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April 1, 2020
LIVING SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Judges 10-13

The other night I had a conversation with my kids about sacrifice. We talked about how the greatest sacrifice one can make in our culture is to lay one's life down for someone else. This ethic, of course, comes from Jesus who Himself said, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Now, we tend to read this individually. We celebrate the individual hero who makes the sacrifice play. It is the basis of every great movie. The basis of every great story. I think of the narrative arc of the recent Avengers series in which a completely self-centered, self-absorbed person (Tony Stark) becomes the hero in the end who gives his life to save the world. It's the same narrative that underlies the Matrix trilogy. The Lord of the Rings. Star Wars. You name it.

However, Jesus would have understood this differently. Jesus lived in an "honor/shame" society. As such, He didn't think in individualistic terms. He thought more in terms of community. Nation. Covenant people. When Jesus talks about laying one's life down for his friends, He's talking about sacrificing for the sake of the whole. Preserving the honor – not just the life - of the community. Not only that but Jesus' own sacrifice preserves the honor of God Himself who promised to lay down His life for the sake of His covenant with His people way back in Genesis 15! One simply cannot overstate how important honor would have been in first century culture. And as we rewind back through the centuries. Back to the time of the Judges. Back to the time when Jephthah led Israel, the "honor/shame" dynamic would have been even stronger. This is critically important context to know if we are to understand the story.

Here's a second piece of context as well. 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. So when Jephthah made his rash vow, 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. But he feels trapped. After all, his honor is now on the line. The honor of his family. And in his own limited understanding, the honor of his God. His daughter understands this as well which is why she willingly lays down her life to preserve her family's honor! She willingly gives her life to help her father save face! She willingly accepts her fate and believes her family's reputation – and her God's reputation - is worth her sacrifice.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah go through with it? How could he 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, a key to understanding is provided from the letter Jephthah sends the king of the Ammonites in 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." You see, 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. And every deity demanded honor. Demanded worship. Demanded sacrifice. If you made the right

sacrifices, you were rewarded with great wealth, military might, and political power. If you honored your god, he would, in turn, honor you. However, make the wrong sacrifices or bring dishonor to your god in some way and you would face judgment. Defeat. Plague. Famine. Drought. Death. Sadly, as Jephthah's letter suggests, Israel had begun to buy into this way of thinking. They began to adopt the ways of the Canaanites – just as Yahweh said they would - and so Yahweh ceased, in their eyes, to be the One True God and became just another petty tribal deity. Thus, Jephthah's tragic choice to sacrifice his daughter and her tragic choice to accept her fate.

The most important takeaway for me today is God's silence. Nowhere does the Bible say God is pleased with Jephthah's decision. And just because something appears in the Bible doesn't make it good or godly or honoring. In fact, one of the things I love most about the Scriptures is its raw honesty about the character of the people God chooses to love. Gives me hope for myself! So how then should we respond to this text? What does it mean to give God...the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...the God revealed fully and completely in Jesus Christ...the honor He deserves and demands? Does it require human sacrifice? Not in the way Jephthah believed. Instead, it requires us to become "living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is our spiritual act of worship." (Romans 12:1) We honor God with the lives we lead. We honor God with the words we say. We honor God by how we treat others. Particularly those who are lost or struggling or lonely or afraid. In this particular cultural moment, we bring honor to God by the loving our neighbor. Remaining indoors. Submitting to the governing authorities. Praying for God to make Himself known in the midst of our national and international pain and suffering.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 14-17

April 2, 2020
HOLY DESPAIR

Readings for today: Judges 14-18

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

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

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

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

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

Why drive us to such despair? To teach us yet again of our need for God. Over and over again, the same narrative is reinforced. Humanity is hopeless. From Adam and Eve to the Great Flood. From Noah to the Tower of Babel. From Abraham to slavery in Egypt. From Moses to the end of Judges.

With each generation, man's inhumanity to man only grows. Only increases. Only becomes more pervasive. And we would be lost except for God. He continues to pursue us. He continues to reach out to us. He continues to be faithful even in the face of our unfaithfulness. The climax of this story is, of course, something we celebrate this Holy Week. Jesus' suffering. Jesus' death on a cross. Jesus' burial in a grave. Jesus' resurrection. God's ultimate and final victory over sin and death.

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-21

April 3, 2020
MADNESS

Readings for today: Judges 19-21

Today we encounter some of the most difficult material in all of Scripture. We see Israel at her lowest point. 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 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. Sadly, we see some of the same dynamics in play in our world today. Even amidst a global pandemic, some of our political leaders can't stop lying. Can't stop attacking one another. Can't stop trying to tear each other down in order to make themselves look good. It's horrifying. But it's not just them. It's us as well. Twitter is still full of rage and anger and hate. Racism is alive and well as people target Asian-Americans simply because the virus happened to originate in China. Ignorant and foolish people are being charged with assault for purposefully spitting on others. Greedy, self-serving opportunists try to make a quick buck by purchasing needed supplies in bulk to sell off at a profit. Hoarders strip the shelves bare of necessities leaving the most vulnerable among us to fend for themselves. And we haven't even begun to see the worst. The next three weeks promise to be among the most difficult we've ever faced as a nation. People will get sick. Loved ones will die. Jobs will be lost. Businesses will close. Fear and anxiety will only increase. And that's just here in the United States. What about those nations where the crisis is just beginning? Nations who do not have the benefit of first world resources? A national healthcare system? Access to technology? Doctors? Medicine? I shudder think of what this virus might do to the slums of Addis Ababa and others like it. Horror, indeed.

If we're totally honest, we know all of us are guilty on some level. I give into fear. I give into anxiety. As the stress builds, it can bring out the worst in me. Darkness that I've tried very hard to bury deep starts to emerge. As I read our passage today, I realize all of us are perpetrators. All of us are victims. We are the Levite. We are the concubine. We've sacrificed others and we've been sacrificed for the sake of self-protection and self-gratification. In the Bible's judgment, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to

shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:10-18)

Perhaps it's providential that we read this section of Judges as we enter Holy Week. A period of time where we reflect on the Cross. On the death of God. The most horrific act in human history. We reflect on the price Jesus paid. The blood He shed. The penalty He bore. This week we will reflect on the suffering He endured. The pain He experienced. The heartbreak of betrayal. We will reflect on the depth of our sin. The depravity of our nature. The darkness of our hearts. We will reflect on the cost of our salvation. On what it took to redeem us from sin and death. To deliver us from all evil. And as we reflect we also remember 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 for the fearful and afflicted and anxious and afraid! Today we declare there is hope even for us! And that hope is found in Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Ruth 1-4

April 4, 2020
ALWAYS HOPE

Readings for today: Ruth 1-4

Years ago, I found myself white-water canoeing down the Snake River in Wyoming as part of a Boy Scout High Adventure experience. The weather was beautiful. The scenery was gorgeous. All the hard work of paddling and portaging our canoes was well-worth it. However, part way through the trip, my partner and I got distracted. We were goofing around like teenagers are wont to do and weren't paying attention. Suddenly, our canoe came up against a logjam in the river and flipped over. My partner was able to scramble to shore but I went under. Now logjams are dangerous for all sorts of reasons. Mostly, you can get caught on the branches underneath and drown. I have no idea how long I was under but I remember feeling panicked beyond belief. Fighting, clawing my way to the surface only to be dragged back down. It felt like an eternity. And just when I reached the point of giving up that's when I finally popped to the surface. I can still remember taking that first breath of fresh air. Filling my lungs with oxygen. Expelling all the carbon dioxide that had built up. It was glorious.

That's how I feel when I finally get to Ruth each year. After almost drowning in the chaos and madness of the Book of Judges, I feel like the Bible brings us up for a breath of fresh air. It reminds us that even in the darkest of times there is always hope. Despite all of the rape and murder and violence of the time of the Judges, God was still at work. Behind the scenes. Under the radar. In ways we often cannot see. While the nations raged and the tribes fought and the world descended into darkness, God's light shines through an ordinary woman meeting an ordinary man with the result being an extraordinary love story.

There's actually no way the Book of Ruth makes any logical sense. Ruth is a foreigner. A Moabite. When her first husband dies, she should have done what her sister-in-law did and gone back to her family. Instead, she makes this incredibly courageous and faithful decision to remain with Naomi. To leave her family and community and culture and religion behind. In short, she's leaving her former identity and adopting a new one. With no guarantees. No guarantee she will be accepted. No guarantee she will get married again. No guarantee that she won't spend the rest of her life in abject poverty. For all she knows, when Naomi returns home, Ruth could be rejected and thrown out onto the street. Still she remains faithful. She follows her mother-in-law home.

And of course we know the rest of the story. In seeking to care for her mother-in-law and ward of starvation, she gleans fields, meaning she picks up the leftovers of the harvest. These are the scraps they will survive on. However, one day she happens to catch the eye of Boaz. The owner of the fields. A distant relative of Naomi's who can serve as a "kinsman-redeemer." Someone who can actually bring Ruth and Naomi into his household and provide for them. Boaz and Ruth meet. Sparks fly. Ruth makes the bold request – for a woman in those days - to essentially marry Boaz and he accepts. The result is a son named Obed who will become the grandfather of David.

Remember this whole episode started because a famine hit the land. That natural disaster set in motion a chain of events that led to Boaz and Ruth coming together as the next link in the line of King David which is really the line of King Jesus, our Messiah. And if this is how God worked in the past, can we not have confidence He is working even now? In the midst of our national crisis? In the midst of a pandemic that spans the globe? Is He not working in the ordinary lives of human beings just like you and me, bringing forth redemption? This is why Christians always cling to hope. Not because we have confidence in the plans of human beings, no matter how well-conceived and well-laid. It's because we have confidence in God. And no matter how dark things may get, we trust God to be our light and lead us through.

**April 6, 2020
REVIVAL**

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-3

Today's reading represents a transition point in salvation history. As we've already seen, things are really bad in Israel. The people do not honor God. They do not have leaders who honor God. They are simply going through the motions of worship. Saying all the right things. Making all the right sacrifices. But in their hearts, they reject God. The rebel against His Law. Their priests are a disaster, engaging in sexual immorality. Making a mockery of the sacrificial system. Abusing their spiritual authority. Eli and his sons are the last in the line of the judges. A corrupt time in Israel's history that heartens back to the days of the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, and slavery in Egypt. And it reminds me of our own time as well. I think of the "scamvangelists" I see on television promising all kinds of miracles and blessings to those who will send in money right now. I think of many preachers who abuse their spiritual power and authority to engage in all sorts of sexual abuse and immorality. I think of the pastors who are trying to leverage this moment for their fifteen minutes of fame while placing their congregations in real danger. It's scary.

Thankfully, God never abandons us. At each point in salvation history when things seem darkest, God Himself brings forth a new light. A new leader. Godly leaders who would seek Him with all their hearts and be "blameless" (not perfect) in their generation. Noah. Abraham. Moses. Now it's Samuel's turn to take up the mantle of leadership and lead Israel back to Yahweh. Samuel is really a bridge from the time of the Judges to the time of the Kings. He will oversee a major transition in the life of Israel as they go from a bunch of tribes, each with their own identity, to one nation under a strong, centralized monarchy. It's also striking to note Samuel's age when he receives this call. Noah, Abraham, and Moses were all old men. Well beyond their prime. Samuel is a young boy. Not yet come into his own. The message here? God can use anyone at anytime to accomplish His purposes.

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

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

"For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him." (2 Chronicles 16:9)

"For My eyes are on all their ways. They are not hidden from Me, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes." (Jeremiah 16:17)

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:13)

God will not be mocked. When God's people continue to turn to sin instead of turning to Him in faithfulness, He will withdraw His presence. He will withhold His Word. He will give "them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...give them up to dishonorable passions...give them up to a debased

mind to do what ought not to be done.” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) And that is exactly what had taken place in Israel and in Eli’s own family. Eli failed to discipline and restrain his sons. Hophni and Phineas are the very definition of corrupt religious leaders who manipulate the faith for their own benefit. And though things look okay on the outside – i.e. sacrifices are being made, prayers are being said, worship is taking place - the people of God are spiritually dying.

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 today? In the midst of our current crisis? In the midst of all the social isolation and quarantine? 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. Or are you more 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 4-8

April 7, 2020
MIRACLES VS. MAGIC

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 4-8

Today's reading is critical for us to understand in light of our current cultural moment. Far too many Christians are treating their faith like magic. They are treating Jesus like some kind of magic talisman that will save them from the virus. Over the weekend, I saw interviews with Christians attending church in large numbers in Louisiana which is now one of the epicenters of the disease. When the reporters asked them why they felt safe attending worship, the answer was almost always some variation of "I'm covered in the blood of Jesus so I'm protected." In addition, I've seen post after post on Twitter of scamvangelists claiming to "defeat" the coronavirus with a prayer or a declaration or some other weird act that makes no sense. (I even saw a guy pretend to "spit" on the virus! Smh.) I think God must be doing facepalms on His throne in heaven.

Consider this story from our reading for today. "And when the people came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the Lord defeated us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, that it may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies." So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. As soon as the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. And when the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" And when they learned that the ark of the Lord had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid, for they said, "A god has come into the camp." And they said, "Woe to us! For nothing like this has happened before. Woe to us! Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness. Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, lest you become slaves to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight." So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died." (1 Samuel 4:3-11)

The people of Israel were unwilling to confront their own sin. Unwilling to reflect on their own unfaithfulness. They were unwilling to confront the real reason for their defeat at the hands of the Philistines. Instead, they attempted to turn the ark of God into some kind of magical totem to strike terror into their enemies. They tried to use the ark of God for their own purposes. To further their own agenda. Hophni and Phinehas were corrupt priests. Ungodly leaders for Israel who disdained the worship of the Living God. They had no fear of the Lord so when they brought the ark into battle, they were utterly defeated. It was an empty shell without the Lord's presence. It held no power of its own. God refuses to let His name be abused. He refuses to let His power be co-opted for human ends. He refuses to share His glory with another.

Every time we treat our faith like magic, it will fail. Every time we attribute some power to the "blood of Jesus" rather than Jesus Himself, we will be let down. Every time we try to make prayer an incantation of some kind or claim some sort of special power for our words simply because we say them in the "name of Jesus", we are committing a grave sin. We are taking the Lord's name in vain. We are declaring things in His name He has not declared. We are refusing to humble ourselves under His mighty hand. We are refusing to repent and fall on our faces before the Lord. We are trying to use God for our own ends. For our own purposes. To further our own plans. And God will not be mocked. He

refuses to allow His name to be abused in such ways. He refuses to let His power be co-opted by religious charlatans. He refuses to share His glory with another. Including you. Including me.

So what should we do? Does this mean we shouldn't pray for a cure? Ask God for a miracle? Cry out Hosanna...Save us, O Son of David? Of course not! God invites His people to pray for all these things and more! God delights when His people approach His throne of grace with confidence, trusting Him to work according to His divine purposes. God engages His people in their pain and suffering, bringing comfort as only he can bring. God draws near the broken-hearted and crushed in spirit. God is with us. God never leaves us or forsakes us. God promises He will protect us – whether in this world or the next. He has us in the palm of His hand. As long as we pray in faith. Faith that God is for us. God is with us. God knows what's best for us. We can trust God to answer according to His will and ways which are always perfect. But always keep in mind this world is not our home. This life is not what God intends. God has something far better prepared for us in eternity and that is what He is working towards in each of our individual lives. So we must trust Him. Even if He withholds healing in this world, we know it's because He has something better prepared for us in the world to come. Even if He doesn't put an end to this plague on our timeline, we know it's because He allows suffering for a season in order to draw all people to Himself. So keep praying for a miracle and resist the temptation to turn your faith into magic!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 9-12

April 8, 2020
THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Readings for today: [1 Samuel 9-12](#)

“Then the Spirit of the Lord will rush upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” (1 Samuel 10:6-7)

The people of Israel found themselves in a time of crisis. Samuel, the faithful judge who had led them for so many years, was failing. His sons did not possess the character of their father. It would not be much longer and Israel would have no leader. No spiritual authority. No one to point them to God and protect them from their enemies. So they called for a king. Giving into their fears and anxiety, they asked Samuel to anoint someone to take his place. Someone who would reign and rule over them like the other nations. Someone who would guide and protect them. Someone they could look to in difficult times. Samuel is crestfallen, of course. He takes it as a rejection of his own leadership. God, however, reminds Samuel that it is not him they are rejecting but God Himself. Out of grace, God grants Israel’s request. He gives them a king named Saul. A man with great leadership potential. A charismatic leader who can rally Israel and deliver them from their enemies. However, what truly sets Saul apart is the Spirit of the Living God. After Saul meets Samuel and is anointed king, Samuel tells him to expect something miraculous to happen. Saul will actually be changed into a different man by the Holy Spirit. God Himself will rush upon Saul, giving him all he needs to be successful. All Saul has to do is walk in obedience and Israel will be saved.

God is still in the salvation business. God is still at work through His people in times of great crisis like the one we are currently facing. When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit rushes upon us and we are reborn. We are changed into different men and women. We are given new hearts. We are transformed from the inside out. God empowering and strengthening us for the work of ministry He’s called us to in this world. Unlike in the Old Testament where the Spirit of God would come and go on a person, in the New Testament the gift of the Spirit is permanent. God coming to take up actual residence in our hearts. God coming to dwell with us on a regular basis. God filling us eternally with His very presence. As such, we are given gifts and graces. The gifts are manifold. Wisdom. Knowledge. Understanding. Discernment. Boldness. Evangelistic zeal. Tongues. Prophecy. Miracles. The list is endless because God is endless. The graces are also manifold and perhaps even more important. They are the fruit of a life lived in humble submission to God. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Gentleness. Faithfulness. Self-discipline. Taken together, these gifts and graces become the resources a believer draws on as she/he seeks to serve the world in Jesus’ name.

So far in our reading we’ve encountered some amazing spiritual leaders. Moses. Joshua. Judges like Deborah and Gideon. Samuel. All of them filled with God’s Spirit. All of them called to lead God’s people in times of great crisis. All of them given the gifts and graces necessary to do the work God has called them to do. It is tempting as we read the stories of these spiritual heroes and heroines to believe that could never be us. We’re too ordinary. Too weak. Too frail in our faith. It’s tempting to believe our calling is far more mundane. But nothing could be further from the truth! The same Spirit that empowered Moses to split a sea and Joshua to tear down walls and gave Deborah a song of victory to sing is the same Spirit that lives and dwells inside the heart of every true Christian! So in this time of great crisis...as so many live in fear and anxiety of contracting a deadly disease...as so many struggle with lost jobs and lost hopes and lost dreams...as so many feel the isolating effects of social distancing and depression...as so many wrestle with deep grief over those they’ve lost...we have an opportunity

to be the hands and feet of Christ! To offer a comforting word or comforting shoulder in the name of Christ! To point people to the eternal hope they too can have if they place their trust in Christ!

Don't worry about having all the answers! Don't worry about getting everything right! Don't worry about making mistakes! Trust the Spirit to lead you! Trust the Spirit to guide you! Simply "do what your hand finds to do for God is with you!"

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-16

April 9, 2020
WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-16

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

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

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

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

We are living in difficult times. Times like these test us. Refine us. Cause us to step back and take stock of our lives. So let's engage in a little self-examination. How's your heart? Are you halfhearted or wholehearted in your love for Jesus? Do you find yourself longing for the gathering of the saints? Missing the opportunity to worship alongside your brothers and sisters in Christ? Is your heart drawn to prayer and Scripture during this season? Are you talking to God more or less? Are you spending more time with Him or less time? Do you find yourself searching for ways to serve? The lost and wandering? The least resourced and under privileged? Those who are most vulnerable to this pandemic? What's the state of your emotions? Are you anxious and afraid? Are you weighed down by the burdens of this world? Do you find yourself struggling to get out of bed each morning? Jesus invites you to come to Him to find rest. Have you accepted His invitation? Jesus invites you to cast all your anxieties on Him because He cares for you. Are you willing to let go? Jesus promises to be with you always. In the midst of dark valleys. In the midst of all the pain and suffering of this life. He is near the broken-hearted and

crushed in spirit, reaching out His hand. Are you reaching back? Friends, in this time of crisis, we've been forcibly reminded of how little control we have in this life. Our strength is not enough. Our wisdom has thus far failed. Our power and wealth afford us no protections. We can't count on these things to save us. Instead we must turn to God. With our whole hearts. Trusting His grace to carry us through.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalms 59

April 10, 2020
TRUSTING GOD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 17-20, Psalms 59

What does it mean to trust God? As Christians, we talk about it all the time. But then crisis hits. Pandemics rage. Conflict boils over. And our words are put to the test. Do we really trust God? Or are we simply paying lip service to an idea? David trusted God. In our reading today, we discover David was a strong young man. A man entrusted with protecting the wealth of his family. A man who spent his days and nights out in the fields. Through all kinds of weather. Suffering all kinds of hardship. Fighting off lions and bears and other wild animals. David is no novice to conflict. No fearful young boy. His confidence has been forged in the fires of hardship and struggle.

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

David trusts God. When asked why he can meet the Philistine with such confidence, David testifies of what the Lord has already done for him. "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine." (1 Samuel 17:37) David has faced incredible odds before. Fighting off lions and bears is no joke! It required courage to track those animals down and save his sheep. And it will require courage to go out and face this Philistine. David doesn't blink. Not because he believes in himself but because of his deep and abiding faith in the God who has protected him and guided him thus far. So he grabs his sling and a few stones and off he goes.

It's one thing to say you trust God. It's another to actually place yourself in a situation where that trust is put to the test. "Trusting God" for David meant defending his flocks against lions and bears.

"Trusting God" for David meant going out to face the Philistine giant. "Trusting God" for David meant refusing to retaliate when Saul became jealous and sought to kill him. "Trusting God" for David meant continuing to serve Saul even though he was being treated unjustly. Over and over again, David trusts God with his life. His reputation. His relationships. His future. Remember, he's already been anointed the next king! One would think he might try to grasp after what is rightfully his. Manipulate things in his favor. Use Saul's mental instability to his own advantage. Imagine him standing on the field of battle, having just cut off Goliath's head. Is there a better time to claim your throne? David does none of these things because David trusts God to work things out according to His will and His way and in His time.

We are living in difficult times. And difficult times require a deeper level of trust in God because our own resources are not enough. How many parents are coming to the end of themselves as they both try to work from home and guide their kids through school? How many healthcare professionals and first responders are putting themselves at risk because they lack the PPE they need to safely fight this virus? How many people are shuttering their businesses or losing jobs as a result of the shutdown in place? What are you turning to for comfort in this hour? Alcohol? (I've stopped laughing at the jokes on social media about the amount of wine being consumed.) Drugs? (The number of mental health calls to crisis lines has gone up over 800% in some places and pot sales are through the roof.) Pornography or some

other form of lurid entertainment? (Porn sites have reported double digit increases in traffic and hours are being spent on video games.) Friends, crisis exposes character. It magnifies the pre-existing cracks in our spiritual foundation. It elevates the spiritual emptiness that too many of us have lived with for far too long. It shatters our weak and superficial commitment to our faith. Only by turning to Christ, will we find the comfort we need in this desperate hour. Only by turning to Christ, will we find healing for the trauma we are experiencing as a people. Only by turning to Christ, will we find the strength and the courage to make it through. On this Good Friday of all days, may you turn in confidence to the One who loved you so much He gave His life for you.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalms 91

April 11, 2020
THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 21-24, Psalms 91

What a beautiful Psalm! So on point for the crisis we find ourselves in. Written by a man who was no stranger to hardship and struggle. A man who suffered for years in the wilderness as he was unjustly pursued by his enemies. A man who knew pain. A man who knew poverty. A man who knew fear and anxiety. But a man who looked to God in faith for deliverance and rescue. David was truly a man after God's own heart. He looked to God for His provision and protection. He refused to take matters into his own hands but constantly sought the Lord's will for his life. Even as he fled from hideout to hideout. Taking refuge in caves and forests. In desert places and barren lands. He was seeking shelter in the shadow of the Most High, trusting God to keep his life every step of the way.

What about us? We are living in dark times. For the first time in history, the entire world has been shut down. The viral pandemic continues to spread and it hasn't even penetrated some of the most vulnerable places. It is dangerous. It is infectious. It represents on some level a perfect storm. By now, most of us probably know someone who's been infected. We may even know someone who's succumbed to the disease. We all know healthcare professionals who are working long hours to fight the battle. We all know first responders who are engaged on the front lines. Some of us work in essential sectors of society like defense, childcare, grocery stores, and gasoline stations. Some of us have been furloughed or laid off as our businesses closed. The economy has taken a massive hit. And what started out for many as an "extended spring break" has now settled into the long, hard reality that life is not going back to normal anytime soon. Calls to mental health hotlines have dramatically increased. Social distancing has given way to social isolation as human beings - social creatures by nature - struggle to adapt to this new world. The stress and pressure has increased and we are not responding well. When they tried to close down liquor stores and pot dispensaries in my state, people almost rioted. These drugs are "essential" in helping us numb our pain. But the pain isn't just personal. It's societal as well. This crisis has exposed the cracks in our foundation as a nation. As the virus disproportionately impacts communities of color, historic injustices are exacerbated. As the virus disproportionately impacts the poor and most vulnerable, the gaps in income equality and our social safety nets are revealed. And perhaps most tragically, this viral pandemic has unmasked the corruption and narcissism of many of our political leaders on both sides of the aisle.

So where can we turn for hope? When all seems lost? When it seems like our resources are simply not enough to meet the challenge of this particular moment? When it seems our leadership is not trustworthy enough to depend on in this cultural moment? When it seems like so much information coming from the media these days is carefully filtered to support an already pre-determined narrative? We turn to God. We turn to the one constant in our lives. The One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The One who never changes. The One who is always faithful. Listen to these words again, dear friends...

"He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, "My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only look with your eyes and see the recompense of the wicked. Because you have made

the Lord your dwelling place—the Most High, who is my refuge—no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent. For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. You will tread on the lion and the adder; the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. "Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name. When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation." (Psalm 91)

God alone is strong enough to lean on during this pandemic. God alone can be trusted to tell us the truth about what is really taking place. God alone has the power to deliver us from plague and sickness and even death. God alone can give us what we so desperately need. Eternal life. A life that transcends the brokenness and chaos and crisis of this world. A life that is safe and secure because it is sheltered by the Almighty Himself. Make God your dwelling place, friends! Make God your refuge! He will command His angels concerning you! Does this mean we will never suffer? Never experience pain? Never have to go through hardship? Of course not. God has never promised such things! What it means is that even in the midst of the fallenness of this ruined world, God is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. And He is at work even now preparing a place for us in His eternal home.

April 13, 2020
PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for today: [Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52](#)

The longer we live in crisis, the more we find ourselves wrestling with despair. How long, O Lord? How long do we have to wait? How long do we have to suffer? How long does this pain have to last? We are desperate for answers. We look for people to blame. It may be another country. It may be another culture. It may be our political leaders. It may be that person at the grocery store who refuses to wear a mask or that neighbor who's hoarded all the toilet paper. Our hearts fill with anger and frustration. Why don't these people get it right? Why didn't our leaders act sooner? Why don't they re-open the economy? Why doesn't the world do something about wet markets? Maybe it's all one big conspiracy? Still no answers come. All we're left with are the opinions of talking heads and spin doctors on cable news. Finally, we come to the end of ourselves. We realize there are really no answers to be had. No one person to blame. No enemy to fight. Life is just hard. Pandemics are not new. There actually is no way to protect ourselves from every bad thing that happens in this world. That's when we turn to God. We surrender to Him. We submit to His will and His way. We praise Him even in the midst of the storm.

Does any of that sound familiar? Any of that ring a bell as you read the Psalms? Of course it does! The Psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. They are full of the songs of God's people as they processed all they were going through in their lives. The Psalms are honest. Real. And very raw at times. They register the full range of emotions. They hit every note on the scale. There is joy. There is sadness. There is happiness. There is anger. There is success. There is failure. There is praise. There is despair. There is peace. There is anxiety. Over and over again, the Psalmist shares his heart with God. Almost every Psalm containing peaks and valleys. Spiritual highs and lows. And throughout the centuries God's people have found solace in them in their time of need.

You and I are living in such a time. A time of great crisis and uncertainty. People are getting sick. People are dying. People are losing jobs. People are suffering in all sorts of ways. The immediate future looks bleak. It's tough to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Tough to imagine what life looks like in a post-COVID world. That's why I love the reading for today. I love reading these words over and over again...

“I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness, and I will sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High.” (Psalm 7:17)

“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?” (Psalm 27:1)

“Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” (Psalm 27:14)

“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!” (Psalm 31:1-2)

“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.” (Psalm 34:17-19)

“I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.” (Psalm 52:8)

May these words bring comfort to you today. May they be your lifeline in the days to come when things get hard. May they give you strength when you feel overwhelmed or anxious or afraid. May they give you hope when all seems lost. God is with us. He loves us. He will never abandon us. May you find your refuge in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142

April 14, 2020
RESILIENCY

Readings for today: [Psalms 56, 120, 140, 141, 142](#)

One of the real issues the COVID-19 virus is exposing is our lack of resiliency on a number of levels. There is the lack of physical resiliency. Because this a “novel” virus, we lack any kind of natural immunity to it which makes it far more contagious and deadlier than other viruses that have been in circulation for a while. There is a lack of mental resiliency. The number of calls to mental health hotlines has increased exponentially as people struggle with the isolating effects of the quarantine. There is a lack of emotional resiliency. People are far more reactive than proactive and this crisis has only exacerbated the problem. There is a lack of spiritual resiliency. Even among Christians. The superficial, self-help, moral therapeutic deism the American church has been peddling for too long simply doesn’t offer enough hope to endure suffering and death on this level. Add to this the lack of resiliency in our communities as social connections have frayed due to the extreme busyness of our former, pre-COVID lives and one can easily see why we find ourselves in such a panic.

Now read the Psalms. Keep in mind the conditions David was dealing with. On the run from his king. Unjustly accused. Persecuted without reason. Captured by the Philistines. Having to pretend he’s gone mad in order to escape. Living in caves in the desolate wilderness. Surviving off what he can scavenge. Fighting running battles off and on for seven long years. It’s a terrifying, stressful, and often brutal existence. Listen to how he describes it as he prays...

“Be gracious to me, O God, for man tramples on me; all day long an attacker oppresses me; my enemies trample on me all day long, for many attack me proudly.” (Psalm 56:1-2)

“Woe to me, that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.” (Psalm 120:5-6)

“Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from violent men, who have planned to trip up my feet. The arrogant have hidden a trap for me, and with cords they have spread a net; beside the way they have set snares for me.” (Psalm 140:4-5)

“Attend to my cry, for I am brought very low! Deliver me from my persecutors, for they are too strong for me! Bring me out of prison, that I may give thanks to your name! The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.” (Psalm 142:6-7)

Medical experts tell us resiliency is built up over time. It is built up as we intentionally expose ourselves to discomfort and pain and suffering. One day a vaccine will be created for COVID-19. Many of us will be inoculated with a weakened form of the virus in order to boost our immune systems. By exposing our physical bodies to the disease, we will build up our strength to fight it off in the future. The same is true for us mentally, emotionally, spiritually, even communally. For far too long, we have believed the lie that we can live our lives without pain. We’ve bought into the false notion that suffering is to be avoided at all costs. We refuse to endure discomfort. Refuse to accept anything less than complete and unconditional affirmation for everything we say and do. We reject any critique or judgment of our lifestyle. We’ve tried to socially engineer failure out of existence by making sure everyone gets a trophy. To what end? We live in the wealthiest, most technologically advanced nation on earth and our biggest fear seems to be boredom. Adjusting to working from home. Teaching our children. Time spent in solitude and silence. Don’t we realize what we seemingly fear the most is

simply real, everyday life in most of the rest of the world? So many of my friends who live in deep poverty around the globe are very confused by what they are seeing and hearing from the West these days. They ask me all kinds of questions like “why is teaching your child considered a burden?” “Why is working from home so challenging when you have a job that makes you more money in a year than my people might see in a lifetime?” “Why is life so exhausting when you sit in a chair all day, staring at a computer screen?” I am humbled by their honest, heartfelt questions. They are not seeking to condemn, just understand. What they do not grasp is that the difficulty of their daily lives has built in them a strength and resiliency we simply lack. Our relative wealth and leisure has weakened us to the point where we are far more susceptible to fear and anxiety. Far more sensitive to pain and suffering. Far more vulnerable to panic and alarm.

Please hear my heart. I don’t say these things out of judgment. I am not trying to shame anyone or add to the already heavy burdens we are carrying. I don’t want to minimize the very real trauma that is happening. People are losing jobs. People are getting sick. People are dying. Loved ones are suffering. All of these things are very real. As a pastor, I am deeply engaged in this fight. But I do think our lack of resiliency is worth pondering and praying over. I do think we’re called to reflect deeply on the words of the Psalmist and let his faith inform our faith during this season of crisis. As we endure. As we persevere. As we seek to serve Christ and our communities. I trust the Spirit will build in us a deep resiliency that will serve us well far into the future.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

April 15, 2020
LOVING OUR ENEMIES IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 25-27, Psalms 17, 73

The Sermon on the Mount is the litmus test for authentic Christian faith. Filled with challenging words that confront us on issues like anger, anxiety, lust, and greed; Jesus forces us to come to grips with the depths of our sin. Perhaps his most challenging words come from Luke 6:27-28 where He says, “Love your enemies!” Jesus says. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you.” Frankly, that sounds crazy. Mixed up. Naive. Until I read about David. And I watch him spare Saul’s life over and over again. I watch him refuse to lift his hand against the Lord’s anointed. I watch him restrain his anger. His desire for revenge. David had every right to strike Saul down when he caught him in the cave. Had every right to pin Saul to the ground with his own spear when he infiltrated the camp. But over and over again, David refrained. Why?

I believe David understood on some level what Jesus would later teach. God’s great desire is for everyone to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. (1 Tim. 2:4) This includes a man like Saul. Evil. Paranoid. Drunk with power. This includes a man like Nabal. Proud. Arrogant. Hard-hearted. This includes a man like David who will succumb to the temptations to use his power for his own purposes. It includes a man like Doug Resler who wrestles everyday with pride and ego and selfishness. The reality that David saw. The reality that Jesus taught is that we are all enemies and yet God in His infinite mercy loved us. God in His infinite grace embraced us while we were yet sinners. While we were yet broken. While we were yet weak and wounded and dead in our sin. God came to us. God loved us. God did good to us. God blessed us. God prayed for us. So we should do for others including those who seek our harm.

Some have asked if we run the risk of further traumatizing victims of abuse. Empowering perpetrators. Turning a blind eye to would-be tyrants. These are very important questions. My response is that God’s love is not passive. It doesn’t make one a doormat. I do not believe Jesus is teaching women to stay with the men who beat them. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to seek out situations where we would suffer. I do not believe Jesus is teaching us to simply bow our heads before injustice. I do not believe is teaching us to passively bow before tyranny. David didn’t stay in Saul’s palace! David left. He escaped. He found his way to safety. And then he resisted. Fiercely. Faithfully. With the hope that his persecutor. His abuser. His enemy would eventually see the light. I love what Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” King pursued a path of non-violent resistance always with the hope that white racists would become his brothers. This was his dream. And I believe deep down it was David’s dream for Saul as well.

Times of crisis seem to exacerbate division. The current pandemic is exposing cracks across the foundations of our society. As much as my heart has been warmed by the support our healthcare workers have received, I’ve been so disappointed in the way our political leaders have attempted to turn this season to their own advantage. As much as I’ve admired the way health experts like Dr. Fauci and Dr. Birx have led us through this crisis, I’ve been frustrated by the ways different media outlets spin information to feed their own false narratives. As much as I’ve been inspired by the response of ordinary people to serve those in need, I cannot believe the selfish greed of those who would hoard needed supplies or price gouge. And I find myself getting more and more angry at those who make a living off of winding up the “outrage machine” that passes for discourse on cable news or Twitter these days. In short, God is teaching me to love my enemies. Those with whom I disagree. Those whose character and integrity I cannot respect. Those who seem hell-bent to assume the worst. The only way I

can ever learn to love my enemies is to fix my eyes on Christ. Remember that while I was still His enemy, He died for me. The only chance I have at following the Sermon on the Mount is to make Christ the filter for my life. To see the world as He sees it. To see others as He sees them. And to love them as He loves them.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 35, 54, 63, 18

April 17, 2020
EPITAPH

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 28-31, 1 Chronicles 10

My dad's family comes from a small town in western Nebraska. If you go to the cemetery there, you will find all my relatives going back several generations. Grossbachs. Reslers. Arenz's. They're all there. You'll see a headstone for my son Caleb and the plots where Kristi and I will be buried as well. It's a beautiful, peaceful place. Every time we go back to Wauneta, we make sure we go out to visit. We walk among our ancestors. We read their names. Birthdates. Deathdates. And ponder the messages they've left for us.

In the final analysis, what message will your life send? What will be written about you after you die? What memories will your children and grandchildren hold onto? How will they speak of you? King Saul ruled Israel for a number of years. He started off well but quickly went off track. His life is one of half-measures. A part of him tries so hard to be faithful to God but a greater part keeps taking matters into his own hands. His fear gets the best of him on so many occasions. And now we read about his death. A horrible one. You can almost see him on top of Mt. Gilboa. Wounded. Pierced through by many arrows. The bodies of his sons lying on the ground around him. He's in pain. Agony. Grief-stricken. Israel has fallen before the Philistines. The glory of the Lord has departed. He's watching it all come crashing down around him and in his despair, he asks his armor-bearer to finish him off before his enemies come and torture him. His armor-bearer refuses so Saul falls on his own sword.

What verdict does the Bible render about this man's life? "So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse." (1 Chronicles 10:13-14) Saul's death did not come at the hands of the Philistines. Not ultimately. His fate was sealed when he broke faith with God. When he did not wait all those years ago for Samuel to come and make the right sacrifices. From that point forward, Saul was doomed to perish and every action he took to stave off his fate only served to seal it further. Seeking out the witch of En-dor was simply the final straw that broke the camel's back. Saul no longer sought God. No longer pursued God. No longer loved God. And so God put him to death and gave the kingdom to David.

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. How did they respond in good times? How did they respond in hard times? How did they act in times of plenty? How did they cope in times of want? I think about our cultural moment. The pandemic has exposed the cracks in our society. It has shined a bright spot light on the underlying issues that threaten to tear our nation apart. But I also know the same thing is happening deep inside each of us. What do our fears tell us? What do our anxieties reveal? How are we coping and where are we looking for help in this time of trouble? Is it to the Lord? Or something else? And after this season passes into the pages of history, what will people remember about how we handled things? 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: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

April 18, 2020
PSALMS OF ASCENT

Readings for today: [Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130](#)

Psalms of Ascent. Psalms 120-134. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. They sing them in good times. They sing them in bad times. 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. 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.

These psalms are favorites among believers. Especially in times of trouble. In times of plague and pandemic. In times of national or personal crisis. In such times, we cling to 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 maid servant 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) There is something special that happens when we gather to sing these praises. Something deeply transformative. Something life-changing. We are encouraged. We are strengthened. We are blessed by the experience of being in God's presence together and given the strength to endure.

This COVID season is challenging Christians all over the world to think about the priority of corporate worship. What once may have seemed optional or discretionary or perhaps even disposable has taken on a new importance. You never know what you've lost until it's gone, right? Now that we are all living under "shelter in place" orders and are not allowed to gather, it creates a longing in our hearts. A longing for connection. A longing for physical touch. A longing for the presence of other people. Friends, God put these longings in our hearts. God hardwired these longings deep within our souls. It is never good for human beings to be alone and we are all suffering the effects of this lonely, difficult season.

Thankfully, we can still gather. Though not the same - and certainly not an adequate replacement - we can gather virtually online to worship God together. We can gather to sing the songs of ascent. Gather to sing the praises of God. Gather to confess our sins. We can gather under the authority of God's Word and let His Spirit challenge us, convict us, and encourage us. This is what Christians have done for thousands of years. Yes, even in the midst of pandemics like the Spanish flu or the Bubonic plague or

when other diseases have ravaged the earth. I know many of us worship Jesus daily on our own. 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. Especially in a time like this. Furthermore, 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)

Friends, I know this is a challenging time. I know this is a difficult season. I know many of us are re-thinking our priorities and wondering what life will be like when we get back to normal. Or even what "normal" will be like once we are able to gather again! My encouragement to you is to use this time to make corporate worship a priority. Plant your flag in the ground. Take a stand for your faith. Make sure God gets the time He deserves and the worship He demands. Don't fall back into the trap of giving up your Sunday morning gatherings with God's people! Don't let anything come between you and your first love! As Christ sustains you during this season, make sure to thank Him by committing yourself more fully to Him in the days and weeks ahead.

April 20, 2020
GODLY LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 1-4](#)

What our nation needs now more than ever is godly leadership. Men and women who put country before self. The collective good before personal gain. Men and women who are willing to work together to get things done. Cross the aisle for the sake of the future. Put aside petty political differences and grudges and differences in order to bring us together.

Times of crisis reveal the heart of a leader. David lived on the run for years. He was unjustly accused. Unfairly attacked. His life threatened on any number of occasions. He was exiled. Forced to struggle to survive. He fought a running battle with King Saul and yet refused to lift his hand against the Lord's anointed. David took the high road again and again. Calling out to Saul. Seeking reconciliation with Saul. All to no avail. One would think David would become bitter and angry. One would think David would have every right to fight back and seek vengeance. One would think that upon hearing of Saul's death, David would celebrate. Instead, David wept.

David grieved not just for himself but for all of Israel. David was heartbroken for his nation. For his people. He understood he was part of something bigger than himself. There were more important things at stake than his own political gain. David refused to take advantage of the moment to score political points. Instead, he continued to serve the Lord and his people with humility and respect and honor. This is ultimately what wins him his throne. Over time, David's godly leadership becomes more and more evident. His influence grows. His power increases. Eventually, he wins even the enemy commander over to his side.

I search in vain for a "David" among our national political leaders these days. Instead of humility, our leaders continue to display their arrogance. Instead of respect, they continue to hold grudges and attack one another. Instead of putting the country first, they continue to try to leverage this crisis for their own personal gain. And the media is no different. They are just as partisan as the rest. Peddling lies and fake news from across the spectrum. They don't even try to report the news with any kind of objectivity. Everything is subjected to their political and social agenda. This is true for both the Left and Right. And their monumental failures only serve to increase our national suffering and pain.

Today's reading brings me to my knees in prayer. The leadership vacuum in our country means more people dying. More people suffering. More businesses closing. The lack of unity in our nation means more people getting sick. A growing mental health crisis that will soon rival if not surpass COVID-19. And more people thrust into unnecessary poverty. Is the way forward self-evident? No, it is not. Will the days ahead be easy? Not at all. Will more suffering and sacrifice be required? I think so. What would make it more bearable is if we had leaders like David who could remind us we are all part of the solution. Leaders who remain calm in crisis and who could assure us there are better days ahead. Leaders who appeal to our better angels by modeling what it looks like to work together for the common good. Leaders who seek to unify rather than divide. I am praying for God to raise up such leaders to replace the ones we have or by bringing those in power to repentance. I truly believe our future as a nation depends on it.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21

April 21, 2020
REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

Readings for today: [Psalms 6, 9, 10, 14, 16, 21](#)

I found this morning's reading from the Psalms particularly relevant for our current cultural moment. It begins with personal lament. "Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O Lord —how long? Turn, O Lord, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping." (Psalm 6:2-6) I know so many praying this prayer or something like it. Perhaps they are sick from the virus. Perhaps they have other health issues that place their life in danger. Perhaps they know someone who's struggling or suffering or even dying and they cannot be with them because of the quarantine. Perhaps they've lost their job. Closed their business. Maybe they didn't make rent this month or they've stood in long lines at the food bank. Perhaps they feel overwhelmed. Anxious and afraid. Maybe they've even attempted to take their own lives. Yes, our souls are greatly troubled. We are weary with moaning. We've wept a flood of tears.

So where do we turn for help? We turn to the Lord. The maker of heaven and earth. The one who reigns and rules from His throne in heaven. And here is what He says, "The Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness. 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. Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds! For he who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted. Be gracious to me, O Lord! See my affliction from those who hate me, O you who lift me up from the gates of death, that I may recount all your praises, that in the gates of the daughter of Zion I may rejoice in your salvation. The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught. The Lord has made himself known; he has executed judgment; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God. For the needy shall not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever. Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail; let the nations be judged before you! Put them in fear, O Lord! Let the nations know that they are but men!" (Psalm 9:7-20) We acknowledge God's greatness. God's glory. God's honor. He is indeed worthy of all our praise! And we know our God is faithful. He is a stronghold for the oppressed. He rescues those who are enslaved. He comforts us in our fear. But He is also judge. He will administer justice with righteousness. He gives the nations over to their sin. They sink into the pit they themselves have made. They catch their own foot in the trap they laid. All the nations that forgot God are now put on notice. Where is their strength? Where is their peace? Where is their hope? All their wealth and power cannot stop this plague. All their training and expertise and advanced technology have been brought low by the smallest of organisms. The world economy shut down. International travel suspended. Even wars have ceased as the plague rages.

In the midst of it all, it is easy to lose sight of God. To lose heart. To begin to lose all hope. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord. In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God." (Psalm 10:1-4) During times of great crisis, we often ask, "Where is God?" What is He doing? Why has He allowed these things to take place? How can He look on the suffering of His people and not step in? Some take it a

step further. They see in these times of crisis clear evidence that God doesn't exist. How can a good God allow such pain? How can a good God be the author of such evil? Truly if God were good and all-powerful, He would never allow such things to happen! But then the Psalmist reminds us that God is God and we are not. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords and He shall reign forever and ever. "The Lord is king forever and ever; the nations perish from his land. O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more." (Psalm 10:16-18)

This brings us face to face with the fundamental reality of our own sinful existence. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of us are guilty of selfishness and greed and lust. All of us have turned aside. Each to our own way. Each one of us does what is right in our own eyes. "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." (Psalm 14:2-3) Do we not all deserve judgment? Are we not all guilty? Have we not all rightfully earned death and an eternity separated from God? At the end of the day we do have to come to grips with the fact that either we will say to God - Thy will be done - or He will say to us - thy will be done. Either way, we will face the consequences of our decision.

So the encouragement from the Psalms today is to turn to God. To set your mind and heart on Him. To trust Him. Believe Him. Hope in Him. "I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you...The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. 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. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Psalm 16:2, 5-11) Friends, this time of crisis has shaken our lives to their foundations. It has brought down the societies we've built like houses of cards. It has exposed the utter foolishness of our thinking and the spiritual poverty with which we so often live. It has thrown down the idols to whom we had declared our allegiance. As we sit amidst the ruins of what once was, I pray we humble ourselves before the Lord. I pray we turn from our wicked ways and begin to seek Him anew and afresh. I pray we cling to Him above all else and seek Him with all our hearts. As we do, God promises to meet us. Renew us. Restore us. Revive us. Come, Lord Jesus, do your work in me!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

April 22, 2020
FAMILY TREE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 1-2, Psalms 43-44

There is a massive amount of interest in family history these days. With the advent of the internet, one can research from the comfort of one's own home. You can trace your family's origins back centuries. You can see their names. Sometimes get pictures. Find out different tidbits of information about them. What businesses did they run? Who did they marry? What town did they grow up in? You can even send your DNA off and find out who you are related to around the world. My mom and dad did this recently and discovered they had both Neanderthal and Mongolian blood! It was nuts! (Then again, looking back maybe it makes sense...ha!)

Genealogies are important because they root us in a specific history. A specific family. A specific story. Three generations ago, most Americans could tell you a lot about their family history. Mostly they lived in the same small town. Farmed the same land. Got buried in the same cemetery. There was a sense of rootedness to their lives. As the 20th century marched on, people became far more mobile and those connections to their history began to diminish. Sure, they might go back for a visit. Might see mom or dad and show their own kids the house where they grew up. Might be able to tell some of the family story but as time passed even those memories began to fade. Sociologists tell us that current generations are marked by a sense of existential loneliness. They don't know who they are or where they are from. They don't have a sense of "home" or being rooted in a history. They feel aimless and wandering.

The genealogies we read about in Scripture are vitally important. If you've been following along with the reading, you know a lot of these names. You know a lot of their stories. You remember who they are and what they've done. Taken together, they tell the story of God's people and it is important to the Chronicler to situate David within this specific history. Within this specific story. Within this specific family. Not only to demonstrate the fulfillment of prophecy - i.e. the scepter shall not depart from Judah - but also to remind the people of God's great faithfulness. David was no accident. David didn't just stumble into the kingship. David didn't rise up on and seize the kingship on his own. This was the outworking of God's salvation plan from the very beginning. Going all the way back to Adam in the Garden of Eden and tracing its way down through Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. God has been at work. God has brought about His Will for His people. God has been faithful.

Think about your own life. Think about the legacy you've inherited from your family. Good or bad. Think about where you're from and the stories you tell your children about what it was like growing up. Do you feel connected to something larger than yourself? Do you feel like you are part of a specific history? A specific story? A specific family? And what role has God played or does He play in the unfolding narrative that is your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87

April 23, 2020
NO-WIN SCENARIO

Readings for today: [Psalms 49, 84, 85, 87](#)

I am a bit of a Star Trek fan. Especially the new movies. One of the scenes that intrigues me the most is the “Kobayashi Maru.” A training exercise developed for cadets which places them in a no-win scenario. The simulation was developed by Spock - at least according to the new movies - and the only cadet to ever beat the test was Jim Kirk though he had to cheat to do it. The point of the exercise is to help a potential captain understand their own limitations, test their character, and teach them how to manage an unmanageable situation in a non-anxious way.

I think about where we find ourselves today. Our political leaders are facing a true “no-win” scenario. On the one hand, they must employ lockdowns and “stay at home” orders in order to prevent the spread of a dangerous and novel viral strain. These extreme measures, along with social distancing, have flattened the curve and helped prevent deaths. However, the economy has now crashed, putting millions out of work not just here in America but around the world. This has created a potential famine that will impact up to 250 million people according to the BBC. People are beginning to realize that the ability to remain home and safely shelter in place is a privilege only the globally wealthy enjoy. The extreme poor simply do not have this choice. If they remain home, they will starve to death. To add yet another layer to this already challenging scenario is the growing mental health crisis. Crisis lines are burning up with people struggling from social isolation, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Truly, we are facing a crisis of biblical proportions!

Sadly, so many of our leaders are failing the test. They are failing to manage their own fear and anxiety and often end up lashing out in divisive ways. They attempt to score political points on their opponents. They accuse each other of having the blood of innocents on their hands. They don’t want to “waste this crisis” and have started promoted economic and social revolution. They proudly and arrogantly proclaim they have the solution to make sure something like this never happens again as if keeping such a promise were even possible. They tell us that even “one death” is unacceptable but that’s simply not facing reality. People are going to die in this crisis. Either from the disease or from the “cure.” Again, it’s a no-win situation. There are no easy answers. No clear path back to normalcy.

So how does a Christian respond when faced with a “Kobayashi Maru?” We lament. We fall on our faces before the Lord. We humble ourselves before God. We acknowledge our own limitations. We refuse to trust in our own resources. Our own talent. Our own wisdom. Our own strength. We recognize such ways only lead to more death. “Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.” (Psalm (49:12-14) You and I are dust. We were made from dust and to dust we shall return. We are weak and frail. We are vulnerable and fragile. We are foolish and myopic. We are such self-centered creatures.

Why do we feel like the crisis we find ourselves in is a “no-win” scenario? Because we are limiting ourselves to the horizons of this world. We are confining ourselves to life on this earth. We have lost sight of the eternity God offers us in Jesus Christ. I love how the Psalmist proclaims the good news of the gospel. Pointing us in faith to the hope we have in God. “God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” (Psalm 49:15) Death has no hold over the true believer. The true Christian faces death not as an adversary but as a vanquished foe. Death has no hold on us. No power

over us. No authority to condemn us. For on the Cross at Calvary, Jesus Christ met death in all his macabre glory and put him to shame. He disarmed death, making a mockery of him. Friends, there is no such thing as a “no-win” scenario to God! He has “cheated” death by raising His Son from the grave. He has “robbed” death of her greatest prize! He has defeated death once and for all! And all those who place their trust in Him can know the same victory in their own lives as well.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 3-5

April 24, 2020
THE POVERTY OF PROSPERITY PREACHING

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5

Several years ago, a Christian leader ran across this prayer from Jabez in 1 Chronicles 4. “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from harm so that it might not bring me pain!” And God granted what he asked.” (1 Chronicles 4:10) He wrote a book about it. Claimed that if Christians would pray this prayer for thirty days, they would see significant changes in their lives. It became a bestseller. The forces of Christian capitalism took advantage. The book spawned journals and devotionals and Bible studies and music and sermon series. Preachers encouraged their congregations to pray for an “expansion of their territory.” Pray for “God’s hand” to bless everything they set their mind and heart to. Pray for God to “protect them and deliver them from all pain.” Sadly, these things didn’t happen like the preachers promised. People still suffered pain. People still suffered loss. People saw their “territories” decrease through global recessions. And the prayer fad quickly faded from the scene.

Prosperity preaching is heretical. The idea that God promises His people only the good things in this life goes against everything we read in Scripture and everything we experience in real life. Prosperity preachers love to lift up certain sections of Scripture, rip them out of context, and use them almost like magic incantations to force God to do their bidding. They believe their obedience binds God to act in certain ways. They believe their faith requires God to bless them with earthly treasures. It’s all a big scam. It’s bogus theology. Spiritually abusive. Shamelessly self-promoting and self-enriching. (All one has to do is look at the lifestyles of these so-called “preachers” to see the rotten fruit of their manipulative, sinful, and evil tactics.)

So why does Jabez pray this prayer? We have no idea. We do not know much about him. We do not know anything about his life circumstances. We do not know the occasion that spawned this prayer. To build an entire theology of prayer off the back of this one verse is incredibly dangerous. I remember when the book first came out. I was at Princeton at the time. Serving as an intern in a local church where one of the pastors encouraged our congregation to pray the prayer. I had concerns almost immediately. When members of our church asked me what I thought about the prayer of Jabez, I told them I preferred the prayer of Jesus. Praying the Lord’s Prayer for thirty days would bear far more fruit in one’s spiritual life than praying the prayer of Jabez.

Ultimately, the problem with the prayer of Jabez is it makes everything about us. Bless me. Expand my territory. Be with me. Keep me from harm. Protect me from all pain. And yet, as I read Scripture I see how God often uses pain and hardship and suffering to shape and form us into the image of Christ. In fact, the Book of Hebrews says that Christ Himself was made “perfect through suffering.” (Hebrews 2:10) The prayer Jesus taught us to pray makes everything about God. Hallowed be Your name. Your Kingdom come. Your will be done. Yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Our very real needs grounded by our surrender to God’s ultimate will for our lives.

Friends, you and I are living through challenging times. Many of us are experiencing pain. Many of us are experiencing hardship. Many of us are experiencing loss. Our health is threatened. Our wealth is being stripped away. Our territory has shrunk to the homes we are lucky enough to live in. Does this mean God has failed? Does this mean God’s people have lost faith? Is God finally fed up with the world? No. It simply another stark reminder that this world is not our home. This world is broken and ruined and dangerous and hostile. It is cursed by the weight of sin. It suffers and struggles and groans

along with us as it waits for the coming Kingdom of God. In such a world, the prayer of Jabez cannot help us. Only the prayer of Jesus can bring us the comfort and the hope we need!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78

April 25, 2020
RESTING IN GOD'S PROMISE

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 6, Psalms 36, 39, 77, 78

Some days I don't feel like I have much to offer. My brain feels fried. My thoughts scattered and unfocused. I don't feel spiritual at all. The words just won't come. I am tired and weary. The strain of the season is getting to me. I'm mentally and emotionally drained. Anyone else relate? Sure you can. Life is like that sometimes. It's not a condition to avoid. It doesn't mean I've failed. It simply means I'm human and need time to rest. Restore. Renew. Just like everyone else. None of us is a machine. None of us are made to run 24/7. Part of what I'm learning in this season is to embrace the slower pace. The inactivity. The lack of production. But that's hard for me. It cuts against my grain. It pushes back against my naturally activist nature. What I'm learning is how to rest. Rest physically. Rest mentally. Rest emotionally. Rest spiritually. As I lay down my own burdens, I am also learning to pick up the burdens of others. Those less fortunate than me. Those less privileged than me. Because of my relative wealth and position, I have the luxury of rest. Many of my friends around the world do not. So I find myself praying more regularly and fervently. Reaching out to my friends to find out how they are doing. Sacrificially sharing my own resources to help alleviate suffering where I am able. Ultimately, this time is teaching me yet another lesson that life is not about me. It's not about my needs and my wants and my comfort and my safety. It's about finding my rest in the Lord and helping others do the same.

“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. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light. Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart! Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise.” (Psalm 36:5-12)

April 27, 2020
SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Readings for today: [Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93](#)

Today I read something profound a friend posted on Facebook. “We are all in the same storm but we are not all in the same boat.” Those words resonated with me as I think about the number of friends I have facing starvation around the world. The friends I have living in difficult home situations which the quarantine has exacerbated. The friends I have who’ve lost jobs and livelihoods or loved ones during this challenging season. I think about the political leaders I’ve had the chance to interact with and the burdens they carry. The faith leaders I’ve talked to who feel paralyzed and overwhelmed by all the demands. There seems to be no bottom to this pit we find ourselves in. And this has led some of those I love into a deep crisis of faith.

Spiritual crisis is real, friends. It is deep. It is existential. It takes us to the end of ourselves and beyond. It is also quite normal. It is to be expected. It is something many followers of Christ have experienced. The consistent witness of God’s people throughout history testifies to the fact that there will be seasons when God seems so distant. When our lives seem so dark. When the light of Christ is hard to find. When the comfort of Christ seems long in coming. During such seasons, we feel overwhelmed by fear. Doubt. The cares and worries of this world press in on us. We feel trapped. Alone. Unable to be consoled.

St. John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish Christian, famously coined the term, “The Dark Night of the Soul.” It refers to particular seasons in the Christian life where we feel stripped of God’s presence. It’s not true, of course. God is still very much present in our lives but we do not feel Him. We do not experience Him. We do not sense His tender mercies and affections. During such seasons, we feel a void. An absence. And it causes us to wrestle on a deep, foundational level with our faith.

I experienced such a season for 19 months while living in Sun Prairie, WI. The ministry I had been called to was failing. My relationship with those I was accountable to was a disaster. I was struggling daily with fear and doubt and depression. So consumed was I by my own needs, I neglected my wife and children. Things got so bad that my wife gave me an ultimatum. It was either her or the ministry. I was at the end of my rope. I resigned. No idea what was next. No idea how I would feed my family. No idea how I would care for those I loved most in this world. I felt so alone. So afraid. For months I cried out to God. I would pace our living room most of the night praying. Begging. Frustrated. Angry. Where was God when I needed Him most? Where was God when things were at their worst? I was in spiritual crisis and it felt like God was not there.

These experiences are not unusual. St. John of the Cross. St. Paul of the Cross. Mother Theresa. All testify to similar experiences, though their “dark nights” lasted decades. The author of Psalm 88 was clearly familiar with his own “dark night.” “O Lord, God of my salvation, I cry out day and night before you...For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol...You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep...Is your steadfast love declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Abaddon? Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?...O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?...You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.” (Psalms 88:1, 3, 6, 11-12, 14, 18) It’s a depressing Psalm. One of the few with no resolution. No final ascription of praise. The psalmist seemingly feels God’s absence on a visceral level and is left all alone in darkness.

So why does God allow the dark night of the soul? Why does God not rescue us from the depths of our spiritual crises? What are such experiences seemingly so common and even necessary for the Christian? I believe it is how we learn the meaning of true faith. True faith must move from the head to the heart to the gut. To the depths of our being. It must become the fundamental reality of our existence. It must transcend what we think. It must transcend what we feel. It has to come from a place so deep within that it can never be overcome.

Mother Theresa endured her “dark night” from 1948 until her death in 1997. She once wrote, “Where is my faith? Even deep down ... there is nothing but emptiness and darkness ... If there be God—please forgive me. When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven, there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul.” Some have suggested she lost her faith. Not true! In fact, her suffering was very much like that of Jesus on the cross who cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In the end, Mother Theresa hoped her personal letters would be destroyed lest “people think more of me and less of Jesus.”

I wouldn’t trade those 19 months of spiritual darkness in Wisconsin for anything. God had removed any sense of His affections. God had removed any sense of His abiding presence. Doubts and fears assailed my soul as I was stripped to the bone. In the depths of my despair, I was haunted by this one question...do I really believe? Do I believe in God when nothing makes sense? Do I believe in God when I cannot feel His presence? Do I believe in God when all is darkness all around me? Is God more real to me than my thoughts? My feelings? My fears? My doubts?

Maybe some of you are facing those same feelings today. Maybe you are asking similar questions. Do I believe in God when my loved ones get sick? Do I believe in God when I’ve lost my job? Do I believe in God when there seems to be no end in sight? Do I believe in God when the news just gets worse every single day? Do I believe in God when facing an uncertain future filled with potential new outbreaks?

There’s no way to know the answer to such deep questions unless one is willing to walk through the valley of the shadow of death to the other side. Thankfully, at the end of my own dark road, I found God waiting for me there. I found my faith renewed and strengthened in a way I could never have imagined. And I do not harbor any illusions that somehow my journey is at its end or that I won’t have to walk yet another dark road in the course of my life. What I do know is that God has driven my faith deep into my gut. Deep into the bedrock of my being. And though it can be shaken, it can never be destroyed because God is more real than my circumstances. God is more real than my feelings. God is more real than my thoughts. God is more real than my doubts. God is more real than my fears. God is the fundamental reality of my life and I am thankful.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-9

April 28, 2020
BIBLICAL FEMINISM

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-9

Today's reading brings us to the end of the genealogies of Israel. Whew! These are some of the harder sections of Scripture to get through simply because they feel so remote. After all, we don't feel a connection to these people or these particular tribes or these particular families. Sure, we acknowledge they are our spiritual mothers and fathers but there's very little information about most of these names so it's hard to feel any kind of tie. However, a careful reading reminds us that behind every name is a story. And behind every story is a powerful testimony of God's faithfulness.

For example, consider the case of Zelophehad's daughters. "The sons of Manasseh: Asriel, whom his Aramean concubine bore; she bore Machir the father of Gilead. And Machir took a wife for Huppim and for Shuppim. The name of his sister was Maacah. And the name of the second was Zelophehad, and Zelophehad had daughters." (1 Chronicles 7:14-15) Their story is told in Numbers 27 right in the middle of another genealogical section of the Bible when Moses was dividing up the inheritance of the land. It's a remarkable testimony and worth recapping again.

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 (Zelophehad's daughters) 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 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. Thankfully, 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: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

April 29, 2020
THE POWER OF UNITY

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 5:1-10, 1 Chronicles 11-12, Psalms 133

Today we read one of my favorite Psalms. “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the Lord has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.” (Psalm 133) It contains an amazing promise. God commanding His blessing of everlasting life on those who seek to come together in Him. I’ve seen the fulfillment of this promise. Especially in my work over in Africa where Christians come together from different tribes and denominations. Speaking different languages and growing up in different socio-economic classes. They come together to grow the Kingdom of God. It’s powerful. And God blesses the work of their hands. Thousands of churches planted. Tens of thousands of new believers. Millions hearing the gospel for the first time.

I’ve also seen it in the prison I worked in during seminary. Men coming together from all walks of life. Men who committed all kinds of crimes. Men doing all kinds of time. Their common bond in Christ united them across denominational lines. Across racial lines. Across class lines. They came together to worship Christ and to serve Him in the most difficult of circumstances. And God blessed the work of their hands. Hundreds of men heard the gospel for the first time. Many came to faith. Violence in the prison went down. Even the prison guards and administration saw the impact of the spiritual unity of these brothers in Christ.

Sadly, I’ve also seen the devastation disunity creates. Think about what’s happening in our nation today. The fight against the coronavirus should bring us together. We should be united in our fight against a common enemy. However, too many of our political leaders simply cannot help themselves. They stir division. They fan the flames of partisanship. They use this crisis to fan their base into a frenzy. And the result is more sickness. More death. More pain. More suffering. And the American church is often no different. For all the great work so many churches are doing across the country in all kinds of communities, a small minority continue to make headlines with their arrogance. They create a false dichotomy. They peddle a false narrative. They claim they are being persecuted or singled out or attacked by the government. Nothing could be farther from the truth but it serves their purposes to sow division. And far too many in their own congregations suffer the consequences.

The key to unity is humility. Humbling ourselves before the Lord first and foremost. Remembering the grace He first gave to us as sinners. Acknowledging how lost we truly would be without His saving death. Having received His grace, we then extend it out to others. Those we love. Those we live among. Those we struggle alongside. We offer it indiscriminately. Unconditionally. Even - and perhaps most especially - to our enemies. Only God’s grace is sufficient to supply our needs. Only God’s grace is powerful enough to tear down every dividing wall of hostility that keeps us apart. Only God’s grace can transcend race or class or language or tribe. Only God’s grace can bring about the unity our hearts so desire.

Friends, more than anything else, we need unity in our community. In our state. In our nation. In our world today. I hope you will join me in praying daily for God’s grace to be poured out on His people all across the earth. May we who are called by God’s name humble ourselves before Him and pray fervently for repentance. Forgiveness. And the healing of the divisions that keep us from experiencing the abundant life God promises!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 5:11-6:23, 1 Chronicles 13-16

April 30, 2020
TRUE WORSHIP

Readings for today: [2 Samuel 5:11-6:23](#), [1 Chronicles 13-16](#)

What is true worship? Is it a feeling? A style? An experience? How do we know if we've engaged in true worship? Is it because we leave feeling inspired? The preacher's message warmed our hearts? We've eaten the bread and drunk of the cup? The music for the morning matched our musical tastes? What are the hallmarks of true worship? Authenticity? Sincerity? Sentimentality? Getting something out of it?

Worship in 21st century North America has turned largely inward. It is focused, evaluated, planned, produced for the human experience. It caters to the preferences and tastes of the worshipper. It is designed primarily to make the human being feel inspired, motivated, and connected. This "inward turn" is as true for the small church as it is for the mega-church and every church in between. And it's why we see so many Christians bounce from church to church to church over the course of their lives. Long gone are the days when one would INVEST their entire lives into one community come what may. Long gone are the days when Christians would heed the BIBLICAL command to actually practice forgiveness and reconciliation when relationships get hard. Long gone are the days when Christians would DIE TO SELF, laying aside the consumer tendencies of taste. Preference. Personal favorites. As a result, long gone are the days when the church produced robust, courageous, bold, self-sacrificing disciples of Jesus who would give their lives for the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom of God in this world. Not that it never happens, it is simply more an exception rather than the rule.

So what is true worship? It is the worship God both deserves and demands. Believe it or not, God cares deeply how He is worshipped. In 1 Chronicles 13, we see what happens when God's people - with sincere and authentic devotion in their hearts - fail to worship God in the way He commands. The people have gathered. They're excited to bring the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. They call the priests. They call the Levites. They plan a huge celebration. The whole nation is present to witness this incredible moment. They build a new cart to carry the ark in the procession. David and all of Israel are celebrating, singing, dancing before the Lord with all their might. But then an ox stumbles. Uzzah, seeking to protect the ark, puts out his hand to keep it steady. The Lord strikes him down. One can imagine the shock of the crowd. In an instant, all the music and dancing and celebration stops. Silence. Long, prolonged, awkward silence as the people come to grips with what's just happened. David is angry. He pouts for three months, refusing to come to grips with the fact that he himself is somewhat responsible for what happened. His decision to do what was convenient (build a cart to carry the ark) rather than what God demanded (Levites carry the ark on their own shoulders) is ultimately what cost Uzzah his life. Fast forward to 1 Chronicles 15. A different picture emerges. David is ready. He is humble. He submits to God's will. He decrees that "no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the Lord had chosen them to carry the ark of the Lord and to minister to him forever." (1 Chron. 15:2) Once again, the celebration commences. Singing. Dancing. Music. Right sacrifices. God is pleased. God accepts the worship David offers because it is singularly focused on honoring God.

What does true worship look like in our context today? Obviously, none of us know where the Ark of the Covenant resides. (Except Indiana Jones, of course!) The ceremonial laws that governed Old Testament worship have been fulfilled in Christ. Does this set us free then to worship as we choose? To do what feels good? To set the needs of the worshipper above the clear, biblical command to worship God and Him alone? And why does it matter? What difference does it make?

Worship exerts a powerful, shaping influence on our lives. It changes us. Refines us. Transforms us. As such, who we worship matters. What we worship matters. How we worship matters. In these days of strict quarantines when the corporate worship of the people of God has been suspended, we have been given a gift. An opportunity to think about what true worship is, what it looks like, and what is essential and non-essential. I think most of us are finding that as nice as it is to worship God from the comfort of our homes and living rooms, it's just not the same watching a screen. True worship is embodied. It is incarnational. It requires the presence of others worshippers. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." We're all feeling that loss right now. We have a longing in our souls to hear the saints sing. To extend the peace of Christ. To celebrate baptism. To share in the Lord's Supper. All of these are embodied actions that require the physical presence of other people. Friends, God loves it when His family gathers together around His throne. This is the worship He deserves and the worship He demands and one of my prayers is that we will emerge from this season with a greater hunger to gather in His presence. Place a greater priority on coming before Him as a community of faith. Find our hearts filled with a greater desire to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 15, 23-25, 47