look like in our everyday lives? It means spending time with Him in prayer and study of His Word. It means worshiping Him on the Lord's Day with our fellow believers. It means serving Him and giving generously to support His work in the world. These things are non-negotiable. It also means loving and learning God's commands. Actively aligning our lives to the life of Jesus. Taking His words seriously and seeking to apply them to our daily lives. Will we do that perfectly? Of course not. We will make mistakes along the way but there is forgiveness for those who are truly seeking the Lord. There is grace for those who stumble and fall as long as we are continually falling forward.

Let me challenge and encourage you to examine your life. Where do you need to confess the sin of presumption? Where have you taken God for granted? Do you truly love His commands and seek to follow them? Or do you go your own way. Do your own thing. And assume God will give you a pass?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 17:1-18:4, John 8:21-30, Psalms 111, Proverbs 15:11

May 15, 2019

TRUSTWORTHY GOD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 17:1-18:4, John 8:21-30, Psalms 111, Proverbs 15:11

The best things about the Psalms is how they teach us to sing the character of God. To praise God for who He is and what He has done. To reflect on God's nature and being. Over and over again, they declare His righteousness. His faithfulness. His steadfast love. Over and over again, they declare His justice. His holiness. His splendor and majesty. Over and over again, they declare His mercy. His grace. His compassion and forgiveness. If were lost on some deserted island somewhere and I had to pick one book of the Bible to bring with me, it would be the Psalms.

Praying the Psalms is a wonderful exercise. I don't know about you but sometimes I struggle to pray. I struggle to find the right words to express my emotions. Struggle to give myself permission to be honest and real and authentic before the Lord. I struggle to pray in faith, trusting God's character. This is where the Psalms come in. I can pray these words rather than my own. I let the Psalmist guide me deeper into the heart of prayer. I find myself praising. Lamenting. Expressing every emotion imaginable. I find myself thanking God. Remembering all His mighty works and miracles. Praying these words restores my soul. Helps me find my way back to faith again.

Romans 4:21 defines faith as "being fully convinced God is able to what He has promised." Praying with such confidence is rich and powerful. And one can only do that if one is fully convinced God is who He says He is. The Psalms keep God fully in view. They fix our eyes on Him. The focus our hearts on His character and nature and being. They remind us of all His glorious attributes and this, in turn, leads us to pray with greater faith.

Why do we praise God? Why do we give thanks to Him with our whole hearts? Because He is great. "Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them." Splendid and majestic. "Full of splendor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever." Gracious and merciful. "He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the Lord is gracious and merciful." He is our faithful provider. "He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever." He is trustworthy and true. "He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the inheritance of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy; they are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness." Holy and awesome. "He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name!" (Psalms 111:1-9)

Because God is all these things and so much more, we fear Him. We reverence Him. We worship Him. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!" (Psalms 111:10) Let everything you do today – in word or deed - be an act of worship to the Living God!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 18:5-19:24, John 8:31-59, Psalms 112, Proverbs 15:12-14

May 16, 2019

ENVY

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 18:5-19:24, John 8:31-59, Psalms 112, Proverbs 15:12-14

"Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands." (1 Samuel 18:7)

It doesn't take much to ruin a relationship. A friendship. A partnership. Saul and David's relationship began with such great potential. David was Saul's champion against Goliath. David was humble and aspired to nothing more than service to his king. David didn't pose any kind of threat to Saul. In fact, quite the opposite. Everywhere David went, the armies of Saul had success. Every battle David fought, the armies of Saul won. David was Saul's greatest general. His greatest asset. Their partnership could have re-shaped the geopolitics of the entire region. Sadly, Saul fell prey to envy. He simply could not and would not share any glory with another. So when they returned in victory over the Philistines and the women ascribed greater glory to David, Saul became angry. The more David experienced success, the more Saul's jealousy grew. Finally, things came to a breaking point when Saul tried to take David's life. Such is the power of envy in a person's life.

Ultimately, the sin of envy is rooted in discontent. We believe we deserve more than what we have. We aspire for greater position. Greater power. Greater wealth. Greater influence. We believe we've been wronged. Passed over. Dismissed. When we see others around us seemingly getting ahead. Collecting awards. Achieving success. We perceive it as a diminishment. We fall for the lie that their success somehow highlights our failure. Their victories somehow bring to light our defeats. We measure ourselves against them and are found wanting. As soon as envy sets in, it is tough to root out. It warps our thinking. It clouds our vision. It changes our perceptions of reality.

I think of how envious I have been in my life. I remember as a young pastor just starting out how envious I was of my colleagues who led larger congregations, held greater influence in our city, and seemingly got all the press. I remember going through difficult times in my marriage or with my children and envying those around me whose marriages and families seemed to be so strong. To this day, I struggle with the sin of envy. Always comparing myself to those who have achieved more than I ever will in my life.

What's the antidote to envy? Godly contentment. Resting in the truth that it is God who directs my life. God who commands my destiny. God who holds my future in His hands. My life is not my own. My achievements and success are not mine to claim. This life is not about me and my glory. It is about God and God alone. Jesus understood this, of course, when He says in John 8:54, "My glory is nothing." The Son of God didn't come to glorify Himself but to bring glory to His Heavenly Father. He didn't come to accomplish His own will but to fulfill the Father's plan. He didn't come seeking His own success but sought first His Father's Kingdom and righteousness. Because Jesus was faithful to His Father, He was exalted. He was lifted high. He was given the name above every name. Imagine if Saul rested in God? Imagine if Saul truly understood that the glory of Israel had nothing to do with him and everything to do with God? Imagine if Saul saw his role in God's Kingdom clearly? David would never have been a threat no matter how many ten thousands he killed. Imagine what would happen if you and I rested in God? If we truly understood the glory of our lives was not our own but the Lord's? Imagine if we saw our role in God's Kingdom clearly and we embraced it with joy? Would that not put an end to envy in our lives?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 20-21, John 9, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 15:15-17

May 17, 2019

LIVING RIGHT-SIDE UP IN AN UPSIDE DOWN WORLD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 20-21, John 9, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 15:15-17

"For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind." (John 9:39)

Jesus came to turn an upside down world right-side up again. In the Kingdom of Jesus, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. The poor shall be rich and the rich shall be poor. The privileged will be the first to serve those who are underprivileged. The blessed will share generously with those who have not. Hate will be met with kindness. Hurt with forgiveness. Brokenness with healing. Creation will be cared for rather than exploited. Selflessness shall replace selfishness. We will exchange all our "identities" for the only one that truly matters...our identity in Christ.

In our passage today, Jesus heals a man who was born blind. In those days, being born with a disability meant someone had sinned. Perhaps it was your parents who did something wrong or perhaps you had committed some error in the womb. Whatever it was, blindness was seen as God's righteous punishment on the wicked rather than an expression of the brokenness of our world. Jesus corrects this misunderstanding. He heals the man. He takes the opportunity the man's blindness affords to show forth the glory of God. To remind His disciples that this world is not as it should be. It is not as God intended it to be. And this is why Jesus was sent in the first place.

What does it mean to "do the works of God" like Jesus? It means living right-side up in an upside down world. I happen to believe the one Christian doctrine that is empirically proven is total depravity. Human beings are naturally inclined towards selfishness. They naturally put their own needs, wants, and desires first. They naturally prioritize the accumulation of wealth and possessions and power in order to ensure their own personal safety and security. When human beings possess political power, they codify their selfish desires into law thus creating systems of oppression and injustice and privilege that help them maintain control. One sees this played out on the world's stage over and over again and throughout human history. Those who throw off the chains of oppression tend to take up the tools of the oppressor and become oppressors themselves.

Where can we find hope? Only in the way of Jesus. Only in the Kingdom of Jesus. Only by surrendering our lives to Jesus and allowing His Spirit to reshape our hearts and reorder our desires. Jesus came to give sight to the blind but His ways also result in bringing blindness to those who think they have sight. If we persist in thinking/believing our ways are better than the Way, we remain blind and in our blindness, we perpetuate the very problems we are trying to solve. Need an example? Consider sex education. Despite rising rates of sexual addiction, the proliferation of pornography that objectifies women, sexual harassment and abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, broken relationships, etc., we still believe the answer is teaching kids to practice "safe sex." Rather than recognize the sacredness of the sexual act and the deep intimacy of giving oneself physically to another person, we treat sex as a commodity to be used for our personal enjoyment. Need another example? Consider gender dysphoria. Somehow we believe it is right and true to teach children who are psychologically incapable of abstract thought that they should disassociate from their biological gender. We are teaching them that gender is a social construct, denying the scientific, biological reality of their chromosomes. We are celebrating their choices despite the overwhelming evidence that it leads to higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation. Need yet another example? Consider the recent rise in identity politics. Human beings attacking other human beings simply because of the color of their skin, sexual orientation, economic wealth, educational privilege, etc. The rise in tribalism in our nation is tearing apart the social fabric of our country. The blindness is real, friends.

Jesus comes to make us see. See things from God's perspective. See one another as human beings made in God's own image. See the world as God's beloved creation. He comes to teach us the ways of God's Kingdom. Selflessness. Service. Forgiveness. Reconciliation. Grace. Peace. Love. Jesus embodied these values while He was on earth and He calls His followers to do the same. To work for justice. To love mercy. And to walk humbly with our God. This is the way of Jesus. This is the way of the gospel. And it is the only hope our upside down world has of ever becoming right-side up again.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 22-23, John 10:1-21, Psalms 115, Proverbs 15:18-19

May 18, 2019

HEARING THE VOICE OF JESUS

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 22-23, John 10:1-21, Psalms 115, Proverbs 15:18-19

"The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." (John 10:3-4)

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 24-25, John 10:22-42, Psalms 116, Proverbs 15:20-21

May 19, 2019

SURRENDERING TO GOD'S WILL

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 24-25, John 10:22-42, Psalms 116, Proverbs 15:20-21

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 remains 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 26-28, John 11:1-54, Psalms 117, Proverbs 15:22-23

May 20, 2019

RESURRECTION THREAT

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 26-28, John 11:1-54, Psalms 117, Proverbs 15:22-23

Death is something all human beings fear. Death is something we all work hard to avoid. We resist aging because it reminds of death. We hate funerals because they remind us of our own mortality. Governments use the death penalty as a tool to deter crime. Nations threaten one another with death in order to achieve their own ambitions. Death is the ultimate weapon of the principalities and powers of this world.

But what happens when death is defeated? What do you do when a man can stand at the mouth of a tomb and call a dead man back to life? Surely this cannot be tolerated! Surely this kind of thing must be eliminated lest people start to believe there is a world beyond this world. A life beyond this life. If people started to believe such things then death would lost its power. Hell would lose its sting. The principalities and powers would have no way to keep people in line. So what do they do when they hear the news that Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead? Rejoice? Celebrate? Praise God? No. They hatch a plot to kill Jesus.

Why would they do such a thing? Because they are afraid of death. Scared of what the Romans might do if word got out that dead people were coming back to life. The delicate political compromise they had struck with Rome would come crashing down like a house of cards. "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." (John 11:48) This was a very real fear. They had seen firsthand the brutality of the Roman legions. They knew the fate that awaited those provinces that rebelled. Their nation would drown in violence, blood, fire, and death.

So one of them, Caiaphas the high priest, came up with a solution. "You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish." (John 11:49-50) If we can just kill Jesus, we can put an end to this movement before it starts. If we can just get to Jesus, then the rest of the people will fall in line. If we can just eliminate Jesus, then the nation will be safe. Little did he know he was prophesying the manner in which Jesus would die. Jesus would indeed become the atoning sacrifice...just not in the way Caiaphas had planned.

Throughout this story, Jesus reminds us all things are happening for the glory of God. All these events are taking place so that we might believe. They are signs given by God Himself to His people to lead us to faith. In fact, the entire gospel of John is one sign after another culminating in the ultimate sign of Jesus' death and resurrection. These things are written, John says, so that we might believe. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31) So do you have life in Jesus' name? Have you accepted Christ as the Son of God? The One who made full atonement for your sins? This is the offer Jesus makes to Mary and Martha when He says He alone is the resurrection and the life. He is offering a life that transcends death. A life that is eternal and indestructible. A life that never ends.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 29-31, John 11:55-12:19, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 15:24-26

May 21, 2019

AN EGOTISTICAL GOD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 29-31, John 11:55-12:19, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 15:24-26

Recently I had dinner with someone who asked me why the Christian God had an ego. I asked him what he meant. He talked about how the God of the Bible seems overly concerned about His own glory. His own honor. His own fame. He demands too much from us. All our gold. All our wealth. All our time and attention. He wondered if God was co-dependent or insecure and said he could never worship a God like that. I asked him what would make God more worthy of worship in his mind? He answered with a laundry list of human needs – poverty, violence, drought, famine, etc. - that God could take care of and if He did, He would be more worthy of worship.

It's tempting to use God as a means to accomplish our own ends. Judas looked with disdain on the extravagant offering Mary gave to Jesus. The ointment she "wasted" on Jesus' feet could have been sold and given to the poor. Surely Jesus didn't need such extravagance? Surely Jesus didn't need such devotion? Surely Jesus would side with Judas and rebuke Mary for her sin? He must have been shocked when Jesus instead turns and rebukes him. "Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me." (John 12:7-8) Jesus knew the future. He knew what was coming. He knew Mary – however unwittingly - was anointing him for his burial. Her act of devotion was preparing Him for His death. All Judas could see was the immediate needs before him and even those were an excuse for him to line his own pockets. He was not focused on Jesus. Jesus was a means to another end for Judas and the same was true for all the disciples. They believed Jesus would restore the kingdom of Israel and they would be granted places of honor. None of them truly understood what was happening except for women like Mary. Women who were fully devoted to Jesus. Women who loved Him for who He was not just for what He could do for them.

God is worthy of our worship. He is worthy of all our honor and devotion. He is worthy of the best we have to offer. Our gifts. Our time. Our talent. And yet how many of us see God as a means to another end? Perhaps we see Him as the means of blessing in our own lives and so we give and serve with the expectation that we will get something in return. Perhaps we see God as the means of solving the world's problems and so we serve with the expectation that God will relieve human suffering and pain. Perhaps we see God as the means of eternal salvation so we raise our hand. Pray our prayer. Check the boxes and then go about life as usual assuming we've got our "get out of hell" free card. Friends, God will not allow Himself to be used. He will not be reduced to some genie in a bottle. He does not exist to serve us. We exist to serve Him. We exist to love Him. We exist to worship Him. This is why we were created and it is why Jesus affirms Mary. She saw Him clearly whereas Judas did not.

God doesn't have an ego. He doesn't need us. He lives in perfect communion with Himself – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The great news is that He wants us to share in His life. He invites us into relationship with Him. He loves us and reaches out for us and longs to draw us close. There will always be problems in this world. The poor. The hurting. The suffering. God never intended this world to be this way and in fact, He is preparing a world for us where all tears will be wiped away and sin and death will be no more. He sees more and knows more than we do so perhaps a little humility is in order? Perhaps God is God and we are not? Perhaps He knows what's best for us and it transcends the needs of this present world?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 1:1-2:11, John 12:20-50, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 15:27-28

May 22, 2019

WHOSE GLORY DO YOU SEEK?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1:1-2:11, John 12:20-50, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 15:27-28

“Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” (John 12:42-43)

We love the glory of man. We love the honor, success, and accolades of this world. We love the power and privilege and position we achieve. We love the wealth and possessions we accumulate. We love to compare ourselves to others. To keep up with the Jones’. To compete for the trophies of this world. It may be in business where we seek to climb the corporate ladder. It may be in the home where we push our children to achieve all they can. It may be at school where we collect honors and awards for our academic success. It may be at the end of careers where we look back and recount the mountains we summited along the way. Yes, we love the glory of man.

And for the glory of man, we too often sacrifice the glory of God. Living out our faith is costly. It requires sacrifice. Humility. Putting others before ourselves. It requires the greatest to become the least. The rich to become poor. The powerful to let go of their control. Living out our faith means taking all that we are and all that we have and putting it to use for God’s Kingdom. It means claiming the name of Jesus even though it may cost us a promotion. A friendship. Our reputation among our neighbors. Advancement at school. Living out our faith in some parts of the world costs a Christian their family and community. They are cast out and shunned much like the people John references here in his gospel. The pressure to conform is incredible. And the temptation to seek the glory of man over the glory of God very real.

We face this temptation on a daily basis. When a co-worker comes to you to gossip about another colleague. When a group of students tries to rope you in on their bullying. When your neighbors throw their parties with all kinds of booze and drugs. It’s hard to take a stand for Christ. It’s hard to have the courage to stick out from the crowd. To seek the glory of God over the glory of man. When your boss tells you professional advancement depends on you toning down your faith. When teachers at school make fun of Christians, calling them ignorant, intolerant, and bigoted. When neighbors no longer include you or talk to you because you are raising your children so differently. These are all very real situations faced by real Christians on a regular basis. We can get angry at the injustice of it all. We can shake our fists and let our frustrations get the best of us. We can play the victim and develop a “persecution complex.” Or we can simply recognize seeking the glory of God over the glory of men requires sacrifice. Requires us to give up honors and accolades and recognition in this world in order to obtain those things in the world to come.

I have some dear friends who live in Muslim-dominated eastern Ethiopia. When they came to Christ, they were thrown out on the street by their family. Ostracized by their community. They lost friendships. Jobs. Homes. Even marriages and children. They were beaten. Thrown in jail. The temptation to backslide was real. The pressure to relinquish their faith to go home almost irresistible. But they persevered. Like the Apostle Paul, they considered the present sufferings of this world not worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in Christ. (Romans 8:18) They have given everything to follow Christ. To seek His glory above the glory of man.

What about you? What have you given up? What is God challenging you to give up right now? Where will you have opportunities today to seek the glory of Christ above your own glory or the glory of man?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 2:12-3:39, John 13:1-30, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 15:29-30

May 23, 2019

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 2:12-3:39, John 13:1-30, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 15:29-30

The greatest among you will be a servant. These are the words of Jesus and they run directly against our culture today. In order to serve, one has to be selfless. One has to be willing to put another's needs above their own. Be it their spouse. Their children. Their co-workers. Their classmates. The poor. The sick. The hurting. One has to be willing to put aside one's own needs, wants, and desires. Position, power, and privilege. One has be willing to listen. Learn. Love without strings.

This is the model Jesus gives us when he wraps a towel around His waist and washes His disciples' feet. He took the position of the slave. The servant. The lowest of the low in order to serve those He loved. He washed their feet in humility. The Lord of the Universe not holding onto pride or privilege and instead relinquishing it all for the sake of both His friends and His enemies. We too often forget that Judas Iscariot was present throughout the Last Supper. His feet were washed. He too was served the bread and the cup. Jesus loved him to the end as much as He loved the rest of the disciples.

We live in a self-centered world. We talk about self-protection. Self-care. Self-esteem. Self-help is a billion dollar industry. Self-proclaimed gurus use all kinds of media to promote their latest, greatest "secret" to a fulfilled life. But the fruit is rotten. Our society is more fractured than ever. People are more depressed than ever. People are more lonely than ever. Life is more unfulfilled than ever. It doesn't seem to matter how many toys we buy. How much money we make. How many awards and accolades we receive. How many people we sleep with. It doesn't seem to matter how many laws we pass or people we elect or organizations we launch. We cannot seem to grasp the simple truth that the more we focus on "Self", the more we will despair. We will never measure up. Never satisfy all our desires. Never arrive at self-fulfillment.

So what do we do? We follow the way of Jesus. The way of surrender. The way of service. The way of selflessness. Whoever loses their life will find it. Whoever gives up the world will gain it. Whoever denies "self" will find true acceptance. Jesus gave Himself away. He laid down His life so the whole world might be saved. He forgave freely. He embraced sinners. He loved even His enemies. If you want to know what a life of surrender looks like...look to Jesus. If you want to know what a life of service looks like...look to Jesus. If you want to know what a life of self-denial looks like...look to Jesus. He is literally the most joy-filled man who ever lived. He is the most peace-filled man who ever lived. On this everyone -from Buddhists to Hindus to New Age to Agnostics to Christians -seem to agree. Jesus found the secret to a truly fulfilled life. Maybe we should trust Him when He says His is the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 4-6, John 13:31-14:14, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 15:31-32

May 24, 2019

GREATER THINGS

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 4-6, John 13:31-14:14, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 15:31-32

"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. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it." (John 14:12-14)
This passage has always thrown me for a loop. Greater works than Jesus? Greater works than the Son of God? Greater works than the 2nd Member of the Trinity? Surely you jest, Jesus! Jesus healed. Jesus raised the dead. Jesus cast out demons. Jesus turned water into wine. Jesus calmed the storm. Jesus died for the sins of the world. How in God's name can I be expected to do greater things than Jesus?
My problem is twofold. First, I tend to read this passage "selfishly." What I mean by that is I tend to assume Jesus is asking me to perform miracles in my own strength. According to my own wisdom. I look at my own resources. My own lack of faith. My own struggles and doubts and fears. And I naturally assume there is no way Jesus is serious so I dismiss what He has to say out of hand. Surely, I cannot do greater works than Christ! Jesus is asking the impossible!
Secondly, I tend to read this passage individualistically. I assume Jesus is talk to me as an individual. I am supposed to do greater works? I am supposed to perform miracles? Anything I ask for in Jesus' name will be fulfilled? I forget I am part of a larger community. Something the Bible calls the "Body of Christ." I forget that the people Jesus is addressing understood themselves "communally" not individually.
What's my point? When we read the Bible "selfishly" and "individualistically", we run the very real risk of missing so much of the what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is not lobbing the ball back into our court as He heads to His Father. He promises to be with us always even to the end of the age. He promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. The indwelling presence of the 3rd Member of the Trinity. He promises we will be clothed with power from on high when the Spirit descends. This is not a power that arises from our own strength or the depth of our own faith. It comes to us as a gift from God. And as we exercise this faith. Praying in Jesus' name. Praying in alignment with His purposes for our lives. Praying for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. His promise is sure. He will do it. He will accomplish it. He will work miracles and signs and wonders in and through us.

That last word is key...us. This isn't about me. It's never about me. It's always about us. Always about the community. The Body of Christ. The family of faith. God clothes us with power. God indwells us when two or three are gathered in His name. God equips us for His work in the world. God gives us gifts so that we can encourage and equip and empower one another along the way. God works through His church to bring His blessing to the world. Surely when one considers the impact of the church on the world over the last two thousand years, one can see the fulfillment of what Jesus tells Philip. We have indeed done greater works than Jesus! Not because we are greater but because we who have surrendered to His will have allowed His Spirit to work through us to bring blessing all over the earth. What Jesus began with 12 men has now impacted billions. And all this happened after Jesus ascended to His Father.

You were created for more than you realize, friends! You are part of something larger than yourselves! God has a much greater plan for your life than your personal success! God wants to use you...and those you live in relationship with who love Jesus...to change the world! To declare the glories of the gospel to the ends of the earth! Imagine if all of us pooled all our resources. All our time. All our talent. All our treasure and put in service to proclamation of the gospel? Imagine the impact we could make! Here's the good news! You don't have to imagine it. You can see it already happening all around us as Christians gather together to fight injustice, serve the poor, visit the sick, love the incarcerated, and help those in need. Are you part of it? Good. Push yourself to take another step. Are you not yet engaged? What are you waiting for? Jump in and experience the joy of serving Christ alongside those who love Him! You were meant for greater things than you know! Trust the promise of God!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 7-8, John 14:15-31, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 15:33

May 25, 2019

BUILDING FOR SUCCESS

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7-8, John 14:15-31, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 15:33

“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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 9-11, John 15, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 16:1-3

May 26, 2019

#ME TOO

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 9-11, John 15, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 16:1-3

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, the church.

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.

Frankly, we need more Nathans in our world. Courageous people who are willing to stand up to power expose sin. Women and men of conviction who refuse to tolerate any form of abuse. For far too long the church has protected men who abuse and those who protect them. 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 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 stories must be heard. The cries for justice must be satisfied. The truth must come out. These women are our sisters in Christ. They sit in our pews every week. They serve in so many ways. They give so much of themselves. We must listen. We must believe. We must act on their behalf.

Judgment begins at the house of the Lord. (1 Peter 4:17) We must clean up our own mess first before we dare to speak out to the culture around us. We must safeguard and protect. We must be honest and transparent. We must implement healthy systems of accountability. Real lives are at stake and we must not fail.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 12, John 16, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 16:4-5

May 27, 2019

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 12, John 16, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 16:4-5

Today's reading introduces us to the Holy Spirit. What some have called the "forgotten member of the Trinity." Because of the materialistic nature of Western thought and our discomfort with anything supernatural, we often forget the Holy Spirit and the active role He plays in our sanctification and salvation. As Christians, we do not struggle to wrap our minds around the Father. The Creator of heaven and earth. We similarly do not struggle to understand the Son. The Savior of our souls. We do struggle to understand the Spirit. The One who comes to live with us and dwell with us and point us to Christ. And yet, the Spirit is so important! He is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that though He would ascend back into heaven, we would not be abandoned. Not left stranded in this world. Doomed to wander as orphans and strangers in this world.

The Holy Spirit is sent to accomplish several things. First and foremost, He is the Helper. (John 16:7). His role is to encourage and assist believers in following Christ. How does He do this? "When He comes, He will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment:" (John 16:8) He operates as the "conscience" in the heart of every believer. He lets us know when we wander and stray. He tells us when we fall outside of God's will. He brings us back in confession and repentance. He also leads us to righteousness. He doesn't just show up when we do something wrong, He teaches us what is right and good and holy and pure. He also reminds us all of God's final judgment. An assurance for believers and a terror for unbelievers.

The Holy Spirit also guides us into all truth. He illumines God's Word so that we may understand God's ways more fully and seek to align our lives with Him. He gives us insight to see God's activity all around us in creation. In the lives of those we love. Even in our own hearts. Sometimes He shows us what's to come. Gives us a foretaste of heaven or a premonition of the future. Finally, and most importantly, "He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you." (John 16:14-15) The main job of the Holy Spirit is not to draw attention to Himself but to point us to Christ. I think this is one of the reasons He is so often overlooked. He never self-promotes but instead fulfills the will of the Father and the Son to glorify Christ above all things.

Belief in the Holy Spirit is essential for every Christian. Learning to hear His voice. Tap into His wisdom. Follow His will is what leads us to sanctification. He is the One who makes us more into the image of Christ and surrendering to His will in our daily lives is the essence of what it means to be a disciple.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 13, John 17, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 16:6-7

May 28, 2019

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE...

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 13, John 17, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 16:6-7

"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.

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 4,600 churches have been planted. Almost 600,000 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!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 14:1-15:22, John 18:1-24, Psalms 119:97-112, Proverbs 16:8-9

May 29, 2019

LIVING WITH DYSFUNCTION

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 14:1-15:22, John 18:1-24, Psalms 119:97-112, Proverbs 16:8-9

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 spent a few years in counseling together as we tried to break patterns of sin that have not only been passed down but reinforced by our own choices. I had to learn to deal with my anger issues. Wrestle with my own fears and failures and disappointments. I had to face the fact that I caused my children pain through the choices I made and in how I responded to the difference circumstances we had to face as a family. I 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 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 15:23-16:23, John 18:25-19:22, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 16:10-11

May 30, 2019

LEARNING TO LOVE THE LAW

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 15:23-16:23, John 18:25-19:22, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 16:10-11

"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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 17, John 19:23-42, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 16:12-13

May 31, 2019

THE COURAGE OF CHRIST

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 17, John 19:23-42, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 16:12-13

"After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst." A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, "It is finished," and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." (John 19:28-30)

Most of the time I struggle to give Jesus His due. Mainly because I know He is both God and man, I often assume the things He accomplished – all of which are way beyond me - somehow were "easy" for Him because of His divine nature. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus stepped down out of heaven. He emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. Everything He endured was hard. Everything He suffered was real. Judas' betrayal hurt. Peter's denial broke His heart. Every lash of the whip caused Him unbelievable pain. His trial and condemnation before those He came to save wounded Him deeply. I cannot fathom the pain He felt as He hung on the cross.

It took an unbelievable amount of courage for Jesus to face His death. It's why He agonized over it in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was afraid. He was terrified of what awaited Him. He didn't want to go through it. He begged the Father to change His fate. But in the end, He submitted. He surrendered. Someone once said, "Courage is fear that has said its prayers." I believe Jesus embodied this truth. As He hung on the cross, He refused to numb the pain by accepting the sour wine the Romans offered. He wanted to stare death and evil in the face with a clear eye. He wanted to drink the cup of wrath to its dregs and exhaust the power of the enemy. He wanted Satan to know He never ran. Never shrank. Never stepped back from His fate. This is why we call the cross a victory. This is why we believe death was defeated. Because Jesus – full of pain and heartbreak, his body torn to shreds - took on the full measure of the world's sin and cried out, "It is finished."

I am in awe every time I sit and ponder what Jesus did on the cross. The death He died for me. How can it be? How can it be that God would die for me? Amazing love! Amazing grace! The courage it took for my Savior to suffer on my behalf! The bravery it took for Him to embrace His fate knowing what it would cost. The very idea that God would lay His life down for me in an act of extraordinary love! It is more than I can ever ask for or imagine. All I can do is fall on my face in worship. Fall on my knees before His throne. Give Him back all that I am and all that I have to use for His purposes in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 18:1-19:10, John 20:1-31, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 16:14-15

June 1, 2019

FAILURE TO FORGIVE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 18:1-19:10, John 20:1-31, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 16:14-15

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 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've read the last few days, 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 and restore him to his place. In his isolation, Absalom begins to conspire to steal the kingdom. David seems blissfully unaware as 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 looking out for themselves. Eventually there is civil war. Absalom is murdered by Joab. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 19:11-20:13, John 21, Psalms 120, Proverbs 16:16-17

June 2, 2019

LOVING JESUS MORE...

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19:11-20:13, John 21, Psalms 120, Proverbs 16:16-17

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15)

It's THE defining question of our age. The fundamental question of our existence. It separates the follower of Jesus from the fan. The true believer from the casual. And eternity literally rides on our answer. Do we love Jesus more? More than anything else in our lives? More than out possessions? More than our family? More than ourselves? Essentially a restatement of the First Commandment – Thou shalt have no other gods before Me - and Jesus' own summary of the Law - You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength - Jesus' question cuts right to the heart of our faith. Do we truly believe in Christ? Are we truly a follower of Christ? If so, we will seek to love Jesus more than anything else in our lives. We will place Him first. We will prioritize our relationship with Him above all other activities and responsibilities. We will make become like Him our primary goal in life.

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? Do you love me more than this world? Think about all you have seen in the last three years. Think about the miracles you've witnessed. Do you remember when I healed your mother-in-law? Remember when I cast out all those demons? Remember when I raised the dead? Those were signs, Simon, of a new world. A new Kingdom. My world coming into your world. Do you remember standing on top of the mountain and seeing Me in all My glory? Transfigured before your very eyes? The veil between your world and mine grew thin in that moment. Do you remember all I taught you about my world? About love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control? These are the ways of the my world. And what I want to know is do you love my world more than you love your own? Do you love my ways more than you love your own? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? Do you love Me more than your old life? Look around you. Does any of this ring a bell? Do you remember this is the very place I found you. The very place I first called you. Do you remember you'd been fishing all night and were tired. And I asked you to take me back out again. Cast out your nets. See what happens. You did what I asked though I could tell you thought I was crazy. And you brought in such a catch that your nets began to break and your boats began to sink. In that moment, you caught a glimpse of who I was. The Lord of heaven and earth. So when we got to shore and I asked you to give up everything and come follow Me…you did. Now I'm asking again. Do you love Me more than these? More than this old life? More than the boats and the nets and the fish? More than what's familiar? More than what's comfortable? More than what you know? Do you love Me more than your home? More than your business? More than your lifestyle? More than your community? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these? More than your family? More than your closest friends? More than these other disciples who are here with you? This isn't a competition. I'm not asking you to be the best disciple or the first disciple or the most devoted disciple. I'm not asking you to stop loving them or loving your family. I am simply asking if you love Me more? Do you love Me supremely? Do you love Me with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you love Me above everything else in your life including your closest relationships? Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?

Such a challenging question. As I said, it cuts the heart of who we are and what we love. You see, friends, Jesus demands that we love Him more than anything else in our lives. More than this world. More than the things of this world. More than our jobs. More than our lifestyles. More than our town. More than our neighborhood. More than our closest friends. More than our kids. More than our spouses. More than we love ourselves. And this is the secret to the Christian life. Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. Lose your life for my sake and you will find it. Love God with all your heart, soul, mind,

and strength and then you will be able to love your neighbor as yourself. Everything starts with the love of God. Everything flows from the love of God. Everything has its source in the love of God. You want to have the best marriage? Love Jesus more than you love your wife or husband. You want to be the best parent? Love Jesus more than you love your kids. If you're single, do you want to be the best friend or future spouse you can be? Love Jesus more. You want to be the best employer or employee? Love Jesus more than your work. You want to be the best neighbor? Love Jesus more than you love your community. You want to be the best person you can be? Love Jesus more than you love yourself. Do you want true peace and contentment? Define your life by Jesus. Align your life with Jesus. Ground your identity in Jesus. Loving Jesus supremely allows us to love others and other things appropriately. Loving Jesus first allows all our other loves to fall into their proper place. So make Christ your greatest treasure. Love Him more than these...

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 20:14-21:22, Acts 1, Psalms 121, Proverbs 16:18

June 3, 2019

GATHERED WORSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 20:14-21:22, Acts 1, Psalms 121, Proverbs 16:18

Psalms 120-134 are called the “Psalms of Ascent” in the Bible. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22:1-23:23, Acts 2, Psalms 122, Proverbs 16:19-20,

June 4, 2019

AN AMAZING GOD

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 22:1-23:23, Acts 2, Psalms 122, Proverbs 16:19-20

I once 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 23:24-24:25, Acts 3, Psalms 123, Proverbs 16:21-23

June 5, 2019

WHY, GOD?

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 23:24-24:25, Acts 3, Psalms 123, Proverbs 16:21-23

There are so many stories I do not understand. So many things the Bible says that I do not get. I question. I doubt. I struggle. I fight. The cynicism in me wants to chuck the Bible across the room at times. Today is one of those days. Every time I read this story about God inciting David to sin and then turning around to judge him for it baffles me. Sure, I know what the Old Testament scholars say. They argue this is theological spin from the "court scribes" who are trying to make sense of what happened. They argue that the people of Israel were superstitious and took such a strong view of God's sovereignty that when a plague is unleashed on the nation, they have to come up with some kind of theological rationale. All that sounds good but I'm not sure I buy it.

I think the Bible says what it says. "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel..." I have spent many hours pondering what it must be like to be a totally holy God interacting with an unholy people. The Bible is clear that not one of us is righteous. All of us are corrupt. Selfish. Greedy. Lazy. We do not do the things we ought to do. We choose self-destruction over and over again. In the way we spend our time. In the food we eat. In the activities we pursue. Medical health professionals everywhere agree. The data is unequivocal. Furthermore, we often make choices that hurt not just ourselves but others. In the words we say. The actions we take. The anger and rage that boil up within. We are so prone to hate and violence. Again, medical health professionals everywhere agree. The data is unequivocal. It's why I believe if there's one doctrine in Christianity that is empirically provable, it is total depravity. Original sin. It impacts us all.

If this is true – and I firmly believe it is – then it is truly wondrous God's anger isn't kindled against us...ALL. THE. TIME. He has every right to be angry at the way we treat our bodies. The way we treat others. The way we treat the world He has made. He has every right to judge us for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. He has every right to condemn us for our inaction and unwillingness to love ourselves, others, and the world He has made in the way He demands. He is God. He is the one who made us. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is our Creator and we are living in constant rebellion against His sovereign will and plan. And the anger of the Lord does indeed break out against us at times. Especially against His people. Those called and set apart to reflect His glory in the world. Those whom He loves. Those whom He saves. God even uses Satan and evil and sin at times to do His bidding. Consider the case of Pharaoh, Job, Saul, or in this case, David. While I may not understand, God is righteous in His decision because David is an adulterer and murderer. Someone worthy of death. As are the people of Israel. None of them is innocent. Innocence is not a category one can apply to any human being.

So where can we find hope? Only in God's mercy. Only in God's grace. I love the words from the Psalmist today. "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. Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt." (Psalms 123:1-3) Without God, we are helpless and hopeless. Lost and doomed to wander in darkness. Our strength will fail. Our willpower is not enough. Our self-discipline will crumble. We have nothing. We bring nothing. We offer nothing back to God. Thankfully, He doesn't need anything from us and out of unconditional love offers everything to us in Christ. He takes our place. He is punished on our behalf. He pays the price for our sin. He bears the full weight of God's wrath and judgment. He endures. He suffers. He dies. And God's justice is satisfied. The work is finished. Recompense has been made. Forgiveness is now extended. All I can do is pick my Bible back up and praise God for His amazing grace that saved a wretch like me.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 1, Acts 4, Psalms 124, Proverbs 16:24

June 6, 2019

SUFFERING FOR CHRIST

Readings for today: 1 Kings 1, Acts 4, Psalms 124, Proverbs 16:24

"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:8-11)

Something very powerful takes place when we share in the sufferings of Christ. The Apostle Paul experienced it as did the Apostles Peter and John and the new believers in Jerusalem. Christians throughout the ages have experienced it in places like Russia, China, and Ethiopia. I have had the privilege of meeting many of them. Over the past ten years I have personally trained hundreds of church planters in the Horn of Africa. Many of them bear on their bodies the scars of the persecution they face on a daily basis. They've been threatened. Beaten. Shot. Stabbed. Imprisoned. Some of them have even died in the field. And still they go. When I ask them how I can pray over them, they never ask for personal safety but always for boldness to preach the gospel in the face of the opposition. It is deeply humbling and inspiring.

I think about these men and women when I read Acts 4. I love the boldness of those first believers. Peter and John are arrested, imprisoned, and tried for preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. They were not among the elite. They had no wealth. No power. No education. They were just ordinary men whom God used to proclaim an extraordinary message. The gospel stirred up the city – as it always does - and threatened those in power - as it always does. So Peter and John were threatened. I imagine they were roughed up a bit as well. But they return home praising God for the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ. They shared all that happened with their friends and went to prayer. They praised God for the persecution. Praised God for His sovereign will and plan. Praised God for the opportunity to proclaim the gospel. And they prayed for even more boldness. Even more courage. Even more strength to go forth and share. And God answered their prayers. The room in which they were praying began to shake as they were filled with the Holy Spirit and the gospel went forth with even more power from that day.

What do you pray for when you come against opposition? What do you pray for when you experience suffering and hardship? What do you pray for when you are in pain? For most of us, I imagine we pray for relief. Healing. Safety. Comfort. These are not necessarily bad things to pray for but they certainly are not the most important things. The Apostle Paul experienced all these things and more in his life. He was mistreated, abused, left for dead. He gave up his home. His family. His livelihood. He sacrificed everything for the sake of knowing and serving Christ. And what did he gain in return? Christ. Peter and John and the early believers made similar sacrifices. They considered everything "rubbish" when compared to knowing and serving Christ. And what did they gain in return? Christ. What if – instead of safety and security - you prayed for boldness? What if - instead of comfort and peace - you prayed for courage? What if - instead of provision and protection - you prayed for God to use all that you are and all that you have for His Kingdom work in this world? What would your life look like if God were to answer such a prayer?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 2:1-3:2, Acts 5, Psalms 125, Proverbs 16:25

June 7, 2019

THE WAY OF DEATH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 2:1-3:2, Acts 5, Psalms 125, Proverbs 16:25

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 16:25)

We are all a mix of contradictions. David was a man after God’s own heart and yet at the end of his life seems to die a bitter, vindictive, vengeful man. He orders the death of Joab. A man whose military prowess had won David his kingdom. Twice! David knew Joab was a violent and spiteful man but accepted his service as long as it served his purposes. He orders the death of Shimei, the son of Gera. A man who cursed David when he fled from Absalom. Rather than forgive, David holds onto his grudge and seals Shimei’s fate. Who knows how many others made their way onto David’s “hit list” before he died? Who knows how many scores he settled? Not a good way to go out.

Solomon isn’t much better. Despite being beloved by God and given the gift of great wisdom, Solomon too acts like a petty warlord at times. He sends his enforcer Benaiah to kill Adonijah, his own brother, after he makes a subtle play for the throne. He then exiles Abiathar the priest. He sends Benaiah to execute Joab literally on the altar of God and then to kill Shimei after he fails to keep his word to Solomon. It’s a naked and blatant and brutal consolidation of power.

So we turn to the New Testament looking for hope only to run into Ananias and Sapphira. A couple who concoct a scheme to defraud God and His church. They want credit for their generosity even as they hold back profit for themselves. Their sin leads to sudden death as they literally drop at Peter’s feet. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose their soul in the process?

These are hard stories to read that remind us of the total depravity of humanity. We pursue our own selfish ends so much of the time. How often, when we are hurt, do we choose vengeance over forgiveness? How often do we use people to get ahead? How often do we exaggerate our accomplishments? Deceive others into thinking we are better than we actually are all in the pursuit of self-promotion? These are the corrupt ways of humanity and the Bible makes no bones about where they lead.

How much better the way of Christ? The way of love? The way of grace? The way of mercy? The way of peace? It’s a narrow way to be sure. Many would rather choose the wide path that leads to destruction. It’s a hard way to be sure. Many would rather choose the easy path that leads to slavery and addiction. It’s an impossible way in our own strength and wisdom. But what is impossible for us is not impossible for God! He has made a way. Charted a new path. Blazed a new trail through His Son in our world and those who follow Him receive eternal life as their reward. Reject the way of death. Choose the way of life. Let Jesus be your guide!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 3:3-4:34, Acts 6, Psalms 126, Proverbs 16:26-27

June 8, 2019

THE POWER OF WISDOM

Readings for today: 1 Kings 3:3-4:34, Acts 6, Psalms 126, Proverbs 16:26-27

"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. And God answers his prayers. “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore,”(1 Kings 4:29) 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!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 5-6, Acts 7:1-29, Psalms 127, Proverbs 16:28-30

June 9, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Kings 5-6, Acts 7:1-29, Psalms 127, Proverbs 16:28-30

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Kings 7, Acts 7:30-50, Psalms 128, Proverbs 16:31-33

June 10, 2019

BUILDING WITH GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 7, Acts 7:30-50, Psalms 128, Proverbs 16:31-33

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.

I am still thinking about the Psalm we read from yesterday. Especially as I read ambitious building projects Solomon undertook. He spends seven years building the Temple of God. This glorious building that would become the beating heart of Israel for generations. Then he spends thirteen years building his own house which includes these different halls where he will conduct the business of the nation. The people labor for twenty long years to bring Solomon's vision to pass. It is a mighty work. It is a hard work. On some level it is the Lord's work. (Though one wonders why Solomon spent twice as long building his own house as he did the Temple of God?)

What work is God doing in your life? What "house" has He called you to build? I distinctly remember a period of time in my own life where I made my own plans. I tried to build my own house without the Lord's blessing. I remember my mentor, Steve Haynes, telling me, "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. Steve 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" 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.

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 8, Acts 7:51-8:13, Psalms 129, Proverbs 17:1

June 11, 2019

TRUE PRAYER

Readings for today: 1 Kings 8, Acts 7:51-8:13, Psalms 129, Proverbs 17:1

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 we 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 9-10, Acts 8:14-40, Psalms 130, Proverbs 17:2-3

June 12, 2019

FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Readings for today: 1 Kings 9-10, Acts 8:14-40, Psalms 130, Proverbs 17:2-3

I love the Book of Acts. The chaos of the early days of the church. God pressing His people outside their comfort zones. Blowing up their expectations. Transforming how they see themselves, one another, and the world.

Jesus told His disciples that they would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The gospel was so disruptive in Jerusalem and Judea that believers were being dragged from their homes and thrown in prison. Many were being tortured and killed. The Pharisees were coming after them with a vengeance and Saul – who would later become the Apostle Paul - was at the forefront of it all.

As the disciples scattered, running for their lives, they continued to preach the gospel. And that's how Philip came to Samaria. He preached and performed many signs and wonders and many Samaritans believed. They received the Word of God with open hearts. They were baptized in the name of Jesus. But they had not yet received the blessing of the Holy Spirit so the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to lay hands on them. Frankly, we do not know why they didn't receive the Holy Spirit at their conversion. It seems in the early days of the church that the Holy Spirit was moving in different ways. Coming to different people at different times. In Acts 2, He comes with power over the disciples as they are praying together, giving them the miraculous gift of tongues. In Acts 8, He comes at the laying on of hands by Peter and John. In Acts 10, He comes as Peter preaches the gospel to Cornelius and his household. It's important not to build our doctrine on these isolated passages but simply to accept the fact that God was doing a new thing in those days and it manifested itself in different ways.

One thing we can take away from this passage is the importance of being filled with the Spirit. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised His followers they would not be alone. He would not leave them as orphans in this world. He would send His Spirit to dwell with them. To guide them into all truth. To lead them to a deeper understanding of Christ. To empower them for Christ's service in the world. The Spirit imparts gifts to God's people. The Spirit bears fruit in the lives of God's people. The Spirit is active, constantly transforming us and sanctifying us and making us into the image of Christ.

Most of all, the Spirit brings unity. He brings us together across our differences. It is the Spirit who reconciles Jews and Samaritans. Healing racial divisions going back centuries. It is the Spirit who will bring Jews and Gentiles together into one church. Overcoming cultural and social and ritual divisions that had always kept them apart. It is the Spirit who sends Philip to the side of an Ethiopian official as he returns home. Opening his eyes to the truth of the gospel and sending him forth to proclaim the good news to his own people.

Friends, this same Spirit is on the move today! He regenerates the heart of every believer who comes to faith in Jesus Christ. He dwells within us, bearing His fruit in our lives. He teaches us, opening up the Scriptures to us in ways we can understand. He empowers us, giving us gifts to serve the church and our community in Jesus' name. He brings unity to His people, crossing every divide you can imagine. Breaking through every dividing wall of hostility we tend to set up that keeps us apart. He heals. He reconciles. He drives us from our places of safety and security and comfort to bring this ministry of reconciliation to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 11:1-12:19, Acts 9:1-25, Psalms 131, Proverbs 14:4-5

June 13, 2019

THE DANGERS OF ENTITLEMENT

Readings for today: 1 Kings 11:1-12:19, Acts 9:1-25, Psalms 131, Proverbs 17:4-5

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 motives? 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 essential. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 12:20-13:34, Acts 9:26-43, Psalms 132, Proverbs 17:6

June 14, 2019

TRUSTING GOD

Readings for today: 1 Kings 12:20-13:34, Acts 9:26-43, Psalms 132, Proverbs 17:6

Today's reading contains another difficult story. The people of Israel sinned a great sin. Their new king, out of fear of losing his newly won kingdom, created two idols and set them up in Dan and Bethel. He called his people to worship at these temples rather than the Temple of God in Jerusalem. He failed to trust God and brought judgment on himself. God sent Jeroboam a prophet. A man of God from Judah who confronted him on his sin. Rather than repent, he tried to have the prophet killed. God intervened. Jeroboam's hand withered. The altar he had just made was torn down. Ashes poured out of it. Jeroboam realized he was in the presence of a true prophet of God. But he refused to repent and instead tried to co-opt the prophet for his own purposes. The prophet refused. God had told him not to eat or drink while he was in the northern kingdom. But on his way home, he met another prophet. An older man who lived in Bethel. He pursued the prophet from Judah and lied to get him to come back to his house. The prophet from Judah disobeyed the command of God and returned. The result was judgment on the prophet and he is killed on his way back home.

It's a confusing story on a lot of levels. It feels like we don't have all the information. Why did the prophet from Judah trust the words of the older prophet from Bethel? Why did he turn aside after being so bold with the king? Why did he not trust the Word the Lord had given specifically to him?

These are good questions to ponder. Especially that last one. I meet with people all the time who fall into this same trap. God gives them a vision. A dream. A special Word designed specifically for them and their life. But they struggle to obey. The people they surround themselves with sow seeds of doubt. Their own feelings of anxiety and fear cause them to turn back. They run into obstacles or hardships along the way and they abandon the cause.

Trusting God is hard. It's been said that God won't give a person more than they can handle. Not true! God often gives us more than we can handle so we will learn to rely on Him. He calls us out of our comfortable spaces. Out of our homogeneous bubbles. Out of safety. Out of security. So that we can serve His purposes in the world. He calls us to sacrifice. To surrender. To submit every area of our lives to Him. He calls us to do things we wouldn't normally choose to do. He calls us to go places we wouldn't normally choose to go. He calls to have conversations we wouldn't normally choose to have. All to further His Kingdom on earth.

Most Christians I talk to can point to examples in their lives where they felt prompted by God to do something totally beyond them. Totally out of the ordinary. Something that felt a little crazy at the time. The people around them wondered what was going on. Some of them tried to convince them to turn aside. They struggled with their own feelings of fear and anxiety. They wondered themselves if this was really God or some other voice they were listening to. But then they stepped out in faith and met God in a profound way.

I think about a friend of mine in South Korea. His name is Pastor Chun. He runs a ministry called Durihana which focused on the rescue of North Korean refugees. Recently, CNN and other news stations have been running stories on him and his work. He is incredible. He is in his sixties and still risks his life to cross the border. He primarily focuses on young girls who've been sold as sex slaves. He's established an Underground Railroad through China into Thailand where he can apply for asylum in South Korea. Many would call his work crazy. Impractical. Even impossible. I am sure he has feelings of anxiety and fear that he battles from time to time. I am sure he's been tempted along the way to pack it in. And yet, he perseveres. Why? Because he trusts God's Word. He trusts God's call. He trusts God's will for his life and even though it has cost him dearly and may cost him his life one day, he considers it an honor to suffer for Christ.

How has God spoken to you in your life? What fears or anxieties hold you back from pursuing God's will? What temptations have you given into along the way that have turned you aside from pursuing God's call? What voices are drowning out God's voice in your life right now? Trust God. Trust His Word. Trust His Spirit. Turn neither to the right nor to the left. Let Him lead and guide and meet you in a powerful way.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 14:1-15:24, Acts 10:1-23, Psalms 133, Proverbs 17:7-8

June 15, 2019

UNITY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 14:1-15:24, Acts 10:1-23, Psalms 133, Proverbs 17:7-8

“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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15:25-17:24, Acts 10: 24-48, Psalms 134, Proverbs 17:9-11

June 16, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Kings 15:25-17:24, Acts 10: 24-48, Psalms 134, Proverbs 17:9-11

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Kings 18, Acts 11, Psalms 135, Proverbs 17:12-13

June 17, 2019

GOSPEL-CENTERED COMMUNITY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 18, Acts 11, Psalms 135, Proverbs 17:12-13

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, an 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. In that way, we are much like the party of the circumcision that challenged Peter when he reported to them what the Holy Spirit had done. 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. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 19, Acts 12:1-23, Psalms 136, Proverbs 17:14-15

June 18, 2019

HEARING GOD'S VOICE

Readings for today: 1 Kings 19, Acts 12:1-23, Psalms 136, Proverbs 17:14-15

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 Zarephath 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.

This one of my favorite stories in Scripture. Elijah falling into a deep depression after his greatest victory. He must have wondered to himself, "What more can I do? I literally just called down fire from heaven and still it is not enough to bring Ahab and Jezebel to repentance." But once again, Elijah leaned on the Word of the Lord. He traveled to the mountain of God. The same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments. The same mountain where God revealed Himself to Israel in fire and smoke and great darkness. On this same mountain, Elijah meets with God. The wind howls. The earth shakes. Fire breaks out. Finally there is silence. God speaks. Whispering His will to His beloved prophet.

I have no idea what life is like for you right now. Perhaps you are feeling buffeted by hurricane force winds. Perhaps you feel the earth giving way beneath your feet. Perhaps fire has broken out threatening to burn everything you've built to the ground. Maybe you've just won an incredible victory. Achieved a lifelong dream. Found professional success. Perhaps you're depressed and lonely and anxious and afraid. Maybe you're even considering taking your life. Let the story of Elijah encourage you. God is not done with you! He meets you in every season of life! He is with you on the mountaintop when everything is going so well. He is with you in the valleys when it feels like you can barely go on. He is speaking to you. He has some things to say to you. You are His beloved and He will never leave you or forsake you.

How can you tune into what He's saying? You have to do what Elijah did. You have to get quiet. You have to build time in your life for silence. Turn off the devices. Turn off the television. Turn off the ringer on your phone. Get by yourself. Find a spot to be alone. It could be in your home. Out on a trail somewhere. Even in your car. God speaks to us in whispers. He will not raise His voice to compete with the chaos of our lives. He will not talk over us. He will not interrupt us. He simply will wait until we are ready. Wait until we slow down. Wait until we get quiet. God wants you to hear Him today. He wants you to hear the things He has to say. Listen, friends. Give Him the space to speak and you will find the peace and comfort your soul craves.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 20-21, Acts 12:24-13:15, Psalms 137, Proverbs 17:16

June 19, 2019

MISSION

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21, Acts 12:24-13:15, Psalms 137, Proverbs 17:16

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!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 22, Acts 13:16-41, Psalms 138, Proverbs 17:17-18

June 20, 2019

BEDROCK FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, Acts 13:16-41, Psalms 138, Proverbs 17:17-18

"I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness, for you have exalted above all things your name and your word. On the day I called, you answered me; my strength of soul you increased. All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth, and they shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life; you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands." (Psalms 138)

Yesterday morning I had the privilege of hearing the testimony of Andrew and Norine Brunson. Andrew is a pastor and missionary who was imprisoned for his Christian faith in Turkey for two years. He was picked up along with many others as the national government sought to suppress dissent and Western influence. Falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. The numerous hearings and trials were a mockery of justice. He spent many days in solitary confinement. His only contact with the outside world was his wife who he got to see for one hour once a week.

Andrew spoke movingly of his time in prison. He was vulnerable about the struggles he faced. Depression. Despair. Suicide. A sense of God's absence. God's silence. He didn't glorify or sugarcoat the "martyr" experience at all. At the same time, he kept pressing in. He kept pursuing intimacy with God. He kept crying out to Jesus. And in his darkest moment, when he felt God's absence and silence most keenly, he found himself saying over and over again, "Jesus, I love you. Jesus, I love you." Strip everything away. His job. His church. His family. All his earthly possessions. His hope for the future. His connection to God. And he still found himself in love with Christ. He had hit bedrock. The fundamental truth of his existence was his love for Christ.

Andrew is free now. After two years and much political pressure, Andrew boarded a plane with Norine and returned to the US. He is still recovering from the trauma. He is still grappling with post-traumatic stress. He is in therapy but he is recovering. His love for Christ sustained him in his darkest hour and is helping him heal.

Andrew challenged us all to chase after intimacy with Christ. To ask God for His presence. What does this look like, you ask? I think it best expressed in the Psalm we read today. The Psalmist sings to the Lord with his whole heart. He humbly bows before the Lord in reverence and awe. He walks in close communion with the Lord, crying out to him for answers. He lives his life in confidence, trusting God for his strength in the midst of his trials and temptations. He knows God has a purpose for his life. Both the good and the bad. The joys and the sorrows. The triumphs and the tragedies. He trusts the Lord is with him no matter where he goes. Most of all, he knows what Andrew and Norine discovered. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. It forms the bedrock of his life.

What forms the bedrock of your life? Strip it all away and what would you have? What's most fundamental? Most foundational? What have the trials and struggles and sufferings of this world revealed about your relationship with Jesus? Is Christ the stronghold of you life?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 1-2, Acts 13:42-14:7, Psalms 139, Proverbs 17:19-21

June 21, 2019

COMMUNION WITH GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-2, Acts 13:42-14:7, Psalms 139, Proverbs 17:19-21

God desires intimacy with His people. The real question is do we desire intimacy with Him? I think of the desire for intimacy that drove Elisha to pursue Elijah and stick with him as his time on earth drew to a close. Elisha could feel the loss coming. His grief was beginning to build. He wanted to make sure he treasured every moment. He wanted to see Elijah's ascendance into heaven. He wanted to be there are the very moment when the heavens opened to receive his mentor.

I think of the Gentiles who responded to Paul's preaching. The hunger and thirst they exhibited for God. The way they rejoiced when they heard how much God loved them and longed for a relationship with him. The way entire cities would turn out to hear to the Good News.

God desires intimacy with His people. Psalm 139 makes this clear. He searches us and knows us. He discerns our thoughts and emotions. He knows every word before we say it. Every action before we take it. He surrounds us and hems us in on every side. There is no place we can go to get away from Him. Nowhere we can run. Nowhere we can hide. He is in the highest of heavens and the depths of the earth. He is with us even when we go across the seas. No matter where life finds us, His hand is with us. He holds us fast.

God knows us intimately. He shaped and formed us in our mother's wombs. He carefully crafted each and every part. There is nothing we do or say or think that He does not see. God knows us as we are and He loves us as we are but He also loves us too much to leave us there. This is why our frame is not hidden from him. This is why our unformed substance is not a secret to Him. He is with us. He is leading us. He is reaching out to us. He longs for us to turn and pursue intimacy with Him.

How do we pursue intimacy with Christ? Prayer. How do we grow a hunger and thirst for God? Spending time meditating on His Word. How do we develop a passion for a relationship with God? Simply sitting and cultivating a deep awareness of His abiding presence. Friends, let me encourage you to make these words from Psalms 139 your prayer today - "How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you…Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 3:1-4:17, Acts 14:8-28, Psalms 140, Proverbs 17:22

June 22, 2019

ANSWERED PRAYERS

Readings for today: 2 Kings 3:1-4:17, Acts 14:8-28, Psalms 140, Proverbs 17:22

On one of my trips to Ethiopia, we met with a group of denominational leaders to launch a new regional training center. The people in this part of the country are beautiful and industrious. They engage in backbreaking work every single day. They are mainly pastoralists who live a semi-nomadic lifestyle depending on the rains. They herd cattle and sheep. They raise camels and goats. They grow mouthwatering fruit. However, they are located pretty far from Addis Ababa which is the capital city of the country. Because of the distance, they do not get a lot of aid from their government or even their denominational leadership. In addition, their remote location and nomadic lifestyle has made it difficult for them to connect with NGO's and Christian non-profits. Different church groups have come and gone over the years but the challenges are too much for them to overcome.

The leaders we met with shared all this with us as we talked about what a partnership might look like moving forward. One of them referenced the story we read today from 2 Kings. He told us it has felt like they've been wandering in the wilderness for years with no water. They have been praying for God to do what He did for Elisha and the kings. Fill the dry streams with water. Flood their valley and their land with resources so they can help their people and bring them to Christ. He truly believed the Petros Network was an answer to their prayers and he has been right. The partnership God led us to forge with these brothers and sisters is leading to incredible fruit as hundreds of churches are now being planted and thousands brought to Christ. Further plans for education and clean water access are also being made as we continue to pray for God to fill the dry steams with His Living Water!!

Where do you need Living Water in your life? The prophet Jeremiah warns us not to seek to quench out thirsty souls from cisterns of our own making. Instead we are to quench our thirst in Christ. We are to come to Him and let Him refresh and renew us every day. Too often, we make our plans just like the kings did. We do not consult God. We do what we think is best. And we end up in the desert. Wandering in the wilderness. Struggle to survive. Today's passage calls us to "inquire of the Lord" when we find ourselves in those spaces. To seek His will through His Word and in prayer. To engage in worship as we seek His presence. Intimacy with Christ is the only thing that can truly quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger. His abiding Presence is the source of Life itself and our connection to Him is vital if we are to flourish.

Engage in self-examination today. Ask Christ to reveal to you those areas of your life where you are trusting in your own wisdom and strength. Engage in prayer today. Ask Christ to give you a hunger and thirst for His Presence. Meditate on God's Word today. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal His will to you through the text. Most of all, trust Christ is for you. He loves you. Christ longs to become a spring inside you eternally flowing with Living Water so you will never be thirsty again.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 4:18-5:27, Acts 15:1-35, Psalms 141, Proverbs 17:23

June 23 2019

CONFLICT

Readings for today: 2 Kings 4:18-5:27, Acts 15:1-35, Psalms 141, Proverbs 17:23

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're 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 6-7, Acts 15:36-16:15, Psalms 142, Proverbs 17:24-25

June 24, 2019

OPEN OUR EYES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 6-7, Acts 15:36-16:15, Psalms 142, Proverbs 17:24-25

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 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8:1-9:13, Acts 16:16-40, Psalms 143, Proverbs 17:26

June 25, 2019

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:1-9:13, Acts 16:16-40, Psalms 143, Proverbs 17:26

“And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." (Acts 16:20-21)

The gospel is disruptive. It confronts as much as it comforts. It stirs up as much as it calms down. It incites conflict as much as it brings peace. The Bible calls it a “two-edged sword.” Jesus warns us it will cause division. Setting family members against one another. Good friends. Whole communities. It forces us to face ourselves. Face our fears. Face our failures. It forces us to make a choice between Jesus and Self. Submission or sedition. Surrender or rebellion.

Preaching. Teaching. Living the gospel will set you at odds with our culture today. One could easily reframe the verse above to say, “And when they had brought them to the judge, they said, “These people are Christians and they are disturbing our city. They advocate a way of life that is bigoted, hateful, deceptive, and not lawful for us as Americans to accept or practice.” The Bible commands us to deny ourselves. Our culture celebrates Self as the new god. The Bible condemns greed, pride, lust, and ambition. Our culture monetizes them. The Bible teaches us to surrender and submit. Our culture teaches us to resist and rebel. The Bible demands that we love our enemies. Our culture demands that we demonize them. The Bible roots human freedom in the practice of forgiveness and grace. Our culture enslaves through rage, anger, and vengeance.

Paul is on his way to pray. He soon notices a young woman following him. She lives in terrible torment. Oppressed and possessed by demons. She is enslaved. Rather than care for her, her community uses her for monetary gain. They pay her to divine the future and her owners reap the profits. Then one day she meets Paul. She can’t help herself. There’s something about him that is different. Attractive. So she follows him around for days. The evil spirit lurking within her recognizes the Spirit of Christ that lives in Paul. She starts shouting to all who would hear her, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” Perhaps wanting to keep a lower profile, Paul finally gets exacerbated and casts the demon out. Now the trouble begins. Her owners have just lost their business. A significant source of their revenue. And Paul is just one man. What will happen if Christianity sweeps the city? Won’t it turn their whole world upside down?

Make no mistake. The gospel is personal but it is not private. It impacts communities, villages, towns, cities, and nations. It influences politics and societal norms. Paul will later tell the Corinthians that the gospel tears down everything that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. He will tell the Romans that the gospel is the power of God. And this same power is alive and well even today. The gospel confronts how we think about human sexuality. Wealth accumulation. The projection of military power. The gospel confronts how we think about the crisis on the border. The rise of white nationalism. The way we weaponize false information and lies to our own political benefit. The gospel confronts how we think about the environment. Family systems. The value of human life from the womb to the tomb. In short, the gospel penetrates and permeates every corner of society seeking to reshape and reform to the glory of God.

What difference does the gospel make in your life? In your relationships? In the way you vote? In the public policies you support? In the candidates you endorse? Where has the gospel disrupted you? Where is it currently challenging you? What implications does this hold for the way you live? “Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 9:14-10:31, Acts 17, Psalms 144, Proverbs 17:27-28

June 26, 2019

EVANGELISM

Readings for today: 2 Kings 9:14-10:31, Acts 17, Psalms 144, Proverbs 17:27-28

I teach evangelism and mission at Denver Seminary once or twice a year and always spend time unpacking this text from Acts. Paul's defense of the gospel in Athens is brilliant and a great model for us as we engage our culture. Remember, 1 Peter 3:15 encourages us to "always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that lies within." As Christians, we should live "questionable lives" or lives of such holiness and devotion that they naturally elicit questions from the people around us who do not yet believe. The Apostle Paul certainly lived such a life and often had to give a defense for what he believed to angry mobs, kings and princes, and the Athenian court on the Aeropagus.

Paul is not engaging in a simple religious debate. This is not just any philosophical discussion. Paul has been dragged before the Athenian court to answer for the beliefs he is espousing. Religion was no joke in the ancient world. They truly believed the gods were engaged in their world and ending up on their bad side resulted in real life consequences. Paul also believes God is engaged with His world and refusing to believe the gospel holds real life consequences. So what we are watching unfold in Acts 17 is a trial. Paul is fighting for his life as well as for the hearts of those who are listening.

Note how Paul begins with an affirmation. He complements the Athenians on their religious devotion. Their city is filled with shrines to every god imaginable. They truly do want to please the gods which is a good thing and a great place to build common ground. He further connects with them around a particular shrine to the "unknown god." The Athenians were so worried about leaving one of the pantheon of gods out that they built a shrine to any gods that were not yet known. And Paul uses this shrine as a springboard to preach the gospel. Let me tell you the name of this unknown God. Let me share with you about His nature and character. Let me reveal to you who He is and what He's about. He is the God of gods. The Lord of heaven and earth. A God with no rival or peer. He cannot be depicted in idols of wood, stone, or precious metal. He cannot be housed in a temple or shrine. He cannot be served by a cult of priests. He needs nothing from us and yet gives everything to us. And through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, He has revealed Himself to us and called us to faith and repentance. As I said before, it's a brilliant argument that the Athenians clearly appreciated even if they didn't necessarily agree. So Paul is released. New converts are made. He moves on to the next city and assignment.

Are you prepared to give a defense of the gospel? Are you ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within? Do you share your faith in Christ with those around you? Do you live a "questionable" life before them? What would you say if someone asked you about Jesus? How would you describe your God to them? What would happen if you were dragged into court and forced to give an answer much like Andrew Brunson was recently in Turkey? Could you make a defense and how would you do it? Times are changing. Persecution is coming. The day is drawing near when holding fast to Biblical faith will be difficult. Jobs will be lost. Accusations will be made. Doors will be shut. What are you doing right now to prepare for the day when you are commanded to give an answer for why you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 10:32-12:21, Acts 18:1-22, Psalms 145, Proverbs 18:1

June 27, 2019

HIGH PLACES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 10:32-12:21, Acts 18:1-22, Psalms 145, Proverbs 18:1

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings. 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 forbade 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 13-14, Acts 18:23-19:12, Psalms 146, Proverbs 18:2-3

June 28, 2019

THE STEADFAST LOVE OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 13-14, Acts 18:23-19:12, Psalms 146, Proverbs 18:2-3

As I read our text for today, I find myself continually struck by the tragic pattern I see 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. God grieves over all He has made and executes His righteous judgment. Humanity drowns. Languages are confused and the people scatter. Enemies oppress and enslave. All so that we might turn our hearts again towards God in repentance.

The time of the kings is no different. Good kings turn their hearts towards God and the people are blessed. Evil kings do what is right in their own eyes and they suffer. God sends prophets like Elijah and Elisha to call them to repentance but they are largely ignored. Finally, God sends judgment. He raises up adversaries both within and without Israel. Rebellion. War. Death. Kings are murdered. Families are decimated. God's righteous wrath over their sin on terrible display.

Humanity never changes. No matter how much "progress" we make technologically, scientifically, culturally, intellectually, you name it…we remain morally depraved. Our hearts are hard towards God. Our necks are stiff. We refuse to bend the knee. The world around us is still awash in injustice and violence. We simply cannot escape our corrupt human nature. Our will to power. Our lust for pleasure. Our craving for wealth. The Bible's diagnosis is incisive and true. "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." (Romans 3:10-12) And just when it seems like all is lost. The end is near. There is no hope. God relents. God reaches out. God intervenes once more.

"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." (2 Kings 13:23) 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. 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) Great is Thy faithfulness! Lord, unto me.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 15-16, Acts 19: 13-41, Psalms 147, Proverbs 18:4-5

June 29, 2019

A SOCIAL/POLITICAL GOSPEL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 15-16, Acts 19: 13-41, Psalms 147, Proverbs 18:4-5

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'!" I hear this all the time from colleagues. Friends. Parishioners. 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. Simply put, 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, race, sexual identity, 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 an 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 threatened.

Such accusations are nothing new to Paul. He's already been accused of preaching a "king other than Caesar" which results in accusations of treason and sedition. They've heard him preach that in Christ, "there is no slave nor free, Jew nor Greek, male nor female" which upends entire social systems and ways of life. He's been accused of blasphemy by his fellow Jews for preaching Jesus as the Messiah. 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. That's because 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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 17:1-18:12, Acts 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 18:6-7

June 30, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Kings 17:1-18:12, Acts 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 18:6-7

Readings for TOMORROW: 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, Acts 21:1-17, Psalms 149, Proverbs 18:8

July 1, 2019

THE DANGERS OF IDOLATRY

Readings for today: 2 Kings 18:13-19:37, Acts 21:1-17, Psalms 149, Proverbs 18:8

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. 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? Could it be 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. "Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, The Lord will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria…And do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you by saying, "The Lord will deliver us." Has any of the gods of the nations ever 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, Hena, and Ivvah? Have they delivered Samaria out of my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (2 Kings 18:29-35)

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. "And Hezekiah prayed before the Lord and said: "O Lord, the 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 the words of Sennacherib, which he has sent to mock the living God. Truly, O Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands and have cast their gods into the fire, for they were not gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone. Therefore they were destroyed. So now, O Lord our God, save us, please, from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, O Lord, are God alone." (2 Kings 19:15-19)

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 daughter. 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."

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 20:1-22:2, Acts 21:18-36, Psalms 150, Proverbs 18:9-10

July 2, 2019

LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Kings 20:1-22:2, Acts 21:18-36, Psalms 150, Proverbs 18:9-10

Last July, I had the privilege of visiting Rwanda with my wife and serving with the great folks at Hope Haven school outside of Kigali. Many may remember the terrible genocide that took place in the 1990's as over one million Tutsi's were killed in 100 days by their Hutu friends and neighbors. While we were there, we visited the National Genocide Museum. Spending time at the mass graves of over 250,000 people was sobering to say the least. 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. "And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." (2 Kings 21:5-6) 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, the people were led astray, and the eventual result was judgment as God sends the Babylonians in to lay waste to Judah.

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

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

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

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22:3-23:30, Acts 21:37-22:16, Psalms 1, Proverbs 18:11-12

July 3, 2019

WALKING IN THE COUNSEL OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22:3-23:30, Acts 21:37-22:16, Psalms 1, Proverbs 18:11-12

"Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers…"

Cable news. Twitter feeds. Facebook posts. Instagram stories. YouTube video channels. Newspapers. Google. Email. Texts. Snapchats. Every day, we are immersed in a sea of information. Most of it reflecting the "counsel of the wicked." Most of it promoting the "way of sinners." Most of it beckoning us to "sit in the seat of scoffers." We cannot escape it. We cannot ignore it. We cannot insulate ourselves against it. It shapes our hearts and minds. It squeezes us into the world's mode. It's why we find ourselves so anxious and depressed and afraid. It's why we find ourselves turning to the ways of the world to get our way. Accumulate power and wealth and influence and control. We want to stay safe. We want to be secure. We want to remain comfortable. We believe we deserve it.

There is another way. The way of the righteous. The one who takes counsel with the Lord. Who follows the way of Christ. Who sits down at the feet of his or her God. "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers." Does this image reflect your life? Is God's Word your delight? Do you meditate on it day and night? Is your life like a flowering tree? Yielding the fruit of blessing for those around you? Your family? Friends? Co-workers? Neighbors? Have you prospered spiritually? Have your grown in wisdom and knowledge and honor as you've walked in faithfulness to Jesus?

"The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away." The wicked are easily identified. They live for themselves. They pursue pleasure. They satisfy every desire. They do not submit their lives to Christ. On the contrary, they reject the existence of God. The recognize no authority but their own. They chase unfettered freedom only to find slavery. They live lives of quiet desperation. Struggling with despair, depression, and thoughts of self-destruction. Such is the way of the wicked which is why they are like the chaff the wind blows away. Does your life have substance to it? Eternal weight and glory? Is it full of meaning and purpose or is it empty and void?

This is why "the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." God will not be mocked. He will not allow our rebellion to stand. He will put an end to our stubbornness and pride once and for all. We will face His judgment for He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. His will reigns supreme over all He has made. We ignore Him at our peril. We take counsel against Him at our own risk. We are fools to reject Him.

Friends, God is calling you home. No matter how far you have wandered. No matter how long it has been. No matter how dark things have gotten. God is offering you His counsel. He invites you into His Presence. He longs to speak with you and share with you His heart for your life. His great desires is that you would thrive. You would become that tree planted by streams of living water. Branches overflowing with fruit. Leaves in full bloom. Turn off the technology. Turn off the television. Put aside the newspapers. Pick up God's Word. Let Him fill you with His wisdom. Then you will prosper in all that you do.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 23:31-25:30, Acts 22:17-23:10, Psalms 2, Proverbs 18:13

July 4, 2019

A BLESSED NATION

Readings for today: 2 Kings 23:31-25:30, Acts 22:17-23:10, Psalms 2, Proverbs 18:13

"Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Psalms 2:10-12)

Today is the 4th of July. Many of us will be celebrating with friends and family and great food. Meme's will be shared all over social media thanking God for our country and the men and women who've given their lives to serve and protect the values we hold dear. The night sky will light up with "rockets red glare and bombs bursting in mid-air." Our hearts will fill with pride and joy and patriotism as we commemorate the national day of Independence in the United States.

At the same time, we need to be honest with ourselves. We should endeavor to celebrate our nation's history with eyes wide open. As we rightfully honor the men and women who've served in uniform, we should also honor those men and women who staged sit-ins and refused to move to the back of the bus. As we remember those who paid the ultimate price defending our freedoms, we should lament those who paid a similar price on our southern border seeking the dream of a better life for their children. As we remember those patriots who forged this nation, we should take time to listen to those they displaced for these were not virgin shores we landed on all those years ago.

Today's reading provides a warning to those with ears to hear. Kings and rulers, presidents and politicians ignore God at their own peril and endanger the nations they lead. God calls us to wisdom and the beginning of wisdom is the "fear of the Lord" according to Scripture. If God will not spare His own people, why do we think He will spare us? If God will send Assyria and Babylon to execute His judgment on Israel, why do we think we are exempt? If God will raze the very Temple where He dwelled to the ground and destroy the city that bears His name, why do we think singing "God bless America" will protect us?
Our future as a nation rests in God's hands. He alone is the arbiter of our fate. Any nation that claims His blessing must walk in His ways. Any nation that claims His protection must submit to His will. Any nation that claims a Christian heritage must demonstrate it in the way they live, the way they love, and the way they serve.

Friends, we have reached a critical point in history. We have given into the politics of hate and fear. We have turned difference into division. Our fellow citizens have become our mortal enemies. We are being torn apart from within. The only hope we have is to repent. Repent of our arrogance and pride. Repent of our selfishness and greed. Repent of our privilege and prejudice. We must repent and return to the Lord with our whole hearts. We must acknowledge that our greatness as a nation is a byproduct of our faithfulness to Christ. It is only as we lose our lives as a nation for Christ's sake that we will find Him granting us an abundant life full of joy and peace. It is only as we give all we have as a nation in service to Him that we will find riches beyond measure. It is only as we lay our lives down as a nation for the most vulnerable in our world that we will once again find God shedding His grace on us and making America truly great. This is the call of the gospel and it as much a mandate for nations as it is for individuals.
My prayer today is that we will be wise as a nation. We will take heed of God's warning. We will lay aside the hate. Lay aside the lust for power. Lay aside the need for control. Instead, may we serve the Lord with fear. Rejoice with trembling over all He has done. I pray for our leadership from the President to the members of Congress to the Supreme Court justices. From governors to state legislators to local mayors and town councils. May they embrace Jesus. May they kiss the Son before it's too late. May they seek refuge in Him, have the courage to walk by faith, and the humility to be led in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake. To whom much is given, much is expected. May our nation strive to be the "city on a hill" and a "light to the nations" so that our world will be blessed!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalms 3, Proverbs 18:14-15

July 5, 2019

GOD'S SALVATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1:1-2:17, Acts 23:11-35, Psalms 3, Proverbs 18:14-15

I've been reading the sermons of Dr. Gardner Taylor, considered one of the greatest African-American preachers of the last century, recently during my devotional time. This morning, I ran across this gem. "No matter the reason, every man (or woman) has his Gethsemane and his Calvary." It reminded me of the utter despair David must have felt when Absalom betrayed him. Absalom, you may remember, murdered his brother to avenge his sister who had been raped. He fled from the king's presence out fear for his own life. The brokenness that ensues divides the kingdom and eventually results in a civil war. Through it all, David never stops loving his son which makes the betrayal even harder to bear. As David flees for his own life, he pens these heartbreaking words…

"O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, "There is no salvation for him in God." (Psalms 3:1-2)

David felt abandoned. Alone. Overwhelmed. And yet, in the midst of his fear and anxiety, he turns to God. "But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cried aloud to the Lord, and he answered me from his holy hill. I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me. I will not be afraid of many thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around. Arise, O Lord! Save me, O my God! For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked. Salvation belongs to the Lord; your blessing be on your people" (Psalms 3:3-8) David knew God was with him. No matter where he went. No matter how far he had to run. No matter how high the odds were stacked against him. God would deliver him. God would protect him. God would save him.

It's important to note there are no guarantees in this Psalm. David never asks for his kingdom. Never asks for his family to be restored. Never asks for things to go back to the way they were before. His hope is not in his circumstances. His hope is in the Lord. And David trusts God with his future. He knows God will be faithful to work things according to His good will and pleasure.
The key to maintaining your faith in the midst of adversity is to release the outcome to God. Trust Him with your future whatever that may be. Humble yourself before Him. Do not presume on His grace. David had made some mistakes along the way. He bore some responsibility for the situation he found himself in. There are no victims in this story. Both Absalom and David are at fault. Both have sinned. Both will face the consequences of their actions. At the same time, only one turns back to the Lord in repentance. Only one seeks the face of God in humility. Only one gives his life back into God's hands.

I love how Dr. Taylor puts it in his sermon, "We can bring any mood before God, so long as we cling to our integrity of soul. When all of this is said, the ultimate cry of higher religion must ever be though He slay me, yet will I serve Him." This is the truth David knew and believed. Though God take the kingdom away from him. Though lifelong alliances breakdown and friends become mortal enemies. Though he lose all his wealth and power and privilege…yet will David serve Him. Yet will David trust in Him. Yet will David turn to Him in repentance and faith. This is why David can cry out to God from the depths of his being. This is why David can bring before God his deepest hurts and heartbreak. He knows God will listen. He knows God will answer. And he trusts God with the result.

What about you? Do you trust God with your life? Do you trust God to direct your steps wherever they may lead? Do you trust God with the outcome? Do you believe God has your best in mind even though it may not look anything like what you once thought? When you go through hardship and struggle and pain, do you resent God? Do you feel you deserve more? Like God's somehow not lived up to His end of the bargain? Follow David's example. Turn to Christ. Trust in Christ. Repent and believe in Christ. He will listen. He will answer. He will save.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24, Psalms 4, Proverbs 18:16-18

July 6, 2019

PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 2:18-4:4, Acts 24, Psalms 4, Proverbs 18:16-18

We live in an anxious world. More and more people are suffering from anxiety disorders, depression, self-harm, and even suicide. There is something desperately wrong with the pace and rhythm of our lives. Something desperately wrong about the goals we are pursuing. We chase wealth and fame and success. We make idols out of youth and physical beauty. We seek to satisfy every sexual desire. But we are not happy. We are not content. We are not at peace. In fact, we are more anxious than ever.

The Psalmist teaches us a better way. “In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (Psalms 4:8) King David has everything a person could ever want. He holds the power of life and death in his hands. He has wealth beyond measure. He is famous and beloved by his people. He truly can do whatever his heart desires. But he does not look for peace from any of these things. He seeks it from the Lord.

How have you been sleeping lately? Do you dream at night? Is your rest deep and peaceful? Or do you find yourself struggling with insomnia. Struggling to sleep more than a few hours at a time. Is your sleep plagued by nightmares? Anxious thoughts that take on a life of their own as soon as you close your eyes? Does your pace cause you to skip out on sleep? Try to get by on four to five hours a night? Let me gently suggest you are heading for a crash. You are trying to live according to your own strength. You are pursuing the ways of this world which will eventually result in pain and suffering if it hasn’t already.

David understood stress. He carried the weight of a nation on his shoulders. Though beloved by his people, he definitely had his enemies. He begins his prayer by crying out to God for help. “Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have given me relief when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer!” His enemies spread lies about him. They are actively trying to tear him down. Question his authority. Question his integrity. Question his honor. “O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame? How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?” David acknowledges his frustration but claims the promises of God. He knows the Lord preserves the righteous. He understands God has His hand on those who fear Him. God will be with him to protect him and guide him. He will hear David’s prayer and respond. “But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord hears when I call to him. Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.” This is why David can sleep in peace. He knows he doesn’t have to take matters into his own hands. God is in control. God commands his destiny. God determines when he wakes and when he sleeps. God has raised him up to his position and God will preserve his life as king.

Do you live with the same faith? The same trust in the Lord? In the midst of all your fears and anxieties and stress and struggles, do you continue to worship God? Do you trust in His Word? Do you listen for His voice and His affirmation more than you do the affirmation of those around you? Is the joy of the Lord your strength? Listen again to David’s words, “Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord. There are many who say, "Who will show us some good? Lift up the light of your face upon us, O Lord!" You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.” (Psalms 4:5-7)

Friends, God wants you to experience peace. He wants you to rest secure in the knowledge that He loves you. Delights in you. Treasures you. You are His child. Bought with the precious blood of His Only Begotten Son. He will protect you. He will provide for you. He will never turn His face from you. His joy is worth more than any wealth you can accumulate. Any success you can achieve. Any fame you can gain. Place your trust in Christ today and find the deep satisfaction your soul longs for!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25, Psalms 5, Proverbs 18:19

July 7, 2019

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 4:5-5:17, Acts 25, Psalms 5, Proverbs 18:19

Why is there so much evil in the world? And what is God doing about it? These are questions the people of God have been struggling with for millennia. We know God is good. We know God is love. We know God is all-powerful and omniscient. We know God sees all things. We know nothing is hidden from his sight. So why then does He allow evil to exist? Why does He not step in and destroy the works of the devil? Why does He not step in to end suffering? Why does He not step in to defeat those who would commit such terrible crimes?

The history of humanity is replete with violence and suffering and unimaginable evil. The Holocaust. Stalin's purges. The killing fields of Pol Pot. Massacres under Mao Tse-Tung. The systematic killing of our own native population and the subjugation of an entire race of people for hundreds of years in America. The list seems endless. Consider the millions of babies who've been aborted. The inhumane treatment of those on our southern border. The rise of white nationalism in recent years. Human progress is a myth. Add to this the personal evil we commit against one another. Harsh words. Betrayal. Hurt. Anger. Gossip. Slander. Abandonment. All leading to deeply broken relationships. All of us have known evil. All of us have seen evil. All of us have experienced evil.

David had seen evil as well. He had been attacked by bloodthirsty men. Slandered by those who hated him. Put down by the boastful who envied his rise to power. He knew they were liars. Full of deceit. Not to be trusted. And yet their words stung. Their attacks drew blood. He had been hurt, wounded, and betrayed. How did David respond? He cried out to God. "Give ear to my words, O Lord; consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God, for to you do I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man." (Psalms 5:1-6) David placed his trust in God alone. He put himself in God's hands. He believed God's justice would win out in the end.

Furthermore, David understood he was not clean. He was not pure. He was just as capable of great evil as anyone. He approached God clothed not in his own righteousness but trusting in His love and grace. "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…But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O Lord; you cover him with favor as with a shield." (Psalms 5:7, 11-12) God was David's refuge. God's steadfast love was David's hope. God's righteousness was David's shield. For all his failings, David feared God. He sought protection in the shadow of His wings.

What about you? You and I are both victim and perpetrator. We are innocent and we are guilty. We are capable of great good and capable of great evil. We are not clean. We are not pure. We are not righteous. Given enough power. Given enough wealth. Given enough influence. Who knows what evil we would do? Who knows what corruption would come out? The key for all of us is to follow David's example. Take refuge in God. Cover yourself in Christ's righteousness. Humble yourself before Him. Fear Him and walk in His ways. As we do this individually and as we do this communally, we will see light push back darkness. Love overcome hate. Good defeat evil. As God puts His righteousness on display in and through us for the sake of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 15:18-6:81, Acts 26, Psalms 6, Proverbs 18:20-21

July 8, 2019

GODLY SORROW

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:18-6:81, Acts 26, Psalms 6, Proverbs 18:20-21

Repentance is a very important word for the Christian. It formed the heart of Jesus' preaching. It represents a clarion call to a new way of life. It necessitates a radical break with the old so the new may emerge. Sadly, I find too many Christians do not understand this word much less seek to embrace it in their daily lives.

Repentance begins with godly sorrow. An overwhelming feeling of guilt over how far we have fallen short of the glory of God. It is the heart-shattering awareness of our sin. The depths of our depravity. Coming to grips with the idolatry of our lives. John Calvin once said, "our hearts are idol factories." I agree and would only add that the assembly line never stops running. We are in constant conflict with ourselves. Refusing to bow the knee. Refusing to submit. Refusing to surrender our lives to the Lordship of Christ.

David lived with a deep awareness of his sin. This man after God's own heart was broken just like all of us. He was not perfect. He was not holy. He was not righteous. He held no corner on the truth. He was unfaithful. He was unforgiving. He was violent and vengeful. But David did have one thing going for him that was his saving grace. He repented. Over and over again. Throughout the course of his life. Whenever he was confronted, he fell on his knees in godly sorrow over what he had done. This is why God loved him so much. A broken and contrite heart God will never despise.

I do not meet many Christians who grieve over their sin. The whole idea of guilt and shame is a non-starter in our world. In fact, our culture would have us believe that any feelings of guilt and shame are not good for our mental health. Instead, we should live in constant affirmation of all we think, say, and do. If anyone hurts us, we should cut them out of our lives. They are "toxic" and not worth our time. If we hurt others, we blame-shift and self-justify. In short, we will do anything to avoid true repentance. Fundamentally, this is why so many churches have cut any kind of "confessional prayer" out of their weekly worship services because we don't want people to feel bad about themselves.

However, the biblical truth is that we all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All of us have wandered and gone astray like sheep without a shepherd. All of us naturally rebel against the Law of God. All of us are sinners in desperate need of grace. This fundamental truth should undo us. It should cut us to the heart. It should grip our souls. We should grieve and shed tears over our broken condition. I love how David puts it, "O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath…I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes." (Psalms 6:1, 6-7) David understands his hopeless and defenseless position before a perfectly Holy God. He knows unless God chooses to show him grace that he is lost. So he cries out in godly sorrow for God to have mercy. He cries out for forgiveness. And God answers him. "The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer." (Psalms 6:9)

When was the last time you cried out to God? When was the last time you confessed your sins? When was the last time you reflected on the utter helplessness of your broken spiritual condition? Yes, God is quick to forgive. Yes, God is quick to show grace. Yes, God is merciful but only to those who repent. Only to those who humbly acknowledge their sin. Only those who come to grips with the sheer depths of their sin will ever come to fully appreciate the magnitude of God's amazing grace.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-8, Acts 27:1-20, Psalms 7, Proverbs 18:22

July 9, 2019

ROOTLESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-8, Acts 27:1-20, Psalms 7, Proverbs 18:22

I have an ancestral home. If you go to the cemetery in the tiny town of Wauneta just off old route 6 in western Nebraska, you will find a bunch of people I'm related to. My parents will be buried there near my grandparents. I have aunts and uncles and a host of cousins buried there as well. We can still go by the home where I spent a lot of time in the summers bouncing on the trampoline. Eating great food. Helping out with the harvest. We can drive by the old feedlot operation. We can run through the pastures where we played "cowpatty softball." We can go out to the land we still own and dig our hands into the dirt. Whenever I visit, I can feel my roots. They run pretty deep in this place. It gives me a sense of security. A groundedness. I know where I have come from. I know the family I've come from. I know my lineage. I know the legacy that's been passed down good, bad and ugly.

Most people these days don't have roots. They are two or three generations removed from their ancestral lands. They might be able to find their hometown on a map but have never been there. They are nomadic. Moving from place to place. Sure, they always make new friends but it's nothing like living in the same community for generations. When the people around you remember your grandfather and grandmother or your parents when they were little or they taught your aunts and uncles in school, you become truly and deeply known. Known in a way that is disconcerting at times. Small towns are notorious for everyone being in everyone else's business! At the same time, being known like this provides a sense of safety and security as well.

Why read through the genealogies of the Bible? Who cares who's descended from whom and how many brothers and sisters they may have had? We can hardly pronounce the names much less understand why they're listed here in such great detail. Genealogies were vital to the ancient Israelite. It was how you were known. "Oh, you're Tola? You must be Issachar's boy." "Oh, you're Saul? You must be from the tribe of Benjamin." Each family had a story. Each tribe a connection to the Promised Land. And these stories and connections are what gave each individual Israelite their identity.

Think about the world we live in right now. Think about how many people are searching for identity. A family or tribe to belong to. They may ground their identity in their race or ethnicity, sexuality, religious faith, professional expertise. They may ground their identity in life experiences or certain abilities/disabilities. Some of these roots run deeper than others. Sadly what's been lost in all this is any sense of connection to community. Any sense of rootedness in a story larger than ourselves. In fact, each generation seems more apt to reject their family identity in favor of one they construct for themselves. No wonder we live such anxious lives.

We are all nomads in a sense. All homeless in significant ways. Constantly searching but never finding. Constantly seeking but always lost. At first, the nomadic lifestyle appeals. Who doesn't want the unencumbered life? A life of unfettered freedom where you get to go where you want and do what you want? Gratify every desire. Chase every pleasure. It sounds wonderful until you actually try it. Pretty soon it loses it's luster. Relationships are superficial and thin. It requires more and more to get that dopamine high. Pretty soon you start to feel anxious. Afraid. Alone. Life loses it's meaning and purpose. We've lost any connection to our family story. We hold little appreciation or understanding for the generations who came before us and we certainly show little concern for the generations coming after us.

This is not what God intends. God created us for family. He created us to be part of His story. Part of this grand unfolding narrative of the Kingdom of God coming into this world. Each generation plays an important role. Each person has a unique part to play. Through faith in Jesus Christ, nomads come home. We find our place. Our people. A purpose greater than our own personal pleasure. God doesn't want you to wander. God refuses to let His children remain lost. He is relentless in His pursuit of those He loves and once He finds them, nothing can snatch them out of His hand. If you are a Christian, the Bible's story is your story. You are related by faith to every single name. Every single person. Every single generation listed. You are not an orphan. You are not alone. You have a home not made with human hands awaiting you in the heavens fashioned by God Himself. Let this truth sink in and ease any anxieties and fears you may have today.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 9-10, Acts 27:21-44, Psalms 8, Proverbs 18:23-24

July 10, 2019

EPITAPH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 9-10, Acts 27:21-44, Psalms 8, Proverbs 18:23-24

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?

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

July 11, 2019

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 11:1-12:18, Acts 28, Psalms 9:1-12, Proverbs 19:1-3

"I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High." (Psalms 9:1-2)

We live in a world full of hate. Anger. Rage. Violence. At least that's what the media would have us believe. They self-select stories based in no small part on the outrage they will generate. Social media platforms have become vents for bitterness. The amount of negativity we are exposed to on a daily basis is enormous. No wonder the "happiness index" in the United States continues to decline with each passing year. And yet the truth of the matter is this…there has never been a better time to be alive as a human being. Yes, some humans are better off than others but as a species overall, we are thriving by every measure. There has never been a safer time to be alive. Yes, some communities are safer than others but again, by every measure, because of advanced healthcare, human rights advocacy, etc., as a species we've never been more safe. Why then are we so anxious and afraid?

The Psalmist lived at a time of great insecurity. The ancient near east was full of violence, suffering, and pain. Food insecurity was an everyday reality for most people. Many babies died in childbirth. Medical care was non-existent. Human rights unknown. Days off, vacation, retirement were foreign concepts because you had to work every single day if you were going to survive. Layer in all the injustices of the ancient world and the harsh criminal codes. The periodic raids of foreign tribes. And the slavery and oppression one experienced should one be defeated in battle. It was a brutal time.

And yet the Psalmist finds a way to "thank God with his whole heart." How in the world in the midst of all his turmoil, suffering, and pain. In the midst of his struggles, anxieties, and fears can he find the strength to thank God for his blessings? David is wise. He does not know the future. He lives with daily uncertainty. He's lived on the run. He's had to fight his way free from his enemies. He knows what it's like to face death. But David has also seen the salvation of God. He has seen God perform miracles and signs and wonders. Show up when all hope is lost. Snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Come to his rescue when things looked very bleak. And as he looks back on those events in his life, he finds his hope renewed. His joy restored. His confidence soars because he knows God is with him.

The simple act of counting your blessings on a regular basis is a powerful one. Looking back over the course of your life and reflecting not the many ways God has spoken to you. Revealed Himself to you. Saved you. Delivered you. Blessed you. I was talking to one of my children the other day. They struggle with anxiety and fear. Growing up has them frightened. They aren't sure they're going to make it. They were starting to spin out and get very negative and I simply asked them to count the blessings in their life. A great family. Good friends. A home to live in. Food to eat. A car to drive. A job that pays at least some of the bills. We talked about the many experiences they've had and the things they've seen. They've been on mission trips. They know those less fortunate live. They've seen suffering up close and personal.

The more we talked, the more encouraged they became. Pretty soon we were laughing and joking and talking about the future with little to no fear at all. When was the last time you sat down and counted the blessings in your life? Recounted all the things God has done for you over the course of your life? When was the last time you turned off cable news and took a break from social media? Intentionally shut down the doomsday voices of our culture so you could listen to the still, small voice of God? Take some time today and claim this promise for your life, "The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you." (Psalms 9:9-10) God will never let you down.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17, Romans 1:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 19:4-5

July 12, 2019

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 12:19-14:17, Romans 1:1-17, Psalms 9:13-20, Proverbs 19:4-5

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36, Romans 1:18-32, Psalms 10:1-15, Proverbs 19:6-7

July 13, 2019

WORSHIP

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 15:1-16:36, Romans 1:18-32, Psalms 10:1-15, Proverbs 19:6-7

I love the song David appoints Asaph to sing. It's all about God. All about His majesty and splendor and greatness. All about His mighty deeds. The miracles performed by His mighty hand. It calls us to lay aside our issues. Our struggles. Our trials. Our fears. It calls us to lay aside our distractions. Preoccupations. Those things that draw our attention away from God. It calls us to lay down our personal preferences. Our needs. Our wants. Our desires. It calls us to focus on God and God alone.

"Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works! Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice!" (1 Chronicles 16:8-10)

"Sing to the Lord, all the earth! Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and he is to be feared above all gods." (1 Chronicles 16:23-25)

How often do we walk into worship with a critical spirit? How often do we walk out of worship and evaluate the experience based on what we did or did not get out of it? How often do we judge our worship based on the emotions we felt? These questions only betray the poverty of our spiritual condition. The sinful, selfish nature of our hearts. Worship is not about us. It's not about getting our needs met. Our desires fulfilled. It cannot be judged on the relevance to our daily lives. Worship is about God. It's about His Presence. His majesty. His glory. Worship requires all our focus. All our attention. All our energy. The greatness of our God should consume us. Overwhelm the senses. Bring us to our knees in awe and wonder at all He has done. In the light of His mighty works of salvation, the petty needs, wants and desires that occupy so much of our attention should fade into the background.

Does that mean our needs will go unmet? Of course not! God is faithful. Look at how Asaph ends his song. "Say also: "Save us, O God of our salvation, and gather and deliver us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!" Then all the people said, "Amen!" and praised the Lord." (1 Chronicles 16:35-36) Yes, God will deliver. Yes, God will save. Yes, God will answer our prayers. Yes, God's love is steadfast, loyal, and true. But our salvation is but a byproduct of His glory. It is intended to serve His purposes more than our own. Yes, we glory in the fact that our names are written in the Book of Life. Yes, we glory in the fact that God has gathered us from among the nations. Yes, we glory in the fact that we have been forgiven and set free by the Cross. But even these things pale in significance to the glory of God! In fact, these gifts are given in order to lift our eyes above our station. Above our circumstances. Above all earthly wants, needs, and desires to the One who gives so generously and so lavishly to His people.

Worship God, dear friends! Enter His Presence with thanksgiving! Enter His courts with praise! Give Him all the honor and glory He demands and deserves! For He is God and we are but the sheep of His pasture! He is God and we are but dust and ashes! He is God and we are but "few in number, of little account, and sojourners" in this world. Wanderers far from our eternal home. Worship God for He has chosen us from before the foundations of the world to bear His image and reflect His glory to the world!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17, Romans 2:1-24, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 19:8-9

July 14, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 1 Chronicles 16:37-18:17, Romans 2:1-24, Psalms 10:16-18, Proverbs 19:8-9

Readings for TOMORROW: 1 Chronicles 19-21, Romans 2:25-3:8, Psalms 11, Proverbs 19:10-12

July 15, 2019

TRANSFORMATION

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 19-21, Romans 2:25-3:8, Psalms 11, Proverbs 19:10-12

"But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God." (Romans 2:29)

How does transformation happen? From the outside in or from the inside out? Some combination of both? Imagine being the Apostle Paul. You're a rabbi trained by the great Gamaliel. You are a highly esteemed leader among the Pharisees. You've been steeped in the traditions of your forefathers. You know God's Law by heart. As such, you believe circumcision is at the heart of what it means to be a Jew. It is the defining mark of the covenant people of God. But on your missionary travels, you've seen the Holy Spirit come over Gentiles. You've seen uncircumcised people respond to the call of the gospel. Not just in isolated cases but in huge numbers. This breaks down all your categories. It disrupts. It unsettles. You feel the theological ground beneath your feet begin to shift.

We are experiencing a similar shift in our world today. Especially in America where Christendom is breaking down all around us. The old world where the church enjoyed "home field advantage" is gone. Gone are the days when businesses were closed on Sundays. Gone are the days when Wednesday night was church night. Gone are the days – in many cases - where the church occupied the center of a community's life. We are being pushed to the margins. We can feel the ground beneath our feet beginning to shift.

How did Paul respond? He turned back to the Scriptures. The cultural crisis forced him deeper into his faith. Deeper into his understanding of God. Deeper into his understanding of his own traditions. He went back to Abraham. Back to where it all began. He realized circumcision was but an outward expression of an inward faith. Abraham believed God and this is what was counted to him as righteousness. Not circumcision. Not the outward physical sign. And this gave him fresh eyes to see what God was up to in the world. He was able to extend freedom to the Gentiles rather than require them to become Jewish in their faith. He realized God was pushing past all cultural barriers as the gospel began spreading to the ends of the earth.

What about us? How do we handle the cultural crisis of our own day? How do we deal with the tribalism and identity politics of our age? How do engage people who apply a litmus test to relationships that is analogous to circumcision? Do we fight back with our own labels? Do we isolate and retreat from the public sphere? Do we accommodate to much that we lose our Christian identity altogether?

I've thought long and hard about these issues. I've prayed for God's wisdom and here is what I've learned. It is God's love that transforms the human heart, not God's Law. I cannot "require" people to believe like I do. I cannot force them to act "Christianly." I cannot "police" their language or behavior. All I can do is love them with the unconditional love and grace of Jesus Christ. As they draw near to Him and come to faith, then I can teach them to "obey all Christ's commands." Our obedience to God's Law flows from a heart transformed by God's love. And transformation comes as the Spirit descends. Transformation comes as the heart is regenerated. Transformation comes as God removes our heart of stone and gives us a heart flesh. Once this miracle of salvation takes place, then we find the strength and desire to faithfully keep God's Law.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 22-23, Romans 3:9-31, Psalms 12, Proverbs 19:13-14

July 16, 2019

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 22-23, Romans 3:9-31, Psalms 12, Proverbs 19:13-14

All of us live under the Law of God. All of us are accountable for every thought, word, and deed. All of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ where every part of our lives will be laid bare. Nothing will be hidden. Nothing held back. Nothing will escape God's notice. For He sees all and knows all and judges all with righteousness.

Reflecting on the Law of God produces humility. It brings us to our knees. It stops every mouth. It ends every rationalizing and self-justifying thought. The purpose of the Law is to show us the depths of our sin. It holds a mirror up to our soul. It reflects back to us the reality that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. None are righteous. None understand. None truly seek God. All turn aside. All go their own way. All do what is right in their own eyes. Our thoughts are prone to deceit. Our lips prone to bitterness and curses. Our feet swift to shed blood, get revenge, take out our anger on those around us. Our paths are lined with the bodies of those we've hurt and wounded along the way. We do not fear God. We do not love God. We have no peace with God. This is the fundamental truth of our existence. We were conceived in sin. Born in iniquity. And there is no escape.

Many years ago, I took some classes on psychology. One of the experiments had to do with learned helplessness. As I remember it, an animal was put in a box with the lid closed and given a shock. Because it could not escape, it eventually stopped trying. It simply endured. Even after the lid was removed, it would not jump out. It "learned helplessness." In many ways, that is the intended purpose of the Law of God. To teach us how utterly helpless and hopeless we are to save ourselves. We live in a closed system. A world corrupted by sin. There is no escape. The lid is too tight. We cannot get out. Our only hope is that the Master will come and save us from our broken condition.

This is what Paul is pointing us to this morning. The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law! It is a righteousness available through faith to all who believe in Jesus Christ! This righteousness is a gift. It cannot be earned. It cannot achieved. It cannot be gained. It can only be received. God knows the broken condition of our world. He sees the helplessness of His creatures. He understands our hopeless condition. So He sends His Son to atone for our sin and to show forth His righteousness that God might both be just and the justifier of the one who believes.

The good news of the gospel is that God has done what we could not! He has achieved what we never could! He has kept the Law! He has fulfilled the Law! He has satisfied the Law with its demands! And now He simply calls us to believe Him. To trust in what He has accomplished on our behalf! Trust Jesus, friends! For your life! For your future! For our nation and for our world!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11, Romans 4:1-12, Psalms 13, Proverbs 19:15-16

July 17, 2019

TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 24:1-26:11, Romans 4:1-12, Psalms 13, Proverbs 19:15-16

“Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

This statement forms the backbone of Paul’s theology. It is how he made sense of what he saw happening among the Gentiles. Remember, Paul was a Jew. And not just any Jew, he was a Pharisee. And not just any Pharisee but a leader among them. Advanced in his knowledge. His zeal for the faith unmatched by his peers. Yes, Paul had met the Risen Christ and it had transformed him. He converted to the Christian faith. He realized all the promises of God had been fulfilled in Jesus. By raising Christ from the dead, Yahweh had ratified Jesus’ life and teachings. But Paul still wasn’t prepared for God’s Spirit to be poured out on the Gentiles. He wasn’t prepared for God to save the unclean. Impure. Uncircumcised heathen. But he could not deny what he saw happening before his eyes. So he dove back into the Scriptures. If God was indeed delivering those who were not circumcised, then what value did circumcision hold? Did this nullify the covenant of God? Was God somehow going back on His promises?

Not at all. “Abraham received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” (Romans 4:11-12) The covenant was established with Abraham by faith not by circumcision. It was Abraham’s belief and trust that God would do what He had promised that made him righteous in God’s sight. The act of circumcision was simply a step of obedience that sealed the righteousness Abraham already had received by faith. The implications of this realization staggered Paul. It meant Abraham was not just the father of the Jewish people but the spiritual father of all who believed. Circumcised and uncircumcised alike! Jew and Gentile alike!

But what is true faith? Paul will define it a little later in chapter four, again using Abraham as his example. “No unbelief made him 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) True faith is not an intellectual assent to an idea. It is not a belief in an abstraction we call “god.” It is not intelligent design. It is not moral therapeutic deism. It is not sentimentalism. It is not what’s proposed by the “COEXIST” bumper sticker. True faith is trusting in the promise of God. Staking your life, your livelihood, and your future on the fundamental premise that God is able to do what He has promised. And what has God promised? He has promised if you lose your life like Jesus did, you will find it. If you give your life away like Jesus did, you will gain it. If you lay down your life like Jesus did, you will find God raising you back up again.

Following Jesus requires us to die to self. Die to our desires. Die to our wants. Die to our needs. Die to our hopes and dreams. Following Jesus requires us to trust God with our future. Trust God with our lives. Trust God to provide for us. Protect us. Guide us and direct us. Following Jesus requires us to live with eternity in mind. Store up our treasures for heaven. Live as citizens of God’s Kingdom among the kingdoms of this earth. Make no mistake, living for Christ will cost you in a world that is doing all it can to kill Him. Living for Christ will set you apart. It will make you a target for the religious and irreligious alike. You will be hated by both the prodigal and the Pharisee. You will find yourself cutting against the grain over and over again. Just like Abraham. Just like Paul. The key is to keep your eyes on Jesus. His grace is sufficient. His love is enough. He is with you always even to the end of the age.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34, Romans 4:13-5:5, Psalms 14, Proverbs 19:17

July 18, 2019

NATIONAL SUFFERING

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 26:12-27:34, Romans 4:13-5:5, Psalms 14, Proverbs 19:17

Our nation is suffering. Hatred and anger and rage are on the rise. Forces of racism and bigotry seemingly on the march. Spurred on by political leaders on both the Left and Right who desire nothing more than power. The play to their base rather than appeal to the whole country. Partisan politics devolving into open warfare. The result is division. A chasm that is growing with each passing day. With each passing speech. It is hard to see how this ends well. In the meantime, real people in real communities across our country are suffering. The fruit of our rotten political discourse emboldens the worst among us. Racists march. Anarchists attack. Hate crimes rise. Fear gives way to violence. Casualties mount.

Why is all this happening? Where is God in all this? The words of the Psalmist ring true this morning, “The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” (Psalms 14:1-3) God is looking down on us right now. But what does the Lord see? A people who have turned away. Foolish people who no longer believe in God. Idolatrous people who have recast God in their own image. We have sown the wind and are reaping the whirlwind. In our pride and arrogance, we believed we didn’t need God. Didn’t need His guidance. Didn’t need to follow His ways. We thought we could relegate Him to the private sphere. We thought we could put Him in a corner while we got on with the rest of our lives. We thought His ways were too naive. Too weak for the harsh realities of this world. We refused to humble ourselves and acknowledge our national sins of slavery, racism, abortion, and genocide. So our foundations began to crumble. The ground beneath us turned to sand. And we are suffering.

So now, in what feels like the 11th hour, where do we find hope? Only in the Lord. Friends, we have peace with God only through the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of what He accomplished for us on the Cross, we have been reconciled to God. And God entrusts us with the message of reconciliation for the world. God is even now sending us out as reconcilers into a world that is full of brokenness, hatred, violence and evil. He is sending us out as sheep among wolves. He is sending us out to be wise as serpents but harmless as doves. As such, we will suffer for our faith. This is to be expected. The world will not receive the message of love we have to offer. They will reject it as naive and foolish. Weak and helpless. Because their minds have grown dark and their hearts hard, they will turn on us. They will find us to be the easiest targets for their rage. Such has always been the lot of the people of God. But we, like Jesus, “rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3-5)

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ then God’s love has been poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit. God has literally filled you up with His love so that you can go out into the world and give it away. It is a fresh spring in your heart that never stops flowing. It is a deep well that never runs dry. You don’t have to manufacture it. You are not in charge of creating it. You don’t have to muster it each day by your own strength. It is there by virtue of your faith in Christ. My challenge to you is to give this love away. Give it away to your family and friends. Give it away to your neighbors and co-workers. Give it away on social media and in your conversations with those you meet. Give it away even to your enemies and those who hate you. The only hope our communities, our nation, and our world have are the people of God living as the light of God by sharing the love of God. Go and share God’s love today!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 28-29, Romans 5:6-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 19:18-19

July 19, 2019

TRUE FINANCIAL PEACE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 28-29, Romans 5:6-21, Psalms 15, Proverbs 19:18-19

Someone once famously remarked that the last thing to be converted in a person's life is their checkbook. It brings a humorous image to my mind of a person being baptized while holding their wallet in the air. Money is a tough subject for many. It's deeply personal. There never feels like there's enough to go around. Many believers around the world live in life-threatening poverty. The Church has often manipulated and scammed the faithful. We have sold indulgences. We have accumulated great wealth and possessions. We aren't always faithful to take the resources entrusted to us and use them for God's glory in the world. I am sure this is why the Bible says the love of money is the root of all evil. It's why Jesus spent so much time on the subject. He knows what wealth does to our corrupt hearts. He knows greed is an insatiable desire. He knows how easy it is for us to fall into the trap of always wanting more.

That's why I love David's prayer so much. It beautifully frames how we are to think about money and wealth and possessions. Listen to his words again, "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." David understands God owns it all. Everything he has is a gift from God. Everything he's achieved is because God stood at his side. God is the only one who has the right to claim ownership over this world. He alone is worthy. He alone deserves all the praise and glory for what He has done. He reigns over the universe and, as king, it is up to Him to bestow riches and honor on those who serve Him.

Imagine how your perspective would change if you truly believed everything you owned was a gift from God? Imagine if you truly believed God reigned and ruled over your life? Not as an abstract thought but as an actual, concrete, daily experience? Would you handle your money differently? Would you cling to your possessions less tightly? Would your anxiety and fear over the future diminish as you found yourself trusting more fully in God to provide?

David clearly understood his position before the Lord. Throughout the course of his life and despite his many, many mistakes, David never seemed to lose sight of how far he'd come and who had raised him up. David was humble before the Lord. He held onto position and power and his possessions lightly. "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. O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own." David understood his life was but a shadow. So fleeting. So frail. He was here today and gone tomorrow. He came from the dust and to dust he will return. His short lifespan was minuscule in comparison to God's eternity and all that he had accomplished and accumulated in his life was just as temporal.

How does godly humility change your perspective on your life? Do you understand and reflect on how far you have come and the grace of God in bringing you there? Do you grasp how truly insignificant you are in the grand sweep of God's eternal history? Do you hold onto your achievements and wealth and influence lightly or do you find yourself grasping them ever more tightly as the years pass?

David knows wealth is a major temptation. If we are not careful, love of money can supplant the love of God in our hearts. So he prays to the Lord, "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 29:10-18)

Keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people and direct their hearts toward you. What a great prayer! What a godly desire! David, at the end of his reign and the end of his life, does not ask for more power. More wealth. More success. Longer life. Greater glory for his kingdom and his people. He simply asks God to keep their hearts true towards Him. To keep them generous and joyful in their giving. To be godly stewards of all they have been given. To grasp how richly blessed they have been so they can continue to be a blessing in this world. May this be our prayer today as well!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 1-3, Romans 6, Psalms 16, Proverbs 19:20-21

July 20, 2019

TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 1-3, Romans 6, Psalms 16, Proverbs 19:20-21

We are a haunted race. Haunted by Eden. Haunted by what we've lost. Haunted by the poverty of our spiritual condition. Stalked by death. Enslaved by sin. Our minds and hearts darkened and warped and twisted. We like to think we are more than this but we are not. And every day provides fresh evidence of the total depravity of the human condition. Scroll through Twitter. Turn on cable news. Listen to the hatred and bitterness and animosity. Slowly. Inexorably. Inevitably. Our baser, more primal selves are taking control. The further we run from God, the deeper we plunge into depression and despair. The more we resist accountability to our Creator, the faster our descent into hell and ruin.

"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions." (Romans 6:12) We are in the midst of an age-old conflict. Who will reign? Will it be God? Will it be us? There is an attempt being made – and I have to admit it seems closer than ever – to throw off any vestiges of restraint. We want unfettered freedom. Complete autonomy. We want to be like God. We keep falling for the serpent's lie and we keep dying as a result. We become enslaved to our passions. We find ourselves at the mercy of our worst instincts. We keep making the same mistakes over and over again. We are so confused. So hurt. So wounded. We are suffering and in pain. For those who doubt, simply consider the rapid increase in rates of depression, self-harm, addiction, and suicide. The wages of sin is indeed death…but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord!

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin…So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:1-7, 11)

Friends, Christ has set us free. Christ has broken the power of sin. Christ has defeated the power of death. Christ has delivered us from the power of the devil. No longer do we need be haunted by the memory of a better world. No longer do we need worry about the future. No longer do we need to live in shame and regret over what we have lost or what we have done. In Christ, we have communion with God. In Christ, we have all the riches of heaven. In Christ, our future hope is secure. In Christ, we become citizens of an eternal kingdom. In Christ, we have access to the Father. In Christ, we have all the power and authority we need to walk in newness of life.

Trust Him with your life. Submit to His will. Surrender to His love. Give Him all the control. As you do this, you will find sin no longer reigning over you. No longer exercising dominion over your life. It is for freedom that Christ has set you free so do not go back to a life of slavery!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11, Romans 7:1-13, Psalms 17, Proverbs 19:22-23

July 21, 2019

GOD IS GOOD

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4:1-6:11, Romans 7:1-13, Psalms 17, Proverbs 19:22-23

I love the passage from today. The Temple is finished. The furnishings are in place. Everything has been prepared to God's exact specifications. Solomon assembles the leaders of the nation. They fill the streets of Jerusalem. He brings out the ark. All the vessels from the tent of meeting. Everything sacred from the Tabernacle where Israel has met with God for generations. The procession heads down Main Street. Countless sacrifices are made along the way. The noise is deafening. There is singing. There is dancing. There is praising. There is worshiping. There is prayer. All the pomp and pageantry Solomon could muster is on display. Eventually they reach the courts of the Temple. The ark is installed in its place in the Holy of Holies. And in that moment the people cry out with one voice,

"For he is good, and his steadfast love endures forever…" (2 Chronicles 5:13)

If you had to boil your faith down to a single statement. If you thought long and hard about how to summarize what you believe about God, you would be hard-pressed to beat this simple yet profound statement of faith.

God is good. This must be true. Life is too hard. The universe seemingly too random and capricious. The suffering of our world too great. If God is not good, He cannot be trusted. If God is not good, then we are left to the mercy of our circumstances. If God is not good then there is no redemption in tragedy. No purpose for our pain. If God is not good then life has not ultimate end. If God is not good then there is no basis for human morality. No objective standard to guide us into what is true and noble and pure and holy.

God is love. This must be true. We are all broken creatures. We all fall short. We all struggle for significance and dignity and worth. We look to pleasure. We look to success. We look to money. We look to influence and power. But all of these fail to satisfy. All of these fade to ashes and dust. And yet our hearts still yearn for something more. We yearn to be loved for who we are. Not as we should be. Not as we ought to be. But as we are…warts and all.

God's love endures forever. Here's the good news about God. He is steadfast. Loyal. Faithful. True. He never leaves us or forsakes us no matter how hard or dark the road may get. God is always at our side. From His goodness flows our goodness. From His love flows our self-worth. And because He is always there, we never walk alone.

Friends, these are the fundamental truths we declare about God. He is good. He is love. He is steadfast. He endures forever. This is the only sure foundation on which we can build a life. This is the bedrock on which we stand. No matter how fierce the storms or how raging the seas, we will never be shaken for God is with us. He is our fortress. He is our refuge. He is our strength and help in time of trouble. Do not be afraid. Do not tremble. Do not let your insecurities get the best of you. You are loved by a good, good Father.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10, Romans 7:14-8:8, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 19:24-25

July 22, 2019

PRAYING FOR REVIVAL

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 6:12-8:10, Romans 7:14-8:8, Psalms 18:1-15, Proverbs 19:24-25

"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 live openly and honestly 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 repent and relinquish our vain and selfish pride.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19, Romans 8:9-25, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 19:26

July 23, 2019

SUFFERING

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 8:11-10:19, Romans 8:9-25, Psalms 18:16-36, Proverbs 19:26

"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him." (Romans 8:16-17)

What if I told you suffering was an essential part of the Christian life? Would it make you think twice about following Jesus? Would it cause you to re-evaluate what you believe? One of the great heresies of our time is prosperity preaching. It's the idea that if you are faithful enough. If you are obedient enough. You will be blessed. God will grant you your heart's desire. You will be wealthy. You will be healthy and strong. You will be successful. The television airways are filled with these messages. Prosperity preachers putting on a show and making bargains on your behalf with God. Implicitly or explicitly, they tie suffering to sin. They believe pain is a result of disobedience. They argue poverty and sickness is a result of a lack of faith. Such nonsense!

Paul makes it clear that those who follow Christ will share in His sufferings. Not because we seek suffering out. Not because Jesus demands His followers live in constant pain or poverty. But simply because the lives we lead put us at odds with the world around us. Our faith makes us aliens and strangers in our culture. It sets us apart. Makes us a target. Why? Because we serve a heavenly King. Our primary allegiance is not to king and country. Not to flag or nation. Not to tribe or family. But to God Himself. By faith, we are adopted as His sons and daughters. By faith, we become part of His family. By faith, our citizenship is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

Jesus suffered. Jesus endured incredible pain. Jesus was tortured, falsely accused, and executed by the State because he posed a threat. His message subverted the kingdoms of this world. His preaching confronted the religious leaders of His day. He called them to repent. He called them to confess. He called them to lay down their wealth and power and position and authority for the sake of others. He called them to give their very lives away for the sake of the impure, unholy, rejected, and outcast. He upended social conventions. He tore down cultural taboos. Even the laws of nature obeyed Him! Disease disappeared. Demons were cast out. Death itself defeated. Watching Jesus work must have been awesome and frightening all at the same time.

Jesus followers – the people known as Christians – are called to the same way of life. Paul reminds us the suffering we endure for our faith is actually what makes us co-heirs with Christ! And we are not alone. All of creation suffers along with us under the curse of sin. Every single human being struggles under the weight of sin. The difference is that those who follow Christ have hope. We have hope of an eternal life waiting for us when Christ returns to claim His own. On that great day, our adoption will be complete. Our sufferings will come to an end. Every tear will be wiped away. Every hurt healed. Every pain redressed. Every injustice set right. This is why our present sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in us!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 11-13, Romans 8:26-39, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 19:27-29

July 24, 2019

WHAT'S THE POINT OF CHURCH?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 11-13, Romans 8:26-39, Psalms 18:37-50, Proverbs 19:27-29

I can't tell you how many times I have heard this question. Usually from people who've been burned or frustrated or wounded by an experience. Sometimes from others who find church boring or old-fashioned or useless. And the answers I hear so many give are unsatisfying. Church is for inspiration. Church teaches you how to be a good person. Church is where I get my needs met. Notice the common theme? Church is about me? Sometimes I hear better answers. Church is where I find my community. Church is where I worship God. Church is where I am challenged to grow in my faith. Yes, those are deeper realities but still too self-centered for my taste.

Listen to the words of Jesus. "You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth." He is speaking to His disciples. The nascent group that will become the beating heart of the church after His death, resurrection, and ascension. Notice the church is not designed to meet their needs. Not designed to fulfill their longings. It's not about them at all. It's about the world. It's about bringing light to world darkened by sin and despair. It's about preserving (the role of salt in the ancient world) a world from complete and total corruption.

Jesus' words came to mind as we read through 2 Chronicles this morning. "And those who had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their fathers. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they made Rehoboam the son of Solomon secure, for they walked for three years in the way of David and Solomon." (2 Chronicles 11:16-17) You may remember from our readings in 1 and 2 Kings the decisions of the kings of Israel to depart from the true worship of God. They set up their own temples. They established their own priesthood. They developed their own rituals. In short, they disobeyed the Lord and refused to worship Him in the way He deserves and demands. As a result, the priests and Levites left the nation of Israel and came to Judah. They sacrificed homes and lands and community in order to stay true to God. The impact they made on the southern Kingdom was enormous as was the void they left in the northern Kingdom. Their departure hastened the northern kingdom's plunge into ruin while their arrival in the southern kingdom strengthened it significantly. Such is the nature of salt and light.

Now consider our own situation. Consider what is taking place in our own country. Consider the anger and hate and bitterness and rage of our cultural moment. Sin and corruption are on the rise. More and more people seeking to throw off any biblical restraint as they pursue their own desires. Each person doing what is right in their own eyes. The gospel is now considered a threat. The church is being accused of fostering hatred and intolerance. Christians are beginning to be marginalized. They are losing jobs. Businesses are being discriminated against. Suggestions are being made that holding to a biblical faith disqualifies one for public service. And too many churches are confirming the worst fears of the world by sacrificing deeply held convictions for political power

So what's the Biblical response? How should the Church respond? She must recover her God-given vocation. Listen to how Lesslie Newbigin describes it, "In the Old Testament story, God chooses Abraham and a nation that will come from him to bear the blessing for all nations. Israel is called to be a sign and instrument of God's redemptive purpose for all humanity, but they fail in their calling. And so God judges Israel, and "from the beginning there is a process of elimination. . . . There is a covenant between God and Israel, and those who flout the terms of the covenant are no part of the chosen people." There is a narrowing until, at the cross, "He alone on that day is Israel." Jesus fulfills the purpose of election, faithfully doing what Israel did not do—disclosing and effecting God's renewal for the whole world. "But this is not the end of the story of Israel. It is the beginning of the story of the true Israel." For Newbigin, "Jesus does not found a new people of God, a new society," but restores Israel to their calling. His mission is to Israel, and he appoints twelve as a representative number to make known the beginnings of the true Israel. Following the cross and resurrection and the mighty event of Pentecost, the way is clear for all nations: "Now at last the ancient promise that Israel shall be a light to the

Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth is to be fulfilled." The "Church is the Israel of God, not a newly founded society." Gentiles are incorporated into the true Israel that is gathered, renewed, and sent by Christ. They are like branches engrafted into an olive tree. "There is only one Israel of God, one olive tree of God's planting." What our world needs now more than ever is a restored and renewed Church. A Church with a deep sense of calling and a fundamental conviction to be who God has declared her to be. Salt and Light. Will we do this perfectly? Of course not. Can we do this faithfully? Absolutely. What will it require? A radical re-orientation away from Self and towards God and the world He loves so much.

Consider your relationship to the Church. To the Body and Bride of Christ. What role are you playing in building up the Body? In presenting the Bride spotless and blameless before her Lord? How are you sacrificially giving of your time, talent, and treasure to help the Church fulfill her high calling?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 14-16, Romans 9, Psalms 19, Proverbs 20:1

July 25, 2019

ELECTION

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 14-16, Romans 9:1-24, Psalms 19, Proverbs 20:1

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 17-18, Romans 9:25-10:13, Psalms 20, Proverbs 20:2-3

July 26, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 17-18, Romans 9:25-10:13, Psalms 20, Proverbs 20:2-3

Readings for TOMORROW: 2 Chronicles 19-20, Romans 10:14-11:12, Psalms 21, Proverbs 20:4-6

July 27, 2019

SINGING OUR FAITH

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 19-20, Romans 10:14-11:12, Psalms 21, Proverbs 20:4-6

One of my favorite professors in seminary was an African-American man by the name of Cleophus LaRue. He was beloved by many and well-known for launching into sermons in the middle of class. There's nothing quite like listening to great African-American preaching. There is a timbre and cadence that inspires and lifts the soul. Such was my experience in this man's class. I remember one day a fellow student asking Dr. LaRue if there was anything worth preaching in the Old Testament. "It's full of all kinds of archaic rules and laws and histories that have no relevance to today's world." Dr. LaRue looked at him in shock. "Nothing worth preaching? Do you not know? Have you not heard of the time Jehoshaphat sent his army into battle led by the choir?" And off he went! It was awe-inspiring and I've never forgotten it.

Jehoshaphat is one of my favorite kings. He's not perfect. He makes mistakes along the way. He makes alliances with the wrong kind of people. And yet, his heart is for the Lord. "Jehoshaphat lived at Jerusalem. And he went out again among the people, from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim, and brought them back to the Lord, the God of their fathers." (2 Chronicles 19:4) I cannot imagine the daily pressures a king faces. Pressures to make decisions. Pressures to provide for his people. Pressures to defend against his enemies. Pressures all around and yet Jehoshaphat made it a priority to go out among his people and bring them back to the Lord. He obeyed the Great Commission long before Jesus spoke those words. He taught his people to obey all the Lord had commanded. He believed one of the defining priorities of his kingship was the ability to make disciples. To foster an environment in his nation where his people would grow spiritually. It's truly stunning when you take a step back to think about it.

Now some might ask what purpose did it serve? Some might question if this is really the king's job? Shouldn't he be attending to affairs of state? But then we run across the story my professor preached on that day in class. The story of Jehoshaphat sending his army out in battle led by the choir. They are outnumbered. They are outmatched. They are outgunned. But rather than despair, Jehoshaphat turns his heart to the Lord. He calls on the Lord to be faithful to His promises. He walks by faith, trusting God to deliver him from all his enemies. And his people - having been taught the faith by Jehoshaphat himself and seen his example firsthand - follow him. Listen to what Jehoshaphat says and does, "Hear me, Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe his prophets, and you will succeed." And when he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy attire, as they went before the army, and say, "Give thanks to the Lord, for his steadfast love endures forever." And when they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the men of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed." (2 Chronicles 20:20-22)

Imagine trusting God so much that you can literally face death with a tune on your lips! Imagine believing God so much that you can walk into battle with a song in your heart! Imagine facing whatever overwhelming odds you may face in your life with joy because you know…YOU KNOW…the Lord is good and His steadfast love endures forever! How does one get to such a place in their faith? By worshiping God. Spending time with Him regularly and frequently. Never neglecting the gathering of God's people. Seeking to serve God in all you say and do throughout the week. Keeping God's will and God's glory as the overarching priority of your life not because you are trying to earn anything or have something to prove but simply because you love God and you want to live for Him. Will you do this perfectly? No. Neither did Jehoshaphat. But God's not asking for perfection. He's asking for your heart. Give Him your heart today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 21-23, Romans 11:13-36, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 20:7

July 28, 2019

ECHOES IN ETERNITY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 21-23, Romans 11:13-36, Psalms 22:1-18, Proverbs 20:7

"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 birth date 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 are blessed. Dishonor God and their lives and subjects are 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!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 24-25, Romans 12, Psalms 22:19-31, Proverbs 20:8-10

July 29, 2019

CONFORM VS. TRANSFORM

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 24-25, Romans 12, Psalms 22:19-31, Proverbs 20:8-10

I recently came across this quote from one of my favorite pastors, “I more and more find the precious part of each day to be the thirty or forty minutes I spend each morning before breakfast with the Bible. All the rest of the day I am bombarded with the stories that the world is telling about itself. I am more and more skeptical about these stories. As I take time to immerse myself in the story that the Bible tells, my vision is cleared and I see things in another way. I see the day that lies ahead in its place in God’s story.” (Lesslie Newbigin) It reminded me of what Paul says in Romans 12 about not being conformed to the patterns of this world but instead be transformed by the renewal of the mind through Spirit.

What does such transformation look like? It looks like the life Paul describes at the end of chapter 12. “Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:9-21)

This is the difference Christ makes in a person’s life. He changes us from the inside out. He shifts our outlook and understanding of the world. He transforms our thoughts and our attitudes as we surrender more and more of our hearts to Him. Because we are so deeply satisfied in Christ. Because Christ meets our every need. Because Christ is the object of all our devotion and affection, we are set free. Set free to love. Set free to do good. Set free to honor one another. To put one another’s needs above our own. We are patient in affliction knowing it is but a season. We are constant in prayer because we know our Father hears our every word. We are set free to be generous because money has no hold on us. We can bless those who attack us or seek to do us harm because Christ Himself is our defense and our reputation is secure in heaven. Christ gives us the confidence to grieve with those who grieve and celebrate the success of others. Because we rest in the forgiveness and grace of Christ, we can extend it out to others which leads to unity and harmony. Humility rather than pride is our constant companion. And we can release the need to get even or get back because we trust in the justice of God.

I get asked all the time, “What makes a Christian different?” Friends, this is it! When Paul talks about not being conformed to the patterns of this world, he means rejecting the way of hate. The way of outrage. The way of selfishness and pride. He means rejecting the ways of sin and evil for the ends never justify the means. He means rejecting any compromise with godlessness and instead living a life of unconditional love and grace. He means laying aside our desire for control. Our desire for power. Our desire for wealth and privilege and position and instead humbling ourselves before God. Christians understand our lives our not our own. We have been bought with a price. We have been purchased by God. We are slaves to Christ. We have no will of our own. No desires of our own. We exist to serve Christ and to bring Him glory. This is our highest calling. Our life’s passion. Our greatest priority. And it is the world’s most desperate need. Salt and light, friends. This is what you are in Christ. Believe this! And live your life for Him!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 26-28, Romans 13, Psalms 23, Proverbs 20:11

July 30, 2019

FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 26-28, Romans 13, Psalms 23, Proverbs 20:11

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.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 29, Romans 14, Psalms 24, Proverbs 20:12

July 31, 2019

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 29, Romans 14, Psalms 24, Proverbs 20:12

I recently hiked a 14er with my family. It can be a grueling exercise mentally and emotionally and physically. You find yourself often wishing you were further along than you actually are. In fact, I encourage my children not to look ahead lest they get frustrated. Just focus on your feet and take each step. Once you reach the top, it is a surreal experience. There is nothing quite like feeling like you are on top of the world. As you head back down the trail, you meet others who are on their way up and you try to encourage them. You know how they feel.

I think our spiritual life is similar to hiking a 14er. You have people strung out along the trail. Some are at or near the top. Others are just getting started. Some have reached plateaus where they rest. Others are toiling away. Some are battling exhaustion with every step. Still others are making their way back down having experienced the exhilaration of the summit. The key is not to judge a person for where they are but to encourage, challenge, and exhort them along the way.

I love how the Apostle Paul describes it in Romans 14. He's speaking to a community of Jews and Gentiles who are struggling to get along. Struggling to honor one another. Struggling to recognize and encourage each other on their journey towards God. Some are stronger in their faith. Some are weak. Some are knowledgeable in their faith. Others are not. Some cling to certain laws pertaining to food and drink and days and seasons for comfort. Others do not find comfort in these things. In fact, they often feel restrictive. The point Paul makes to everyone is not to judge. To not use your "rights" to put a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister. To instead seek to serve them in love. To put aside anything that might get in the way of true and authentic fellowship.

"Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand…For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God… Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building." (Romans 14:4, 7-12, 18-19)

Ultimately living together in Christian community puts our faith to the test. Do we truly believe only God can judge the human heart? Do we truly believe our unity rests on Christ alone? Do we truly believe all of us are required to die to self? Do we truly believe no matter what happens, we are the Lord's?

I have traveled the world. Met Christians in many different cultures and countries. I have worshiped in many different languages. I have fellowshipped with new believers and old believers. Christians who've been walking with Christ for a few days and Christians who've been walking with Christ for decades. My life has been enriched by these experiences. Do I have my own opinions? My own preferences? My own ideas and way of doing things? Of course. But I surrender all that to Christ. I recognize so much of what I take for granted is culturally conditioned by the world I grew up in. So I surrender it to Christ. And I seek to the paths that make for peace and mutual encouragement. How can you do this for your church family today?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 30-31, Romans 15:1-22, Psalms 25:1-15, Proverbs 20:13-15

August 1, 2019

THE DANGER OF EXPEDIENCY

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 30-31, Romans 15:1-22, Psalms 25:1-15, Proverbs 20:13-15

I don't know about you but I find it far too easy to take short cuts. Life is too busy. The world is too crazy. The pressures and demands I face on a daily basis too much. I am often anxious and afraid for our future. So I look for life hacks. I look for ways to save time and money and energy. In such moments, I am tempted to compromise. Compromise my convictions. Compromise my values. Compromise my faith simply for the sake of getting things done. The late, great Roman Catholic monk, Thomas Merton, was once asked what he thought posed the greatest danger to the church. "Efficiency" was his answer. Mine would be similar. Expediency. Expediency is the process of getting things done quickly and efficiently but often at the expense of our moral values. We sacrifice for the sake of moving on. We crater for the sake of convenience. Sure, we tell ourselves the "ends justify the means" but that answer never quite satisfies. We know when we've taken the low road. We know when we've given in to our baser instincts. And even though things may have gotten done or decisions made that we support, it never feels good.

"All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies." (Psalms 25:10) How I wish we believed this truth! How I wish we held fast to righteousness! How I wish we refused to take the paths of this world and instead clung to God no matter the cost! Reading through the Kings and Chronicles of the Old Testament feels so familiar these days. We too have compromised with the Baals and false gods of our age. We too have turned aside from seeking God with a pure heart. We too are trying to have it both ways. The kings of Israel and Judah were not necessarily bad people. Yes, the Bible often calls them evil but that is because they fail in their one true duty and that is to seek the Lord with a whole heart. A single-minded devotion. Judged by this standard, all of us are guilty. All of us are evil. No, these kings we read about were real people just like you. Just like me. They were given great responsibility. Just like you. Just like me. They had access to great wealth and influence and power. Just like you. Just like me. But they too often privileged expediency over faithfulness.

I think that's why it's so refreshing to read about Hezekiah. Here's a king who chose the paths of righteousness. He chose the paths of the Lord despite the cost. He called Israel back to true worship and obedience despite being mocked and ridiculed. He re-instituted pure worship and even led the way by giving generously so the people could make the right sacrifices. I love how the author of the Chronicles describes him, "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)

Hezekiah prospered because he sought the Lord with a whole heart. He wasn't perfect. In fact, when the people of God failed to purify themselves prior to celebrating the Passover, Hezekiah was quick to acknowledge his mistake. As king, he was responsible. As the one with authority, he was culpable for their failures. So what did Hezekiah do? Did he make excuses? Play the victim? Claim ignorance? Justify himself? No. He prayed for forgiveness. "May the good Lord pardon everyone who sets his heart to seek God, the Lord, the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary's rules of cleanness." And the Lord heard Hezekiah and healed the people." (2 Chronicles 30:19-20)

One of the main reasons we fall for the temptation of expediency is because we confuse holiness with perfection. We confuse righteousness with always getting it right. We live in fear of making a mistake. And because we know deep down we cannot live up to this impossible standard, we settle for less. We give up. We lose hope. But the Bible clearly teaches us through Hezekiah's example that the sacrifices God desires are broken spirits and contrite hearts. God wants our devotion. God wants our full attention. God wants us to seek Him with our whole hearts. God wants our worship to be authentic and real. He has no interest in us going through the motions. He wants us to serve Him not from a sense of duty but from a deep desire to love and please our Savior.

Love is a choice, friends. It is not so much a feeling or an emotion as much as it is a conscious decision to put God first in our lives. In our families. In our work. In our hearts. Are you seeking the paths of the Lord? Are you committed to walking in His steadfast love and faithfulness? Does your devotion to Jesus trump every other relationship in your life?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13, Romans 15:23-16:9, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 20:16-18

August 2, 2019

KINGDOM-WORK REQUIRES TEAMWORK

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 32:1-33:13, Romans 15:23-16:9, Psalms 25:16-22, Proverbs 20:16-18

No person is an island. No Kingdom leader every goes it alone. As one celebrity Christian leader falls after another, it is good for us to reflect on Paul's words from Romans 16. Paul is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. The burden of Paul's work is shared by many. The names are listed for all to see. Phoebe. Pricilla and Aquila. Epenetus. Mary. Andronicus and Junia. Ampliatus. Urbanus and Stachys. These are just a few of the leaders Paul surrounded himself with as he carried the gospel throughout the Mediterranean basin. We also know he journeyed with Barnabus, Luke, John Mark, and several others. The early church was wise to set apart teams of missionaries rather than commission these men to go out on their own.

We would do well to follow their example. We live in a culture that celebrates the myth of the self-made woman or man. The woman who does it all. She has a fast-track career. Perfect kids. Volunteers on the local school board and teaches Bible study at church. The man who does it all. He climbs the corporate ladder. Prays with his kids every night. Serves his wife sacrificially. And is a leader in the community. We celebrate these women and men. We place them on pedestals. We follow them on social media. We read their books and take their advice. We seek to emulate them in all we do. Then they fail. They fall. They have an affair. They embezzle money. Their carefully curated public persona comes crashing down. And we are shattered. So disappointed. So discouraged. So let down.

Why do these things happen? The pattern is now fairly clear. These men and women start to isolate themselves. They separate from their team. They believe their own hype. They put themselves beyond any kind of real accountability. The results are disastrous.

Friends, Kingdom-work is teamwork. Not even the Son of God could do it by himself! Throughout the Scriptures, we see the great leaders of the Bible sharing authority. Moses raises up elders to serve alongside he and Joshua. David has an abundance of counselors to share the load. Jesus calls 12 disciples and the Apostle Paul thanks numerous people at the end of his letters for their support and encouragement and labor in the work of the gospel.

Who's on your team? With whom do you share the burdens of your life with? Are you and your spouse a team in your home? Do you give your children as much authority and responsibility as they can handle as they grow up? Do you share leadership at work? Are you intentionally raising up leaders to take your place? Do you give people around you the freedom to fail and learn from their failures? Do you empower your team to make real decisions and then hold them accountable? Do you submit yourself to accountability? These things are critical if you are going to do God's work over the long haul.

For my part, I am deeply grateful for a group of elders who hold me accountable. They ask about my marriage. They pray for my family. They are not afraid to tell me no. I am deeply grateful for a wife who is a true partner in life and ministry. She gets in my face. Doesn't believe the hype. Brings me back to earth when I need it. I am thankful for my children and the honest relationships we are cultivating with each other. I am thankful for colleagues who ask great, probing, personal questions that make me reflect deeply on life. I am thankful for an accountability partner of almost 20 years who knows everything about me and who challenges me to live more faithfully for Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33, Romans 16:10-27, Psalms 26, Proverbs 20:19

August 3, 2019

CAN JESUS HOLD THE CENTER?

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 33:14-34:33, Romans 16:10-27, Psalms 26, Proverbs 20:19

I am often struck as I look out on my congregation on Sunday mornings by the diversity present in the room. Old and young. Rich and poor. Men and women. People coming from different backgrounds and life experiences. People who grew up in church sitting next to those who've had no experience with the church. Democrats and Republicans. Highly educated and less educated. White collar and blue collar and no collar. Families from different nations around the globe like India, Malawi, Vietnam, and Costa Rica. We are still predominantly white but have a growing number of black and brown brothers and sisters in our midst. We are abled and disabled. We have LGBTQ friends who join us each week. It's an amazing mix of people coming to meet Jesus.

The church of Jesus Christ is a miracle. In Christ, every dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Every identity that separates us one from another set aside. For Paul, it meant laying aside the centuries-old divisions between Jew and Gentile. Circumcision. Food laws. Sabbath keeping. All de-centered in order to make space for Gentile believers who did not know and had not grown up in a covenant community governed by the Mosaic Law. Sexual immorality. Idolatry. Sorcery and witchcraft. These things Gentiles were called to lay aside as they represented the former life they had before Christ. Only Christ is powerful enough to make this happen and the same is true today. We are so very different from one another. Each one of us unique in our own way. Each one of us sees the world a different way. Growing up in a highly individualized and highly commercialized culture like the US shapes our worldview. We don't know what it means to live in authentic community with each other. And this is why being part of a church is so important.

The church is where we actually get to live out our union with Christ. It tests the depth of our faith on a regular basis. What do we do when someone hurts our feelings? How do we respond when someone lets us down? What happens when we get into a fight with someone because they see the world differently? Will we let the worldly identities we cling to divide us or will we let Christ reign in our hearts and draw us together? This is what Paul is calling for at the end of Romans when he says, "And now I make one more appeal, my dear brothers and sisters. Watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you have been taught. Stay away from them." (Romans 16:17)

Of course, all of us are sinners. All of us can be the source of division if we are not careful. So how do we make sure to guard our own heart? Two things. First and foremost, seek the mind of Christ in all you say and do. Make sure every word you speak and every action you take is guided by His wisdom revealed in His Word. When you fall short – as you inevitably will - rest on His forgiveness. Be humble. Extend grace to yourself and others. None of us are perfect. Second, constantly search your heart to make sure you are motivated by the love of Christ. Are these words going to build up my sister or brother or tear them down? Am I really seeking their good? Am I seeking to serve them in love or out of selfish ambition? If you are like me, the temptation to manipulate others to my own ends is strong and has to be resisted on a daily basis.

Friends, Jesus can and does hold the center of our life together. He is strong enough to keep us together when everything else in the world threatens to pull us apart. Christ exerts a gravitational pull on our lives that keeps us in orbit no matter how diverse our fellowship may be or how vast the differences between us. Cling to Christ. Seek the mind of Christ. Be motivated by the love of Christ. Live from your union with Christ that He died to secure for all eternity.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 35-36, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 20:20-21

August 4 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: 2 Chronicles 35-36, 1 Corinthians 1:1-17, Psalms 27:1-6, Proverbs 20:20-21

Readings for TOMORROW: Ezra 1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 20:22-23

August 5, 2019

DIVINE FOOLISHNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 1-2, 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, Psalms 27:7-14, Proverbs 20:22-23

I recently read a book titled, “The Enigma of Reason” where the authors argue persuasively that reason – far from being the evolutionary superpower we make it out to be – is deeply flawed and never objective. In fact, they believe what we call “reason” is simply one way of drawing inferences about the world around us. It’s far more instinctual than we like to think. It is driven by desire more than logic and we are far more likely to use “reason” to confirm our existing biases than we are to actually make decisions based on the evidence presented to us.

I thought about that book again this morning as we read about the differences between God’s wisdom and human wisdom in 1 Corinthians. God’s way are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. What human beings consider “wisdom” results in all kinds of tragedy. Consider the “logic” of racism. The persistent idea that the color of one’s skin determines the value of one’s worth. Consider the “logic” of greed. The persistent idea that we should spend our days accumulating as much as possible and those who are successful are somehow “better” than those who are not. Consider the “logic” of gender dysphoria. The idea that we can choose our own gender and deny our chromosomal reality. Consider the “logic” of sexual freedom. The idea that we should offer our bodies to whoever we wish as long as their is consent. Such logic is terrifying and tragic and deeply heartbreaking. It is resulting in deep loneliness, suffering, and pain. It should not surprise us as we pursue human wisdom that things only seem to be getting worse. Rates of depression and suicide are on the rise. So are rates of reported mental illness. At what point do we stop and reflect on the fact that following human “logic” may be the latest form of self-harm?

Paul says “the message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction. But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.” This is not a triumphalistic statement rather one written in tears. Paul surveys the landscape of his own culture and his heart breaks to see so many enslaved to their sinful desires. He spends his life trying to break their chains and set them free. He longs for the day when Christ will appear and all things will be made new. Until that day comes, he calls us Christians to proclaim the “foolishness” of God. God has put to shame the wisdom of this world. He uses the foolishness of preaching to proclaim His victory over sin and death. The idea that God would give His life to save His people makes no human sense whatsoever. Why would God do such a thing? How in the world can this be just? Righteous? Even logical or rational? Furthermore, why would God gather HIs church from the all the poor and powerless? Why does He use the weak to shame the strong? Why does He use the foolish to confound the wise? Why does He use those who’ve been despised to expose the vanity and empty pride of our world?

He does it for His glory. He does it in order to make HIs glory known. No one can take credit for what God has done. Why would anyone even want to? God left heaven and came to earth. Relinquished all His power and authority in order to become a human being. He humbled Himself in obedience to the point of death. Even death on a cross. The worst and most shameful death ever devised by the wisdom of man. Because Christ embraced this descent, God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. And now He calls those who follow Christ to walk the same path. To take the same journey.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 3:1-4:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4, Psalms 28, Proverbs 20:24-25

August 6, 2019

REBUILDING

Readings for today: Ezra 3:1-4:23, 1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4, Psalms 28, Proverbs 20:24-25

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 disrupted. 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 followers. Those who would eventually be called "Christians" 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? What about our country? How are you at work in the midst of the chaos and hate and violence of our culture to bring joy and peace? Love and hope?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4:24-6:22, 1 Corinthians 3:5-23, Psalms 29, Proverbs 20:26-27

August 7, 2019

CULT OF CELEBRITY

Readings for today: Ezra 4:24-6:22, 1 Corinthians 3:5-23, Psalms 29, Proverbs 20:26-27

Our culture is obsessed with celebrity. Entire news cycle are devoted to the latest gossip. What's he or she wearing this season? Who's hooked up with whom? When is she due and what are they naming their kid? What's the latest scandal? Who's life is crashing and burning? We follow them on Instagram and Twitter. We repost and retweet. We are desperate for their attention. Desperate to be associated with them. Desperate to be like them.

Sadly, the same is true in the church. Celebrity preachers amass thousands of followers. They are measured by the number of people who come on a Sunday morning. The number of sites they launch for their church. The number of hits on their podcast. The number of followers on social media. They sell books. They sell merchandise. They do everything they can to promote their brand.

Over and against all this come the words of the Apostle Paul, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." (1 Corinthians 3:5) Paul gets it. Of all the leaders in the early church, Paul was probably the most prominent. His missionary journeys were the stuff of legends. His church planting prowess second to none. His influence was global. His words were read and distributed all across the Mediterranean. His personal story of sacrifice and perseverance in the face of incredible persecution was inspiring. And yet, Paul considered himself nothing. He called himself a servant. He never gave into the temptation of self-promotion. He never tried to advance his "brand."

How was Paul able to stay humble in a world hellbent on the accumulation of fortune and fame? He kept his eyes on Christ. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Cor. 3:6-7) Paul understood all of his success came from God. He simply played his role. He planted the church. Apollos watered the church through his charismatic preaching. Others joined in and lent a hand. And it was God who brought the increase.

Paul understood this wasn't about him. "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it." (1 Cor. 3:10) God had saved him. God had literally turned his life around. God had taken the greatest persecutor the church had ever known and turned him to her greatest missionary. Paul had been a Pharisee. A leader among the religious elite. His zealousness for the Law of God was beyond question. His passion for Yahweh and the Jewish faith unmatched. His devotion to the traditions of his people unwavering. And then the Risen Christ confronted him on the road outside Damascus. Changed by God's amazing grace, Paul's life literally took an 180 degree turn. Now he was called to lay the foundation for the early church. Others would come after him to build on what he started. All of it belonging to God.

I love how Paul concludes this section of his letter to the Corinthians. "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's." (1 Corinthians 3:21-23) What amazing promises! God has sent His Christ into the world to reclaim His own. Christ has sent His people into the world to proclaim the gospel. All things are therefore ours not by virtue of our faith but because Christ Himself is faithful. Do not place your trust in any man. Do not place your trust in any woman. Do not put any human being on a pedestal. Fix your eyes on Christ! Make Him your supreme treasure!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7:1-8:20, 1 Corinthians 4, Psalms 30, Proverbs 20:28-30

August 8, 2019

TRUE GREATNESS

Readings for today: Ezra 7:1-8:20, 1 Corinthians 4, Psalms 30, Proverbs 20:28-30

“For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13)

These are some of Paul’s most powerful words. I love the vision he sets for himself. He clings to nothing in this world. He refuses to trade his soul for any material gain. He relinquishes power and privilege. He easily lays down his rights as an apostle. He embraces weakness. Folly. Shame. He lets go of the need to be wealthy and healthy and wise. He doesn’t care about his reputation. When attacked, he responds with kindness. When persecuted, he perseveres. When people speak or think ill of him, he extends grace. This world holds nothing for Paul. He understands it will all pass away. We enter this world with nothing. We will depart with nothing. From dust we came and to dust we shall return. The only thing that matters is Christ. The only work that will endure is that done in His name and for His glory. The only wealth that will last is that which we store up in heaven. The only reputation we should care about is our reputation before God.

Scum of the earth. The refuse of all things. The first shall be last. The greatest among you shall be a servant. If any would come after me, let him take up his cross. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world but lose his soul? Friends, the Bible cannot be more clear. The path to true greatness is the path of service. The path of humility. Downward mobility. We must decrease so Christ can increase. This is why Jesus said the path was so narrow that led to salvation.

Many years ago, in a time of prayer, I asked the Lord to reveal His specific will for my life. He gave me three words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I asked the Lord, “What do these words mean?” He answered. “Be content to labor in obscurity. Let go of your need to be respected and well-known. To be successful in the eyes of your peers. To have the biggest and best church.” Second, “Embrace anonymity. Let go of your need to make your own name great. To make a name for yourself in the world. Instead, do all you can to lift up My Name. To make My name famous.” Third, “Recognize your insignificance. Even at your best, your work is but a drop in the bucket. A blip on the radar screen. It will come and go in a moment. Your significance is not derived from what you do or what you have to offer or what you accomplish in this life. You have significance only through Me.”

It was a powerful moment for me. One that I will never forget. These three words have guided my life. They are the guardrails that keep me humble. They keep my pride from rising up and driving me from the presence of the Lord. Whenever I feel distant from God, I return to these words. I evaluate my life. And I confess my sins. Through Christ, my ambitions have crumbled. My desires have changed. My addiction to worldly success has been broken. I’ve been set free.

I want nothing more in life than to be a fool for Christ. Weak for Christ’s sake. Shamed for Christ’s sake. For Christ is the Lord of my shame. Christ is glorified in my weakness. Christ’s wisdom is magnified in my foolishness. All that I have. All that I am. All that I desire. All for Christ. This has become my prayer and my plea.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 8:21-9:15, 1 Corinthians 5, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 21:1-2

August 9, 2019

CULTURAL BLINDERS

Readings for today: Ezra 8:21-9:15, 1 Corinthians 5, Psalms 31:1-8, Proverbs 21:1-2

Today's reading - which finishes in chapter 10 - 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 men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so when given the chance, 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?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 10, 1 Corinthians 6, Psalms 31L9-18, Proverbs 21:3

August 10, 2019

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE

Readings for today: Ezra 10, 1 Corinthians 6, Psalms 31:9-18, Proverbs 21:3

"You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Our world is increasingly moving away from God. We reject God's Law. We ignore God's commands. We purposefully and intentionally rebel against God's will. Take the Ten Commandments for example. Our culture celebrates greed or what the Bible calls "coveting." We are becoming more and more comfortable with deceit, fake news, or what the Bible calls "false witness." Stealing is acceptable as long as we don't get caught. Sexual immorality is okay as long as it feels good. Murder is considered a "choice" especially when it comes to the unborn or the elderly. Families are breaking down as we dishonor our parents. Sabbath-keeping is a total lost cause. As are the first three commandments about honoring God. When one takes a step back and surveys the landscape, one can easily see the coordinated effort of the enemy.

Nothing is new under the sun. Our world today is no better or worse than the 1st century. The enemy is not all that creative. His tactics always remain the same. He does all he can to destroy the works of God in every culture, in every time, and every place. So if the words of the Apostle Paul to the believers at Corinth sound familiar at all, that shouldn't surprise us. We are still dealing with sexual immorality. Still dealing with idolatry. Still dealing with stealing and deceit. Still dealing with addiction and suffering.

The great news is that God is still at work as well. Still reaching people. Still transforming hearts. Still changing lives. Why do we keep the Law of God? Why do we live lives of honor and honesty? Why do we live lives of faithfulness and sexual purity? Why do we live lives of kindness and humility? We do these things not to earn God's favor. Not to gain our way into heaven. Not to make God love us. We do these things because we've been bought with a price. We do these things out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Laying down His life in order to save us from our sin.

I love how Paul puts it, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11) You see, without Christ we are enslaved to sin. We can't help ourselves. We are broken people. Our desires are all disordered. Our minds are warped and twisted. Our wants and needs are self-centered. It's not that we can't do anything good. Of course we can. It's that even at our best we are corrupt. Even our best laid plans go awry. Even our greatest ideas for human flourishing fall short. Human history is replete with legions of examples.

So how are you intentionally glorifying your body? More importantly, why are you glorifying God in your body? Does it flow from a deep well of gratitude for what He's done for you? Does it rest on His finished work on the cross? Do you have the sense that you are building your life on the foundation He has poured? Or are you trying to white-knuckle your faith? Trying to keep the Law of God in your own strength or because you're trying to earn your way into God's favor? Let me encourage you to reflect deeply on Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Pay attention to the progression. You are not your own. You were bought with a price. So glorify God with your body. Resist the temptation to reverse engineer the process. Let His grace fill you. Lead you. Guide you. Secure you.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1:1-3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:1-24, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 21:4

August 11, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Nehemiah 1:1-3:14, 1 Corinthians 7:1-24, Psalms 31:19-24, Proverbs 21:4

Readings for TOMORROW: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

August 12, 2019

THE HARD WORK OF PRAYER

Readings for today: Nehemiah 3:15-5:13, 1 Corinthians 7:25-40, Psalms 32, Proverbs 21:5-7

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. He should organize protests! Pass laws! Crash the system! 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. It makes space for wisdom. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 5:14-7:72, 1 Corinthians 8, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 21:8-10

August 13, 2019

RELINQUISHING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5:14-7:72, 1 Corinthians 8, Psalms 33:1-11, Proverbs 21:8-10

We live in a nation founded on the notion that human beings are endowed with inalienable rights. Life. Liberty. The pursuit of happiness. We further enshrine our rights in the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights which includes the right to freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly, and petition. The right to bear arms and the right to refuse to quarter soldiers in one's home. Protections against unlawful search and seizure and self-incrimination. The right to a speedy, public trial by a jury of one's peers where the accused gets to confront those testifying against them. So on and so forth. It's a transcendent document that forms the basis of our legal system where we go to protect our rights. Fight for our rights. Defend our rights.

But what if God calls you to give up your rights? What if God calls you to relinquish your rights? To lay them down for the sake of others? Would you be willing to do so?

The Apostle Paul lays down his rights and he calls his Corinthian brothers and sisters to do the same. Especially in the matter of meat sacrificed to idols. It seems some in the church felt that any meat sacrificed to idols was tainted. Impure. Unholy. To eat such meat was to participate in pagan practices that dishonored God. Paul disagreed but willingly gave up meat in order to prevent his brothers and sisters from stumbling into sin. "But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak…And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." (1 Corinthians 8:9, 11-13)

Nehemiah lays down his rights. He understood that if he took what was his right as governor, it would place an undue burden on the people. It would increase their suffering. So he deliberately relinquishes what was a major part of his salary in order to provide more for the people. He deliberately goes without – sending his servants to work on the wall - so that work of protecting Jerusalem can be finished more quickly. He understands that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few and he sacrifices for the greater good. "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. Even their servants lorded it over the people. But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work on this wall, and we acquired no land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. Moreover, there were at my table 150 men, Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. Now 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. Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." (Nehemiah 5:15-19)

What about us? We are in the midst of a national gun debate once again. Mass shootings are far too common in our country and statistically speaking, the single greatest contributing factor seems to be the ease by which people gain access to these dangerous firearms. Yes, the Second Amendment clearly protects our right to bear arms. But might I suggest our founders could never have envisioned a world where weapons can kill at such a rapid rate and cause such mass destruction? Furthermore, there are clearly people in our society who have no idea how to handle the responsibility of bearing arms. Can we not lay down our rights for the weaker brothers and sisters among us? Put in place some basic protections to restrict access only to those who are willing to take their responsibilities as gun owners seriously?

We are also in the midst of a national debate about income inequality. The gap between the rich and poor is growing despite our robust economy. CEO's of the nation's largest firms continue to see dramatic increases in compensation while lower level workers don't get a fair shake. Unrestrained capitalism is a scary thing because of the nature of human sin. Left to our own devices – with no restrictions whatsoever - we will look out for ourselves rather than for others. We will seek to get as much as we can while we can and leave others behind.

Can we not lay down our rights for those who are less fortunate? What would happen if CEO's and corporate titans willingly relinquished their right to high pay, stock options, etc. in order to serve their employees?

The answer is not demonization. Christians must categorically reject the calls from certain political leaders to demonize gun owners and corporate leaders just as we categorically reject calls from other political leaders demonizing people on the basis of race or immigration status. Instead, all of us must search our own hearts to find ways we can lay down our rights for the sake of those we serve. Governmental coercion is not the answer as it only breeds resentment and fear. What we need is for the people of God to step forward as Paul did in his day and Nehemiah did in his day to lead a movement whereby we lay down our lives for the sake of our friends, neighbors and communities. We relinquish our rights so that those who are weaker, less fortunate, less able, less privileged can rise up. We sacrifice to create a rising tide that lifts all boats. This is the call of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 7:73-9:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 21:11-12

August 14, 2019

REHEARSING OUR STORY

Readings for today: Nehemiah 7:73-9:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, Psalms 33:12-22, Proverbs 21:11-12

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. 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.

I don't know about you but I get discouraged at times. I look at all the pain and suffering in the world around me and in the lives of those I love and I feel doubts creep in. Fears begin to stir. Anxiety rises. I get worried. Reading and rehearsing the story gives me hope. It lifts my eyes above the dark circumstances of my life to the light revealed in God's purpose and plan. It moves me from fear to faith. From grief to gratitude. God is on the move! He will be faithful to His promises! He will bring to completion the good work He's begun!

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 9:22-10:39, 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 21:13

August 15, 2019

ESSENTIALS AND NON-ESSENTIALS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 9:22-10:39, 1 Corinthians 9:19-10:13, Psalms 34:1-10, Proverbs 21:13

There is an ancient phrase attributed to Saint Augustine that states, “In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.” It is a beautiful and wise way to live one’s life. We all have core beliefs that cannot be compromised. Core ideas that make us who we are. They are essential to our being. For example, all human beings have a desire to be loved. All human beings have a desire for significance. All human beings have a desire to be accepted for who they are. These traits are part of what it means to be “essentially” human. Of course, we all have opinions. We all have different ideas on politics, faith, lifestyles, etc. We have a myriad of different thoughts on these subjects but if we make them essential. That is to say, if I condition my relationships based on what side of the political aisle one falls then I have made something that is non-essential an essential which results in deep brokenness.

One of the things I love about the Apostle Paul is how he is able to remain focused on the main thing. He keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the gospel and lets nothing get in the way of its proclamation to the ends of the earth. He has a phenomenal ability to see past his own cultural blinders and help others do the same. Listen to what he writes to the Corinthians. “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) Paul understands his calling. He is to win as many people as he can for Jesus. He is to preach and proclaim to as many people groups as possible. He is to share with Jew and Gentile alike the good news. He never lets anything get in the way of his calling. Not hardship or persecution. Not imprisonment or false accusations. Not discouragement or despair. Yes, I am sure he experienced all these things and more along the way but they never quite gained purchase in his life. He always seemed able to beat them back with the grace of Christ. Paul’s greatest desire was to see all people be saved and come to a knowledge of God’s truth. Is it ours as well?

We often pray in our church family for God to give us his eyes to see and his heart for the world around us. What does that mean? It means we live or die with the gospel. It means we grieve deeply over the unbelief of our loved ones, friends, and neighbors. It means our hearts ache in the face of the gross injustices of our world. It means we throw a party and celebrate every time a single sinner repents and comes to faith. It means we wake up every morning prepared to do battle with principalities and powers. The gospel is the most essential. Most foundational. Most fundamental truth of our existence. It shapes who we are. It defines us. It gives us a new identity altogether.

Ask yourself an honest question this morning…would your life be any different if Jesus were not in it? Would you treat people any differently? Work any differently? Spend money differently? Vote differently? If you woke up this morning to the news that they had found the body of Jesus in some unmarked grave in Israel and the whole “Christian project” came crashing down around, how would it impact your day to day? Is the gospel the most essential thing in your life? Is it core to who you are? Or is it non-essential? Do you accessorize your life with a little Jesus? Throw him a bone from time to time?

These are not easy questions for us to answer probably because all of us know instinctually that Jesus is not as core as he should be to our lives. Friends, the journey of following Jesus is a journey to the center of our existence. It is a journey to the heart of who we are. It requires us to drill down as deeply as possible. To get past all the trivial and mundane. All the superficial and insignificant. It requires us to relinquish and surrender everything that is important to us so that we might cling to Christ alone.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26, 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 21:14-16

August 16, 2019

PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11:1-12:26, 1 Corinthians 10:14-33, Psalms 34:11-22, Proverbs 21:14-16

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.

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 21:17-18

August 17, 2019

CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Nehemiah 12:27-13:31, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, Psalms 35:1-16, Proverbs 21:17-18

"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1)

There is only one litmus test for a truly Christian leader. Do they imitate Christ? Do their lives reflect the humility and sacrifice of Christ? Do they seek to serve and give their lives as a ransom for many? Do they pick up their cross? Do they practice self-denial for the sake of others? Do they actively align their lives with Scripture and live according to God's commands? Do they love the Lord with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength? Do they love their neighbor – as Jesus defined "neighbor" - as themselves?

We live in a world where godly leadership seems scarce. Our politicians are corrupt. Our business leaders are greedy. Our pastors are self-promoting. Our social media celebrities narcissistic. The list of those who abuse their positions of power and exploit the system for their own gain seems endless. These are the ones who get all the press. These are the ones who get all the run in the media. These are the ones we follow on Instagram and Twitter and who appear on the grocery store rags. And it is easy to get discouraged.

But then I think of the young man I know in Washington DC who serves Jesus as a congressional aide. He works tirelessly to make the world a better place by shaping public policy. I think of the small business owner who goes about her work everyday with integrity. Cares for her employees. Pays them a fair wage and sacrifices personally to make her business grow so she can bless her community. I think of the small town pastor who offers the invocation at the local high school football game, visits his people when they are sick, preaches the Word faithfully and well, and does all he can to make his community a better place. I think of the single mom who works two jobs as she raises her kids. She makes incredible sacrifices to get them to school, practice, and eventually pay for college. I think of the church planters I know who leave their homes and families and tribes to go to unreached villages where the name of Jesus has yet to be heard. I think of the pastor I know who risks his life to save North Korean women held as sex slaves along the Chinese border.

Perhaps our problem isn't the lack of godly leadership in the world as much as we keep looking in the wrong places. Elevating the wrong people. Paying attention to those whose erratic, extreme, and ungodly behavior makes for good headlines. Perhaps if we unfollowed the celebrities. Stopped watching cable news. Ignored the tabloids. And instead spent our time lifting up and encouraging and imitating the godly leaders we know in our lives, the world might soon become a better place?

As hard is it may be to believe, Paul was no celebrity. The Roman Empire was a big place and there was a lot going on. The centers of power and focus of attention was the emperor's court. The march of the legions. The mob in Rome itself. No one much cared about a Jewish Pharisee from a backwater province moving from urban center to urban center planting small communities of people who committed themselves to the way of Jesus. Paul missionary journeys would not have trended on Twitter. Never would have made the evening news. No talking heads would have wasted their time on him. Even at the end of his life, he was so insignificant the Roman officials basically ignored him once he was on house arrest until his eventual execution. And yet within a couple of hundred years, these little communities Paul started would literally overrun the Empire.

Think about your own life. Think about your own leadership. What example are you setting? What legacy are you leaving behind? I firmly believe that our leadership credibility rests on our ability to imitate Christ. Not that we will ever do this perfectly. Paul called himself the "chief of sinners" and so we are but as we tune our hearts to sing His praise. As we train our feet to walk the Jesus way. As we turn our lives away from sin and towards Christ, we will leave a great blessing in our wake that will echo throughout the generations.

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-3, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 21:19-20

August 18, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Esther 1-3, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Psalms 35:17-28, Proverbs 21:19-20

Readings for TOMORROW: Esther 4-7, 1 Corinthians 12:1-26, Psalms 36, Proverbs 21:21-22

August 19, 2019

DIVINE REVERSALS

Readings for today: Esther 4-7, 1 Corinthians 12:1-26, Psalms 36, Proverbs 21:21-22

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? Let Esther give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 21:23-24

August 20, 2019

LOVE

Readings for today: Esther 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13, Psalms 37:1-11, Proverbs 21:23-24

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still “love” each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

To many people have fallen for the lie that they must “love” themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person’s needs above one’s own is anathema in our culture. Love must be “self-serving.” Love must lead to “self-actualization.” Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that “love” is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our animal attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear…God is love, love is not God. It’s a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God’s love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the “other.” It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God’s love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don’t want to do and we don’t do the things we do want to do. We can’t help ourselves.

God’s love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. “God believes in you.” God’s love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God’s love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desires is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God’s love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God’s love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God’s love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God’s love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the

punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God's love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren't talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God's love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 1-3, 1 Corinthians 14:1-17, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 21:25-26

August 21, 2019

WHY DO THE RIGHTEOUS SUFFER?

Readings for today: Job 1-3, 1 Corinthians 14:1-17, Psalms 37:12-29, Proverbs 21:25-26

In a very real sense, the Bible begins with the book of Job. Job was written chronologically before all the other books and it poses ancient, unanswerable questions. Why do the righteous suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Where is God when it hurts? How can a good God allow evil to exist? These questions seem universal. They seem hardwired into our DNA. Human beings in every time and place and culture and condition have pondered these questions. Various answers have been given. Buddhists believe suffering is illusory. Enlightenment is reached when we detach from this world. Hindus believe suffering is part of the wheel of life. How we handle suffering in some sense determines if we transcend to a higher order of existence as that wheel turns. Atheists believe suffering is random, capricious, and meaningless since there is nothing transcendent about human life. Muslims and Jews believe suffering is a result of human sin. A condition which infects every person at the deepest, most fundamental level. The answer to suffering is to love God and obey His commands. Christians similarly believe in the depravity of the human condition but believe redemption is found at the cross where God Himself enters our suffering and lays down His life for us.

Job is a meditation on human suffering. It asks hard questions. Tackles difficult issues. Honestly and transparently grapples with the deepest truths. It is part of the "wisdom literature" of the Bible which shapes how we read it. It is not to be read as pure history, though there may have been an historical Job. It is not be read literally, after all, how in the world could the author know what's happening in the courts of heaven? It is to be read as ancient wisdom from a Spirit-inspired author who is seeking to understand why the righteous seem to suffer so much in our world.

What do we learn from these opening chapters? Job is a righteous man. In fact, he is the most righteous man who has ever lived. He is faithful. His heart is true. His worship is pure. His life is a model for us all. But there are forces that exist beyond Job's control or understanding. There is evil in the world. Spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places that actively seek our harm. The world is not a friendly place for the righteous. It is not safe or secure. Bad things do happen. Horrible things. Terrible things. Job suffers them all. His children are murdered. His flocks and herds stolen. His wealth disappears overnight. His health is shattered. Disease and infection cover him from head to toe. Job is utterly and completely broken. At the same time – small comfort as it is - his life is still in God's hands. There is a limit to what God will allow. Evil does not run rampant or unrestrained. As deep as our suffering gets, God's faithfulness is deeper still. Job has hit rock bottom and still he clings to his faith. It is all he has left.

It's a hard, painful read and it's important not to jump to conclusions. My encouragement is to follow the example of Job's friends. Come and sit with Job in the ashes of his life. Grieve with him. Comfort him. Listen to him. Listen to him cry out for justice. Listen to him cry out for mercy. Listen - as painful as it is - for him to cry out for death. Resist the urge to offer empty platitudes. Resist the urge to offer easy answers. Resist the urge to ease your own discomfort. Walking with someone through the valley of the shadow of death is never easy. Sitting with someone in the midst of their darkest depression and despair is heartbreaking. And yet we cannot rush the process. We must pray for the courage to walk the Via Dolorosa (The way of suffering) together. After all, is this not what Christ did for us?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 4-7, 1 Corinthians 14:18-40, Psalms 37:30-40, Proverbs 21:27

August 22, 2019

SPEAKING OUT OF TURN

Readings for today: Job 4-7, 1 Corinthians 14:18-40, Psalms 37:30-40, Proverbs 21:27

Job's friends were doing so well. Word gets out about all Job has suffered and they come running. They grieve with him. They weep with him. They sit with him in the dust and ashes of his tragic life. For seven days, they silently keep vigil. For seven days, their presence is a comfort. For seven days, they faithfully love and care for their dear friend. Then they open their mouths…

What is it about us that makes us so prone to rush to judgment? To refuse to hear someone out? To listen to their story in full? What is it about us that feels the need to jump in? Cut people off? Interrupt? I remember when my wife first met my family. One of the first things that struck her was how often we interrupted each other. Arguing was our love language. Three strong-willed brothers going at it all the time, pontificating on every subject imaginable. Most of it was hot air, of course. We were clueless. Ignorant. Foolish. Even when we were correct, it didn't matter, because our goal was to be right. To win the argument. To pump our own tires and make ourselves feel good.

I think about my brothers when I read the Book of Job. When I hear the arguments Job's friends make in response to Job's heartbreaking cries. They are more interested in correcting his theology than comforting his soul. They are more interested in defending God than demonstrating love. They feel compelled to justify Job's suffering as if getting to the root cause will ease his pain. I see it all the time. In the midst of great tragedy or crisis, so many people want to know why? Why did this happen? Why now? Why me? Why didn't God protect me or those I love? When I was young and foolish, I tried to answer these questions. I would sit with grieving families thinking my theological answers would bring them peace. Thankfully, I learned quickly from my mistakes. The better approach was simply to listen. To put my arms around them. To simply sit in the ashes and resist the temptation to offer explanations.

Regardless of what people say, the question they really are asking is where is God? Is He with me in the midst of my pain? Is He here with me at the bedside of the one I love? Is He in the room? Does He hear my cries? Does He weep with me? The central truth of Christianity is this…God is with us. Jesus is Emmanuel. We are never alone. God traveled the vast reaches of our universe to be with us. He left heaven and came to earth to become one of us. He entered human history. Became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. All so that we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are loved.

Friends, you are blessed. You have access to a truth Job could only long for. You have Jesus. He is with you in your pain. He is with you in your heartache. He is with you in your grief. He is with you in suffering. He's not here to blame. He's not here to condemn. He's not here to put the burden on you or remind you of the consequences of your actions. He is here to hold you. He is here to comfort you. He is here to offer you grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 8-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28, Psalms 38, Proverbs 21:28-29

August 23, 2019

ABANDONED BY GOD

Readings for today: Job 8-11, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28, Psalms 38, Proverbs 21:28-29

"Behold, he passes by me, and I see him not; he moves on, but I do not perceive him." (Job 9:11)

There is nothing worse than feeling abandoned by God. I know so many who have experienced this dark night of the soul or who are going through it even now. It is a lonely journey. One fraught with danger. Many lose their way. Many lose their faith. I have listened to their stories. Stories of abuse and trauma. Stories of struggle and heartache. Stories of existential longing and loss. It is probably the most heartbreaking part of the work I do. I often find myself in tears alongside them. I find myself praying desperately for them. I find myself wishing I could give them what their hearts long for. But I cannot. For I am not God.

Job is crying out to God. Crying out in the midst of his pain and suffering for God to answer. For God to deliver. For God to save. He is crying out for God's presence. He longs to hear His voice. He wants to know God is with him but all he feels is God's absence. Where is God when it hurts? Where is God when we struggle? Where is God when suffer pain and loss? These are some of the deepest, most profound questions of our existence. They seem hardwired into our souls. Even those who do not think much about God find themselves asking these questions when tragedy strikes.

Job is not the only one who's experienced God's absence. David too knows what it's like. "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…But I am like a deaf man; I do not hear, like a mute man who does not open his mouth…But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer…For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever before me…Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!" (Psalms 38:8-9, 13, 15, 17, 21-22) Sound familiar? Ever felt this way? Ever prayed this kind of prayer? All of us have on some level. Every Christian I know has experienced the absence of God at some point in their lives. They have felt abandoned by God. Left on their own. It's deeply unsettling. Challenging on an ontological level. It forces us to come face to face with our deepest fears. And lest you think it's tied to sin, consider God's servant Job who was blameless and righteous in his generation. Consider God's servant David who was a man after God's own heart. Consider God's servant Mother Theresa who experienced a profound absence of God over the last several decades of her own life.

Consider Jesus Christ Himself who cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" If we are going to faithfully follow Jesus, we should expect to go through this dark night of the soul. We should expect to travel through the valley of the shadow of death. We should expect God to wean us off our trust in "feelings" or "experiences" so we can learn to trust in Him alone. On the cross, Jesus felt the pain of His Father's absence far more than the pain of the nails in his hands and feet. Over the course of her life, Mother Theresa felt the pain of God's absence more than the pain of those she served in Calcutta. David. Job. All of them suffered terribly from existential loneliness. But God didn't leave them there. God remained faithful. As they walked the dark and narrow and terrifying way, He was always at their side. Though they could not sense Him, He was beside them. Though they could not feel Him, He was there. Just as He redeemed His own Son's life from the grave, so He redeemed Job's life and David's life and Mother Theresa's life. And His promise is that one day He will redeem our lives as well. Trust Him. Trust Him more than your feelings. Trust Him more than your desires. Trust Him more than your experiences. Trust the One whose name is Faithful and True!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 12-15, 1 Corinthians 15:29-58, Psalms 39, Proverbs 21:30-31

August 24, 2019

ARGUING WITH GOD

Readings for today: Job 12-15, 1 Corinthians 15:29-58, Psalms 39, Proverbs 21:30-31

What is prayer? For some it is a wrote exercise. We repeat the phrases we memorized as a young person over and over again before meals and before bed. For others, prayer is a "just break glass in case of emergency" exercise. We call on God only when we need him. Only as a last resort. For others, prayer is about creating intimacy with God. Spending time with him in the mornings or in the evenings. Sharing with him the emotions and struggles of the day. For others, it's a list. Sins to be confessed. Needs to be met. Praises to offer. All these things are good and right and hopefully a regular part of your daily prayer time.

Job invites us to add yet another layer – argument. Now I know that sounds strange. After all, who can argue with God? What's the point when "No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord." (Proverbs 21:30) Furthermore, it doesn't feel good. It feels like we're questioning God. Contending against God. Fighting God and how can that be holy? How can that be righteous? How can that be acceptable? What if God gets sick of it and decides to strike us down? What if God gets tired of us and turns his back? Argue with God? Get mad at God? Shake my fist at God? You have to be kidding me!

But then we read these words from King David in the Psalms…"My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: "O Lord, make me know my end and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting I am! Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!" (Psalms 39:3-5) It's tempting to think of David singing these words in a sweet, sing-songy voice but that's not what the text says. David is angry. His heart burns hot within him. He is enraged at all he is suffering and he lashes out at God. He raises his voice. He clenches his fist. And he demands God give him an answer.

Job reacts similarly to his own suffering. "Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be in the right. Who is there who will contend with me? For then I would be silent and die. Only grant me two things, then I will not hide myself from your face: withdraw your hand far from me, and let not dread of you terrify me. Then call, and I will answer; or let me speak, and you reply to me." (Job 13:18-22) Job wants an audience before God. Job wants to try his case before His Creator. What he is experiencing is not fair. It is not just. It is not righteous. It doesn't fit with who he knows God to be.

Job is angry with God. But in his anger he does not sin. In his anger he maintains his faith. In his anger he still trusts in God's goodness and faithfulness and steadfast love. "Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face. This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him." (Job 13:15-16) Job understands God can handle his anger. Job understands God can handle his frustration. Job understands God is like a loving Father who lets his child yell and scream and carry on and throw a fit and yet never stops loving him. Never stops reaching out for him. And once the child expends all their anger and pent-up frustration, the Father gathers him into his arms. Sits him on his lap. Whispers words of peace and hope and love and joy into his ears.

This too is prayer. Coming before God in total honesty. Raw. Real. Transparent. Laying before him all our brokenness, suffering, and pain. Sharing with God our deepest emotions. Our darkest fears. Our desperate needs. Letting God see us in all our weakness. Too often, we think we have to have it altogether when we pray to God but that is a lie. The Bible clearly invites us to come before God as we are and to engage him for who he is. This is the example Job sets for us.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 16-19, 1 Corinthians 16, Psalms 40, Proverbs 22:1

August 25, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Job 16-19, 1 Corinthians 16, Psalms 40, Proverbs 22:1

Readings for TOMORROW: Job 20-22, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 22:2-4

August 26, 2019

THE COMFORT OF GOD

Readings for today: Job 20-22, 2 Corinthians 1:1-11, Psalms 40:11-17, Proverbs 22:2-4

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

One of the more powerful testimonies I've seen in a while was given recently by comedian and late night host, Stephen Colbert, in an interview with Anderson Cooper. (https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=p5bkP8H5NHM) In the interview, they are discussion loss and grief and Stephen shares remarkably about his faith in Christ and how it carries him through. He speaks movingly about the empathy that develops when one experiences suffering or tragedy and the ability it gives us to connect with others who may be going through something similar. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul is getting at in the opening words of his second letter to his Corinthian friends. They are suffering and yet God is there to not only comfort them but also use them to comfort others with the same comfort they've been comforted with. This is such an important lesson! The comfort God brings to us in times of pain or loss or grief is never simply for us. It is also a gift given to us to give to others in His name. All of us are wounded healers of one sort or another. All of us can speak vulnerably and honestly and transparently about our experiences with pain. All of us can bring comfort to others if we are willing to share from our own deep places of heartbreak.

There is a famous play by Thornton Wilder called, "The Angel that Troubled the Waters." In the play, he describes the scene at the pool of Bethesda where a multitude of hurting people gather to wait for that miraculous moment when the angel of God descends, stirs up the waters of the pool, and they become a source of healing. Anxious, crippled, broken people gather here day after day, hoping against hope that they will be the ones to receive the gift of healing. Among them is one particular man who never seems to make it. Others are always jumping the line in front of him to get to the pool first. On this particular day, he cries out in desperation to the angel to help him into the water so he can find healing but the angel instead whispers to him, "Stand back, this healing is not for you. Without your wound where would your power be? It is your very remorse that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. Not the angels themselves can persuade the wretched blundering children of earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."

Why do the words of Job's friends offer such small comfort? Because they do not come from the mouths of those wounded in love's service. They do not come from men broken on the wheel of living. Yes, what they say often – thought not always - reflects God's truth but the words are not offered in empathy or compassion. They are arguing with Job not comforting him. Thankfully, God never makes this mistake. In our deepest, darkest moments. When the future seems so bleak and the pain feels overwhelming. There God meets us. He wraps his arms around us. He doesn't offer answers so much as he offers himself. He knows what it is to suffer so he can help those who are suffering. He knows what it is to feel alone and abandoned so he can help those who struggle with the same. In a very real sense, he himself has been "broken on the wheels of living." He is the wounded soldier who serves the cause of love.

We all experience pain and suffering in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know its sting. We all experience grief and loss in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know what it's like to lose someone we love. We all experience heartbreak and tragedy in this life. Some more than others. Some less than others. But all of us know what it feels like to have someone or something dear stolen from us. And by faith, these become gifts. Strange gifts to be sure but gifts nonetheless. Gifts we can share with others who may be going through the same thing. Friends, this is the beauty of the gospel. It is the story of a God who embraced suffering in order to bring comfort. Embraced pain in order to bring relief. Embraced death in order to bring life. And through Christ, all your pain and suffering and grief and heartbreak is redeemed. It becomes part of the beauty God is bringing out of the ashes of your life. It becomes a gift you get to share with those you love.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 23-27, 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11, Psalms 41, Proverbs 22:5-6

August 27, 2019

FAITH VS. FEELINGS

Readings for today: Job 23-27, 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:11, Psalms 41, Proverbs 22:5-6

This past Sunday, my twin daughters stood before their church family and publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus Christ. It was a beautiful moment. One of my proudest as a dad. As we prepared for this day, we talked a lot about why we believe and what we believe. We talked a lot about what it was they were professing to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Initially, both of them said the same thing. "We are doing this because we want to get closer to God." Now I love the sentiment. I too long to experience a deep closeness with God. But our feelings and experiences cannot be the foundation of our faith. It must go deeper. Faith is not so much "subjective" as it is "objective." It is a conscious decision to place our trust in Jesus who lived, died, and rose again on our behalf. It is His faithfulness that matters not our own. It is His completed work on the cross that saves not the emotional high we get at camp or in a worship service. It's not that those emotional experiences aren't special. Of course they are! I love it when God feels very close and my experiences of Him are deeply intimate.

But what happens when God feels distant? Absent? What if we can't find God? Then what happens to our faith? In our reading today, Job describes what it feels like when God seems absent. "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his seat!…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." (Job 23:3, 8-9) He is crushed by the experience of feeling abandoned by God. He is feeling alone. Anxious. Afraid. And if his faith were based purely on his subjective experience of God, he would chuck the whole thing. Thankfully, however, Job knows God is God. He trusts God to be true to His character and nature and promises even when Job cannot see Him or find Him. "But God knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold. My foot has held fast to his steps; I have kept his way and have not turned aside…But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind." (Job 23:10-11, 13-14)

He will complete what He appoints for me. What a promise! I know far too many people who, at some point in time in their life, raised their hand and prayed the sinners prayer. I know far too many people who publicly proclaimed their faith in Jesus and went down to the waters of baptism. I know far too many people who at one time believed but who now have abandoned their faith. Why? Because they placed their trust in their feelings. They placed their trust in their emotional experiences. Their faith was purely subjective and when the storms of this life began to blow and God seemed distant, their faith failed them. And they walked away.

Thankfully, God never walks away. Even when we are faithless, He is faithful! Even when we don't feel His presence, He is there. Even when we cannot find Him or see Him, He is holding us in His arms. His promise is to never leave us nor forsake us. In fact, one of the many names for Jesus in the Scriptures is Emmanuel which means, "God with us." Maybe you find yourself struggling this morning like Job. Maybe you feel like God is distant or absent from your life. Maybe you find yourself wrestling this morning like Jacob. Maybe you feel like God is punishing you or you are feeling the weight of His judgment. Maybe you find yourself confused this morning like Moses. You know God has placed a call on your life but you have no idea how it will come to pass. Maybe you find yourself angry this morning like David. You look around at all the evil and injustice in the world and you cannot imagine how God could ever let such things happen. These emotions are strong. These feelings are real. But rather than let them draw you away from God, let them lead you right back to the cross. Right back to the place where God Himself suffered and died. Right back to the place where God revealed Himself in all His tragic splendor all for love of His ruined creation. Let the objective reality of His death and resurrection renew your faith. Restore your belief. Re-establish your trust. No matter what we think or feel, God remains God. And He will bring to completion the good work He began in you!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 28-30, 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, Psalms 42, Proverbs 22:7

August 28, 2019

SEARCHING FOR WISDOM

Readings for today: Job 28-30, 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, Psalms 42, Proverbs 22:7

Human beings are amazing creatures. Capable of incredible things. We have split the atom. Probed the depths of our solar system. Studied life at a molecular level. We have delved deep into the earth. Sent our submarines into the ocean's depths to search out her mysteries. We have been to the top of the highest mountains. Nothing seems beyond our grasp. We have gained so much knowledge over the centuries. So much information. What we lack is wisdom.

In his bestseller, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind, Yuval Harari catalogues the miraculous story of the human race. How did this one species come to dominate the earth? How were they able to accomplish so much in so little time? And where do we go from here? He's not optimistic. "Despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles – but nobody knows where we're going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one. We are consequently wreaking havoc on our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don't know what they want?" Dr. Harari is not a Christian. In fact, he is an atheist but even he can see the lack of wisdom in our world.

Job's diagnosis of the human condition isn't all that different from Harari. Job too catalogues the amazing things human beings are able to do. Mine the depths of the earth. Till the soil and bring forth food. Redirect the courses of streams and rivers. Even overturn mountains and build roads through the wilderness. "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. It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx or sapphire. Gold and glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for jewels of fine gold. No mention shall be made of coral or of crystal; the price of wisdom is above pearls. The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold. "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.' "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place." (Job 28:12-23)

Only God knows the way to wisdom. Humanity for all her astonishing ability simply cannot manufacture it on her own. It is a gift. It comes to us from God. It requires humility. Submission. Relinquishing our pride and bowing the knee before our Creator. "And God said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.'" (Job 28:28) Our world suffers terribly from lack of wisdom. We spend our lives trying to solve the very problems we create. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to sexuality. The result is abortion, sexually transmitted disease, sexual abuse, the objectification of the human body, and broken relationships. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to wealth. The result is the rich get richer while the poor suffer. We reject God's wisdom when it comes to creation care. The result is a world on fire and a climate that is getting more extreme with each passing year. When will we learn? When will we finally surrender? When will we finally let go and let God have control over all of life?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 31-33, 2 Corinthians 3, Psalms 43, Proverbs 22:8-9

August 29, 2019

GLORY

Readings for today: Job 31-33, 2 Corinthians 3, Psalms 43, Proverbs 22:8-9

I remember sitting on top of Cadillac Mountain when I was in college. I was a counselor at a residential camp in Maine for the summer and had taken a group of boys camping in Acadia National Park. We got up while it was still dark and hiked under the stars until we reached the top of the mountain to see the sunrise. It was a gorgeous night. Very little light pollution so it felt like you could see the entire Milky Way. It was truly glorious. But then the sun began to peek over the horizon. It's rays reflected off the waters of the North Atlantic. It felt like we could see for thousands of miles. The stars were almost immediately forgotten. The beautiful night gave way to an even more glorious dawn. It was an experience I will never forget.

I think about that sunrise as I read these words from Paul this morning. "Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory." (2 Corinthians 3:7-11) Yes, the Law of God has its own particular glory. Handed down from on high on Mt. Sinai to Moses, it had served to guide the people of Israel for generations. It revealed God's will. It revealed God's nature and character. It revealed God's love. It revealed God's holiness. The Law of God taught the people of Israel not only how to live and relate to their Creator but it also taught them the depths of their depravity and sin. The Law was given not just to restrain evil but also to remind us of our desperate need for a Savior.

Thus, the glory revealed in Christ far surpassed the glory revealed in the Law. In Christ, the Law finds its fulfillment. In Christ, the Law finds its telos or goal. In Christ, the demands of the Law are satisfied. The curse of the Law is broken. And the glory of the Law gives way to even more glory. This is why Paul can say confidently, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:17-18) He understands we no longer live under the governance of the Law. It's guardianship is over. The need for a tutor ends when the Master arrives. Does this mean we are free to do whatever we please? Of course not. To submit ourselves to sin is to submit ourselves to a yoke of slavery! Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Freedom to follow Christ. Freedom to obey Christ. Freedom to love Christ. It is the Spirit who pulls back the veil from our eyes. It is the Spirit who helps us see the glory of the Lord. It is the Spirit that renews and transforms us from one degree of glory to another. From the glory we received when we were conceived in the image of God to the glory we receive when we are "re-conceived" in the image of Christ. All of this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit and all of it is ours in Christ Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 34-36, 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 22:10-12

August 30, 2019

JARS OF CLAY

Readings for today: Job 34-36, 2 Corinthians 4:1-12, Psalms 44:1-8, Proverbs 22:10-12

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them back in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It is simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God is His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure to be "real" and "authentic." To publicly curate our brokenness on social media in service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They both flip the script and ascribe the power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand that these "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustice we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. So we can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "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. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it now is poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all He has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ Jesus. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 22:13

August 31, 2019

GOD'S PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Job 37-39, 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10, Psalms 44:9-26, Proverbs 22:13

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 38:2, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 40-42, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Psalms 45, Proverbs 22:14

September 1, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Job 40-42, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Psalms 45, Proverbs 22:14

Readings for TOMORROW: Ecclesiastes 1-3, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalms 46, Proverbs 22:15

September 2, 2019

CHASING THE WIND

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-3, 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Psalms 46, Proverbs 22:15

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. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 4-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:7, Psalms 47, Proverbs 22:16

September 3, 2019

HARD-WIRED FOR CONNECTION

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 4-6, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:7, Psalms 47, Proverbs 22:16

It is not good for human beings to be alone. From the opening pages of Scripture we hear these words and we know in our bones they are true. We are suffering through an epidemic of loneliness in our country these days. So many people feel like they have no one to talk to. No shoulder to cry on. No one to lean on when times get hard. No close friendships. The surgeon general recently released a study calling loneliness a major health crisis. It is one of the major sources of depression, self-harm, and suicide. It reduces our life expectancy. Many therapists I talk to tell me that much of their practice is simply sitting and listening to people share about their daily lives. Their clients aren't seeking therapy so much as friendship. This is not to minimize the very real mental health crisis in our country today only to point out that one of the root causes is a lack of any kind of deep relationships.

Over and against this lonely way of life, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes offers this sound advice. "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) Now I know we usually reserve these verses for weddings but they apply to all of life. Woe to the one who falls and is alone. Woe to the one who is cold and is alone. Woe to the one who is attacked and is alone. I'm sure we've all had these experiences at some point in time and it is painful.

God made us for community. He created us as relational beings. Cast in His image, we are built to relate to others in the same way the members of the Trinity relate to one another. Our hearts crave deep relationships. Our souls need to be knit together with other people. We all have this longing deep within. Not only that but we were created for a relationship with God! A threefold cord is not quickly broken! As we intertwine our lives with God's life and with the lives of other people, we find ourselves growing stronger, more confident, and more at peace. With God at our side and our brothers and sisters at our backs, we can withstand anything. This is how life was intended to be but sin separates. Separates us from God. Separates us from one another. So we must repent. Repent of our ungodly impulse to "go it alone." Repent of the excuses we make that keep us separated from community and from the Lord Himself. Repent of the way we prioritize tasks and activities and technology over face to face interaction with the people we love.

I learned a long time ago that God most often shows up in my life with skin on. He speaks to me and He ministers to me through flesh and blood people. My family. My friends. My colleagues. My church family. I am blessed by these relationships and the more I let them into my life, the more I am encouraged, comforted, strengthened, and inspired to live for Christ. This was true even for the Apostle Paul. Listen to how he describes the blessing he received from Titus…"For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more." (2 Corinthians 7:5-7)

Who is God sending into your life? Who has He sent and what are you doing to grow that relationship? Are you open to new relationships? New people? New experiences? Or do you find yourself pulling back? Isolating? Growing more and more lonely with each passing day? Don't believe the lie, friends! You were made for community! You were built for relationships! You are hard-wired for connection! Lean into Christ! Lean into your family! Lean into your friendships! Let God fill your soul!

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

September 4, 2019

TRUE REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-9, 2 Corinthians 7:8-16, Psalms 48, Proverbs 22:17-19

John the Baptist came preaching a message of repentance. Jesus came preaching a message of repentance. Paul traveled all over the known world at the time preaching a message of repentance. Clearly "repentance" lies at the heart of the Christian faith. But what is repentance? Is it simply saying sorry to God? An existential feeling of guilt or condemnation? A deep sense that we are wrong? And how does one actually "repent?" Kneel in sackcloth and ashes? Engage in self-harm like the monks of old? Beat oneself up emotionally and spiritually? Subject oneself to rigorous, daily self-examination?

I love how Paul describes repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." The key to repentance is the fruit it produces in a person's life. If your grief – as deep and profound as it may be - produces death it is not from God. On the other hand, if your grief leads to salvation without regret than you can be sure it is from the Lord.

I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled someone whose grief only produced death. They were sorry they got caught. Sorry for the mess they found themselves in. Sorry for the way life turned out. Sorry for the bad choices they made. But they weren't sorry enough to make a change. Their sorrow did not lead to repentance. It did not lead to surrender. It did not lead to submission. They still wanted control. Still wanted to be in charge. Still wanted to justify themselves. So we'd scratch the surface of their grief only to find excuses. Blame-shifting. Denial. As a result, their lives seemed perpetually locked in a death spiral.

At the same time, I have had the joy of walking with people through their grief as it produced salvation. Their sorrow was less about them and more about God. They had come face to face with the depth of their sin. The depth of their depravity. They realized no matter how hard they tried, they simply didn't have it in them to make things right. In their despair, they cast themselves at the foot of the cross where they found freedom and healing. Hope for their journey. And all their regrets. All the guilt from past mistakes. All the shame they carried was washed away. They fixed their eyes on Christ. They surrendered to His love. Submitted to His will. Gave Him control over their lives. Scratch the surface of their grief and you find beauty. Joy. Peace. And they enter a virtuous cycle of living that leads to fulfillment and true happiness.

Where do you find yourself this morning? When confronted by the Spirit or by other people in your life over mistakes you have made. Sins you have committed. Ways you have fallen short and let people down. How do you respond? Is your grief grounded in Christ or in the world? Does your repentance lead to a changed life or are you still holding onto past regrets? Let me encourage you to let go of the death-dealing ways of this world so that you may receive the life-giving Spirit of Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Psalms 49, Proverbs 22:20-21

September 5, 2019

FINDING TRUE JOY

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 10-12, 2 Corinthians 8:1-15, Psalms 49, Proverbs 22:20-21

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 decade, 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, 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)

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Songs 1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, Psalms 50, Proverbs 22:22-23

September 6, 2019

SEX AND GOD

Readings for today: Song of Songs 1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:16-24, Psalms 50, Proverbs 22:22-23

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 don't want to picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. So we flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is this book about? The love of a man for 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? it certainly was for many of the ancient rabbi's. They put a content warning on this book, restricting it to those who were 30 and over. Then again, the ancient church often read this text as they approached the Lord's Table. They recognized the deep intimacy God desires to have with us and they affirmed such love by tying this book to the most sacred act of worship. 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 reveals how deep our corruption runs. We are so confused when it comes to human sexuality. We have bought the lie that it's all about our personal pleasure. We have depersonalized it through pornography, casual hook ups, and apps like Tinder. We see sex as dirty yet secretly gratifying. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom but then seems shocked when such freedom leads to broken relationships, disease, abuse, and violence. We want all the pleasures sex brings but none of the responsibility. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us, it is that our sexual appetites are insatiable. Our lusts are impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Songs 5-8, 2 Corinthians 9, Psalms 51, Proverbs 22:24-25

September 7, 2019

DEATH-DEFYING LOVE

Readings for today: Song of Songs 5-8, 2 Corinthians 9, Psalms 51, Proverbs 22:24-25

“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 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 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-2, 2 Corinthians 10, Psalms 52, Proverbs 22:26-27

September 8, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 1-2, 2 Corinthians 10, Psalms 52, Proverbs 22:26-27

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 3-5, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, Psalms 53, Proverbs 22:28-29

September 9, 2019

FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: Isaiah 3-5, 2 Corinthians 11:1-15, Psalms 53, Proverbs 22:28-29

“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 read 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) “For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. For the look on their faces bears witness against them; they proclaim their sin like Sodom; they do not hide it. Woe to them! For they have brought evil on themselves.” (Isaiah 3:8-9) “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight! Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!” (Isaiah 5:20-23)

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? How many of us have given into the temptation of fighting for the lesser of two evils? Letting the ends justify the means in our political process? Yes, we lament the lack of prayer in our schools. We lament the absence of the Ten Commandments in our public spaces. We lament the way crosses are being torn down. Christians targeted for their beliefs. 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? Why we refuse to deny ourselves and pick up our own crosses? Why 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 the Word of the Lord as it is spoken through Isaiah to us? Are we willing to repent and return and re-commit ourselves to God's ways?

"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 Chronicles 7:14)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 6-7, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Psalms 54, Proverbs 23:1-3

September 10, 2019

PROPHETIC SIGNS

Readings for today: Isaiah 6-7, 2 Corinthians 11:16-33, Psalms 54, Proverbs 23:1-3

"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 over 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. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 8-9, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Psalms 55, Proverbs 23:4-5

September 11, 2019

FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Isaiah 8-9, 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, Psalms 55, Proverbs 23:4-5

"But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he will become a sanctuary…" (Is. 8:13-14)

I have always loved the juxtaposition of these verses. Fear. Dread. Sanctuary. How in the world does all this work? It seems like God is asking for mutually exclusive things. On the one hand, he wants us to fear him to the point of dread. Let that sink in for a moment. God is asking us to be afraid of him. Afraid of the one who can cast our souls into hell. Afraid of the one who rightfully and righteously acts as our supreme judge. Afraid of the one who brought us into this world and certainly can take us out. We should be afraid of God. He is holy and we are not. He is perfect and we are not. He is all-powerful. All-knowing. Always present. Nothing is hidden from his sight. Nothing escapes his notice. Nothing is too insignificant or beneath him. He is in all and through all and in him all things hold together. He reigns and rules from a throne established outside time and space. He is the Lord of glory and the Lord of hosts. Legions of angels serve at his command. His will is immutable. His character is unchangeable. His kingdom is unshakable. He is wholly other. Awesome in might and majesty. We enter into his presence with our faces pressed to the ground. Fear is completely appropriate when we consider the gulf that exists between us and God.

At the same time, God promises to be our sanctuary. Those who honestly fear the Lord. Who honor God as holy with their lives. Who offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. God extends an invitation to dwell with him. To come under his protection. To be supplied by his provision. To receive grace and mercy instead of judgment and wrath. To those who enter into his presence by faith in Jesus Christ. Faith in the one whom God sent to be the perfect sacrifice for sin. Faith in the one who lived in perfect submission and perfect obedience to his Father's will. Faith in the one who not only died but rose again bodily from the grave. To these he gives the gift of adoption. They become sons and daughters of God. They become part of God's family. They are set apart as God's chosen people. God himself becomes their sanctuary.

Such people have no need of fear for the perfect love of God revealed in Jesus Christ casts out all fear. Fear has to do with punishment. Fear has to do with God's righteous judgment on human sin. But Christ Jesus has taken our place. He has endured the punishment we deserved. He has endured the wrath of God on our behalf and turned it away. Perfectly satisfying God's judgment. Perfectly meeting all the demands of justice. He completes the work. He serves the full sentence. He endures what we could not and opens the door to forgiveness and grace. His blood makes perfect atonement for our sin and all those who believe in him are now invited to make God their sanctuary. To run into his arms. To enter into his presence with thanksgiving and praise. The way to the holy of holies is now wide open for any and all who call on the name of the Lord and are saved.

Do you believe this? Does your life reflect this reality? Do you fear God and honor him as holy? Have you placed your faith in Christ? Do you believe the death he died, he died for you? Do you believe the blood he shed, he shed for you? Do you believe the victory he won, he won for you? If so, you have nothing to fear. You are a child of God. Accepted. Beloved. Chosen by God before the foundations of the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 10-11, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, Psalms 56, Proverbs 23:6-8

September 12, 2019

THE SALVATION OF GOD

Readings for today: Isaiah 10-11, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21, Psalms 56, Proverbs 23:6-8

“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?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 12-14, 2 Corinthians 13:1-13, Psalms 57, Proverbs 23:9-11

September 13, 2019

PRIDE COMES BEFORE THE FALL

Readings for today: Isaiah 12-14, 2 Corinthians 13:1-13, Psalms 57, Proverbs 23:9-11

“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. Those who see you will stare at you and ponder over you: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a desert and overthrew its cities, who did not let his prisoners go home?” (Isaiah 14:12-17)

Pride is the deadliest of sins. Pride makes us think we are gods. The king of Babylon rose up against the people of God. He conquered the known world. He reigned supreme over all the earth. His power was unmatched. His wealth unparalleled. His held life and death in his hands. But in his pride, he aspired for more. He aspired to be a god. He demanded his people worship him. He demanded they treat him like a god. He attempted to set his throne on high. On the mountains where the gods dwelled far to the north. He wanted to make himself like the Most High. But God would not be mocked. God will tolerate no rivals. He will not share his glory with another. So he brings judgment on Babylon. He brings the king down to Sheol. He makes an example of him before the nations of the earth. The one who once made the earth to tremble and the kingdoms to quake is brought low. His power is nothing before the bared might of the Lord Almighty.

This passage also holds a deeper meaning for those who have the eyes to see. Traditionally, Christians have read these words as prophecy about the inevitable defeat of Satan. You may be familiar with the King James Version which translates verse 12 like this, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!” As believers in Jesus Christ, we recognize that behind every earthly tyrant stands a heavenly being of immense evil. He is the power behind every throne. He is the wellspring of every injustice. He is the cause of all suffering and pain. He is constantly at work, trying his best to tear down all things godly and good. It is tempting at times to believe he is winning. It is daunting at times when we see his handiwork on display. Sometimes, if we aren’t careful, we even begin to believe the lie that he is as powerful as God Himself.

This is where the words of Isaiah become so important. God will judge the kings and rulers and tyrants of this earth. No matter how powerful they become, he will bring them low. They will not escape God’s justice. In the same way, God has judged the devil. He has cast Lucifer out of heaven. He has taken all the glory from the Morning Star. Colossians 2 declares that on the cross, Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them…” He tore down every high thing that set itself up against the knowledge of God. He removed every foothold of the devil. He destroyed the tempter’s power. He won the victory over sin and death and evil in the world. No longer are we slaves to fear. No longer are we slaves to sin. No longer are we at the mercy of Satan. Christ has kicked down the gates of hell and set the captives free!

Do you believe this? Do you believe you have been set free? Do you believe sin no longer has a hold on you? The devil no longer holds any power over you? Do you believe death has been defeated? Do you believe the grave is not the end? Do you believe your life is hid with Christ in glory? Do you believe He holds you even now in His strong and faithful hands? Do you believe Christ is praying for you always before the throne of God above? Do you believe? And do you live in light of this belief?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 15-18, Galatians 1, Psalms 58, Proverbs 23:12

September 14, 2019

HONOR AND SHAME

Readings for today: Isaiah 15-18, Galatians 1, Psalms 58, Proverbs 23:12

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. Cush. All face the wrath of God. 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 Moabites - each individual Moabite for that matter - did to deserve their fate. We want to know what the Philistines - every Philistine 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? Listen to how he describes the fate of the pagan nations surrounding Israel..."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) "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) Consider these words concerning Syria, "The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror! Before morning, they are no more! This is the portion of those who loot us, and the lot of those who plunder us." (Isaiah 17:13-14) And these concerning Cush, "All you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth, when a signal is raised on the mountains, look! When a trumpet is blown, hear… They shall all of them be left to the birds of prey of the mountains and to the beasts of the earth. And the birds of prey will summer on them, and all the beasts of the earth will winter on them." (Isaiah 18:3, 6) Why is God so angry? Why is God so bent on judgment? God is seeking to protect His honor. The nations of the earth "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 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. 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?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 19-21, Galatians 2:1-16, Psalms 59, Proverbs 23:13-14

September 15, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 19-21, Galatians 2:1-16, Psalms 59, Proverbs 23:13-14

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 22-24, Galatians 2:17-3:9, Psalms 60, Proverbs 23:15-16

September 16, 2019

JUSTIFICATION

Readings for today: Isaiah 22-24, Galatians 2:17-3:9, Psalms 60, Proverbs 23:15-16

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)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 25:1-28:13, Galatians 3:10-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 23:17-18

September 17, 2019

ON THAT DAY…

Readings for today: Isaiah 25:1-28:13, Galatians 3:10-22, Psalms 61, Proverbs 23:17-18

Some days are harder than others. Some days we wake up anxious and afraid. Some days we can barely drag ourselves out of bed. Some days we experience pain and suffering. Some days we feel hopeless and depressed. Some days everything seems to go wrong. Some days…

But there is another day coming. A day when all will be made new. Everything will be set right. Weeping and crying and suffering and pain will be no more. No more heartbreak. No more anxiety. No more fear. No more death. God Himself has guaranteed such a day! And on that day we will see His promises fulfilled!

"On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken." (Isaiah 25:6-8)

"In days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots and fill the whole world with fruit." (Isaiah 27:6)

"In that day from the river Euphrates to the Brook of Egypt the Lord will thresh out the grain, and you will be gleaned one by one, O people of Israel. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem." (Isaiah 27:12-13)

"In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people, and a spirit of justice to him who sits in judgment, and strength to those who turn back the battle at the gate." (Isaiah 28:5-6)

God is faithful! He will never fail. No matter what difficulties you may be facing in your life right now. No matter what challenges you struggle to overcome. No matter what fears grip your soul. No matter what anxieties threaten to paralyze you. God is with you! He is working on your behalf! He is for you not against you! Look to Him! Keep your eyes on Him! Focus all your attention on Him! Trust in His love. Seek His glory. Serve Him with gladness! Praise Him even in the midst of the storm. God will keep you. God will never leave you or forsake you. He is your strength when you are weak. He is your wisdom when you are foolish. He is your confidence when you are insecure. He is your hope when you feel despair. God keeps those "in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Him, because they trust in Him. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock." (Isaiah 26:3-4)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 28:14-30:11, Galatians 3:23-4:31, Psalms 62, Proverbs 23:19-21

September 18, 2019

DEALING WITH DEATH

Readings for today: Isaiah 28:14-30:11, Galatians 3:23-4:31, Psalms 62, Proverbs 23:19-21

The heart of the reading for me today is Isaiah 28:15-18. Here God confronts His people with sobering words. “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)

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 30:12-33:9, Galatians 5:1-12, Psalms 63, Proverbs 23:22

September 19, 2019

TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: Isaiah 30:12-33:9, Galatians 5:1-12, Psalms 63, Proverbs 23:22

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. He had experienced this. 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 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 33:10-36:22, Galatians 5:13-25, Psalms 64, Proverbs 23:23

September 20, 2019

GOD IS OUR STABILITY

Readings for today: Isaiah 33:10-36:22, Galatians 5:13-25, Psalms 64, Proverbs 23:23

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. "You conceive chaff; you give birth to stubble; your breath is a fire that will consume you." (Is. 33:11) 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. "Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, O peoples…for the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter….for the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion." (Is. 34:1-2, 8) 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. "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there." (Is. 35:8-9) 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 37-38, Galatians 6, Psalms 65, Proverbs 23:24

September 21, 2019

THE FOLLY OF FALSE GODS

Readings for today: Isaiah 37-38, Galatians 6, Psalms 65, Proverbs 23:24

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. Whose 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."

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 39:1-41:16, Ephesians 1, Psalms 66, Proverbs 23:25-28

September 22, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 39:1-41:16, Ephesians 1, Psalms 66, Proverbs 23:25-28

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 41:17-43:13, Ephesians 2, Psalms 67, Proverbs 23:29-35

September 23, 2019

HE WILL TAKE YOU BY THE HAND…

Readings for today: Isaiah 41:17-43:13, Ephesians 2, Psalms 67, Proverbs 23:29-35

One of my favorite memories is of the first time we took our son 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. Pointing to the waves, he 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.

These passages from Isaiah are tender. The picture of God taking us by the hand and leading us, guiding us, showing us the way is sweet 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...

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)

“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. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” (Isaiah 43:1-2)

“Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you.” (Isaiah 43:4-5)

There is a lot in life that makes us afraid. Crisis. Uncertainty. Tragic 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43:14-45:10, Ephesians 3, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 24:1-2

September 24, 2019

CREATED. CALLED. REDEEMED.

Readings for today: Isaiah 43:14-45:10, Ephesians 3, Psalms 68:1-18, Proverbs 24:1-2

I am beginning to prepare my heart for Africa. These trips fill my soul in ways I cannot explain. Probably because I'm way outside my comfort zone when I go, I find God meeting me there in new and fresh ways. Now the travel is not easy. It's a long 30+ hour trip from Denver to Yabelo. It involves multiple flights and a four hour car ride. One of the ways I pass the time on the plane is to look at the map that charts our progress as we go. I watch as we make our way from D.C. to Addis Ababa. We pass over Dublin, Rome, Cairo, Khartoum, Juba, and Entebbe. As we draw near, I look at the window to the east and 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 fly over Europe and Egypt and Sudan before finally landing in Ethiopia. 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 today 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! I love how the Apostle Paul describes it in Ephesians 3:8-10, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." All of us have been created for this purpose. Called to this purpose. Redeemed for this purpose. To share with an unbelieving world the unsearchable riches of Christ! 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. 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 at the end of the month in Yabelo. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 45:11-48:11, Ephesians 4:1-16, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 24:3-4

September 25, 2019

TROPHIES OF GRACE

Readings for today: Isaiah 45:11-48:11, Ephesians 4:1-16, Psalms 68:19-35, Proverbs 24:3-4

“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 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. It is a gift and from this gift flows grace. “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” (Eph. 4:7) The reality is each of us is stillborn spiritually. We are conceived in iniquity and born into sin. We are trapped. Imprisoned. Enslaved. We have no hope of escape. Only Christ can save us. Only Christ can rescue us. Only Christ can raise us up and make us alive again. “Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.” (Eph. 4:8-10) Thankfully, Christ is willing to leave heaven. Come to earth. Become obedient unto death. And descend into hell. Christ kicks in the door of the devil’s domain. He assaults Satan’s fortress in order to set us free. He then leads us in a victorious procession back to heaven where we live for all eternity as trophies of His 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 48:12-50:11, Ephesians 4:17-32, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 24:5-6

September 26, 2019

GOD IS OUR HELP

Readings for today: Isaiah 48:12-50:11, Ephesians 4:17-32, Psalms 69:1-18, Proverbs 24:5-6

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 atheists! 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. Listen again to His promise…"Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called! I am he; I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together. Assemble, all of you, and listen! Who among them has declared these things? The Lord loves him…I, even I, have spoken and called him; I have brought him, and he will prosper in his way. Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord God has sent me, and his Spirit. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go. Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea; your offspring would have been like the sand, and your descendants like its grains; their name would never be cut off or destroyed from before me." (Isaiah 48:12-19)

What does such a life look like in real-time? It looks like my friend 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 Nankpak. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 51-53, Ephesians 5, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 24:7

September 27, 2019

SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for today: Isaiah 51-53, Ephesians 5, Psalms 69:19-36, Proverbs 24:7

One of the great blessings of my life has been to meet saints who have suffered for the cause of Christ. One of those is Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda. Bishop John gave up a thriving ministry in Uganda where he was relatively safe to enter into the horror of the aftermath of the genocide in his home country. He writes and speaks powerfully on the subject as he seeks to answer the question, "Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?" His answer is powerful because it is born out of his personal experience as well as his willingness to sit in the ashes with so many and listen to their stories. "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)

Another saint I've had the privilege of spending time with is Pastor Chun Ki-Won. Pastor Chun is the founder of a ministry called Durihana in South Korea which operates both as an accredited international school as well as a base for rescue operations for those enslaved in North Korea. Pastor Chun risks his life on a regular basis to save those who are trapped and suffering. He has been nicknamed the "Asian Schindler" for his work at saving literally hundreds of refugees over the last few decades. A few years ago, I had the privilege of visiting the Durihana school and spending time with some of the refugees there. It was heartbreaking to listen to them tell of the starvation, physical and sexual abuse, rape, and torture they endured. These young women had suffered on a level I simply could not fathom and yet their faith remained strong. 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. Alive and active in North Korea. Bringing healing to broken bodies and restoration to broken souls. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He stretches 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? If God can bring healing to the refugees of North Korea can he not do the same for us? 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54:1-57:14, Ephesians 6, Psalms 70, Proverbs 24:8

September 28, 2019

SPIRITUAL BATTLE

Readings for today: Isaiah 54:1-57:14, Ephesians 6, Psalms 70, Proverbs 24:8

"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Ephesians 6:10-12)

We are in the middle of our Celebrating Missions Weekend and have the privilege of hosting Pastor Chun Ki-Won and several North Korean refugees. Pastor Chun is known as the "Asian Schindler" and has been involved in running an Underground Railroad from North Korea through China to Southeast Asia in order to repatriate North Korean refugees into South Korean society. It is a ministry fraught with danger. There is a price on his head in North Korea. He has spent many months in a Chinese prison. He certainly is a target for the evil cosmic powers that reign over the present darkness of this world. Over the last two decades he has rescued over 1200 refugees, many of them coming out of the sex trade. He rescues them. Educates them. Helps them find a new life of freedom in South Korean society.

Pastor Chun lives these verses from Ephesians. He risks his life regularly to save those who are imprisoned. He is under spiritual attack constantly. The North Korean media spreads lies about him, accusing him of being a human trafficker himself. The Chinese have threatened his life on any number of occasions. He is contending against the spiritual forces of evil as he seeks to bring light to one of the darkest places on earth. As I listen to him, I am struck by his great faithfulness. He is a man who walks by faith and not by sight. He puts on the full armor of God and has been protected – often miraculously - from capture and imprisonment. The stories he shares are quite frankly astounding and convicting.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he doesn't exist. You and I live in a world that ignores the spiritual realm. We ignore the spiritual forces of evil arrayed against us in the heavenly places. We pretend these things don't exist. We arrogantly assume we are beyond such things. We believe such things are for the superstitious. The primitive. The ignorant. But the Bible clearly acknowledges the spiritual realm. The Bible clearly declares that there is a great enemy of our souls and he is actively seeking to rob, kill, and destroy. And we must take him seriously.

Every day is a spiritual battle. From the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed, we are actively being attacked and influenced by our enemy. He wants to discourage us. He wants to sideline us. He wants to tempt us to compromise our deeply held convictions. More than anything else, he wants us to live selfish lives. Lives wrapped around our own well-being. Lives focused on getting as much as we can for as long as we can to make life as comfortable as possible. Frankly, he wants us to pursue the American Dream rather than God's dream and when we do, we suffer. The world suffers. And the enemy gains a foothold.

Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Resist the temptation to live for yourself. Resist the temptation to live a life of achievement and accumulation. Resist the temptation to hoard God's blessings. Instead, put on the whole armor of God. Resist the devil that he may flee. Engage the battle. Wrestle with the spiritual forces of evil. Don't give in! Don't sell yourself so cheaply! Don't compromise with the enemy! Don't give him an inch in your life! Live for Christ. Dedicate your whole life to Christ. Seek Christ with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. As you do, God will do great things through you for His Kingdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 57:15-59:21, Philippians 1:1-26, Psalms 71, Proverbs 24:9-10

September 29, 2019

READINGS FOR THE DAY

Readings for TODAY: Isaiah 57:15-59:21, Philippians 1:1-26, Psalms 71, Proverbs 24:9-10

Readings for TOMORROW: Isaiah 60:1-62:5, Philippians 1:27-2:18, Psalms 72, Proverbs 24:11-12

September 30, 2019

WHAT THIS WORLD NEEDS...

Readings for today: Isaiah 60:1-62:5, Philippians 1:27-2:18, Psalms 72, Proverbs 24:11-12

Now more than ever, our world needs Jesus. In the midst of the death, violence, suffering, corruption, greed, avarice, poverty, and pain; our world needs the people of God to shine like light in the darkness. Bringing hope to the hopeless. Help to the helpless. Comfort to the afflicted. Deliverance for the captives. Good news to the anxious and afraid. If we want to know why the world is continuing to descend into chaos, we need to look in the mirror. God has no plan B. His plan from the beginning of time has been to use His people - those called by His name and bearing His image - to fill the earth with His glory.

“The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.” (Isaiah 62:2-4)

This is God’s vision for the world. And the vehicle He chooses to accomplish His vision is His church. His people. His family. Those He adopts as His sons and daughters. The Bible declares that all those who believe in Jesus Christ are given the right to be called children of God. With that right comes the responsibility to live as God’s children. To let our manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ…(Phil. 1:27) As we stand firm in one spirit. As we strive side by side for the faith of the gospel. As we seek the same mind that is ours in Christ Jesus. As we walk humbly together before the world, seeking to serve rather than be served. As we work out our salvation with fear and trembling. God promises that we will “be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,” (Phil. 2:15) He promises to use us to accomplish His redemptive and salvific purposes in this world.

Such has always been the call for the people of God. Consider the words of the ancient prophet Isaiah…

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” (Isaiah 60:1-3)

“Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise. The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended. Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I might be glorified.” (Isaiah 60:18-21)

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord 's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion— to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. 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 61:1-4)

Living as God’s children requires intentionality. It requires a radical reorientation of all that we love. It requires us to put God first. To worship Him alone. To earnestly seek His face. To order our life and our priorities in such a way that we make His glory our goal. It requires us to live as He lived. To love as He loved. To serve as He

served. It requires us to come before Him daily in prayer. Daily in confession of sin. Daily in reading His Word. Daily in worshipping Him from our hearts. It requires us to engage with His people. Worshipping alongside the other members of our spiritual family. Tearing down the dividing walls of hostility that so often divide us. It requires the regular practice of forgiveness and grace. Mercy and compassion. Courage and boldness to proclaim the truth in love. It isn't easy but it is what God requires of us.

So how are you doing? How are you really doing? When you look at your life, what do you see? When you look at your schedule, where is your time with God? When you look at your resources, how much of it goes to the work of the Kingdom? When you consider your priorities, where is God on your list? When you look at the world around you, what needs are you specifically equipped by God to meet? Stop waiting. Stop complaining. Stop blaming. Get to work as God's chosen people, bringing life and light and hope and joy in the name of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 62:6-65:25, Philippians 2:19-3:3, Psalms 73, Proverbs 24:13-14

October 1, 2019

MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for today: Isaiah 62:6-65:25, Philippians 2:19-3:3, Psalms 73, Proverbs 24:13-14

”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.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 66, Philippians 3:4-21, Psalms 74, Proverbs 24:15-16

October 2, 2019

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Isaiah 66, Philippians 3:4-21, Psalms 74, Proverbs 24:15-16

"Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 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. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:4-11)

What defines you? What are you most proud of in your life? Is it your job? Your family? Your personality? Your enneagram type? Is it your accomplishments? Your achievements? The trophies you keep on the shelf? Is it your memories? Your past glories? Is it your race? Your culture? Your sexuality? What defines you? What shapes you? What makes you who you are? What's at the core of your identity?

The Apostle Paul had all kinds of reasons to boast. All kinds of reasons to be confident in himself. He was the Jew of Jews. Circumcised on the eighth day. A man who could trace his lineage all the way back to Benjamin. Trained as a Pharisee under the tutelage of one of the greatest teachers of his age. Unsurpassed in zeal for his faith, he persecuted Christians. A strict observer of Torah, Paul was blameless according to the Law. Add to this the fact that he was a Roman citizen. A successful businessman. A rising star in Jerusalem. And yet all that he counts as loss for the sake of knowing Christ. He counts all those things as rubbish. Garbage. Things not worth comparing to the surpassing grace of knowing Christ and being found in Him. His righteousness is like a filthy rag compared to the righteousness he receives from Christ. His power is nothing compared to the power of Christ's resurrection. In short, Paul willingly and joyfully relinquishes everything he has and all that he is in exchange for Christ.

What about you? What about me? I lived the American Dream. Loving family. Middle class lifestyle. Good student. Varsity athlete. Eagle Scout. College graduate. Youngest hospital manager in history. Ivy League education. Best preacher of my class. Successful pastor. Adjunct professor. International speaker. Denominational leader. Husband to my best friend. Father of four great kids. I am blessed beyond all measure and all of it is simply not worth comparing to the love I have for Christ. To the love He has for me. All of it is rubbish. Garbage. Filthy rags in comparison to the righteousness Christ won for me on the Cross. I would trade all of it in an instant if I might share in His sufferings and gain the power of His resurrection in my life.

Christ gave up everything for me. How can I not do the same? And lest you think I lead a charmed life, there is a darker side to my story as well. I grew up in an alcoholic home. Endured the uncertainty of job losses and business failures. Sometimes wondered where my next meal would come from. I was lonely. Anxious. Afraid most of the time. I had no spiritual center. I flunked out of college. Drank my way into oblivion. Barely made ends meet when I first got married. Lived on public assistance for most of the early years of my marriage. Struggled through grad school. Failed as a church planter. Let me wife and kids down on more than one occasion. I have not always been a good husband and my anger issues made me difficult to live with at times. And still Christ loves me. Still Christ gave Himself for me. Still Christ laid His life down for me.

The core of my identity is Christ. I am a wretched sinner but Christ is a great Savior. I bring nothing to the table that He has not already given me. I offer nothing back to Him of worth or value. I simply bring myself – warts and all - and it is enough. It is all Christ wants. It is all Christ desires. It is why He came. To claim me as His own forever. To capture my heart once and for all. To deliver me from the prison of my sin and suffering and self-affliction. To offer me His life in place of my despair. I am humbled when I consider all He has done for me. I am filled with gratitude and thankfulness. My heart overflows with joy. Thanks be to Christ for His inexpressible gift!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1:1-2:30, Philippians 4, Psalms 75, Proverbs 24:17-20

October 3, 2019

THE PATHOS OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1:1-2:30, Philippians 4, Psalms 75, Proverbs 24:17-20

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?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 2:31-4:18, Colossians 1:1-17, Psalms 76, Proverbs 24:21-22

October 4, 2019

PRAYER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 2:31-4:18, Colossians 1:1-17, Psalms 76, Proverbs 24:21-22

If God were to answer all your prayers today, how many people would be impacted? How many communities would be restored? How many lost people would be saved? How many loved ones would find comfort? How many churches would be revived? These are sobering questions to ponder because the tendency in prayer is focus solely on ourselves. The temptation is to navel-gaze and come to God over and over again with our lists of wants and needs and desires. It takes great discipline to pray faithfully and regularly for others. Family. Friends. Co-workers. Brothers and sisters in Christ. Even our enemies. That's why I love these words from Colossians…

"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12)

I love Paul's heart for others. He prays fervently for those under his spiritual care. He prays without ceasing for those who are lost and wandering in darkness and despair. He lifts up even his enemies before the Lord and asks God to convict and judge them in righteousness according to His perfect will.

I also love how Paul prays for others. I love the content of his prayers. Of all the things he could have lifted up in prayer – their pain, suffering, heartbreak, poverty, etc. - Paul prays for their spiritual well-being. He prayed for them to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. God's wisdom. God's insight and understanding. He prays they will - in the midst of all they're going through - remain faithful to Jesus in their manner of life. He prays for their fruitfulness as believers. He prays for them to be strengthened with God's power. To endure. To persevere. To thrive. He prays for them to find joy in the midst of their trials and tribulations. And he prays finally for them to be filled with gratitude for all God has done.

I find myself deeply convicted by Paul's prayer life. The way he prays. The people he prays for. The heart of his prayers. And I find myself longing to do the same for the people God has placed in my life. To pray for my wife and children. Pray for my extended family and friends. Pray for my church family and denomination. Pray for the community where I live and my country. Pray for the world and the brothers and sisters I know who are engaged in God's great work. Praying even for my enemies. And as I pray, I find myself focusing less on the immediate needs – though I lift those to the Lord as well - but more for God to fill them with His strength, wisdom, knowledge, and joy. For as God fills us with these things. Really as God fills us with His presence. We find the courage and strength to face every circumstance. We find the peace that passes all understanding that transcends every tragedy. We find the hope that endures in the face of every despair.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 4:19-6:15, Colossians 1:18-29, Psalms 77, Proverbs 24:23-25

October 5, 2019

THE PREEMINENCE OF CHRIST

Readings for today: Jeremiah 4:19-6:15, Colossians 1:18-29, Psalms 77, Proverbs 24:23-25

I am starting to prepare for my trip to Ethiopia at the end of the month. One of the things I do when I am over there is teach on the character and nature of God. Specifically, I spend a lot of time teaching on 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…all are 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. It is also notoriously difficult to translate into local tribal dialects!

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? In the consumeristic and materialistic mindset that marks American Christianity, what is lost is our wonder and 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 Resurrected Christ. And yet, we can barely get to church on Sunday morning. We can barely bring ourselves to pray or read God's Word on a regular basis. Even during the Christmas season, we spend most of Advent prepping for Santa Claus, decorating the house, and going on spending sprees we cannot afford.

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.

So I find myself often 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 at the foot of the cross? More time worshiping at the empty tomb? More time in silent awe and wonder at what the Triune God has done in giving His only Begotten Son for the sake of the world?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 6:16-8:7, Colossians 2:8-23, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 24:26

October 6, 2019

READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for Today: Jeremiah 6:16-8:7, Colossians 2:8-23, Psalms 78:1-31, Proverbs 24:26

Readings for Tomorrow: Jeremiah 8:8-9:26, Colossians 3:1-17, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 24:27

October 7, 2019

THE GRIEF OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 8:8-9:26, Colossians 3:1-17, Psalms 78:32-55, Proverbs 24:27

It's a striking conversation. God processing His grief as He considers the plight of His people. For many years, commentators have ascribed these words to Jeremiah. Following a theological tradition that holds to the "impassibility" of God or the idea that God cannot suffer, they shift the voice to Jeremiah even though there is no such indication in the text. Thankfully, the doctrine of God's impassibility has been challenged in recent decades as scholars take a more honest look at passages like the one we read in Jeremiah today. Listen again to the words and imagine God having this conversation with Himself...(Jeremiah 8:22-9:3)

"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?" God hears the cries of His people as they beg Him for mercy. Their suffering has caused them to question His faithfulness.

"Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" It is not God who is faithless but God's people who have abandoned Him.

"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." The people of God cry out again for salvation. They are suffering terribly.

"For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me." God suffers with His people. He shares their pain. God freely and willingly moves towards them as they struggle and sits with them in the ashes and dust as they grieve.

"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?" Once again, the rhetorical questions rise. If God is with His people as they suffer, why are they not healed? Why are they not saved?

"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." God will not save for His people persist in their rebellion. They refuse to repent and return to Him. God is distraught over the sins of His people.

This passage from Jeremiah 8 and 9 is one of the most poignant in all of Scripture. Again, 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.) 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 a sign of brokenness? What if God, because He remains untouched by sin, is able to experience the full range of 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 turn around and blame 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. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. In fact, they do 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 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 forever true.

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 covenant He first made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and later 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 10-11, Colossians 3:18-4:18, Psalms 78:56-72, Proverbs 24:28-29

October 8, 2019

WORDS MATTER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 10-11, Colossians 3:18-4:18, Psalms 78:56-72, Proverbs 24:28-29

How do you engage the world around you? What words do you use when you speak? When you tweet? When you send email? How do the people around you experience you? How do they receive you? What would they say about you if asked? Are you known as a kind person? A gentle person? A positive person? If someone were to record you today as you went about your life, what would they discover? What kind of wake do you leave? Do you build others up or tear them down? Are you quick to speak and slow to listen? Do you find yourself getting easily riled up? Going on the attack? Taking things personally and getting defensive? Lashing out in anger and frustration?
Listen to what Paul says today to his Colossians friends. “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.” (Colossians 4:6)

Convicting, isn’t it? Especially if you the kind of person who binges on cable news or scrolls endlessly through your twitter feed. As a pastor, I purposefully try to enter these spaces. I purposefully try to engage in a healthy, positive way on social media. I follow people from all across the political and theological and social spectrum. I try to stay up on the news of the day by browsing several different platforms. I have to tell you it isn’t easy. My heart gets beat up along the way. My soul takes a pounding from all the anger and hate and vitriol that is out there, We don’t seem to know how to talk to each other anymore. We apply litmus tests to each other based on the company we keep. I think of the blowback television personality Ellen DeGeneres received Sunday evening after being “caught” watching a football game with former President George W. Bush. People from her own tribe questioning her “liberal credibility” because she ate popcorn at a sporting event next to someone from the other side of the political aisle. I think of the blowback a pastoral colleague and friend received for meeting with someone from a different theological tribe than our own. Rumors. Gossip. Innuendo. Christians bearing false witness about this man because he dared to meet with someone outside our stream. It’s getting out of hand. And real people are suffering real consequences as a result. Jobs are being lost. Livelihoods destroyed. Businesses are being shut down. All because we can’t seem to follow Paul’s advice. To speak with grace. To season our words with salt so that we might preserve and add flavor to our conversations. To treat everyone with the dignity and worth they deserve as people made in the image of God.
Why is this so hard for us? I believe it has to do with fear. We fear what we don’t understand. We fear those who are different. We fear change and uncertainty and our world is full of that right now. Not only do we find ourselves in the midst of massive cultural upheaval but the pace at which it’s happening is scary. One day vaping is considered a safe alternative to cigarettes. The next we are performing funerals for young people who are dying from it. One day we affirm surgical transitions for young people still struggling through puberty and the next these same people are asking for de-transitioning surgeries to return to their biological gender. One day we legalize marijuana and the next we are finding out the negative impacts on the adolescent brain. Our “ready, fire, aim” approach is not working. Our inability to sit down and reason together is costing us dearly. Our unwillingness to hear the other side or listen to different opinions or consider alternative evidence is harmful and abusive.

So what can we do? Each of us is given a sphere of influence. For some of us it is our home. Our family. Our circle of friends. For others it is the team we lead at work or the business we run. For others it is our congregation. For still others it is the constituency we serve. Whatever authority God has given you, use it to build up. Whatever power God has given you, use it for the good of those around you. Whatever influence God has given you, use it bless others even if they don’t agree or belong to your tribe. Speak words of grace. Words of life. Words of hope into those around you. For this is what God has done for us. Remember, none of us agreed with God. None of us stood on His side. None of us came from His tribe. Still He came to us. Still He laid down His life for us. Still He loved us so much He gave His only Begotten Son. Believe in Him! Follow Him! Speak in His name!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 12:1-14:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8, Psalms 79, Proverbs 24:30-34

October 9, 2019

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Readings for today: Jeremiah 12:1-14:10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8, Psalms 79, Proverbs 24:30-34

What did you expect when you first came to faith in Jesus Christ? Some expect all their problems to go away. Some expect all their suffering will end. Some have no expectations that anything will change other than their eternal destiny. Some expect to see miracles of healing and provision in their life. Some expect to receive a new circle of friendships. Some expect to live with an intimate sense of God's abiding presence. Others expect the church to become their family. What were your expectations? Were they met? Were they fulfilled? I expect not.

One of the real problems in the American church is we expect so little. We expect so little from God. We expect God to bless all our plans. We expect God to sprinkle fairy dust on all our problems. We expect God to indulge our sin. We expect God to be "on-call" when we have an emergency. We expect so little from the church. We expect the church to be a safe place for us but we're unwilling to help make it safe for others. We expect the church to meet our needs but rarely raise a hand to help out. We expect the church to produce programming that makes us or our children feel good and we jump ship the moment another church down provides something more attractive or exciting. We expect the church to be family but we are not willing to make the sacrifices necessary in our own lives to build the deep relationships required. We expect so little from ourselves. We do not humble ourselves before God and seek to follow His ways. We do not plant ourselves deep in His Word and in prayer. We do not pursue holiness and righteousness. We do not offer forgiveness and grace nor are we willing to do the hard work of reconciliation with those we've wounded or who've wounded us. No wonder the church in America experiences so little of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to how Paul describes the early believers in Thessaloniki…"For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that God 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." (1 Thessalonians 1:4-7) The early church held great expectations. They expected God to work miracles on their behalf for His glory and the expansion of His Kingdom on earth. They expected much from each other as they built diverse worshipping communities across racial, cultural, and generational barriers. They expected much from themselves as they pursued lives of personal holiness before the Lord. And God added to their number daily those being saved. God used them to conquer an empire not through violence or the exercise of political power but through self-sacrificing love. The men and women of the early church laid down their lives for the sake of the gospel. For the sake of their church family. For the sake of one another and their example has inspired millions through the ages to do the same.

What are your expectations as a Christian? What do you expect from yourself? Are you intentionally growing a deep, **intimate** relationship with Christ? Are you seeking to faithfully walk in His ways? To live a life of holiness and righteousness before Him? What do you expect from your church family? How are you helping to build her up? How are you helping people get connected with each other? How are you plugging in and serving and giving and helping your local church thrive? What do you expect from God? Does He exist to serve you and your needs or do you exist to serve Him and His Kingdom? God has great expectations for His people. He had made us in His image. Redeemed us through the death of His own Son. And He now sends us out into the world to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 14:11-16:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-3:13, Psalms 80, Proverbs 25:1-5

October 10, 2019

MYTH BUSTING

Readings for today: Jeremiah 14:11-16:15, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-3:13, Psalms 80, Proverbs 25:1-5

There is a dangerous 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 worshipping 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 6:16-18:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:3, Psalms 81, Proverbs 25:6-8

October 11, 2019

FOLLOW YOUR HEART?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 6:16-18:23, 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5:3, Psalms 81, Proverbs 25:6-8

”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. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-28, Psalms 82, Proverbs 25:9-10

October 12, 2019

AT WAR WITH GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 19-21, 1 Thessalonians 5:4-28, Psalms 82, Proverbs 25:9-10

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 will sound a note of hope. Admittedly I am stealing a bit from tomorrow's reading - ha! - but 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 22:1-23:20, 2 Thessalonians 1, Psalms 83, Proverbs 25:11-14

October 13, 2019

READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Jeremiah 22:1-23:20, 2 Thessalonians 1, Psalms 83, Proverbs 25:11-14

Readings for today: Jeremiah 23:21-25:38, 2 Thessalonians 2, Psalms 84, Proverbs 25:15

October 14, 2019

FALSE PROPHETS

Readings for today: Jeremiah 23:21-25:38, 2 Thessalonians 2, Psalms 84, Proverbs 25:15

We live in a world of false prophets. Prophets, priests, pastors who use the Word of God to manipulate and control. To prop up unrighteous systems and support evil deeds. The examples are legion. Priests using their position of power to abuse the most vulnerable. Pastors using their influence to accumulate massive amounts of wealth at the expense of their congregations. Still other Christian leaders using their social media platforms to promote hatred against men and women of different faiths. Entire denominations aligning their theology with one party's political platform or another. I have listened to pastors use the image of the heavenly Jerusalem to promote the building of a wall on our southern border. I have heard leaders in my old denomination fiercely defend abortion on demand as righteous and good. I have experienced the merging of pagan rituals with the precious sacraments of the Christian faith. The words of the ancient prophet Jeremiah hold true now more than ever…

"I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their deeds." (Jeremiah 23:21-22)

"I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!' How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams that they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Baal?" (Jeremiah 23:25-27)

"Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who steal my words from one another. Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the Lord, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the Lord.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the Lord."(Jeremiah 23:30-32)

Friends, God will not be mocked. He will not allow His name to be profaned. He will not stand idly by while people warp and twist and pervert His Word. Do we really think God is not listening? Do we really think God doesn't see our sin? Do we really think God will not rise up and act to defend His own honor and glory? We are fools as Jeremiah points out. "Am I a God at hand, declares the Lord, and not a God far away? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? declares the Lord. Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 23:23-24) God hears every word we say. He sees every tweet. He knows every Facebook post. He looks down from heaven and his anger grows as He watches those who claim to be shepherds for His people embrace unrighteousness. His wrath is kindled towards those who use His name to acquire wealth and power and privilege at the expense of those we are called to serve. The poor. The lost. The lonely. The least of these. He will not stand idly by as false prophets share their dreams and cast their visions and spread their lies.

'The Lord will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice; he will roar mightily against his fold, and shout, like those who tread grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against the nations; he is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the wicked he will put to the sword, declares the Lord…Wail, you shepherds, and cry out, and roll in ashes, you lords of the flock, for the days of your slaughter and dispersion have come, and you shall fall like a choice vessel. No refuge will remain for the shepherds, nor escape for the lords of the flock. A voice—the cry of the shepherds, and the wail of the lords of the flock! For the Lord is laying waste their pasture, and the peaceful folds are devastated because of the fierce anger of the Lord. Like a lion he has left his lair, for their land has

become a waste because of the sword of the oppressor, and because of his fierce anger." (Jeremiah 25:30-31, 34-38)

Make no mistake, friends. The Lord is coming in righteous judgment against the false prophets we see on television or hear opining on cable news or follow on Twitter. He will make them drink the cup of His wrath. He will bring them down just as surely as they lifted themselves up. And it would be easy for us to rejoice in their fall. Until we start to examine our hearts. We too must acknowledge where we have sinned. We too must humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. We too must confess the manifold ways we have allowed the corrupt values of this world to infiltrate our hearts. Influence our decisions. Shape the way we see the world. Like the false prophets of old, we must heed His call to return to His Word in faithfulness. We must let His love replace our hate. Let His kindness replace our anger. His joy replace our sorrow. His peace replace our anxiety. Above all, we must cling to His truth above our own. We must reject the lies and falsehoods and never give fear a foothold lest we compromise our faith. The grass will wither. The flower will fade. The glory of the nations will come and go. Only God's Word stands forever.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 26-27, 2 Thessalonians 3, Psalms 85, Proverbs 25:16

October 15, 2019

WITH GOD'S HELP

Readings for today: Jeremiah 26-27, 2 Thessalonians 3, Psalms 85, Proverbs 25:16

"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)

"Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honored, as happened among you, and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men. For not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And we have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command. May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the steadfastness of Christ." (2 Thessalonians 3:1-5)

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 verses above, it's instructive to note both how Paul prays for his Thessalonians friends and how he asks for prayer. Everything he asks for comes from God. Not a single thing 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. He asks that the Word of the Lord would go ahead of them and that they would be delivered from evil along the way. Finally, he prays that the Lord would direct their hearts to His great love and the steadfastness of Christ. Friends, Christ is our only hope in this life and the next. Only those who are in Christ will be saved. Only those who are in Christ will be delivered. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Therefore those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our own willpower alone. Another 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.

One 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

October 16, 2019

FOR I KNOW THE PLANS I HAVE FOR YOU….

Readings for today: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

"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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 30:1-31:26, 1 Timothy 2, Psalms 87, Proverbs 25:18-19

October 17, 2019

POLITICAL PRAYER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 30:1-31:26, 1 Timothy 2, Psalms 87, Proverbs 25:18-19

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.“ (1 Timothy 2:1-4)

Do you believe God wants to save Donald Trump? Do you believe God wants to save Hilary Clinton? Do you believe God wants to save Xi Jinping or Kim Jong-Un? Do you believe God wants to save your senator or representative? What about the man or woman serving in your state assembly? Town Council? School board?

Politics has a way of bringing out the worst in us. Our Twitter feeds are full of condemnations of those with whom we disagree. We live in a “call-out” culture where self-proclaimed watchdogs take advantage of every opportunity to go on the attack. We assassinate character. We impugn motives. We assume the absolute worst about people. All sides of the political equation are guilty. And all they are doing is playing to the masses. There’s a reason most of the cable news shows have devolved into opinion segments. We don’t really want hard news. We want to live in an echo chamber where our own views are expressed without being challenged. It’s comforting to us to know there are others who hold our opinions. It’s like a warm blanket that makes us feel safe.

Now imagine you live in Timothy’s world. A young pastor serving a new church in a city called Ephesus where the introduction of the Christian faith caused a riot. Upended the economy. Made you very unpopular with the locals. Talk about a tough job. It would be easy to retreat. To pull back. To go into hiding. It would be easy to attack your enemies. To work against the authorities. To subvert the empire. It would be tempting to call down fire on those who are actively persecuting you. Curse the Romans who are seeking to abuse, torture, and kill many in your congregation. But then you get this letter from your spiritual mentor. Paul encourages you to go the other way. To pray for all people. Especially kings and those in authority. He challenges Timothy to pray in faith for the salvation of all who would believe. Jews and Gentiles. Romans and barbarians. Slave and free. It’s a bold call and it sounds so like Jesus.

Imagine what would happen if we spent as much time praying as we did scrolling through social media? Imagine what would happen if we prayed for our leaders and those in authority rather than constantly subject them to our withering attacks? Imagine if it didn’t matter what political party was in power or who lived in the White House or who donned the robes of the Supreme Court? Imagine if those in power received the full prayer support of Christians all over the country? Imagine if instead of complaining about their decision-making, we prayed for wisdom? Imagine if instead of attacking them over their arrogance and pride, we prayed for humility? Imagine if instead of killing them over the mistakes they inevitably make, we prayed for conviction? And imagine if - after praying - we then re-engaged the public sphere and lovingly confronted our leaders with the truth of the gospel?

The call to prayer is not a call to passivity. It’s not a call to inaction. It’s not a retreat. It’s a way for us to get our own hearts right before the Lord. To check our motives and make sure they align with Jesus. It’s a way for us to surrender any of our own personal or political agendas to the Lord and let Him guide and direct our steps. The kingdoms of this world rise and fall. They come and go. At their very

best, they are still full of corruption and injustice and oppression. Such is true for all human systems. We battle principalities and powers. Spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. The only weapons we have are not of the flesh. The weapons of prayer and God's Word are the only things mighty enough to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God.

Friends, if you find yourself discouraged by the actions or inactions of our current political leaders… pray. If you find yourself frustrated by the overheated rhetoric that passes for political discourse these days…pray. If you find yourself growing angry or feel the rage building at the injustices perpetrated by any local, state, or national administrations…pray. Cry out to God! Call on Him for salvation! And then fight not just for the soul of our nation but for the souls of those who lead our nation.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 31:27-32:44, 1 Timothy 3, Psalms 88, Proverbs 25:20-22

October 18, 2019

NEW COVENANT

Readings for today: Jeremiah 31:27-32:44, 1 Timothy 3, Psalms 88, Proverbs 25:20-22

This morning I went on a run with a friend and we talked about the blessings of adversity. The lessons we learn only through hardship and suffering. The ways God reveals Himself to us when we are down and out and have nowhere to go. The humility we receive when our strength and wisdom has failed and we've come to the end of ourselves. Most of all, we talked about what it's like to be fired in the furnace of affliction and come out refined as pure gold. This is God's promise repeated throughout the Scriptures and we see it again today in our reading from Jeremiah.

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

Think about everything Israel has endured. First, consider her sin. Her unfaithfulness. Her spiritual adultery. Her rebellion against God's Law. Israel was full of evil towards the end. She looked no different than any other nation on earth. She was full of injustice and greed and oppression. She worshipped many gods. Built many temples. Visited many shrines. Rather than serve as a light to the Gentiles, she adopted their pagan customs and ways. The result was judgment. God poured out the cup of His wrath upon them. He tread the winepress of His fury and paid them back in full for their sins. He sent them into exile. He destroyed everything they held dear. It was brutal and terrifying.

Jeremiah has watched all this go by. Set apart by birth from God to serve as His prophet, Jeremiah has the unenviable task of speaking God's truth to a people who will not listen in a time of great cultural upheaval. He is called to pronounce judgment. He is called to speak hard truth. He is called to challenge the rulers of his people who are leading everyone astray. He is beaten. He is imprisoned. He is dragged before the authorities on more than one occasion. His life is hard. He grieves. He weeps. He suffers. And just when you think it can get any worse…a fresh Word appears.

God will not forget His people. He will not abandon them forever. He will make a new covenant with them. It will replace the covenant He first made with Israel when they came up out of Egypt. It will replace the covenant forged at the Mountain of Sinai where they received God's Law. Instead of carving His Law on tablets of stone, God will carve into every person's heart. He will adopt them again as His children. He will be their God. They will be His people. There will no longer be a need for high priests to intercede for God Himself will be their intercessor. Their mediator. Their teacher. He will wipe away their sin. He will cleanse them from their iniquity. He will restore them to right relationship with Him.

How will all this happen? Jesus. In Jesus, God meets His people face to face. He rends the heavens and comes to earth. He comes down to our level. He meets us where we are. He speaks our language. Endures our suffering. Becomes one with us. God with us. He dies in our place. Taking the sins of the

world on His shoulders. He turns aside the Father's wrath. He pays the full penalty for our sin. He satisfies the demands of divine justice. And after rising again from the grave and ascending into heaven, He sends us His Spirit. To dwell in our hearts. To give us a heart transplant. It is the Spirit of God who inscribed God's Law into our hearts. It is the Spirit of God who regenerates us so that we might know the Living God. It is the Spirit of God who applies the work of Jesus to our lives. It is the Spirit of God who guarantees our salvation. This is why Jeremiah buys a field. He can see into the future and He trusts God to make good on His promise.

Do you trust God to make good on His promises? Do you take God at His Word? In the midst of all the trials and struggles and heartbreaks of this life, do you look to Jesus for hope? No matter where you've been. No matter where life has taken you. No matter what you've experienced - good, bad, or ugly - you can trust God to faithful and true. He is calling out to you. He is reaching out for you. He is working right now to bring you home. Embrace the new covenant He offers you in Christ and you will find the peace you've been searching for.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 33-34, 1 Timothy 4, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 25:23-24

October 19, 2019

AMAZING GRACE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 33-34, 1 Timothy 4, Psalms 89:1-13, Proverbs 25:23-24

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. Zedekiah 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. "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known… Behold, I will bring to the city health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel, and rebuild them as they were at first. I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it." (Jeremiah 33:3, 6-9) Yes, they cannot escape God's judgment. Yes, they cannot escape the exile to come. But this is not the final word. God will not allow His eternal covenant to be broken.

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.' "For thus says the Lord: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever." (Jeremiah 33:14-18)

Friends, Jesus is the righteous Branch God has caused to spring up out of the waste and desolation that is left of Israel. God sends His Messiah to executive justice and righteousness in the land once more. God sends His Messiah to save His people and secure His city. Jesus is the greater David. The righteous King who now sits on His throne. Jesus is our great High Priest constantly making intercession for us before the Ancient of Days. Jesus is God's answer to all that has gone wrong in this world and Jesus is God's solution to the perpetual problem of human sin.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 35-36, 1 Timothy 5, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 25:25-27

October 20, 2019

READINGS FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Jeremiah 35-36, 1 Timothy 5, Psalms 89:14-37, Proverbs 25:25-27

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 37-38, 1 Timothy 6, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 25:28

October 21, 2019

REJECTING GOD'S WORD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 37-38, 1 Timothy 6, Psalms 89:38-52, Proverbs 25:28

I want to tag back to yesterday's reading for our devotional today because it speaks to our relationship with God's Word. The Bible declares God's Word to be living and active. Breathed out by God Himself. It is sharper than a two-edged sword and pierces to the innermost parts of our beings. God's Word has a power all its own. It never returns empty. It always accomplishes the purposes God sets out for it because God Himself guarantees it.

God is faithful. God is true. God never breaks His Word. From the beginning, God has set His heart on having a people He will call His very own. He made an unbreakable covenant with Abraham. He renewed that covenant at Mt. Sinai. He raised up prophets, priests, and kings to protect the covenant. Over and over again, God declares His covenant to His people. Each generation needing to commit themselves anew. Sadly, God's people were not faithful. They rejected their God. They rejected His Word. They rejected His ways. Perhaps the saddest story of all comes at the end of Israel's national life, where the king literally cuts up God's Word and burns it in the fire.

"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. 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 39-41, 2 Timothy 1, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 26:1-2

October 22, 2019

EMOTIONAL POWER

Readings for today: Jeremiah 39-41, 2 Timothy 1, Psalms 90-91, Proverbs 26:1-2

I grew up next door to a bully. I was younger than him. Smaller than him. Weaker than him. He made it his goal in life to torment me. Every day I would run outside to play with all the kids in our neighborhood and he would be there waiting for me. The next thing I knew, I was running back inside in tears. My mom first encouraged me to ignore him. When that didn't work, she encouraged me to stand up to him. When that didn't work, she encouraged me to punch him as hard as I could in the mouth. That effectively ended the bullying. As I grew older, I knew I couldn't solve my problems through violence but my feelings still got hurt. People still said mean things about me. Still made fun of me. Still attacked my character from time to time. And something my father used to tell me - that I used to find incredibly frustrating - has stuck with me. "No one hurts your feelings…you allow your feelings to be hurt." No one has emotional power over you unless you give it to them. No one can harm you unless you first make yourself vulnerable. Now I realize there are all kinds of implications to this advice. Some positive. Some negative. But it's the first thing I thought of this morning when I read these words from 2 Timothy… "For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control." (2 Timothy 1:7)

The world tells us we need to be afraid. The world tells us we are weak and vulnerable. The world tells us we are victims of our circumstances. And sometimes the world is right. I know far too many who've suffered abuse. I know far too many who've faced discrimination. I've known far too many who've been the victims of terrible crimes. These things are real and I do not want to diminish them in any way. At the same time, I've also known far too many who live with a spirit of fear. I've known far too many who refuse to take responsibility for their own emotional health and well-being. They make themselves vulnerable to all the wrong people at all the wrong times. They are the victims of their own poor choices and when confronted, they blame-shift. They believe the lies that they are powerless, helpless, and hopeless. Their despair is heartbreaking.

Friends, God has not given us a spirit of fear. He has given us a spirit of power, love, and self-control. He has not left us helpless and hopeless, abandoned and alone. He has given us His Spirit and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. You have been given a spirit of power so that you might transcend your circumstances. You have been given a spirit of love that is in no way contingent on the actions, attitudes, or response of another human being. You have been given a spirit of self-control that allows to fight against both your sinful nature and the corrupt systems of this world. Don't believe the lies! You are not trapped! You are not a victim! You are not a lost cause! These things do not define you!

If you are in Christ then you have been filled with His Spirit. The same Spirit that sustained Christ through His life, death, and resurrection now lives inside of you! Think of all Christ endured in this life. All the injustice. All the abuse. All the suffering. All the pain. Think of the wrongful imprisonment. The mock trial. The extreme torture. The agonizing death. And yet Jesus never plays the victim. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father." (John 10:18)

In some strange way, my father was right. No one hurts my feelings unless I let them. No one takes my joy from me unless I allow it. No one takes my peace from me unless I first give them permission. I have been given authority over my life through Christ. I have been given authority over my body through Christ. I have been given authority over my emotions through Christ. I have been given authority over my mind through Christ. Does this mean bad things will never happen to me? Of course not. In this world we will suffer. In this world we will face trials and temptations. But my life is now hid with Christ so I no longer need be afraid. I've been crucified with Christ and no longer live so this world has no hold on me. This world has nothing for me. My eyes are fixed on Christ who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising its shame.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 42:1-44:23, 2 Timothy 2:1-21, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 26:3-5

October 23, 2019

GOSPEL HOPE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 42:1-44:23, 2 Timothy 2:1-21, Psalms 92-93, Proverbs 26:3-5

Lesslie Newbigin was an Anglican missionary in India for decades. When he retired, he returned home to England where he spent the rest of his life speaking, teaching, and writing about the mission of God around the world. He was asked one day - based on all he had seen - if he was an optimist or a pessimist. I love his response. "I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist; Jesus Christ is risen from the dead."

It sounds like a non-sequitur. Like Newbigin was avoiding the question. I don't think so. After all his years in the mission field, I think his thinking simply transcended the binary categories of this world. For Newbigin, it's not about whether the world is getting better or worse because he knows his only hope is in Christ Jesus. His only hope is in the Kingdom Jesus inaugurated on earth through his death and resurrection. He lives therefore by a different set of rules. He thinks in eternal categories. His eyes have been permanently lifted above the chaos that fills the earth to the peace that comes only from heaven.

The Apostle Paul shares Newbigin's perspective. And he is trying to pass it on to his young protege, Timothy. "Timothy, my dear son, be strong through the grace that God gives you in Christ Jesus…Endure suffering along with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. Soldiers don't get tied up in the affairs of civilian life, for then they cannot please the officer who enlisted them. And athletes cannot win the prize unless they follow the rules. And hardworking farmers should be the first to enjoy the fruit of their labor…Always remember that Jesus Christ, a descendant of King David, was raised from the dead. This is the Good News I preach. And because I preach this Good News, I am suffering and have been chained like a criminal. But the word of God cannot be chained. So I am willing to endure anything if it will bring salvation and eternal glory in Christ Jesus to those God has chosen." (2 Timothy 2:1, 3-6, 8-10) So much of the New Testament from Jesus to Paul to Peter to James to John directs our gaze heavenward. To the place where no moth, rust, or thieves break into steal. To the place where homes are being built not made by human hands. To the place Jesus ascended in order to prepare the way for us. Heaven is the Christian's home. This world is passing away with all its trinkets and trivialities. All its suffering and heartbreak and pain. As good soldiers in Christ, we don't get caught up in its affairs. As God's athletes, we are competing for a heavenly prize. As spiritual farmers, we are sowing and reaping eternal rewards.

Does this mean we forget this world? Does it mean we become so heavenly minded we are of no earthly good? Of course not. We are the salt of the earth. We are the light of the world. We are sent out to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The good news of the gospel. Filled with God's grace and the Holy Spirit, we work to bring God's will, God's way, God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. But we do so soberly. Humbly. Meekly. Always recognizing the temptation to place our hopes in our own strength. Our own wisdom. Our own effort. If we aren't careful, we'll start to believe our own hype. We'll fall into the trap of thinking we can bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth without any help from the King.

This is why Paul leaves Timothy with the following admonition…"This is a trustworthy saying: If we die with him, we will also live with him. If we endure hardship, we will reign with him. If we deny him, he will deny us. If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is. Remind everyone about these things…" (2 Timothy 2:11-14) Friends, our only hope in life and in death is that we belong - body and soul - to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ. No matter how life is going for you - good, bad, ugly - do not place your hope in your circumstances. Do not despair over your circumstances. Fix your eyes on Jesus and let His hope fill your heart!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 44:24-47:7, 2 Timothy 2:22-3:17, Psalms 94, Proverbs 26:6-8

October 24, 2019

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 44:24-47:7, 2 Timothy 2:22-3:17, Psalms 94, Proverbs 26:6-8

“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!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 48:1-49:22, 2 Timothy 4, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 26:9-12

October 25, 2019

GOD-BREATHED

Readings for today: Jeremiah 48:1-49:22, 2 Timothy 4, Psalms 95-96, Proverbs 26:9-12

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.

God doesn't just breathe His Word into you. He wants to breathe His Word through you to the world. This is why Paul concludes his letter to Timothy with a strong charge to preach what he has learned. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." (2 Timothy 4:1-5) Friends, now more than ever our world needs the truth of the gospel. Our world is full of all kinds of fake news, lies, deceit, gossip, slander, etc. People are suffering. People are struggling. They are looking for anything and everything to fill that eternal void in their hearts. How is God responding to this great need? He sends you. He sends me. The people on whom He has breathed His Spirit and into whom He has breathed His Word! So fulfill your calling! Engage your ministry! Do the work of evangelism and share the good news of Jesus with everyone you meet!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49:23-50:46, Titus, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 26:13-16

October 26, 2019

GOD'S WAR WITH EVIL

Readings for today: Jeremiah 49:23-50:46, Titus 1, Psalms 97-98, Proverbs 26:13-16

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 it 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 97 is one of my favorites…"The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods! Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O Lord. For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!" 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 be 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51:1-53, Titus 2, Psalms 99, Proverbs 26:17

October 27, 2019

I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE

Readings for today: Jeremiah 51:44-52, Titus 3, Psalms 100, Proverbs 26:18-19

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!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 1-2, Philemon, Psalms 101, Proverbs 26:20

October 29, 2019

LAMENT

Readings for today: Lamentations 1-2, Philemon, Psalms 101, Proverbs 26:20

I am flying over the Atlantic Ocean right now. On a mission trip bound for Ethiopia. I will spend the next two weeks among the poorest of the poor. Men and women of whom the world is not worthy. Their suffering is unspeakable. Many of them have been beaten. Stabbed. Shot. Some have lost loved ones. Others have been imprisoned. They face hunger, thirst, disease and a host of other challenges that come along with living in the developing world. The people in the villages they serve are even worse off. They face drought. Famine. Natural disasters of various kinds. They have little to no access to healthcare or education or any of the other advantages I take for granted. Death is a constant companion. The result is a lot of despair. Depression. Hopelessness.
Lament is such an important spiritual discipline. It's okay to grieve.It's okay to weep. It's okay to have one's heart broken over the state of the world. In fact, I've often prayed for God to give me His eyes to see and His heart for the world but only recently have I realized that God's eyes are full of tears and His heart is a broken one. Lament allows us to share in God's suffering for the world. It gives us a language to express our pain and heartbreak back to our Heavenly Father who loves us so much.

The suffering of the people of Israel in the wake of the fall of Jerusalem is overwhelming. You can hear the cries of their hearts in the raw emotions of Lamentations. "She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her; all her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies…Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger…For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me, one to revive my spirit; my children are desolate, for the enemy has prevailed…Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me…" (Lamentations 1:2, 12, 16, 20) These are cries of dereliction. Cries of helplessness and hopelessness. There is nothing more bitter than the taste of utter despair.

Furthermore, they know all of this is from God. They recognize it as His divine punishment on them for their sin. "How the Lord in his anger has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger…The Lord has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary…The Lord determined to lay in ruins the wall of the daughter of Zion; he stretched out the measuring line; he did not restrain his hand from destroying; he caused rampart and wall to lament; they languished together. Her gates have sunk into the ground; he has ruined and broken her bars; her king and princes are among the nations; the law is no more, and her prophets find no vision from the Lord." (Lamentations 2:1, 7-9) I can imagine nothing worse than feeling abandoned by God. To experience His wrath in place of His love. His justice in place of His mercy. To experience God as enemy rather than friend. Frankly, that sounds like hell to me.

Lamentations is a book that honors the deepest, darkest, and most desperate places of our hearts. It invites us to grieve terribly over the state of our broken human condition. It encourages us to weep. It affirms our sorrow. The book reveals a God of terrifying justice and great faithfulness. It encourages us to come humbly before God acknowledging our sin yet confident in His grace. Whatever pain, suffering, or heartbreak we may experience in this life. Self-inflicted or not. Circumstantial or not. We can cry out in all honesty to God, "But you, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations. Why do you forget us forever, why do you forsake us for so many days?" (Lamentations 5:19-20) And we can be just as certain He will answer our prayers. "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old." (Lamentations 5:21)

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3, Hebrews 1, Psalms 102, Proverbs 26:21-22

October 30, 2019

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS IS GREAT

Readings for today: Lamentations 3, Hebrews 1, Psalms 102, Proverbs 26:21-22

"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 3:22-26)

Some of the most precious words in all of Scripture are found in the most unlikely of places. Consider these verses from our reading today. They are the inspiration behind one of the greatest hymns in the Christian world. They are sung at funerals and in times of great sorrow as the people of God remind themselves of God's promise. And yet, they come in the midst of a book full of unspeakable suffering and pain. Terrors on every side. God literally waging war on His people for their sin. God razing His city to the ground. Tearing His Temple down to its foundations. Lamentations is one of the hardest books for us to read much less understand. How could God treat His people in this way? How could God literally become our enemy? What does that say about us? What does it say about God?

There is constant theme running throughout all of Scripture. The world is fallen. It is not as it should be. All the pain and suffering, violence and evil was not part of God's original design. It is the direct result of human rebellion. Humanity refuses to worship God in the way He deserves and the way He demands. Instead, we aspire to be gods ourselves. We want to be in control. We want to be in charge. We fight and claw for as much power and wealth and control as possible. The result? Our world groans under the weight of our sin. Sadly, we refuse to take responsibility, choosing instead to blame God for our mess. Yes, the world is fallen but the good news is that God has not abandoned her. He will not let His creation descend into chaos and self-destruction. He reaches out to the world over and over again. He sets apart a people to be His chosen instrument of blessing to the nations. He sends them prophets and priests and kings to lead them in the way of righteousness. His will is for them to herald His great love and faithfulness. Alas, they fail. Their sin gets in the way. They conform to the ways of this world and the result is destruction and exile.

The Bible would be a depressing book indeed except that a deeper and even grander theme emerges. The great faithfulness of God! Yes, this world is fallen but God is not done. Yes, things are not as they should be but God is making all things new. Yes, God's original design has gone awry but God will not let go. God will have the worship He deserves and demands and so He sends His Son. He reveals Himself in all His glory in Jesus. His steadfast love and faithfulness takes on flesh and blood. His mercies take on human form. And those who wait for the Lord will find Him. Those who look to the Messiah will find salvation. They do not hope in vain for God is faithful to Himself. He is true to His own character. He is not like us. He does not lie. He does not change His mind. His love is eternal. His mercies renewed every morning. His grace amazing. His faithfulness is indeed great!

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 4-5, Hebrews 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 26:23

October 31, 2019

JESUS IS GREATER

Readings for today: Lamentations 4-5, Hebrews 2, Psalms 103, Proverbs 26:23

Who is Jesus? A great teacher? An enlightened human being? An angel from heaven? Some kind of celestial creature? Or is He God Himself? God taking on flesh and blood and moving into our world to be with us? Centuries ago, Jesus asked his disciples the most important question we will ever face in this life. "Who do you say that I am?" How you answer that makes all the difference in this life and the next.

Thankfully, God doesn't leave anything to chance. He gives us the Book of Hebrews which sets out to answer this all-important question for the people of God and the author wastes no time getting right to the point. "He 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. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs." (Hebrews 1:3-4) Everything you ever wanted to know about God is revealed in Christ. All the questions you ever wanted to ask about God's nature and character are answered in Christ. All the doubts and fears you've been harboring regarding God's love and grace are quelled in Christ. He shows us who God is in all His fullness. In all His glory. In all His majesty and power. There is no God lurking in the shadows beyond Jesus. There is no God hiding behind Jesus. God has not withheld any part of Himself but instead reveals Himself fully in Jesus.

Jesus is greater than any angel from heaven. His splendor and might far exceeds that of the heavenly host. He upholds the universe by His power. He purifies the human race by laying down His life for their sin. He destroys the power of death through His resurrection. He is given all authority in heaven and on earth as He ascends to sit at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. No angel could ever accomplish such things.

Why would God do such a thing? Why would God choose this way to reveal Himself? Why did God not choose a different way? Because God is faithful to Himself. Faithful to His plan. From the beginning, His design was that humanity would reign and rule with Him over all creation. God's plan was for you and me to serve as His vice-regents on this earth, caring for all He has made. Yes, our rebellion introduced sin and evil into the world and we've been paying the price ever since. But God will not let us go. Instead, He made Jesus a little lower than the angels "so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source…" (Hebrews 2:9-11) Jesus was "perfected" through suffering. Not that He became something He was not but that He perfected the plan of salvation God had in place from before the foundations of the world.

And this gives us hope. "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 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." (Hebrews 2:14-18) Jesus did not come to save angels. The devil and his demons are beyond redemption. Jesus came to save the sons and daughters of Abraham. He came to save humanity from fear and death and the devil. In order to do that, He had to be made like us in every way. Taking on a fallen – though not sinful – human nature. In this way, He can represent us before His Father as our faithful and eternal high priest.

So back to the original question. Who is Jesus? If He is just a good teacher then His death is meaningless. If He's just an enlightened human being then we can take or leave what He has to say. If He's an angel or some other celestial creature then He is not like us and we are left without hope. But if He is God – as the Bible clearly and unequivocally declares Him to be – then we can trust Him when He says our sins are forgiven and we are set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1:1-3:15, Hebrews 3, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 26:24-26

One 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 28-29, 1 Timothy 1, Psalms 86, Proverbs 25:17

November 1, 2019

CALLING

Readings for today: Ezekiel 1:1-3:15, Hebrews 3, Psalms 104:1-23, Proverbs 26:24-26

I remember when I was first called into gospel ministry. It happened almost at the same time I was converted from death to life. I was a student at the University of Colorado in Boulder. I had recently become a Christian and I couldn't stop telling others about Jesus. It felt like an internal pressure I couldn't resist. A burning passion in my heart to share the good news. I wanted everyone to know about this Jesus who had changed my life forever. I led Bible studies. Engaged in apologetic debates with classmates and friends. I served in leadership in my campus ministry. Someone along the way asked me if I had ever thought about being a pastor. From that moment on, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

The years have not been easy. Pastors literally battle principalities and powers and spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly ream on a daily basis. We walk with people through the most difficult times in their lives. Addiction. Abuse. Depression. Suicidal ideation. Physical and emotional trauma. We are on call twenty four hours a day and seven days a week because tragedy never takes a day off. Along the way, we preach sermons, lead ministries, disciple believers, and try to find ways to shepherd a community of people towards the Kingdom. Those we love and serve struggle with sin. They often fight the will of God. Far too many abandon the faith altogether and we feel every loss viscerally. Perhaps that's why pastoral ministry is considered to be hazardous to one's health!

Ezekiel understood the challenge. He knew the call was not to fortune and fame. He would not be a social media influencer or attract thousands with his preaching. Instead, he would struggle and battle and fight for the soul of his people. It would be hard and he would grow tired and be tempted to throw in the towel. Listen to how God describes it, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God.' And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions. Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house." (Ezekiel 2:1-7) Whew. You mean I won't lead a megachurch? You mean my "brand" will suffer? You mean I won't be comfortable and well-esteemed and make a good living? No indeed. Quite the opposite. In order for Ezekiel to fulfill his calling, God is going to have strengthen him. "Because all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart. Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads. Like emery harder than flint have I made your forehead. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house." (Ezekiel 3:7-9) Notice there's not talk of balance here. No talk of self-care. No talk of Ezekiel's well-being. This isn't about him. It's about the call of God on his life and the sacrifice God is asking him to make.

Far too many of my friends and colleagues in ministry struggle with their calling. I don't want to diminish their pain in any way. The suffering is real. Trust me, I know. However, I do find too many hold to unrealistic expectations. They make false assumptions that answering God's call will not cost them personally or professionally. They make the mistake of thinking it shouldn't impact their family

life. They believe ministry can be accomplished in a forty hour work week and the church (or perhaps even God) has no right to demand more. They have a hard time with criticism. They almost can't believe it when people leave their church. They seem shocked when sinners show their true colors. I get it. I feel the frustration myself. But then I go to God's Word. I read about the calling God places on people like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Deborah, David, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Elizabeth, Mary, Peter, and Paul. I pay particular attention to the calling our Father placed on His Son. And I realize my expectations are themselves sinful and self-centered. My life is not my own. I was bought at a price and God has every right to use me as He so chooses. My job is simply to trust Him come what may.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 3:16-6:14, Hebrews 4, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 26:27

November 2, 2019

PREACHING

Readings for today: Ezekiel 3:16-6:14, Hebrews 4, Psalms 104:24-35, Proverbs 26:27

“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul." (Ezekiel 3:17-21)

Preaching is not for the faint of heart. No matter what technique one may use, it ultimately comes down to communicating God’s message to God’s people with faithfulness. Preaching is not self-help. Preaching is not moral therapeutic deism. Preaching is not a TED talk. Preaching is not simply positive and encouraging. As preachers, we cannot escape the call to talk about sin. We cannot escape the call to talk about grace. We cannot preach the Law without the Gospel. We cannot preach salvation without talking about what people are being saved from.

Ezekiel clearly understands his role. He is not to speak his own words. He is not to offer his own ideas. He is not simply helping his people live their best life now. God has made him a watchman. When he sees danger on the horizon, he must sound the warning. When God’s people engage in sin, he must call them out. When the wicked come against him, Ezekiel must not fail. He must confront the wicked with God’s truth and let the chips fall where they may. If Ezekiel preaches faithfully, God will deliver him. But if Ezekiel falls down on the job, he will bear the blood guilt of his people.

It’s a sobering task to be sure. To think about the fact that every time I get up in the pulpit, I have a responsibility to preach God’s Word faithfully no matter how it may be received. And I know myself too well. I am too weak to do this on my own. Left to my own strength, I will run from the confrontation. I will make excuses. I will avoid the hard texts. I will try my best to spin thinks in a positive direction. Frankly, that’s why I typically preach verse by verse through entire books of the Bible. It forces me to grapple with the challenging passages. It forces me to preach sermons that aren’t always warm and fuzzy. It forces me to say difficult things to the people God has placed under my care even as I seek to comfort and assure them of God’s amazing grace.

On the other hand, there is freedom in this passage for me as well. I am not responsible for how God’s people receive God’s Word. That’s worth repeating over and over again to myself. I am NOT responsible for God’s people receive God’s Word. I am simply the messenger. Simply the herald. Simply the watchman. I cannot control how people respond. So when someone tells me “they didn’t get anything out of the sermon”, that’s on them. Hopefully they will reflect on what’s keeping them from hearing and receiving the Word God has for them. Or when someone tells me “that’s the best sermon I’ve ever heard” and then go out the door and do the opposite of what I just talked about…again, that’s not my responsibility. I can grieve for them. Weep over them. Pray to God on their behalf. But ultimately, my job is simply to deliver the message as faithfully as I can.

This passage is not just for preachers by the way! Every single Christian is made a watchman or watchwoman over their families, friends, co-workers, fellow students, and the other people God has placed in your life. Every Christian is called by God to deliver God's Word to the lost and lonely in our world. Shame on us if we let our fear or anxiety or introversion or personal struggles get in the way. God is clear. If we don't sound the warning, the blood of those we love is on our hands. Ask Christ for the boldness to proclaim the gospel to those in your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 5, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 26:28

November 4, 2019

IMPECCAB ILITY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 7-9, Hebrews 5, Psalms 105:1-15, Proverbs 26:28

During my first session over here in Ethiopia, a young Ethiopian church planter asked about the sinlessness of Christ. Was He able to sin? Were the temptations He faced real? Can Christ truly identify with us in our weakness? Did He have a fallen human nature like us? These are questions with huge implications and ones the church has been wrestling over for two thousand years.

The Book of Hebrews is one of my favorites because it pushes to embrace the fullness of both Christ's divine nature and His human nature without diminishing either one. Over the course of history, Christians have tended to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Our human minds simply cannot grasp the mystery of the incarnation so we bring Jesus down to our level. We reduce Him to terms we can understand and grasp. We elevate certain aspects of his nature over and against others. We try to confine Him. Restrain Him. Fence Him in. But Jesus is not a tame God. He will not be domesticated to our theological agendas no matter how well-meaning they may be. He refuses to allow us to define Him and instead presents Himself to us on His terms – and His terms alone – through His Word.

"For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. 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." (Hebrews 2:16-18)

"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. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek." (Hebrews 5:7-10)

The author of the Book of Hebrews clearly believes Jesus was human in every respect. Subject to pain and suffering. Hardship and heartbreak. Hunger. Thirst. Weariness. Sadness and joy. Christ emptied Himself of all His heavenly power and glory in order to become one of us. One with us. As such, He inherited the fallen human nature and was tempted in every way just as we are so He might – through perfect obedience – become the eternal high priest we so desperately need.

The doctrine of impeccability teaches us that it was impossible for Christ to sin. Being God, He not only would not sin, He literally could not sin. This, I submit to you, is yet another attempt to pierce the mystery that is Christ. It is an attempt to use human logic to make sense of the Incarnation. Can God sin? Of course not. Is Jesus God? Absolutely. So Jesus cannot sin? According to the Book of Hebrews, the possibility IS on the table. He was made like us in every way. He suffered when being tempted. He sympathizes with us in our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way just as we are. He learned obedience through His suffering. In short, He became the 2nd Adam and through His life, death, and resurrection offers Himself up for us all. Does any of this make logical sense? No. But God's ways are

higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. His wisdom is unsearchable. And His faithfulness eternal.

So I took the young church planter to the Book of Hebrews. We read over these verses together. We re-affirmed our absolute commitment to a sinless Christ. Not because He could not sin but because He would not sin. Choosing instead a life of perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father's will. We rejoiced together at the immense sacrifice Christ offered by taking on a fallen human nature and sanctifying it from within. We celebrated the fact that He reigns in heaven even now as our great high priest, eternally offering Himself in our place. We were overcome with gratitude with the idea that because of what Christ has done for us, we can now approach the throne of grace with confidence knowing we will find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 10-11, Hebrews 6, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 27:1-2

November 5, 2019

ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Readings for today: Ezekiel 10-11, Hebrews 6, Psalms 105:16-36, Proverbs 27:1-2

"Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring." (Proverbs 27:1)

We began interviewing the church planters here in Ethiopia yesterday. The stories they share are always inspiring. Miracles of healing. Miracles of resurrection. Miraculous deliverance from addiction and demonic possession. All to advance the cause of the gospel in an area that is 98% Muslim and hostile to Christianity. The thousands who have responded to God's call and given their lives to Christ face tremendous persecution. They are cast out of their homes. They are driven from their families. They lose jobs. They are exiled from their community. Some are even killed for their faith.

One young woman is planting a church in the Harar region. Harar is the 4th holiest city in Islam. It is a beautiful place full of incredible history. But there is political unrest in the area. Over here, politics are always mixed with religious faith. Different tribes hold to different faiths. So the issues are complex and multivalent. There are riots and protests across the zone. Many have been injured or killed. Her congregation is afraid for their lives so they have fled the area. Only she remains. And she knows tomorrow is not guaranteed. Still she preaches Christ. Still she ministers to those who are hurting in her community. Still she prays for the salvation of those who seek her life.

What would you do if you knew there was no tomorrow? Many people I know would make a bucket list. They would take an exotic vacation. Do something they've never done before. They would scale Everest. Dive the Great Barrier Reef. Finally take the family to Hawaii. None of these are necessarily bad things but they are certainly not eternal things. The men and women we meet over here have given themselves fully over to God. He guides and directs their steps. Death is a constant companion. They see it all around them. They know there is no tomorrow. They know it is God who holds their lives in His hands.

Control is an illusion. We have no idea what tomorrow may bring. It may bring great glory or great tragedy. It may bring great success or great failure. It may bring new life or it may bring us face to face with death. We like to think we are in control. We make plans. We put money away. We work hard to retire early so we can live the "good life." But we are meant for so much more! God designed us for eternity. He created us to bear His image and likeness to the world around us. He intends for us to make an eternal impact on those we love and live among. True fulfillment comes when we give everything over to God. All our time. All our treasure. All our talent. All our plans. All our best intentions. Even our future. Once give God control, we are set free. The things of this world no longer have a hold on us. The ways of this world no longer seem attractive to us. The kingdoms of this world no longer have any power over us.

What would you do if you knew there was no tomorrow? Would you spend your final hours sharing the gospel with everyone you can like the young woman I just met? Or would you spend those hours on yourself and those you love? Would you give those precious moments to temporary pleasure? Or would you leverage them for something eternal? The reality is tomorrow is never guaranteed. The only hope we have in this world or the next is Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 12:1-14:11, Hebrews 7:1-17, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 27:3

November 6, 2019

LIVING THE GOSPEL

Readings for today: Ezekiel 12:1-14:11, Hebrews 7:1-17, Psalms 105:37-45, Proverbs 27:3

One of the strangest things about being a prophet in the Old Testament is the number of times God uses their lives to illustrate His coming judgment. Jeremiah wore a ruined loincloth, broke a flask, and bought a field in the midst of a siege. Each action an embodiment of God's judgment or salvation. Hosea married a prostitute and gave his children terrible names like "not loved" and "not my people" to illustrate the faithless nature of Israel. Ezekiel lay on his side for hundreds of days, cut off his hair and his beard, and packed a bag for exile to communicate God's righteous judgment on His people. Can you imagine God commanding you to do the same? What would that even look like in our world today?

Thankfully, you and I don't have to imagine. Our call is not to embody God's judgment. Christ perfectly satisfied the demands of God's justice on the cross. He turned away God's wrath from our sin. He took on Himself the punishment we deserved. He became the embodiment of sin in order to win our salvation. So unlike the prophets of old, we no longer have to walk around naked, shave our heads, marry prostitutes, or do anything else to communicate God's judgment on our friends and neighbors.

Instead, we are called to embody the gospel. We are called to make our lives a living demonstration of God's grace. We are called to love our neighbors. Pray for our enemies. Preach to the lost. Care for the poor. We are called to be humble and meek. Peacemakers in a violent and angry world. We are called to tear down every wall that divides us one from another whether it be politics, race, sexuality, or any other high thing that would set itself up against the Kingdom of God. The resources God gives us to accomplish this great task are prayer, fasting, meditation on God's Word, corporate worship, preaching, participation in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and a host of other things the people of God have done down through the ages to remind themselves of God's abiding presence and power in their lives.

So how are you proclaiming Christ with your life? Do the people around you recognize Christ's presence in you? Do they hear from you the good news of the gospel? How will you seek to bring glory to your Savior today?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 14:12-16:41, Hebrews 7:18-28, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 27:4-6

November 7, 2019

THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Readings for today: Ezekiel 14:12-16:41, Hebrews 7:18-28, Psalms 106:1-12, Proverbs 27:4-6

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. And because His sacrifice has been accepted “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 7:25) Friends, you are set free. Receive the free gift of salvation from your high priest and place your trust and confidence in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 16:42-17:24, Hebrews 8, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 27:7-9

November 8, 2019

EVANGELISM

Readings for today: Ezekiel 16:42-17:24, Hebrews 8, Psalms 106:13-31, Proverbs 27:7-9

“Thus says the Lord God: "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of the cedar and will set it out. I will break off from the topmost of its young twigs a tender one, and I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel will I plant it, that it may bear branches and produce fruit and become a noble cedar. And under it will dwell every kind of bird; in the shade of its branches birds of every sort will nest. And all the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord; I bring low the high tree, and make high the low tree, dry up the green tree, and make the dry tree flourish. I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it." (Ezekiel 17:22-24)

I have seen the partial fulfillment of this prophecy. I have the incredible privilege of being part of a church planting movement in the Horn of Africa called the Petros Network. Over the last several years, God has planted almost 5,000 churches. Almost 600,000 people have come to Christ in remote villages where the name of Jesus has never been heard or known. God is taking sprigs from the lofty top of the cedar and planting them in different places all over the earth. He is planting His church in places like Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Djibouti, and Myanmar. These are some of the darkest places on earth. The church planters face incredible hardship and difficulty. They are often persecuted, tortured, and some are even killed on the field. But still they persist. Because God has called them. God is with them. And God is using them to change entire villages, tribes, and nations.

I visited one such church this week. It is planted in a remote village on top of a mountain many kilometers from the nearest city. The pastor is young. The congregation is mainly women and children. Before the church planter came to the village, the name of Jesus was unknown. The village struggled. There was a lot of fear. A lot of disease. A lot of conflict. But when the church planter began preaching the gospel, miracles began to take place. Many people were healed. Many demons were cast out. The spirit of darkness lifted. The villagers were set free. The joy on their faces was evident. Their love for one another obvious. Their passion to worship Jesus inspiring. Clearly, this church has grown and borne much fruit. It has become a noble cedar in that area. Under it’s boughs, many have come to dwell and find rest. And the church planter already has set his eyes and heart on other nearby villages. He wants to take a sprig from the cedar of his church and plant it in the next unreached village. I imagine when we come back in six months to a year, his church will have planted one or two more new churches. This is how the Kingdom grows.

Now consider your church. What sprigs is God taking from your church to plant in other towns or cities? What sprigs is God taking from your church plant in other areas in your community? What sprigs is God taking from your church to plant in other places all around the world? To put it more plainly, has your church planted other churches in areas where the gospel is not known? Has your church planted new ministries in your community in order to reach the lost for Jesus? Has your church sent missionaries and mission teams around the world to partner with the global church to expand the Kingdom?

To make it even more personal, what about you? How are you engaging in the work of evangelism right now in your life? Who are the lost people God is using you to make a gospel impact? In what ways are you seeking to serve your community and bless others in the name of Jesus? When you look at your schedule or you balance your checkbook, how many of your resources are going towards the expansion of God’s Kingdom on earth? Remember, the one who sows sparingly reaps sparingly. The one who sows generously reaps generously. Are you reaping an eternal reward? Are you storing up treasures in heaven? Is your life becoming a noble cedar? Is God sending the lost and lonely and hurting and broken to find rest and healing and comfort under your care?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 18-19, Hebrews 9:1-10, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 27:10

November 9, 2019

A LIFE GOD HONORS

Readings for today: Ezekiel 18-19, Hebrews 9:1-10, Psalms 106:32-48, Proverbs 27:10

Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commands.” God loves the righteous. God loves the man or woman who aligns their lives with His Law. God blesses those who submit their lives to Him. Surrender their ways to Him. Give control over to Him. God wants us to be holy even as He is holy. He created us for His glory. He designed us to bear His image into the world. What does such a life look like?

Listen to how Ezekiel describes it, “If a man is righteous and does what is just and right— if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman in her time of menstrual impurity, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not lend at interest or take any profit, withholds his hand from injustice, executes true justice between man and man, walks in my statutes, and keeps my rules by acting faithfully—he is righteous; he shall surely live, declares the Lord God.” (Ezekiel 18:5-9)

Now some will immediately raise the objection of legalism. They will suggest that attempting to live according to God’s Law is an attempt to justify ourselves before God. They will warn of the danger of trying to earn God’s favor. Earn God’s love. Earn our own salvation. Nothing could be farther from Ezekiel’s mind. Faithful Jews throughout history have never been legalists. Faithful Jews have always understood they are saved by faith in Yahweh. They know the story of Abraham well. However, what faithful Jews also know is that faith always comes to expression in real life. James was a faithful Jew and when he came to faith, he continued to teach what he already knew. “Faith without works is dead.” One cannot claim to believe in Christ and not walk in His ways. One cannot claim to know Christ and ignore His commands. One cannot claim to trust Christ and reject His law. Those who are truly saved understand we are not only saved from something – sin – but we are saved for something – good works. The same works the prophet Ezekiel refers to in the passage cited above.

What is righteousness? It is believing in God to the point where you trust Him with your life. It is being confident in God to the point where you stake your life on His promises. It is trusting God more than your emotions. More than your logic. More than your ability. More than your wealth or position or power or privilege. The people Ezekiel is preaching to needed to be reminded what a life lived for God looks like in real time. It involves worship with God’s people. Sexual purity. Integrity in our financial dealings. Generous giving to the poor and less fortunate. Working for justice. These are the markers of a life of great faithfulness and they give evidence of a heart fully surrendered to God.

So where is your heart today? If someone were to follow you around and make a documentary of your life, what would the people around you see? Would they see clear evidence of a life lived for God? Or a life lived for oneself? Would they see your faith take concrete expression in acts of mercy and love? Or would they see hypocrisy? Would they see a righteous life? The kind of life God honors? Or would they see a life lived in pursuit of worldly goods and worldly goals? Friends, God longs to bless you. God longs to bring you peace. God longs to help you. Heal you. Restore your soul. But God will not bless the unrighteous life. He will not bless a life lived in rebellion to Him. A life lived in apathy towards Him. A life that is dismissive of Him. Turn to Christ. Cling to His truth and follow His way that you may receive His life.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 20, Hebrews 9:11-28, Psalms 107, Proverbs 27:11

November 10, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 20, Hebrews 9:11-28, Psalms 107, Proverbs 27:11
Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 23, Hebrews 10:18-39, Psalms 109, Proverbs 27:13

November 11, 2019

CHRIST, OUR GREAT SAVIOR

Readings for today: Ezekiel 23, Hebrews 10:18-39, Psalms 109, Proverbs 27:13

“Although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly: I am a great sinner and Christ is a great Savior.“ - John Newton

John Newton was a great sinner. Pressed into service in the Royal Navy at a young age, he ended up a captain in the slave trade. He purchased human beings, held them in deplorable conditions in the hold of his ships, and transported them to the West Indies where he sold them for profit. Three times he traversed the dreaded Triangle. And even after his days as a captain came to an end, he still invested heavily in the slave trade itself. Newton was saved during a storm on March 10, 1748 though he would not mark his full conversion until much later. He became an abolitionist in 1788 with the publication of Thoughts upon the Slave Trade where he described the horror of the conditions aboard the slave ships during the Middle Passage. In that book, he makes "a confession, which ... comes too late ... It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.” John Newton understood the depths of his sin.

The passage from Ezekiel today is a tough one. It describes in graphic terms how God feels about our sin. He likens it to sexual depravity of the worst kind. He describes the faithlessness of both Israel and Judah as spiritual adultery. He accuses them of lusting after other gods. Inviting them into their beds. Sleeping with them over and over again. The people of God are shameless in their spiritual prostitution. They are enslaved to their perverted desires. They show little to no restraint. Frankly, it sounds very familiar. I cannot tell you the number of conversations I’ve had over the last two decades with Christian believers whose lives reflect the same shamelessness. Claiming to know Christ, they embrace a sinful lifestyle. Greed. Lust. Pride. Bitterness. Anger. Selfishness. Their lives are marked by the works of the flesh rather than the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:18-24) As such, they are the people the author of Hebrews is referring to when he writes, “For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:26-31)

Friends, God takes our sin seriously and we would be lost except for His amazing grace. No matter how dark the stains of your sin. No matter how deep the corruption in your life runs. No matter how heavy the load of guilt and shame. No matter how great your sin, Christ is greater still! “Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:19-25) God never lets His people go. Yes, Israel played the whore but God was faithful to restore her after the exile. Yes, John Newton engaged in the horrors of the slave trade but God was

faithful to rescue him and use him to abolish the slave trade once and for all. Yes, I am a great sinner but God is always faithful to forgive me for my sin and cleanse me from my unrighteousness. His grace is truly amazing to save a wretch like me!

What about you? Do you understand the depths of your sinful condition before God? Do you grasp the darkness that pervades your soul? We are conceived in sin and brought forth in iniquity. Each of us goes his or her own way. We have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But the promise of God is if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us. Cleanse us. Sanctify us. And make us more into the image of His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 24-26, Hebrews 11:1-61, Psalms 110, Proverbs 27:14

November 12, 2019

BY FAITH

Readings for today: Ezekiel 24-26, Hebrews 11:1-16, Psalms 110, Proverbs 27:14

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

Some say faith is blind. Some say faith is foolish. Some say faith is an opiate of sorts for the masses. A delusion we are indoctrinated into by religious institutions. That's not how the Bible defines faith. It is a fundamental belief. A conviction that what remains unseen is nonetheless very real. It is an assurance for the future where all our hopes and dreams for eternity will come to pass. It is ultimately a deep and abiding trust in God and His plan for our lives and for our world.

Hebrews 11 is rightly called the "Hall of Fame" of faith. It lists the many heroes and heroines who walked by faith. Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain. Why? Because he offered it in faith. Enoch did not taste death. Why? Because he walked with God. Noah risked it all to build an ark. Why? Because he loved God more than he loved the things of this world. Abraham left home, kindred, and country. He left behind all that was familiar. All that was safe. All that was secure. Why? Because he had his eyes fixed on a better country. A heavenly one. Sarah embraced a miraculous pregnancy in her old age. She carried Isaac to term though the toll on her body must have been enormous. She risked her life to bring the child of promise into the world. Why? Because she knew God was faithful. The list goes on and on. And it's not meant to be exhaustive. It's meant to be illustrative. To encourage those of us who are still fighting the good fight of faith in this world. Who are still sojourning on this earth that is not our home. It's written to encourage those of us who are still seeking a homeland, eternal in the heavens. The place where God dwells.

What does walking by faith look like for you today? In what areas of your life are you being called to trust God? How are you placing your life, your future, your hopes and your dreams into His hands? Are you intentionally seeking to live by faith? Remember, "without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6) Living by faith requires intentionality. Walking by faith requires self-discipline. It means dying to self every moment of every day. Laying aside the desires of the flesh in favor of the fruit of the Spirit. It means trusting God to reveal His will in His time. It means taking all that we are and all that we have and placing it at God's disposal to use as He sees fit. It means walking with open hands before the Lord, allowing Him to guide and direct our steps.

I can tell you from personal experience there is nothing more exciting and nothing more daunting than following Christ. You end up on these amazing journeys you never thought possible. You have this experiences you never would have imagined. You get taken to the end of your own wisdom and strength and resources again and again as God teaches you to rely on Him. It's not easy. It's often scary. But God is faithful and He delivers on His promises. Make your decision right now to live this day by faith!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 27-28, Hebrews 11:17-31, Psalms 111, Proverbs 27:15-16

November 13, 2019

PRIDE: THE DEADLIEST OF SINS

Readings for today: Ezekiel 27-28, Hebrews 11:17-31, Psalms 111, Proverbs 27:15-16

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 especially to the kings of Tyre. "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; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries; so I brought fire out from your midst; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever." (Ezekiel 28:12-19) Whew. This pride thing is no joke!

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to me. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-30, Hebrews 11:32-12:13, Psalms 112, Proverbs 27:17

November 14, 2019

OF WHOM THE WORLD IS UNWORTHY…

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-30, Hebrews 11:32-12:13, Psalms 112, Proverbs 27:17

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy —wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." Hebrews 11:32-38)

Over the course of the last twenty years of ministry, I have met Gideon. Barak. Samson. Jephthah. David. Samuel. Deborah. Sarah. Priscilla. Junia. Godly men and women who endure great hardship. Persecution. Suffering. Even death. They are often filled with great power. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, they perform miracles of healing. They cast out demons. They raise the dead. I have also seen them feed the hungry. Care for the sick. Visit those in prison. These seemingly mundane actions are just as miraculous as the signs and wonders according to Scripture.

Why do they sacrifice so much? What motivates such people to pour themselves out and place themselves at risk for the sake of the gospel? It is Jesus. They look "Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) They see what Christ has done for us. How Christ poured Himself out for us. Emptied Himself of all His glory. Left the riches of heaven to become poor for our sake's. Jesus gave it all. Jesus paid it all. Jesus surrendered all. And as they keep their eyes fixed on Him, they find themselves responding in much the same way.

Sacrifice should come naturally to the Christian. While the flesh may resist, a regenerated heart should warm to the idea of giving all that we have to Jesus. A soul renewed by the Holy Spirit will find it's greatest fulfillment in serving Christ. On some level, it shouldn't even have to be taught. It's not like all the men and women listed in Hebrews 11 underwent seminary training or a 12 week discipleship course or even had Bibles to read in a year! :-) God called. They answered. God commanded. They went. God raised them up. They obeyed. Not perfectly. Not always faithfully. But on balance - over the course of their lives - they believed God and trusted in His promises.

These are the witnesses that surround us even now. They cheer us on from the heavenly realm. They understand that this world is a battlefield where the Lord is waging His stubborn war for the souls of humankind. They once walked in our shoes. They know the suffering we endure. They know what it's like to feel anxiety and fear and pain. But they also know the power of faith. Through Christ, they overcame the world and they know we can as well. Why is the world not worthy of such people? Because this world is not our home. This world is passing away. This world groaning and laboring and waiting for the new creation. You and I were not made for this world. We were never meant to live forever in this world. We were created for a different home. A heavenly home. A place where there is no crying or suffering or pain. A place where there is no more darkness or night. A safe place where sin and evil are cast out once and for all. This is the world we look to in Christ Jesus. This is the world guaranteed us by Christ's saving death and resurrection.

So don’t hold on to the things of this world. Don’t pursue the temporary pleasures it has to offer. Don’t spend your energy and time and resources chasing the wind. Instead, give all you have to the Lord. Embrace His will. Walk in His way. Serve Christ and you will receive the eternal rewards He promises to all who believe!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 31-32, Hebrews 12:14-29, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 27:18-20

November 15, 2019

WHY BE HOLY?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 31-32, Hebrews 12:14-29, Psalms 113-114, Proverbs 27:18-20
"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Hebrews 12:14)

Holiness has fallen on hard times. In my experience, very few Christians desire holiness much less "strive" for it. We much prefer grace. We much prefer unconditional love. We much prefer a god who never judges. Never confronts. Never demands. Consider the rash of pastors who have fallen recently into sexual or financial sin. Almost without exception they refuse to submit to any kind of disciplinary process. Almost without exception they end up starting new churches with names like "second chance"or "sanctuary." And almost without exception their "new" message is all about love. All about the radical nature of God's grace. All about the unconditional nature of God's forgiveness. What's rarely preached is the need for repentance. An intentional turning away from our sin. The clear expectation from Scripture that those who follow Christ will deny themselves and pursue a life of holiness before the Lord.

Israel understood the importance of holiness. After all, they were confronted by God Himself at Mt. Sinai and it clearly left an impression! "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." (Hebrews 12:18-21) Imagine being in the congregation and hearing God's voice like the sound of thunder. Imagine being brought to your knees at the sight of God descending from heaven and lighting an entire mountaintop on fire. Imagine an experience of God so terrifying, you fall on your face in fear for your life. This is what Israel encountered in the wilderness after they had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. And the call of God to His people was clear. "Be holy as I am holy."

Fast forward to Jesus. To the saving death and resurrection of Christ. Christians are living in light of the 2nd Exodus. The great deliverance of God's people from sin. No longer do we need to be afraid. Christ has taken the punishment we deserve on Himself. Christ has satisfied the just demands of the Law. Christ has turned aside the Father's righteous anger by taking our place. So rather than approach God in fear, we can approach God in confidence. "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." (Hebrews 12:22-24) As we gaze into heaven itself, our hearts should be filled with an even greater desire for holiness. An even greater desire for righteousness. Motivated by the great love God has shown for us, we turn aside from our sin. Surrender to His will. Deny our base desires and walk in the obedience He demands.

Is this legalism? No. Legalism is the outward adherence to the Law with no inward change in the heart. Is this works righteousness? No. We cannot earn God's favor or love through our own effort. Is this dead religion? No. Going through the motions of empty ritual has nothing to do holiness. The motivation that drives our striving for holiness comes from a eternally grateful heart for the gift God has given. "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken…" This is why we pursue holiness. This is why we approach the throne of grace with reverence and awe. This is why we offer to God the worship He demands and the worship He deserves. For God indeed is a consuming fire. He consumes all that is sinful inside us as He makes us more like Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 33-34, Hebrews 13, Psalms 115, Proverbs 27:21-22

November 16, 2019

GOD'S ETERNAL PLAN OF SALVATION

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-34, Hebrews 13, Psalms 115, Proverbs 27:21-22

Today and tomorrow's reading in Ezekiel 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 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." (Ezekiel 36:22-23) 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 worshipped 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 worshippers? Listen to what God Himself says He will do, "I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. 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 36:24-28) 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 35-36, James 1:1-18, Psalms 116, Proverbs 27:23-27

November 17, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 35-36, James 1:1-18, Psalms 116, Proverbs 27:23-27
Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-38, James 1:19-2:17, Psalms 117, Proverbs 28:1

November 18, 2019

DRY BONES

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-38, James 1:19-2:17, Psalms 117, Proverbs 28:1

I love the vision of the valley of dry bones. I can almost picture Ezekiel there in the midst of all that death. Preaching. Prophesying. And I can imagine his astonishment as the bones begin to come together. Sinews begin to form. Lungs filling with the breath of God Himself. It's a vision of resurrection. A vision of new creation. A vision of renewal and revitalization. A reminder that with God hope is never fully lost.

I have been to the valley of dry bones in my life. I have been there personally. I have been there professionally. One of the things I love most about my work is the time I get to spend with congregations who have plateaued or are experiencing decline. They often feel dry and listless. Their energies and resources are spent. Their hope is almost gone. I often use this passage to lead them back to God's vision for their church. God's vision for their ministry. God's vision for their mission to the community in which they are planted. I use this text to help them dream again. To help them discover new possibilities. To help them see the future God has for them.

Sometimes I get to see the dry bones come together. Sometimes I get to see muscles and sinews begin to form. Sometimes I get to watch as God breathes new life into His people and the congregation comes alive. They rediscover God's purpose. They reaffirm God's promise. They revitalize with God's power. It's an awesome thing to witness. Sadly, sometimes the bones remain dry. Muscles and sinews refuse to form. The valley remains eerily quiet and deathly calm. And the congregation dies a slow, inexorable death. It's heartbreaking.

I see this happen in individual lives as well. I think of the young woman who comes to me seeking counsel for a broken marriage. She and her husband are at odds. The children are caught in the middle. She's struggling at work. Struggling at home. Struggling in almost every area of her life. But she responds to God's Word. She is open to God's Spirit. And slowly but surely the bones of her life begin to come together as God breathes new life into her soul. Then I think of the young man I know. He too is struggling in his marriage. He too is struggling as a father. He too is struggling at work and at home and in almost every area of his life. But he refuses to submit to God's Word. He remains closed to God's Spirit. His bones never move and his continues it's descent into chaos and pain.

We all have choices to make. Will our bones respond to the gospel? Will our bones respond to the preaching of God's Word? Will our bones respond to what God wants to do in and through us? Or will we remain dead in our sin? Dead in our choices? Dead in the decisions we make each day?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 39:1-40:27, James 2:18-3:18, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 28:2

November 19, 2019

TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: Ezekiel 39:1-40:27, James 2:18-3:18, Psalms 118:1-18, Proverbs 28:2

One of the great scandals of the western church is the number of Christians who confess Jesus with their lips but deny Him with their lives. They say they believe in Jesus but only in the abstract. They claim to have faith in God but only if He remains distant and uninvolved in our lives. They claim saving faith but never submit their lives to Christ. We call them "nominal" Christians. "C&E" (Christmas and Easter) Christians. "Cultural" Christians. Mainly because we don't want to appear judgmental. The Apostle James, on the other hand, pulls no punches. "Faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:26)

What does it mean to believe in God? The Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 10:9, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That seems clear enough except that far too many use this verse as an excuse NOT to obey God's commands which certainly wasn't what Paul had in mind. Clearly in James' day, he was dealing with Christians who claimed a right belief in God but didn't follow it up with right practice. This is why James makes this extraordinary statement, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" (James 2:19) He's speaking to both the Jewish and Gentile believers of his own time and pointing out it isn't enough to hold to an intellectual belief in the nature and character of God. Even the demons understand God's divine nature! One must submit their life to God as well.

His argument is a persuasive one and deeply biblical. For support, he draws on the Abraham, the great paradigm of faith, and Rahab who ended up in the lineage of Christ. He makes the point that saving faith in their lives resulted in works. In fact, one would not be able to say that "Abraham believed God" unless Abraham willingly demonstrated that belief by offering up his only beloved son. In the same way, one would not be able to say that "Rahab believed God" unless she willingly demonstrated that belief by hiding the spies of Israel and sending the authorities on a wild goose chase. In both cases, faith was active alongside their works and faith came to completion or fulfillment by their works.

Now I can already hear the protests. What about grace? I thought we were saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Absolutely we are! But what is equally clear is that salvation changes us. It transforms us. It gives us a new heart with new desires. A new spirit with new passions. We find ourselves longing to do God's will. Longing to serve God's purposes. Longing to follow God's commands. Jesus Himself says, "If you love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

When we try to separate our faith from our works, we are exposing our lack of true, saving faith. If we approach faith looking for the absolute minimum we need to do to be saved, we are not saved at all. It's like trying to separate the body from the soul according to James. Such a dis-integration of the human being would result in death. The same is true when we try to separate our faith from our works.

So where do you find yourself this morning? Are you willing to take a ruthless self-inventory? Does your faith change the way you live your daily life? Does being a Christian make you a different spouse? Different parent? Different student? Different employer or employee? Does it make a you a different friend? Do you find yourself longing for worship? Longing for time with God? Longing to read His Word? Longing for prayer? Do you actively seek to submit every area of your life to His Law? Are you grieved over your sin? There is no better time than the present to repent, friends. Fall on your face before the Lord who loves you and gave His life for you. Turn to Him. Ask Him for forgiveness. Ask Him for the strength and wisdom and humility to submit to His will and His way. Confirm your saving faith with your work and rest in the assurance of salvation Christ will bring!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 40:28-41:26, James 4, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 28:3-5

November 20, 2019

AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 40:28-41:26, James 4, Psalms 118:19-29, Proverbs 28:3-5

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. Perhaps that's why I love James 4:6 so much, "But God still gives more grace…"

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?

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.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 42-43, James 5, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 28:6-7

November 21, 2019

LOVING THE LAW OF GOD

Readings for today: Ezekiel 42-43, James 5, Psalms 119:1-16, Proverbs 28:6-7

"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.

While I was in Africa, my wife dropped my car off at the shop. The check engine light had come on. We weren't sure what was wrong but thankfully we have a mechanic we can trust. The very first thing they did was hook the car 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 whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways! You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently. Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous rules. I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me! How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O Lord; teach me your statutes! With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth. In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word." (Psalms 119:1-16)

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 hierarchal 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?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 44:1-45:12, 1 Peter 1:1-12, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 28:8-10

November 22, 2019

PERSECUTION

Readings for today: Ezekiel 44:1-45:12, 1 Peter 1:1-12, Psalms 119:17-32, Proverbs 28:8-10

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 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 1:3-7)

When I read a passage like this I cannot help but think of the hundreds of young men and women I’ve met overseas who endure incredible hardship and suffering to bring the gospel to their people. I think of a South Sudanese man whose family was sent to a refugee camp while he remained behind to minister in the middle of a civil war. I think of a Ugandan man who travels by bus, boat, donkey, and foot to get to the many churches he’s planted to encourage and exhort them to hold fast to Jesus. I think of the men and women I’ve met in Eastern Ethiopia who are planting churches in Muslim villages. Their lives are often threatened. They meet in secret in homes. They’ve spent time in hospitals recovering from injuries and time in prison fighting false charges. They are my heroes and I treasure the time I have with them.

I think of Andrew Brunson. An EPC pastor who was imprisoned for two years in Turkey on false charges. He was harassed. Abused. Suffered through solitary confinement. His “trials” were a joke and the Turkish government sought to use him as leverage to get what they wanted from the United States. He suffered while in prison. He struggled with his faith. His story is a powerful one and he shares vulnerably about what happens when we come to the end of ourselves and find Jesus there waiting for us in the dark night of the soul.

The Apostle Peter was no stranger to suffering. He too battled through beatings and flogging and imprisonments. He was attacked and considered a traitor to the Jewish faith. But he persevered. He boldly proclaimed the gospel even though it would eventually cost him his life. Why? Why did so many of the early Christians sacrifice their very lives? Why have Christians down through the centuries endured such persecution with faith and hope? Why do many Christians around the world today suffer for the cause of Christ? It’s because they believe wholeheartedly in an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

What about you? Do you hold fast to this same hope? When you face trials of various kinds, are you able to endure with joy? When you suffer or struggle or battle temptation, are you able to endure with faith? When you feel attacked or falsely accused or put down for your faith, are you able to persevere with hope? Do you fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith who with joy endured the cross, despising it’s shame? If you do, you can trust the promise that your faith - tested and tried by the refining fires of this world - will turn out as gold. And your life will result in praise and glory and honor to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45:13-46:24, 1 Peter 1:13-2:10, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 28:11

November 23, 2019

LIFE REVOLVES AROUND WORSHIP

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45:13-46:24, 1 Peter 1:13-2:10, Psalms 119:33-48, Proverbs 28:11

God designed human life to be an act of worship. From the moment we're born until the day we die, we are hardwired to worship. Sadly, because human nature is thoroughly corrupted by sin, we will worship just about anything other than God. We'll worship celebrity. Wealth. Health. Beauty. Success. Sex. Power. You name it, we'll turn it into an object of worship. We'll bring our sacrifices. We'll sing our praises. We'll sacrifice time and money and energy and attention to appease these false gods. But they are insatiable. They are ravenous. They demand more than we can give, leaving us feeling empty and anxious and alone. They are brutal tyrants, ruthlessly and relentlessly driving us to despair and even death.

Friends, God created us to worship Him and enjoy Him forever. To live in unbroken, unending relationship with Him. This is why God pays such particular attention to the reconstruction of the Temple in Ezekiel. It's why He sets up times and seasons for worship. "Thus says the Lord God: The gate of the inner court that faces east shall be shut on the six working days, but on the Sabbath day it shall be opened, and on the day of the new moon it shall be opened…When the people of the land come before the Lord at the appointed feasts," (Ezekiel 46:1, 9) It's why He cares so much about the sacrifices. He is setting up a way of life that will directly counteract the effects of sin. He is creating a holy rhythm that will lead us continually back to Him. Follow this way and you will find spiritual renewal. Be faithful in this way and you will find true peace. Walk in this way and your hope will be restored as you get in touch with the reason why you were made in the first place.

I love how Peter describes God's vision for His people. "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10) I don't know about you but I don't naturally think of myself in these terms. I don't naturally think of my church family in these terms. I don't naturally think of my brothers and sisters in Christ in the global church in these terms. Sin keeps all the focus on me. My wants. My desires. And when I let sin reign, I lose sight of who I truly am. Worship draws me back to my true self. It places God in the center of my life. Reminds me who I am and who I belong to and the price that was paid to secure my salvation. Worship floods my heart with gratitude and thanksgiving and praise for all God has done. Worship continually shapes and molds me into the image of Christ as I engage this holy rhythm over the course of a lifetime.

So here are some questions to ponder. Does your life revolve around worship of the Living God? How are you aligning your life with the holy rhythm God set up for His people? Do you spend time worshipping God each day? Do you gather with God's people for worship each week? Do you actively participate in the annual festivals like Christmas and Easter each year? Do you see these things are peripheral to your life or central? Are they easily sacrificed in favor of other opportunities or are they non-negotiable aspects to the life you are actively seeking to create for yourself and those you love?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 47-48, 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 28:12-13

November 24, 2029

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 47-48, 1 Peter 2:11-3:7, Psalms 119:49-64, Proverbs 28:12-13
Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1:1-2:23, 1 Peter 3:8-4:6, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 28:14

November 25, 2019

LIVING A GODLY LIFE IN AN UNGODLY WORLD

Readings for today: Daniel 1:1-2:23, 1 Peter 3:8-4:6, Psalms 119:65-80, Proverbs 28:14

“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 forcibly taken 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 godly lives in an increasingly ungodly world. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 2:24-3:30, 1 Peter 4:7-5:14, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 28:15-16

November 26, 2019

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Daniel 2:24-3:30, 1 Peter 4:7-5:14, Psalms 119:81-96, Proverbs 28:15-16

There isn't much in this world a little humility wouldn't solve. Part of the problem in our current "call-out" and "cancel" culture is our arrogance. We impugn motives. We make false assumptions. We refuse to acknowledge our own blind spots. We believe we are right and others wrong. We believe we are good and others evil. We believe in the righteousness of our own cause which necessarily requires us to believe those who oppose us are unrighteous. This scorched earth approach to politics, religion, economics, race, class, even casual conversation makes it impossible to build the bridges necessary for human life to flourish in all its diversity.

Contrast this approach to what the Spirit says through the Apostle Peter in our reading for today. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another…Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 4:8-10, 5:5-7) Can you imagine how much different our world would be if we embraced this way of life? Imagine how different social media would be? Imagine how different cable news would be? Imagine how different our political rhetoric would be? Imagine how different our family conversations around the dinner table would be?

Clothe yourself with humility. What does this actually mean? Humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. It's simply thinking of oneself less altogether. The more we decrease, the more others around us can increase. The more we seek to serve others in Christ's name, the more we bring blessing to those around us and the more glory we bring to Christ. The more we live as Jesus lived and love as Jesus loved, the more the world around us changes for the good. Humility is essential to this equation because we've been indoctrinated for far too long with the lie that we have to look out for number one. We have to take care of ourselves first. We must make sure our own needs get met before we seek the good of others. What a crock!

Humility is the key to unlocking the peace of God in our lives. It is only after we humble ourselves under God's mighty hand. Seeking in humility to obey His commands. Letting Him guide the course of our lives. Submitting to His will and His way that we are invited to cast all of our cares and worries and anxieties on Him. He does indeed care for us. More than we can know. More than we'll ever understand. But if we hold onto our pride, we will never truly give Him our anxieties and fears. Instead we will believe the lie that our struggles are too small for God's attention. Our fears too foolish for God to waste His time with. We will hold onto them with a white-knuckle grip all because we are too proud to admit we are weak. We are poor. We are powerless.

Friends, the truth of the matter is that we are all broken creatures. We have all been corrupted by sin. It's hardwired into our DNA at conception. It is confirmed by our thoughts, feelings, and actions ever single day. No amount of affirmation can assuage the existential guilt we all feel when we transgress the will of God. No amount of legal wrangling will grant us freedom from following God's commands. The more we run, the more anxious and depressed we become. The more we hide, the more fear takes hold. The more we distance ourselves from the One who loves us, the less secure we will feel. Stop running. Stop hiding. Stop holding your Savior at arm's length. Humble yourselves under His mighty hand and trust Him to lift you up in due time. Truly relinquish all your anxieties and fears to Him and receive the peace that passes all understanding.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4, 2 Peter 1, Psalms 97-112, Proverbs 28:17-18

November 27, 2019

PRAY FOR OUR POLITICAL LEADERS

Readings for today: Daniel 4, 2 Peter 1, Psalms 119:97-112, Proverbs 28:17-18

One of the most controversial commands in Scripture is the command to pray for our political leaders. To honor those in power over us. To seek the good of those in authority. The Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:17 commands us to "honor the emperor." The Apostle Paul commands us in 1 Timothy 2:2 to "pray for kings and others in power so we may live quiet and peaceful lives as we worship and honor God." Proverbs teaches us that "the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, He turns it wherever He will." And throughout the writings of the New Testament there is this command to be "subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1, Titus 3:1-2).

Too many of us reject these commands. Instead we tear down those rulers and governing authorities. We attack their character. We question their motives. We assume the worst rather than the best. Especially if they belong to another political party. We gleefully share fake news. We willingly embrace false narratives. We delight in calling them out or piling onto every single mistake. The examples are legion from the past several administrations. Both Republicans and Democrats are guilty. As are the Libertarians, Green Party, and Socialists. No one is innocent.

Imagine what would happen if we followed Daniel's example? If we truly sought the good of those who rule over us? If we truly sought to bless those who in authority? If we truly prayed for those who carry the weight of leadership in our nation? Imagine what would happen if we had the courage to speak truth to power - not out of a desire to tear them down but in an effort to build them up? With the hope of godly conviction? Imagine if instead of attacking those in power or engaging in power politics ourselves, Christians instead served as honest brokers? Serving presidents and politicians with no other goal than to encourage them to lead our nation well? Imagine if we could put aside our own sinful desires for photo ops in the Oval Office, influence in the corridors of power, and coercive control over the laws of our country?

Daniel was given a powerful position within Babylonian society. He had the ear of the king. He was known for his wisdom and godly character. He never sought personal gain. Never used political maneuvering for his own personal benefit. Never sought power or privilege or higher status. His allegiance was to a much higher authority. He lived for God alone and this made his position unassailable. When his political enemies came after him, they found nothing to pin on him. They dug up no dirt. They found no one who would speak against Daniel. Daniel's deep faith led to true freedom. He was free to speak God's truth to Nebuchadnezzer. Free to confront him on his pride and arrogance. Free to give him the bad news about the meaning of his dreams. Daniel was free to call Nebuchadnezzer to repent which he eventually did.

"King Nebuchadnezzar to all peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied to you! It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his dominion endures from generation to generation…At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?…Now I, Nebuchadnezzar,

praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble." (Daniel 4:1-3, 34-35, 37)

Where did Daniel find such freedom? Prayer. He humbly presented himself before the Lord multiple times a day. He came before the Lord with praise. He confessed his sins. He lifted up his needs and the needs of his people. And I am convinced Daniel prayed fervently for the kings he served like Nebuchadnezzer. Sometimes it is tempting to think we have it bad in our country. To think our leaders have reached a level of corruption that places them beyond the grace of God. Nothing could be further from the truth! Nebuchadnezzer was one of the world's great tyrants. When Peter and Paul talked about honoring and praying for the emperor, they were talking about Nero of Rome. Christians throughout the centuries and throughout the world today suffer under the harshest of regimes and still they pray for their leaders. Can we do any less?

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 5, 2 Peter 2, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 28:19-20

November 28, 2019

THANKSGIVING

Readings for today: Daniel 5, 2 Peter 2, Psalms 119:113-128, Proverbs 28:19-20

“You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.” (Psalms 119:114)

I am thankful this morning. Thankful for a family I love. Great friendships I treasure. Work that is meaningful and significant. A church family who loves and pursues Jesus. Freedom won for me at great sacrifice by those who serve in our Armed Forces. My life protected on so many levels by our first responders. A warm home. Plenty of food on my table. There is frankly very little want or need in my life.

Beyond and above all of that is a deep sense of gratitude for all God has done for me. He pursued me when I was lost and lonely. He lifted me in His arms and carried me through the darkest times of my life. He rejoiced with me at each of life’s special celebrations. My wedding day. The birth of each of my children. My graduation from seminary and my ordination to the ministry. He has been my hiding place when I am scared. He has been my shield when I felt under attack. He has been faithful to walk with me through every deep valley and summit every high mountain along the way.

I am thankful my God loved me so much He sent His one and only begotten Son to save me from my sin. I am thankful God loved this broken world so much He left heaven, threw Himself on the wheel of history, broke his own body in order to make her whole. I am thankful the Word became flesh and blood and made His dwelling among us. I am thankful God bridged the gulf Adam created between heaven and earth through his sin so that the door might be open and we find our way home. I am thankful God was willing to lay down His life for us. Sacrificing the glory of heaven for the humiliation of earth. Sacrificing the splendor of heaven for the dullness of earth. Sacrificing the sweet communion of heaven for the discord of earth. God gave up so much to save us. As the old hymn says so beautifully, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?”

It is so easy to focus on all the ungodliness in our world. The blasphemies committed in Daniel 5 or referenced in 2 Peter 3. But today is a day of thankfulness. A day of gratitude. A day to focus not on how far we fall short but on how far God is willing to go to save! My prayer for you is that your day would be filled with joy and laughter. Fellowship and friendship. Fun and games. Even if it is a hard day because you’ve lost someone you love. Or a tense day because of the relational strain in your family. Or a lonely day because you are separated from those closest to you. I pray even in these spaces that you experience the grace and mercy of God. That you find your heart strangely warmed by His presence. God is with us. This is the heart of the gospel. So we give thanks.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 6, 2 Peter 3, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 28:21-22

November 29, 2019

HOW LONG O LORD?

Readings for today: Daniel 6, 2 Peter 3, Psalms 119:129-152, Proverbs 28:21-22

I struggle to find words as an infant-sized casket is lowered into the ground. The sobs of the parents ring in my ears. There are stunned and bewildered looks on the faces of those who gather for support. How long O Lord? How long?

I sit at the bedside of a woman dying from cancer. Her body ravaged by chemo and radiation. Her husband stands by her side weeping. Her children and grandchildren struggling to understand how this could happen so fast. So soon. How long O Lord? How long?

I listen to a friend of mine share about the injustices he has faced. His only crime is the color of his skin. Profiled. Pulled over. Humiliated in front of his children. He is angry. He shakes his fist in frustration at a society that simply cannot get beyond its racist past. How long O Lord? How long?

I pray with a family who's been in country for over a decade. They work hard. They've done everything right. Their visa's been renewed year after year. But because immigration has become a political football, they are about to lose everything. Their home. Their community. They anticipate being denied access to the US and having to start all over again back in a country they no longer consider home. How long O Lord? How long?

I visit a remote village in Africa. The rains are delayed this year. Drought sweeps the region. Livestock are dying. Crops are failing. Children are suffering. Helpless and hopeless, the men and women of the village look to me but I cannot save them. How long O Lord? How long?

I often find myself asking God, "Why the delay?" "What are you waiting for?" "Why do you not end the suffering in our world?" And God answers me from His Word. "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." (2 Peter 3:8-10) Yes, this world is full of suffering. Yes, this world is full of pain. Yes, this world is full of heartbreak. Evil runs rampant. Sin corrupts all it touches. Creation groans under the strain. This is not how things should be. This is not what God wanted. This was never God's plan.

The world was designed to flourish and thrive under the care and protection of a high priest God made in His image. The world was designed to house the glory of God as human beings bore His image out to all creation. The world was designed to be cultivated and nourished by the work of our hands. But we abandoned our calling. We abdicated our position. We relinquished our divinely-appointed role. Sin entered the world and the natural consequence for sin is death.

So why doesn't God act? Why doesn't God put an end to this world? Think about what you're asking. On the great Day of the Lord, the heavens will pass away with a roar. Heavenly bodies will burn up and dissolve. Old things will pass away to make room for the new. Those image-bearers who do not repent. Who have yet to bow the knee to Christ. Who refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord will be doomed to an eternity apart from God. This is why God is slow to act. He is not slow because He is sadistic. He is

slow because He is patient. Time doesn't pass for Him like it does for us. He is waiting. Waiting patiently for all to repent. Waiting patiently for all to come to faith. And He is at work among us, drawing us to Himself. He holds the suffering close. He is with those who walk through the valley of the shadow of death. He is near to the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

So come to Him if you are weary. Come to Him if you are heavy laden. Come to Him if you are weighed down by the stresses and cares and worries of this world. Come and find rest for your soul.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7, 1 John 1, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 28:23-24

November 30, 2019

TRANSPARENCY

Readings for today: Daniel 7, 1 John 1, Psalms 119:153-176, Proverbs 28:23-24

It's the hidden things that kill us. The stuff we bury deep inside. The secrets we keep. Yesterday, I saw the movie, It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood, which tells the story of Mr. Rogers and his friendship with a reporter named Lloyd. Lloyd is a troubled man. He is filled with all kinds of pain. Abandoned by his father as a boy, he watched as his mother died in agony. He's never forgiven his father. Never forgotten his betrayal. And the anger he feels is poisoning his soul. He is cynical. He is bitter. And these unprocessed feelings warp his view of the world. Then he meets Mr. Rogers. Mr. Rogers is transparent. He is who he is whether on set or on the street. He has nothing to hide. As 1 John says so well, "He walks in the light."

I know so many Lloyd's. I've talked with them in my office. Prayed with them after worship. Met them for coffee at Fika. They've shared with me a bit of their darkness. Opened up to me about their pain. Confided in me their heartbreaks. So much of their lives are lived in fear of what might happen should they be exposed. They walk in darkness. I know this journey well. I too have walked in darkness. I too wander there every now and again. I am not immune. There are things I've done that I'm ashamed of. There are things I've said I wish I could take back. There are people I've hurt through my carelessness and callousness. And it is so tempting to try and move on. To stuff my emotions down deep inside and pretend I'm okay. But just like Lloyd, those things have a way of rising to the surface. Left unchecked, they begin to infect all we say and do. This is why we seem to repeat the same mistakes over and over again.

John points us to a different way. "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:5-10) For far too long I read "light" and "darkness" in this passage as right and wrong. Good and evil. And I despaired. For I do not walk in the light as I should and so I would beat myself up over and over again. But now I think I understand John better. He's not suggesting we live a life of perfection before God but a life of transparency. We walk in the light. Nothing hidden. Nothing held back. Nothing secret. We expose all that we are to the light of God's presence. As we walk transparently before Him, we have fellowship with one another. True, deep, rich, authentic fellowship. Intimate relationships. Spiritual friendships. This is the natural byproduct of a life lived in the light. Walking transparently is not easy. It is scary. It is risky. We will constantly feel exposed and under threat. But we persevere knowing the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover all our sin. We endure trusting God to be faithful and just to forgive us. We push on knowing we are being continuously cleansed from all unrighteousness.

What secrets are you keeping? What parts of your life do you keep hidden even from those you love? Where have you embraced darkness out of fear of walking in the light? Confess your sins to God. Bring those things transparently before Him. Let the promise of His forgiveness wash over you. Let His Spirit cleanse you. Let His grace heal and strengthen you so that you may walk transparently before those you love. Share your deepest, darkest secrets with those closest to you. To be loved for who you are not just the image you project is source of true freedom.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 8, 1 John 2:1-17, Psalms 120, Proverbs 28:25-26

December 1 , 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Daniel 8, 1 John 2:1-17, Psalms 120, Proverbs 28:25-26

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 9:1-11:1, 1 John 2:18-3:6, Psalms 121, Proverbs 28:27-28

December 2, 2019

ANCIENT OF DAYS

Readings for today: Daniel 9:1-11:1, 1 John 2:18-3:6, Psalms 121, Proverbs 28:27-28

So I feel like I need to recap the last few days in Daniel as we head into the home stretch. The latter half of the book is confusing. Visions. Dreams. Terrifying nightmares. So much ink has been spilt trying to interpret the meaning of these chapters. 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 11:2-35, 1 John 3:7-24, Psalms 122, Proverbs 29:1

December 3, 2019

DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for today: Daniel 11:2-35, 1 John 3:7-24, Psalms 122, Proverbs 29:1

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 and though our reading today breaks up his final vision, it's best to read chapters 10-12 as a literary whole. To understand what's happening in these crazy dreams, you need to know the background. You need to know where Daniel stands in the timeline. You need to know what's happening in the life of Israel.

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.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 11:36-12:13, 1 John 4, Psalms 123, Proverbs 29:2-4

December 4, 2019

DISCERNMENT

Readings for today: Daniel 11:36-12:13, 1 John 4, Psalms 123, Proverbs 29:2-4

Discernment is a lost art. The ability to determine right from wrong. Truth from falsehood. Good from evil. In fact, recent studies have shown how challenging it is for people to identify fake news, debunk conspiracy theories, and identify propaganda. The crisis is compounded by the rise in online warfare as Chinese troll farms and Russian bots weaponize social media to sow seeds of dissent and confusion in societies that value free speech. All this is made possible, of course, by post-modern philosophies that started taking hold late in the 20th century where truth was intentionally relativized, individualized, and marginalized. The results are not good. We are more depressed than ever. More anxious than ever. More dis-integrated than ever. The social fabric of our culture tearing apart at the seams.
Over and against the prevailing winds come these words from the Apostle John, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. 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. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error." (1 John 4:1-6)

The Graeco-Roman world was a lot like our own. People did what was right in their own eyes. It was a culture that showed little to no restraint. People were encouraged to engage in whatever behaviors felt good and right at the time. John is writing to Christian believers who are trying to remain faithful to Jesus in the midst of all the mess. He wants them to be able to know right from wrong. Good from evil. Truth from error. So he offers them a roadmap as it were. A decision-making matrix that will allow them to find the godly path.

Test #1: Does the thought, attitude, or action align with Jesus? Does it reflect the ethics of the Kingdom of God? Does it bring honor and glory to His name? Will following the "spirit of the age" lead one to confess or deny Jesus?

Test #2: Resist temptation. Once one determines what is good and true and noble and right and godly, one must resist the very real temptation to go the other way. To listen to the false prophets. To follow the ways of the world. It's tempting to think we are at the mercy of our feelings. Trapped by our biology. But these are lies from the spirit of the anti-Christ. John promises that in Christ we have the power to overcome temptation because greater is He that is in us than is in the world.

Test #3: Hold fast to your identity in Christ. No matter what challenges may come. No matter what difficulties you may face. No matter how much stress and anxiety and fear you may endure. You are from God. You are in Christ. Your heart has been transformed and renewed by the Holy Spirit. Listen to God's Word. Obey God's commands. Trust in His will and His way for your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-3, 1 John 5, Psalms 124, Proverbs 24:5-8

December 5, 2019

MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE?

Readings for today: Hosea 1-3, 1 John 5, Psalms 124, Proverbs 29:5-8

How many times have I heard well-meaning people tell those who are hurting or grieving or suffering, “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” I think the prophets would beg to differ. As we’ve read through the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel, how many times have we seen God ask - even demand - more from His prophets than any person should ever be able to handle? Speaking truth to power. Risking your life over and over again. Wandering naked through the streets. Embodying the coming judgment of God. And just when we can’t think it could ever get any worse along comes the prophet Hosea. Called by God to marry a prostitute. His life would mirror the broken relationship between God and His people. 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.

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.

It is abundantly clear throughout the book of Hosea that our only hope in life or death is the great faithfulness of God. The steadfast loyal love of God for His people. No matter what we may do or where we may go or how many times we play the “whore” and chase after other gods. God 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)

The heart of the gospel has nothing to do with us and everything to do with God. The fundamental truth of our lives is that we all fall short of God's glory. We all run from God to the far country and play the prodigal. We all would much rather wallow in the muck and mire of sin than surrender to God. The reality is life often gives us more than we can handle which is why we need God. And the great news is He is faithful. He 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 4-5, 2 John 1, Psalms 125, Proverbs 29:9-11

December 6, 2019

FACE TO FACE

Readings for today: Hosea 4-5, 2 John 1, Psalms 125, Proverbs 29:9-11

“Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.” (2 John 1:12)

We live in such a lonely world. Though we are more connected than ever, our relationships are superficial at best. We no longer know how to talk to each other. No longer know how to engage each other. No longer know how to share with each other. I see this particularly in my children’s generation. It’s amazing to me how scared they often are to make a simple phone call much less talk to someone face to face. Of course, this isn’t just a “millennial thing.” People across the age spectrum are finding it hard to relate to each other.

I remember years ago being asked by an older woman if I would come talk to her neighbor about Jesus. I asked her how long she had lived next to this person. “Over thirty years” was her response. And why have you never shared Jesus with her? “Because we only talk about the Packers and the weather.” What do you know about this person? “Well, they lost their spouse a few years ago. Went through a bout of cancer. Struggled with their kids a bit.” And you’ve never shared Jesus with them? Never taken them a meal? Never invited them over for dinner? Never prayed with them in the midst of their struggles? “No”. The look on her face was heartbreaking. She simply did not know how to get from the Packers to the deeper issues her neighbor was struggling with. I can sympathize.

We live in a world that fosters disconnection from real, flesh and blood, face to face relationships. The busyness of our daily lives creates relational distance. The pace we try to keep promotes exhaustion. The activity level we maintain connects us with lots and lots of different people but prevents us from spending the kind of time we need to build deep, intimate friendships. The result is isolation. Loneliness. Social anxiety. Fear. These things conspire to create a vicious cycle that only leads us deeper and deeper into despair.

Contrast this way of life with the way of Jesus. The celebration of Christmas is the celebration of the Incarnation. This miraculous idea that God would actually leave heaven to come to earth. The Word becoming flesh and blood and moving into our neighborhood. God becoming one of us that He might see us face to face. Go eyeball to eyeball with His beloved children in order to draw them into intimate relationship with Him. I’ve often had people ask me why God couldn’t make His will more plain. Why can’t God make His love more obvious? Why doesn’t He just write us a note and spread it across the skies? Because God doesn’t work like that. God’s not into text messages or social media. He’s not going to shoot you an email or hit you up on Snapchat. He came for you. He’s coming for you. He will not rest until He gets to look you in the face and tell you of His deep love for you. This Christmas season, may we not only receive His love but share it face to face with those around us.

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9, 3 John 1, Psalms 126, Proverbs 29:12-14

December 7, 2019

TAKING SIN SERIOUSLY

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9, 3 John 1, Psalms 126, Proverbs 29:12-14

"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!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14, Jude 1, Psalms 127, Proverbs 29:15-17

December 8, 2019

SCRIPTURES FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14, Jude 1, Psalms 127, Proverbs 29:15-17
Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3, Revelation 1, Psalms 128, Proverbs 29:18

December 9, 2019

REPENTANCE

Readings for today: Joel 1-3, Revelation 1, Psalms 128, Proverbs 29:18

Joel is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament mainly because of how it describes repentance 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. So we believe the lies. If we could just elect the right person. Just put the right programs in place. Just attend church more often. Just worship with more emotion. Sadly, we will do anything and everything to avoid falling on our faces, helpless before the Lord. We will do all we can to avoid putting on sackcloth and ashes. We simply refuse to bow the knee. Confession of sins both personal and corporate is a lost art. 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 than we do in heartfelt prayer. We spend much time guarding our hearts because we've been wounded than forgiving those who hurt us. We have such little faith but remain unwilling to put the time and effort in to deepen our relationship with Christ. I know these are broad 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 getting in our face. He leaves us no room for equivocation. We either accept or reject them and the consequences of our decision is clear. If we reject them, there will be judgment. If we accept them, there will be blessing.

“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)

Friends, the Word of God is clear. God desires to bring revival to His people. But revival requires repentance. Revival requires submission to God’s will. To God’s way. And most importantly, to God’s love. Until we do this, we will not see revival come. 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 1-3, Revelation 2:1-17, Psalms 129, Proverbs 29:19-20

December 10, 2019

GOD'S JUSTICE

Readings for today: Amos 1-3, Revelation 2:1-17, Psalms 129, Proverbs 29:19-20

We all want justice. We want those who do evil to get what they deserve. We want those who commit the crime to do the time. No one can stand above the law. No one should get a pass. Be they a President or a member of the US Congress. Be they a lawyer or a doctor. A pastor or a priest. Everyone is subject to the governing authorities and all should be held accountable for their actions. We believe this passionately. It's driving our political debates right now. It's the underlying premise behind the Mueller Report and the Horowitz Report and the Impeachment process. Justice is all we seem to talk about these days.

But what about God's justice? What about when God judges the nations of the earth? What about when God judges Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, the Ammonites, and Moab for the violence and suffering they caused? What do we think when God applies the "eye for an eye" standard against those who transgress His Law? We start to backpedal. We start making excuses. We reject justice in favor of mercy and even begin to question the character of God. Why? Because down deep. In places dark and secret in our hearts. We all know we are guilty. We all know we are sinful. We all know we make mistakes. We all know we commit crimes against God and our fellow human beings every single day. And while we will cry out for justice against others, we certainly don't want that same standard applied to us. While we will go on social media and attack others, we never want those guns turned on us. While we cast aspersions on other people's character, question their motives, and assume the absolute worst of their intentions; we definitely want to be given a break. Shown a little grace. Given a little mercy. In short, we are so quick to judge others but so unwilling to judge ourselves.

The same was true for Israel. As they people of God, they enjoyed a special relationship with their Creator. "'You only have I known of all the families of the earth…" (Amos 3:2) God had chosen them from among the nations of the earth. He had shown them favor. Showered them with blessing. Given them His Law. God's desire was that they would become a light to the pagan nations that surrounded them. They would serve as His instrument of salvation in the world. But Israel rejected God's Word. They rebelled against God's Law. They betrayed God at every turn. So God lays down His judgment on His own people. They would not escape His righteous justice.

What was true for the people of Israel remained true for the churches of Revelation. What was true for the churches of Revelation remains true for us today. We all stand under God's judgment. We are all subject to God's justice. All of us are guilty. All of us stand condemned. Left on our own with no advocate to speak for us before the Father, all of us would suffer the same fate as the pagan nations that surrounded Israel or the Nicolaitans whom God hated. This is why we need Jesus. The Righteous One who took our place. Stood as our substitute. Took the punishment we deserved. Satisfied the demands of God's justice. Turned aside God's wrath. It is only through faith in Christ that we escape the wrath to come. This is the true message of Christmas. God loving the world so much He sends His only Son to suffer on our behalf. God desiring none to perish so He takes the sin of the world on His own shoulders. God unwilling to watch the creature made in His image continue their descent into darkness, evil, and pain so He plunges into the depths to rescue. To save. Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 4-6, Revelation 2:18-3:6, Psalms 130, Proverbs 29:21-22

December 11, 2019

LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN…

Readings for today: Amos 4-6, Revelation 2:18-3:6, Psalms 130, Proverbs 29:21-22

Whenever I read the words from Amos 5:24, I immediately think of Martin Luther King Jr. This verse was one of many that formed the bedrock of the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's. Delivered August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial, this sermon is one of the greatest ever delivered. Sadly, Martin's dream has yet to be realized but his words remain timely and relevant for our own time.

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of the Nation. Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon of light and hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as the joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chain of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corner of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to the capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men -- black men as well as white men -- would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But it is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check -- a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity in this Nation.

So we have come to cash this check. A check that will give us the riches of freedom and the security of justice.We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America that the fierce urgency is now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to life our Nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the Nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning.Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will be content will have a rude awakening if the Nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America until the Negro is granted his

citizenship rights. The whirlwind of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our Nation until the bright day of Justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever continue our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people -- for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is inextricably tied up with our destiny. They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.

We cannot walk alone, and as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights: "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We can not be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating "For Whites Only." We cannot be satisfied so long as the Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and the Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi. Go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettoes of our northern cities knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this Nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed--"we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a Nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the conduct of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its Governor, having his lips dripping the words of interposition and nullification -- one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and little white girls as brothers and sisters.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted: every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plane, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our Nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together; to pray together; to struggle together; to go to jail together; to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring. From the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire, let freedom ring. From the mighty mountains of New York, let freedom ring, from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania, let freedom ring, from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the crevatial slopes of California.

But not only that. Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill in Mississippi. From every mountainside.

Let freedom ring and when this happens...And when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at Last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, We're Free at Last!”

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 7-9, Revelation 3:7-22, Psalms 131, Proverbs 29:23

December 12, 2019

PSALMS OF ASCENT

Readings for today: Amos 7-9, Revelation 3:7-22, Psalms 131, Proverbs 29:23

"O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore." (Psalms 131:1-3)

Today's reading finds us in the middle of what the Bible calls the "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 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.

I think these Psalms are particularly potent during the Christmas season. For centuries, Christmas dedicated the weeks leading up to Christmas for reflection and prayer and fasting. Advent is one of the "penitential seasons" of the church where we spend intentional time denying ourselves the pleasures of this world in order to prepare for the coming of the Christ child. Sadly, we have commercialized this season. We've turned it into a season of excess. We eat too much. Drink too much. Spend too much. While there is greater generosity and greater joy, there is also a lot of stress and anxiety and fear as well. Depression rates skyrocket. Suicide rates go through the roof. People experience crisis after crisis. All because we have taken our eyes off of Jesus - the reason for the season - and fix them on the things of this world. This is where the Psalms of Ascent come in. They help focus us back on God. They lift our eyes above the hills to the One who comes to our rescue. They draw us into the presence of God where we can quiet our souls and calm our fears. They restore our hope in the Lord.
Imagine if you took the next twelve days and intentionally slowed things down. Imagine if you took the next twelve days and intentionally quieted things down. Imagine if you took the next twelve days and you filled your time with the Lord and the people you love. How would that change your experience of Christmas this year? Instead of feeling rushed and overwhelmed, you may find yourself feeling peace and joy. Instead of struggling to fit everything in, you may find yourself more focused on those relationships that are most important to you. Instead of barely making it to Christmas and through Christmas, you may find yourself with plenty of time to sit at the manger wondering at the glory of it all.

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah 1, Revelation 4, Psalms 132, Proverbs 29:24-25

December 13, 2019

THE WAY OF JESUS

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Revelation 4, Psalms 132, Proverbs 29:24-25

“For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” - Audre Lorde

At first glance, Audre Lorde is probably the last name you would expect to see cited on this blog. Lorde was a revolutionary. A proud black lesbian feminist whose deeply personal writings - both poetry and prose - contributed significantly to the Civil Rights movement. Most definitely not a Christian, Lorde identified more with the deities of her African roots. However, one of her most famous essays contains this powerful phrase, “The master”s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” Her essential argument is that real change requires us to dismantle current frameworks of thinking - the racist, patriarchal system in her mind - and replace them with new systems of thought. Put another way, any change generated from within a broken system remains broken and corrupted by the very system one is trying to change. I agree with her. Strangely enough, so does an ancient Jewish prophet named Obadiah.

“But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity; do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives; do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress. For the day of the Lord is near upon all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.” (Obadiah 1:12-15)

How many times have we seen it happen throughout human history? A marginalized group of people rise up in rebellion. Overthrow their oppressors. Replace those in authority with their own people. Only to fall prey to the same temptations. I think of what’s happening right now in Bolivia as a charismatic, revolutionary, indigenous leader swept into power by a populist revolt seeks to overturn the very constitution he swore to uphold by ignoring term limits. I think of the number of African nations that have watched this vicious cycle repeat itself over and over again. And I have concerns about the infighting in our own country. I think about the scorched earth policy both political parties employ to deny the other any kind of victory. It’s clearly a struggle for power with the winner gloating over the misfortune of the loser. The victor seeking to loot the wealth of the vanquished. The one who wins not content until they grind their opponent to dust. It’s a zero sum game. And all of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We will not find peace until we stop playing the “master’s game.” Stop playing by the “master’s rules.” Stop using the “master’s tools” to tear one another down.

The day of the Lord is coming, friends. A day of judgment. A day of recompense. When God Himself will arrive to judge the nations of the earth. As we have done…so shall it be done to us. Our deeds will return on our own heads. Our work will be tested with fire. Those who have placed their trust in Christ. Who have refused to play the by the rules of this world. Who have refused to conform to the patterns of this world. Who have refused to surrender to the powers and principalities who rule this world will be saved. As Christians, our primary allegiance is to the King of kings. Our primary loyalty is to the Lord of lords. Our citizenship belongs to the

kingdom of heaven. Our identity is grounded not in race. Not in sexuality. Not in gender. Not in wealth or power or privilege. But in Christ alone. As such, we are no longer slaves to the broken systems of this world. No longer servants to the corrupt frameworks of this earth. No longer bound and oppressed by the hate-filled, rage-fueled, violence-driven authority structures of this age. We can choose a different way. We can choose the way of peace. The way of hope. The way of joy. The way of love. We can choose the way of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4, Revelation 5, Psalms 133, Proverbs 29:26-27

December 14, 2019

DYING TO SELF

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4, Revelation 5, Psalms 133, Proverbs 29:26-27

Jonah is a great book. Especially when read in it's historical context. The northern kingdom of Israel has just been destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. They've been scattered to the four winds. Forcibly resettled in new lands. Their way of life gone forever. And now we get to read of God's prophetic attempt to call those same Assyrians to repentance. To say Jonah is an unwilling prophet is an understatement! 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. 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 requires us to die to self in order to live for someone else. 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 should set Christians apart from the rest of the world.

Unfortunately, too many Christians 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 Christian 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 Bernie supporters? Rich as well as poor? Privileged as well as under-privileged? The list is infinite but thankfully so is God's grace.

The way to life is the way of love. And the way of love is the way of sacrifice. We must die so others might live. We must lay down our lives so that others may thrive. We must give our lives away so that others might rise. Friends and enemies alike. Worthy and unworthy alike. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it looks like to have the heart of God.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4, Revelation 6, Psalms 134, Proverbs 30:1-4

December 15, 2019

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Micah 1-4, Revelation 6, Psalms 134, Proverbs 30:1-4
Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7, Revelation 7, Psalms 135, Proverbs 30:5-6

December 16, 2019

GOD'S EVERLASTING ARMS

Readings for today: Micah 5-7, Revelation 7, Psalms 135, Proverbs 30:5-6

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, 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 so crucial for our 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 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!

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3, Revelation 8, Psalms 136, Proverbs 30:7-9

December 17, 2019

TWO-FACED GOD

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3, Revelation 8, Psalms 136, Proverbs 30:7-9

"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. The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness." (Nahum 1:2-8)

The Romans had a myth about a god named Janus. Janus was the god of beginnings and endings. He looked to both the future and the past. He was the god of transitions. The god of dualities. The god of doorways and gates. As such, he was always depicted as having two faces.

One of the most common questions I get when we read the Bible in groups is why God seems to have two faces. Why God seems to have two natures. The Old Testament often depicts Him as a vengeful, angry deity capable of great atrocities while the New Testament often depicts Him as a God of love and grace and mercy. What gives? How can both be true? Should we just jettison the Old Testament as irrelevant to our understanding of God's nature and character as some are wont to do? Jesus doesn't leave us that option. He tells us not one "jot or tittle" will pass from the Law. He clearly believes His Messiahship is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as much as He is our God today. He is the Alpha and the Omega. The Beginning and the End. He is the Lord of life and the Lord of time. In a sense, He is the true Janus with this one critical difference…He only has one face.

God is eternally consistent and He interacts with His creation in an eternally consistent way. From the beginning, God makes the heavens and the earth out of nothing. It is perfect. It is good. He then makes a creature in His own image. Endows it with the ability to discern right from wrong. Good from evil. Obedience from disobedience. He gives this creature dominion over all He has made. The sole reason for this creature's existence is to steward all creation for the glory of God. Care for creation as the high priest of God. And creation itself is designed to thrive under the authority of this image-bearing creature. Tragically, the creature rebels against God. Rejects his calling. And abuses his authority. Now the world suffers. The world groans. The world cries out in pain. Disease. Pestilence. Violence. Natural disasters. Famine. Drought. These are signs of a world in chaos. A world in turmoil. A world in upheaval because the high priest has abandoned his call in order to serve himself.

All of us are guilty. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory God originally intended for us. All of us are naturally selfish. Self-interested. Self-promoting. Self-absorbed. We are our highest priority. Taking care of self is our number one goal. This is the opposite of God's design. In God's eyes, it is "evil" and the source of all the pain in the world. God is just. He is holy. He is righteous. So He judges the people of the earth. He sends His prophets to call them to account for their sin. He rightly demands they get back to work. Return to their high calling. Fulfill the

purpose for which they were designed in the first place. But humanity continues to rebel. Continues to dig in their heels. They make other gods. Gods they can control. Gods they can manipulate. Gods who reflect their broken image. These gods are lifeless of course. They offer nothing because they are not real. So sin piles up on sin. The injustice and violence and suffering of the world increases. Eventually, God does step in. He punishes. He puts an end to evil. The results are terrifying in their scope and power. Still humanity protests. Still humanity blame-shifts. How can God be so cruel? How can God be so unfair? How can God be so unloving?

Eventually, in the fullness of time, God sends His one and only Son into the world. This has been God's plan all along. Hatched in the mists of eternity before time began. God plotting to rescue His creation from the Fall. Planning to redeem the creature made in His image and restore him to his rightful place in the world. Sin has piled up on sin. The injustice and violence and suffering only continues to increase. So God steps in. He takes our punishment. He puts an end to evil. The scope and power of Jesus' suffering and death is terrifying to behold. How can God be so cruel to His Son? How can God be so unfair as to lay the sin of the world on His shoulders? How can the Father be so unloving towards His beloved Son?

In Christ, the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament come together. Jesus satisfies the demands of the Father's justice. He turns away the Father's righteous wrath. He takes the Father's righteous judgment on Himself. In so doing, He becomes a refuge for all who would come to Him. He becomes a stronghold for all who would run to Him. He becomes a sanctuary for all who would seek shelter in Him. He is good and His love endures forever!

Readings for tomorrow: Habakkuk 1-3, Revelation 9, Psalms 137, Proverbs 30:10

December 18, 2019

IS GOD ENOUGH?

Readings for today: Habakkuk 1-3, Revelation 9, Psalms 137, Proverbs 30:10

“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 after he committed rape and adultery. 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?

Especially during this Christmas season, I hope you will take time to ponder and reflect on the gift of Jesus. He truly is more than enough!

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3, Revelation 10, Psalms 138, Proverbs 30:11-14

December 19, 2019

THE CHALLENGE OF REVELATION

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3, Revelation 10, Psalms 138, Proverbs 30:11-14

I always find it strangely appropriate to finish my Bible reading each year in the Book of Revelation. As we head into the celebration of Christmas - the first advent of Jesus Christ - it is good to let our hearts naturally turn to His second advent. The day when He comes again. When the living and the dead are raised and 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.

Does this mean we should just chuck Revelation? Of course not. But as we read, we should remind ourselves over and over again of the words John spoke to the seven churches. They must become the "lens" through which we read the rest of the book. After all, this letter was initially intended for their benefit and encouragement. As you and I struggle and wrestle through the ups and downs of life. As we battle our own demons and fight against forces beyond our control. As we watch our country and our world descend into more and more chaos. I believe these words from John become more and more relevant. "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)

It is good to know that God is in control. Not in a flippant, cliche, empty platitude kind of way but a real, gritty, earthy, down-in-the-weeds, feet-on-the-ground kind of experience that undergirds all of life. It is good to hold fast to an eternal perspective when things in this life go haywire. To know God is at work even now building a new Jerusalem which will one day descend to earth. To know that God is at work even now preparing a place for each and every one of us

that we may dwell with Him forever. To know that God is at work not just in heaven above but in earth below to draw many to Himself. He sends us out in His name to fight injustice. To minister peace. To heal the sick. Visit those in prison. Clothe the naked. Feed the hungry. Bring the good news of the gospel to those who have not heard or who need to hear again. Do we as the church often lose our way? Of course. Just look at the warnings John issues to the seven churches. Ephesus, you have lost your first love. Smyrna, you are about to suffer terribly. Pergamum, too many of follow false teaching. Thyatira, you tolerate sexual immorality and idolatry. Sardis, your works are not yet complete. Philadelphia, hold fast to your faith. Laodicea, pick a side. Sounds about right. Par for the course for the church of Jesus Christ. We are mixed bag. Broken people trying our best to follow Jesus. We won't always get it right. We won't always get it wrong. Thankfully, our eternal destiny does not rest on our faithfulness but on the faithfulness of the One who declares, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." (Revelation 1:17-18)

As your journey through the Bible in 2019 comes to a close and you ponder what the Lord may be calling you to in 2020, what lessons have you learned? How has your faith been challenged? Where have you found comfort? How have you grown spiritually? What questions persist? What doubts continue to plague? Don't be afraid to take these to Jesus! He is not afraid of your fears. He is not daunted by your questions. He doesn't get angry over your battle with unbelief. He is here to help. He is here to comfort. He is here to guide. Trust Him and He will see you through!

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2, Revelation 11, Psalms 139, Proverbs 30:15-16

December 20, 2019

CREATED FOR WORSHIP

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2, Revelation 11, Psalms 139, Proverbs 30:15-16

What is the meaning of life? Why are we put on this green earth? What is our purpose? What is God's will? These are the fundamental questions of our existence. And no matter how hard we try or how much we drink or how many pills we take or how much we smoke or how much we eat or how much we save or how much we spend or how hard we work out or how successful we become or how much sex we experience or how many children we have or how much power and control we are able to gain…we will never find peace until we find the answers. For thousands of years humanity has been on this quest. Searched high and low. Traversed the globe. Looked in every nook and cranny on earth. To no avail. U2 was right. We still haven't found what we're looking for.

What is the chief end of man? What is the reason for our existence? Why are we here? To worship God and enjoy Him forever. To praise God for who He is and what He's all about. To serve God and bear Him glorious image to the world. This is why God comes down so hard on Israel when they neglect the rebuilding of His Temple. It's not that God's homeless. It's not that God is feeling lonely. It's not that God somehow is dependent on the worship of His people. Far from it. God created the universe and all that is in it and exists outside time and space in perfect communion with Himself. But God does love us and He desires to have a relationship with us and the Temple is the place where Israel could come and meet with Him. The Temple was the place where Israel could come and worship Him. The Temple was the place where heaven met earth and on that threshold we find all our fundamental questions answered.

"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." (Haggai 1:3-6, 8)

God will have the worship He deserves and the worship He demands. He created us to praise Him. Created us to worship Him. Created us to serve Him. When we abandon those purposes or neglect those purposes, our lives descend into chaos and confusion. When we are attentive to the Lord and surrender to His will and willingly offer our lives to Him, we experience the blessings of peace and joy and love that pass all understanding. As you head into Christmas this year, where is your heart? Is it drawn towards worship? Drawn to the stable? Drawn to the manger? Drawn towards the Christ child? Do you find your heart longing to go to the "Temple" to worship the Living God?

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1, Revelation 12, Psalms 140, Proverbs 30:17

December 21, 2019

UNDERSTANDING REVELATION

Readings for today: Zechariah 1, Revelation 12, Psalms 140, Proverbs 30:17

Imagine for a moment you live in a world full of violence. Suffering. Pain. Disease. A world where food can be scarce. Clean water unreliable. Disposable income non-existent. Imagine your political leaders are corrupt. Regime change is a constant. Imagine armies marching through your town, your city, your community with frequency. Stripping your storehouses bare. Often burning your fields. Stealing everything of value. Imagine feeling trapped. Helpless. Powerless.

Now layer in the fact that you are a Christian in a predominantly pagan city. There are only about twenty to thirty of you. You have no wealth. No political power. No cultural influence. You are considered an oddity at best, seditious at worst. Because you refuse to participate in the cult of the emperor or the cultural festivals of your city, you are often persecuted. The people taking out their anger and frustration on you with great regularity. Because you follow special rules regarding diet, practice sexual restraint, and care for the sick, poor, and dying; you stand out. You cannot hide. You are marginalized.

Such was the lot of the early Christians John was writing to and it is against this backdrop that we have to read Revelation. Especially passages like the one we find in chapter twelve. The early Christians faced significant persecution. Their lives were threatened almost every day. Living out their faith was not safe. It was costly. It was sacrificial. They were discriminated against in the workplace, in the marketplace, and in the halls of political power in their communities. So when John writes about the suffering of the woman in Revelation and the terrifying might of the dragon as he pursues her, one can easily imaging those early Christians drawing strength and hope from his words…"Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Revelation 12:10-11)

One of the reasons reading and understanding Revelation is so hard for us is we've never experienced persecution. Not on the level of our brothers and sisters in the first century or in places like China or Iran today. We have lived relatively comfortable lives of privilege, power, wealth, and influence. We've enjoyed a somewhat unprecedented run of peace especially if one is white and middle class. We've not had to grapple with institutional discrimination. Systemic persecution.We don't know what it's like to be targeted by the government, and more importantly, the government's police force. And so we are left to speculate. Left to hypothesize on the identity of the woman and the dragon. Left to conjecture on when the war will happen and why God allows the war in the first place.

These questions are important ones but it is equally important to keep in mind the cultural distance between us and those Christians who are living under intense persecution around the world, including our own country. For them, these words are not allegorical but literal. They know what it's like to hear the dragon's roar, feel his breath, and endure his relentless pursuit. They know what it's like to watch their loved ones suffer and struggle and die for their faith. They are the casualties of the very real war being waged in the heavens. The dragon will not go quietly. He will not give up easily. He wants to take as many with him as he can.

So how do we read and understand this difficult book? We humbly let these truths sink in. We resist the temptation to engage this book philosophically and instead try to read it from the perspective of those who suffer. What hope can we find? What can we learn about perseverance and endurance and facing our trials by faith? How can we hold onto faith in the Son of God who came into the world to defeat the powers of darkness and destroy the devil once and for all?

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 2-3, Revelation 13, Psalms 141, Proverbs 30:18-20

December 22, 2019

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Zechariah 2-3, Revelation 13, Psalms 141, Proverbs 30:18-20
Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 4-5, Revelation 14, Psalms 142, Proverbs 30:21-23

December 23, 2019

SEALED AND SET APART

Readings for today: Zechariah 4-5, Revelation 14, Psalms 142, Proverbs 30:21-23

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 chapters seven and fourteen. 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 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 in chapter seven 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 in chapter seven 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, when this number reappears in chapter fourteen, 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.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 6-7, Revelation 15, Psalms 143, Proverbs 30:24-28

December 24, 2019

CHRISTMAS EVE

Readings for today: Zechariah 6-7, Revelation 15, Psalms 143, Proverbs 30:24-28

It's Christmas Eve. The most special and miraculous night of the year. I think of the millions who will gather around the globe this evening to sing praises to God for all He has done. To worship Christ the newborn King. To marvel at God's presence in a manger. To tell the old, old story once again.

Why does this story refuse to die? Why does it not just fade into history like so many other stories? What is it about this particular baby that makes Him stand out from all others? As many have pointed out over the years, human history is full of myths and legends. Full of miracles and signs and wonders. Many different religions have come and gone over the centuries. Why has Christianity persisted? Why does it remain so compelling? Historians puzzle over the answer. The rise of the Christian faith is one of the most unlikely things that has ever occurred. There really is no good human explanation for how a rag-tag bunch of uneducated disciples were able to convert an empire within three centuries. No one really understands or can explain how a group of largely poor, powerless, marginalized, and persecuted people were able to spread the gospel so far and wide.

Perhaps it is true? Perhaps this baby we celebrate tonight truly is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. Perhaps He is who He says He is. God incarnate in human flesh come to dwell among us. Come to be with us. Come to fight for us. This, of course, is the conclusion of literally billions of people on the earth today and throughout history. It is what keeps them coming back. It's what keeps them preaching. Keeps them serving. Keeps them giving so much of themselves for the sake of the world.

I love the picture today from the Book of Revelation. The saints of God who have triumphed over death. Those who have persevered through the trials and tribulations of this life. Those who have endured suffering and persecution but have held fast to their faith in Christ. Together, they gather before the throne. Spread out over a sea of glass mingled with fire. And what are they doing? They're singing. They're worshipping. They're praising God for all He has done. "And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Revelation 15:3-4)

Tonight you and I have the chance to sing the "song of the Lamb" once again. Sing the song of the Emmanuel. Wherever you gather this evening and whoever you gather with, I pray it is a special time of worship. May Christ fill your hearts with His presence and perfect love! Merry Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8, Revelation 16, Psalms 144, Proverbs 30:29-31

December 25, 2019

CHRISTMAS

Readings for today: Zechariah 8, Revelation 16, Psalms 144, Proverbs 30:29-31
Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 9, Revelation 17, Psalms 145, Proverbs 30:32

December 26, 2019

SONGS OF PRAISE

Readings for today: Zechariah 9, Revelation 17, Psalms 145, Proverbs 30:32

There may not be a better Psalm for the day after Christmas. After all the songs have been sung. The Word preached. The candles lit. The majesty and mystery of Christmas Eve comes to a close. We go to our homes. We eat good food. We drink good wine. We enjoy special time with those we love. Then life ramps up again. We head back to work. Homes empty as friends and family catch flights back home. Gifts are returned. Decorations taken down and put away for another year. Before we know it, we launch into another year.

It's easy to forget God in the midst of ordinary life. It's easy to lose sight of Him. It's easy for the feelings of peace and joy and love and grace to fade the further we get from Christmas. The Psalmist encourages us to keep praising God. To keep reminding ourselves of all His wonderful acts. To remain consciously aware of His abiding presence. To lay hold of His perfect love which casts out all fear. How do we do this? We worship. We praise. We glorify God each and every day of each and every week of each and every month in the coming year.

"I will exalt you, my God and King, and praise your name forever and ever. I will praise you every day; yes, I will praise you forever. Great is the Lord! He is most worthy of praise! No one can measure his greatness. Let each generation tell its children of your mighty acts; let them proclaim your power. I will meditate on your majestic, glorious splendor and your wonderful miracles. Your awe-inspiring deeds will be on every tongue; I will proclaim your greatness. Everyone will share the story of your wonderful goodness; they will sing with joy about your righteousness. The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. The Lord is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation. All of your works will thank you, Lord, and your faithful followers will praise you. They will speak of the glory of your kingdom; they will give examples of your power. They will tell about your mighty deeds and about the majesty and glory of your reign. For your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. You rule throughout all generations. The Lord always keeps his promises; he is gracious in all he does. The Lord helps the fallen and lifts those bent beneath their loads. The eyes of all look to you in hope; you give them their food as they need it. When you open your hand, you satisfy the hunger and thirst of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in everything he does; he is filled with kindness. The Lord is close to all who call on him, yes, to all who call on him in truth. He grants the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cries for help and rescues them. The Lord protects all those who love him, but he destroys the wicked. I will praise the Lord, and may everyone on earth bless his holy name forever and ever." (Psalms 145:1-21)

There is nothing more important for your spiritual life than meditating on promises of God. Reminding yourself of His steadfast love and faithfulness day after day. God is good. All the time. God is great. All the time. God is gracious and merciful. All the time. He is close to all who call on Him with a sincere heart. He protects those who love Him. He hears the cries of His people. He answers the prayers offered in His name and for his glory.

Friends, we are coming to the end of yet another year of reading Scripture together. Some of you finished early. Others fell behind. Others will finish right on time. I trust all of you wrestled and struggled and prayerfully reflected on how God was speaking to you through His Word as we read. It's not easy to read the Bible. It's not easy to attempt to immerse yourself in the strange

world of Scripture. But I believe God rewards those who diligently seek Him and I am thankful for the questions you asked. The doubts you wrestled over. The fears you courageously expressed. The way your faith has been challenged and tested and grown. I want to invite you to join us in 2020 for another round. We will launch around January 5th in the new year with a chronological plan that will involve reading six days with Sundays off as we join together in corporate worship. Looking forward to it!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 10-11, Revelation 18, Psalms 146, Proverbs 30:33

December 27, 2019

RESOLUTIONS

Readings for today: Zechariah 10-11, Revelation 18, Psalms 146, Proverbs 30:33

What are your resolutions for the coming year? The promises you are making yourself? Is it to eat better? Exercise more regularly? Is it to stop drinking? Stop smoking? Conquer some other addiction in your life? Is it to dream bigger? Start a new business? Launch out on a new career? Is it to try something new? Learn something you never thought you could? Is it to make more time for those you love? Slow down? Simplify?

Studies show four out of five people end up breaking their resolutions. Fully one-third barely make it past the first month. Why? Because we are often trying to accomplish these goals through sheer will-power alone. We try to make these changes without help. Without accountability. Without relying on anyone's strength but our own.

Listen to the wisdom of the Psalmist. "Don't put your confidence in powerful people (including yourself!); there is no help for you there. When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them. But joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God." (Psalms 146:3-5) God alone can give you the strength to change. In fact, if you have accepted Christ, His promise is that He will send His Spirit to dwell inside you. To initiate and accomplish His sanctifying work. He will make you more like Jesus! He will transform you from the inside out! He who began this good work in you will bring it completion!

What's our role in all this? Simply to surrender. To present ourselves before God day after day and ask Him to have His way with us. We open our hands and hearts to His love and grace. We intentionally seek to pattern our lives after His life. And what does His life look like? Again, hear the wisdom of the Psalmist. "He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. He keeps every promise forever. He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the godly. The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked." (Psalms 146:6-9)

Today in my devotional reading, I ran across this great quote from 20th century Christian missionary and statesman, Frank Laubach… "If anybody were to ask me how to find God I should say at once, hunt out the deepest need you can find and forget all about your own comfort while you try to meet that need. Talk to God about it and He will meet you there. You will know it." I believe this with all my heart because I have seen and experienced it with my own eyes. When I have gotten engaged in God's mission in the world, I have found Him waiting for me there. My faith grows. My heart breaks. My eyes fill with tears. And I realize God is changing me. Giving me His heart of compassion. His heart of love. His heart of mercy. And I am overwhelmed with deep thankfulness. This thankfulness spills over into my everyday life. I become a better husband and father. A wiser pastor. A more faithful friend.

If you are wondering what you can do in the coming year to "make God your helper", let me encourage the following four spiritual practices…

1) Spend time with God every day. Intentionally place yourself before Him and ask God to help you look at your life and the world around you through His eyes.

2) Gather with a local church family in corporate worship each week. Put it on your schedule right now. Before all the activities and opportunities begin to crowd God out. God promises to meet His people wherever two or three or more are gathered in His name.

3) Find a small group of friends to intentionally pursue Jesus with. Pursue relationships of authenticity and transparency and accountability. Deep spiritual friendships don't happen by accident. They require intentionality and sacrifice.

4) Find a place to serve. Inside the church. Outside the church. Both. Find a way to get involved in God's mission to reach the lost and to teach others all He has commanded us as believers. We were created to carry God's image to the ends of the earth. Get in touch with why you were made.

Don't try to do 2020 on your own! Don't fall for the lie that somehow you are strong enough or bold enough or talented enough or stubborn enough. Surrender to the Lord and He will become your helper. He will be your strength and your courage. He will lift you up and carry you though!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 12-13, Revelation 19, Psalms 147, Proverbs 31:1-7

December 28, 2019

FORWARD LOOK

Readings for today: Zechariah 12-13, Revelation 19, Psalms 147, Proverbs 31:1-7

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 as 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 emodiment 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 upheavel. 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)

Surely, it is argued, the gospel writers ripped these verses out of context. These prophecies were meant for a particular people bound to a particular time. But such a perspective is itself bound by modern, western understandings of philosophy that would have been completely foreign to the Hebrew authors of the Bible. For them, the text is living and active and often comes layered with different meanings. So it's the most natural thing in the world - after they meet the Risen Christ - to go searching through the Old Testament to understand the clues God left that lead us to faith in His Messiah. Such words - often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament - are

meant to remind us that 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.

Christmas is now behind us. The celebration of the first Advent of the Messiah naturally causes us to long for His second Advent. The day pictured in Revelation 19 when Jesus shall return to put all things right, make all things new, and put an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. But until that great "Day of the Lord" comes, what should 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. So these words from Zechariah encourage us just as they 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 will give victory to the rest of Judah first, before Jerusalem, so that the people of Jerusalem and the royal line of David will not have greater honor than the rest of Judah. On that day the Lord will defend the people of Jerusalem; the weakest among them will be as mighty as King David! And the royal descendants will be like God, like the angel of the Lord who goes before them! For on that day I will begin to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem. "Then I will pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the family of David and on the people of Jerusalem." (Zechariah 12:7-10)

"I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'These are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God." (Zechariah 13:9)

Friends, the Lord will come again! He is on His way even now! Every day brings us one step closer to the day when heaven comes to earth and every tear wiped away. Believe this! Trust this! Hold fast to your faith no matter circumstances this life may bring!

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 14, Revelation 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 31:8-9

December 29, 2019

SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY

Readings for today: Zechariah 14, Revelation 20, Psalms 148, Proverbs 31:8-9
Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-2, Revelation 21, Psalms 149, Proverbs 31:10-24

December 30, 2019

NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH

Readings for today: Malachi 1-2, Revelation 21, Psalms 149, Proverbs 31:10-24

I love the image of a new heavens and new earth. Creation redeemed. Creation renewed. Creation restored to its original glory. God finally putting an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. This is the final fulfillment of God's salvation plan. It's the final act of the divine play that's been working itself out since the opening words of Genesis. And as you let these words sink into your soul, take note of a few important things.

First, the new creation will be like a bride adorned for her husband. I remember well my wedding day. My wife has never looked more beautiful. Never more pure. Never more perfect than at that moment she walked down the aisle. (I have never felt more unworthy either!) The same is true for the new creation when it comes. God has always intended to have a relationship with His creation. He desires depth. Intimacy. Complete and total transparency. The kind of relationship we can only dream about this side of heaven. The kind of relationship of which human marriage is but a foretaste.

Second, there is no Temple. God is fully present and we are fully able to bear His presence in our glorified, resurrected bodies. God literally takes up residence with us. He can be seen. Touched. Heard. He wipes away our tears. He heals our infirmities. He makes us finally, completely, and utterly whole. There is no need for sun or moon for God will be our light. There is no need for walls or guards for God is in perfect control. There is no need for judgment or punishment for all the nations of the earth will walk in the light of the Lord and will bring Him the worship He deserves.

Third, there are no divisions in the new creation. No human distinctions to keep us apart. Every dividing wall of hostility will finally be torn down. The New Jerusalem is built on the foundation of the twelve apostles and her gates represent the twelve tribes. In other words, God will gather His people - Jew and Gentile alike - together and make them one. He will gather His people from every tribe, tongue and nation before His throne and all that separates us will fade away like mist before the Lord.

It's a beautiful picture, is it not? Now here's the challenge. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask for the church to be a living reflection of this future glory. We ask for God's will to be done in our lives. In our community. In our nation. In our world. How are we living and acting and speaking and treating others so that they see the new heavens and new earth emerging in our midst? How are we presenting to the world a picture of heaven? How are we giving those around us a foretaste of what's to come through what we say and do? Christians are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God in this world. As you close out your Bible reading this year, I'd encourage you to reflect on the following questions…

1) Is there less of you and more of Jesus than when you began this year?

2) What parts of your life have been crucified with Christ and therefore no longer live?

3) How have you intentionally died to self and sought to live for Christ?

Becoming more like Christ is more a marathon than a sprint. It involves a long obedience in the same direction. I hope you've gleaned that if nothing else from your reading this year. God is at work across the centuries and across the generations. His primary desire is to make us more and more into the image of His Son. To restore us to the image He originally intended for us to bear. May the Lord continue His work in us and among us and through us until He comes again! Maranatha!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 3-4, Revelation 22, Psalms 150, Proverbs 31:25-31

December 31, 2019

MARANATHA!

Readings for today: Malachi 3-4, Revelation 22, Psalms 150, Proverbs 31:25-31

Come, Lord Jesus!" Echoing Paul's famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - "Maranatha" - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heartcry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John 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 plan for this world have yet to reach its 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!

Postscript: If you’ve been walking through the Bible in a Year with us...well done! You’ve made it! Congratulations! This is a significant milestone in your spiritual life. What’s next? Do it again. And again. And again. Keep reading. Keep reflecting. Keep seeking to hear God’s voice through His Word. Email me if you would like to join us in 2020 as we dive back in with a new plan for a new year! Doug@pepc.org.