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July 2, 2020
DEJA VU

Readings for today: 2 Kings 12-13, 2 Chronicles 24

As I read the passages for yesterday and today, I see a familiar and tragic pattern emerging. The same pattern that's been in place since the Fall. Cain and Abel. The state of the world just before the Flood. Tower of Babel. The time of the Judges. Left to her own devices, humanity inevitably descends into godlessness. Violence. Suffering. Pain. Jehu is called to be God's hand of justice. He executes God's will in a brutal, terrifying fashion. It is a harsh reminder of how seriously God takes our sin and serves as a foreshadowing of hell. By contrast, the rise of Joash reminds us God always claims a remnant for Himself. A faithful people who follow His will and provide hope for the nation. Joash lived most of his life in faithfulness and the result is peace and prosperity and security. He restored the Temple. He cleansed the land of idolatry. He led the people back to true worship of the Living God.

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. We see this dynamic played out over and over again throughout the Scriptures. I love what it says in 2 Kings 13:23, "But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion on them, and he turned toward them, because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them, nor has he cast them from his presence until now." No matter how far humanity falls. No matter how bad things may get. No matter how much violence and suffering and pain may be taking place. God is faithful. God is true. God is steadfast. Immovable. He will not abandon us. He will not forsake His people. He loves us with an everlasting love. "For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (Psalms 30:5)

I pray this brings you comfort today. I know we are all living through an extremely difficult season. I asked a retired pastor recently if he had seen anything like this in all his years of ministry. His answer was not even close. A global pandemic. Economic shutdown. Racial tension and unrest. Political division. It feels like the very ground is shifting under our feet. We see the mistreatment and murder of people of color. The rioting and looting. The assaults on our law enforcement. The vandalism and destruction of public monuments that include far more than just confederate statues. It's hard to get our heads and hearts around the turmoil and chaos we're seeing and experiencing. It's tempting to rise up. Marshal whatever power and authority we have. Cling to our rights. Protect our livelihoods and property. Turn inward and make sure we remain safe. But God calls us to a different way. A better way. The way of Jesus. It is the way of prayer. The way of sacrifice. The way of empathy. The way of love. Now more than ever we need revival! Now more than ever we need to turn to God!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27

July 3, 2020
HIGH PLACES

Readings for today: [2 Kings 14-15, 2 Chronicles 25-27](#)

High places. We see them pop up all over the place in the Kings and Chronicles. Often the righteousness of kings is judged on whether or not they tolerate them. What are they? Originally, they were sacred spaces where the Canaanite tribes worshiped their gods. If you flip back to Deuteronomy 12, you read these words, “You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess served their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.” (Deut. 12:2-3) Yahweh had set His people apart. They would be different. They would not be like any other tribe or nation. Because they were a nation of priests, they would worship Yahweh in the way He prescribed. “But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go, and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you.” (Deut. 12:5-7)

Where was this place? Originally, it was the Tabernacle that traveled with them in the wilderness. After Solomon, it was the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the place where God had set His name and indwelt with His presence. This was the “place” the Israelites were commanded to seek when they worshiped. However, the travel could be difficult. The cost was high. It meant time away from the fields. Time away from home. After the kingdoms split, it meant possible defection by the northern tribes so the Israelite kings set up their own shrines (the sin of Jeroboam) and forbade their people from traveling to Jerusalem at the prescribed times. The people set up their own shrines to Yahweh on the very high places He once commanded them to destroy. If we assume the best of them, they were trying to worship Yahweh. Trying to remain faithful. Just not in the way He demanded or the way He deserved. At their worst, they adopted the worship practices of the locals and worshiped false gods.

God cares about our worship. He cares about what happens week in and week out in local churches all over the world. Not because God is taking attendance but because God seeks worshipers who will worship Him in Spirit and in Truth. Worshipers who will give Him the worship He demands in the way He deserves. Worshipers who will not compromise. Worshipers who will honor Him as holy. Worshipers who refuse to make themselves the center of the experience. Worshipers who lay aside their wants, their needs, their desires, their preferences to come before the Lord in humility. To do anything else is to create a “high place.” A shrine to another god. And most of that time, that “god” is Self. The besetting sin of the Western Church is the idolatry of self. We are the object of our worship. Our satisfaction is the key performance indicator. We engage worship based on our own personal preferences. We refuse to honor God as holy. God as supreme. God as Lord. We are proud. We are arrogant. We think far too much of ourselves. And if the lives of the kings teach us anything it is this...God will not be mocked. We will be judged on the basis of who or what we worship.

Where are the high places in your life? How has this season changed the way you think about worship? Worshiping God during a global pandemic looks much different than worshiping Him when things are going well. Worship has had to change to meet the demands of this season. Online. Virtual. Digital. Singing at home on your own is far different than singing in a crowd of fellow believers. Listening in

your home with your dogs and cats and kids running around is far different than sitting in a sanctuary. Celebrating the sacraments feels far different than gathering in person around the Lord's Table with your brothers and sisters in Christ. What will our worshiping life look like as we creep back to normal? Will I find myself craving more worship or less? Craving more fellowship or less? Craving more of God's presence or less? And what do these things reveal about the state of my heart before the Lord?

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4

July 4, 2020
NATIONAL REVIVAL

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

Happy 4th of July! Today I'm praying for spiritual revival for our nation. A revival on par with what happened in Nineveh in Jonah's day. A revival that would reach the halls of power. A revival that would break out in the streets. A revival so complete it would include the rich and poor. Great and small. Black, white, brown. Republican and Democrat. I'm praying for God to do a work so mighty. So obvious. So clear that it simply cannot be denied. And I am praying for God to get all the glory. But let me be clear. I am not praying for revival so that America will be great again. Revival is never about us. Never about our wants. Our needs. Our desires. Revival can never be about our own greatness and it cannot be about our own glory. America, like any nation on earth, will only be great as she seeks the Lord. As she submits to His will. Confesses her sin. Repents from her wicked ways. Friends, our hope is not in democracy. Our hope is not in capitalism. Our hope is not in our military might and power or even the freedoms so many brave men and women have died to protect. Our hope is in Jesus Christ. He is our only hope in this life or the next. His name is the only name given under heaven by which we might be saved. His life, death, and resurrection is the only way we find redemption.

So I am praying for revival. I am praying we have the courage in our nation to face our checkered past. I am praying we have the humility in our nation to acknowledge our tragic failings. I am praying we find the strength to repent for the full measure of our sin. This can only come from the Holy Spirit, of course. Only by turning to Him can we find what we need to move forward into a brighter and more glorious future. The people of Nineveh believed God. They heard the Word and they got on their knees. Though they were a great city in a great empire, they humbled themselves before the Lord. They turned from their evil ways. They turned from their violent ways. They turned from their oppressive ways. And God saw their hearts. He relented of the disaster He was preparing for them. And over 100,000 people were saved.

A dear friend of mine shared recently with me that he believes we are living through extraordinary times. He is a pastor. He is a community organizer. He is a leader of non-violent protests in his city. He is African-American and serves a predominantly white congregation in the Deep South. When I asked him how he is feeling about the state of our country, he was excited. He believes there has never been a better time to preach the gospel and that's why he's on the front lines in his own community. He is out there sharing Jesus. Like Jonah, he is walking the length and breadth of his city calling for people to repent and place their trust in Christ. He is an inspiration to me. Now he knows how difficult things have become. He is not blind to the challenges of the global pandemic or the racial tensions or the economic shutdown. He is very aware of the impact these things have had on the people he loves and serves. But he also knows this is a time when the very ground beneath our feet has been shaken. Lives have been stripped down to the studs and there is a new openness to the gospel's call.

Friends, we are living in extraordinary times in our extraordinary country. The task of forming a more perfect union has now come to us. The call to fulfill the vision of a nation where all people are created equal remains. Every generation must accept their responsibility to engage the hard work of bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice and peace. We cannot rest on the work of those who have come before. Each of us must now take our place. Shoulder our part of the load. Bear the responsibility God has called us to bear so that we can leave this nation in a better place than how we found it. Again, not for our sake. Not even for the sake of future generations of Americans. But for the glory of God alone. May we hear clearly the call of the gospel: "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." America will find her greatness as she repents before God and gives herself away for the sake of the world.

July 6, 2020
JUDGE OF THE NATIONS

Readings for today: [Amos 1-5](#)

God sits in judgment on the nations. He will judge them just as surely as He will judge every person who walks the face of the earth. It is clear from the Book of Amos that sin is not just personal and individual but also corporate and collective. And God is no respecter of persons. Meaning He shows no favorites. He judges all the nations of the earth. Socialists and capitalists. Communists and democracies. Monarchies and parliamentary systems. It doesn't matter the form of government. It doesn't matter what economic system a nation employs. All that matters is does the nation do righteousness? Do they seek the Lord? Do they honor and submit to God's Word?

Damascus. Gaza. Tyre. Edom. The Ammonites. Moab. Judah. Israel. All of them are judged. All of them are tried before the judgment seat of the Lord. Their crimes are legion. Violence. Conquest. Murder. Rage. Attacking the most vulnerable. Rejection of God's Law. Mistreatment of the poor and powerless in their midst. Sexual immorality. Worshiping false gods. It's a comprehensive indictment. Especially against the people of God. They should know better. They should be better. They are the ones God set apart originally to be a light to the other nations. They are the ones God expects to set the example. To show the world a different way. But Israel and Judah failed to fulfill their call. Instead of remaining faithful to God, they became just like the pagan nations.

God is faithful. He will not let a nation persist in her sin. He will judge them. He will punish them. He will force them to face the consequences of their unrighteousness. So God plucks a man named Amos from among the shepherds of Tekoa. Amos is sent from Judah to Israel to proclaim the Word of the Lord. He is called to speak truth to power and to call Israel to return in faithfulness to God. He confronts Israel on her sin. Particularly the sin of injustice. They enslave their fellow Israelites, selling them for silver. They mistreat the poor. They do not care for the afflicted. Though they are still engaging in all the prescribed feasts and festivals, the Lord rejects their worship. Rejects their offerings. Rejects their sacrifices. Because their actions do not match up with their words.

So where can Israel find hope? Only as she seeks the Lord. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph." (Amos 5:14-15) God is merciful. God is gracious. He forgives those who repent and humble themselves before Him and that includes the nations of the earth.

These are convicting words for us this morning. Coming off a weekend where we celebrate the great blessings God has given America, we also recognize there is still much work to do if we are to fulfill our calling to be the great "city on a hill." Our nation has largely abandoned God. Largely abandoned His Word and His ways. We have perpetuated injustice for far too long. Whether it is the injustice of abortion or the injustice of racism. The injustice of attacking the family or the injustice of mass incarceration. The injustice of our welfare system or the injustice of runaway capitalism. Where can we find hope? Only in Christ. Only as we turn to the Lord in humble repentance and turn from our wicked ways. Only as we recapture the best of America which is enshrined on our Statue of Liberty...

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 6-9

July 7, 2020
HOPE ON THE FAR SIDE OF PAIN

Readings for today: [Amos 6-9](#)

Reading the prophets is challenging. We don't like what they have to say. We don't want to hear their words. They hit too close to home. They cut us to the heart. Deep down we know what they say is true. The reign of Jeroboam II in Israel was a glorious one. He ruled at a time when the nation enjoyed great power and wealth. They felt safe and secure. All was good. But the people grew complacent. They continued to worship at the false shrines Jeroboam I had set up. They continued to oppress the poor and pervert justice. They refused to obey the commands of God. God had raised up king after king but all of them abandoned Him. None of them remained faithful. And the people followed their lead. Kind of feels familiar, doesn't it?

God's patience eventually runs out. Sit and ponder that thought for a moment. It's not that God loves His people any more or any less. It's not that God is now going to turn His back on them. It's not that God will abandon His covenant. He cannot. He will not. Instead, His relationship with them will shift. He moves from grace to justice. He stops sending prophets to call them back to faithfulness and instead sends prophets to pronounce judgment. Israel will be destroyed. Israel will be wiped from the face of the earth. Israel will be punished for the full measure of her sins. The Lord disciplining those He loves. The Lord allowing a season of hardship, suffering, and death to come in order to turn their hearts back to Him.

It is a hard but necessary truth to face. The Lord's love for us is double-edged. He will show grace and mercy. He will remain steadfast and faithful and true. He will be tender and compassionate at times. But He will also discipline us. He will confront us. He will allow us to suffer the consequences for our sins. Being in relationship with God means trusting Him to love us like a faithful father. He will not always give us what we want but He will provide what we need. And His primary goal is not to make us comfortable. Not to make us happy. Not to protect us from all pain and heartache and suffering. No, His primary goal is to make us more like Jesus. His only beloved Son who Himself was made perfect through suffering.

Friends, I know we are all going through challenging times. There is tremendous fear and anxiety all around us. We watch the news and find our hearts filled with frustration and anger. We suffer and struggle and battle through each and every day. The future is uncertain and that drives us nuts. Some of us have gotten sick. Some of us have been laid off. Some of us have experienced oppression. All of us have been impacted in one way or another. The only hope we have is that God is at work! God will be faithful! Even as we suffer through this difficult time, we know there is a light at the end of the tunnel! There is hope waiting for us on the far side of pain. Listen to the promise God gave Israel and let it turn your heart back to Him today.

“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them,” says the Lord your God.” (Amos 9:13-15)

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-5

July 8, 2020
THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF GOD

Readings for today: [Hosea 1-5](#)

As a pastor, I have spent countless hours in marriage counseling. More often than not, they are in my office because one or both have been unfaithful. They have stepped out on their spouse with a friend. A co-worker. Perhaps even a prostitute. The pain is unspeakable. The betrayal beyond words. It is almost impossible to recover. Why? Because even in our sex-saturated culture there is a sense that sexual intimacy is the greatest gift one can give to another person. It is the gift of oneself. The gift of the deepest, most profound parts of oneself. It is an act that transcends simple physical pleasure, joining hearts and entangling souls in a deeply spiritual way. This is why God has always reserved it for the marriage covenant. Sex was something to be enjoyed within the bounds of an unconditional commitment to one other person for as long as you both shall live.

However, we have made a mockery of this gift. Our culture debases sexuality by promoting a hookup, swipe right culture. We called it sexual freedom and yet suffer from an epidemic of STD's, unplanned pregnancies, and sexual abuse. We thought it would lead to greater intimacy but the quality of our relationships continues to decline. Marriages fail at ever higher rates as individuals pursue their own pleasure and fulfillment at the expense of the other. The sexual revolution continues to gain steam through social media, television, movies, etc. which are univocal in their declaration that we are at the mercy of our hormonal urges. Whatever feels good is right and true regardless of the collateral damage it leaves in our wake.

This is the central message of Hosea. God takes up the very real issue of adultery and employs it as a metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and His people. He even calls His prophet Hosea to embody this relationship by marrying a prostitute. Hosea's pain is a reflection of God's pain. Hosea's heartbreak at Gomer's continual betrayals is a reflection of God's heartbreak over Israel's worship of the pagan gods. The names of Hosea's children reflect not only his suffering but the divine pathos of God Himself as He wrestles with the unconditional love He pledged to Israel. When Hosea purchases his bride back from the slave traders in Hosea 3, one is reminded of the incredible grace of God which relentlessly pursues us to the day we die.

It is abundantly clear, throughout the book of Hosea, that our only hope is the great faithfulness of God. The steadfast loyal love of God for His people. No matter what they may do or where they may go or how many times they play the "whore" and chase after other gods, Yahweh will not let go. He will redeem. He will save.

"Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God." And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head. And they shall go up from the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel." (Hosea 1:10-11)

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more.

And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord.” (Hosea 2:14-18, 20)

“Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king, and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.” (Hosea 3:5)

This is the heart of the gospel. No matter how bad things get. No matter how many times we sin and fall short of the glory of God. No matter how far we run into the far country and play the prodigal. God is faithful. God is loyal. Steadfast. True. He will never stop pursuing. Never stop watching. Never stop waiting for us to repent and return. There is nothing that can separate us from His love. Nothing that can snatch us out of His hand. Nothing that can break the eternal covenant He first made with us. This is good news! Even great news for those who love God and are called according to His purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9

July 9, 2020
THE WIDENESS OF GOD'S MERCY

Readings for today: [Hosea 6-9](#)

“Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” (Hosea 6:1-3)

What a beautiful prayer for our time! God’s prophet issuing a call to God’s people. Return. Come back. Be healed. Be comforted. Be revived. The same God who allowed the calamity to come. The same God who allowed the plague to persist. The same God who allowed the violence and anger to vent itself in our streets is the same God who will bind up our broken hearts. He’s the same God who will bathe and dress all our wounds. He’s the same God who will end the plague. Bring blessing to our lives and to our nation and to our world...provided we seek Him. Provided we return to Him. Provided we humbly submit ourselves to Him.

God is faithful. His mercy is everlasting. His grace never fails. He is as consistent as the sunrise. As regular as the spring rains. He will never abandon us. He will never forsake us. He will never leave us. He is always available. He never sleeps. His foot never slips. His door is never closed. So we press on to know the Lord. We seek Him with all our hearts. We chase after Him with longing like the deer panting for streams of water. We look for the Lord in the land of the living. We abide in His life-giving presence. We drink from the well of Living Water. We eat the Bread of Life that always satisfies.

I think of the number of people I know right now who are seeking for comfort in all the wrong places. They cling to all they have left. They hoard all they have gained. They believe they must protect themselves at all costs. But these are foundations built on sand. These are treasures stored up on earth. Their lives are based on temporary pleasures that simply will not last. I think about the people I know who are lost and wandering during this time. They are hopeless and helpless like sheep without a shepherd. They are hurting and vulnerable and frightened and anxious. And my heart goes out to them. How I wish I could call them back to the Lord!

I think of our nation right now and the challenges we face. The rampant distrust. The culture of outrage. The post-truth era. We cannot seem to agree on simple facts. Everything becomes about the exercise of power. Everything becomes about control. We have wandered so far from God. The American Dream has become a living nightmare. Our nation is sick and needs healing. Our nation is struck down and needs to be bound back up. We are desperate for revival. The renewal of the Holy Spirit.

Father, may you heal us! Heal our divisions! Heal our hearts! Heal our souls! Father, may you bind us up! Restore the years the locusts have eaten through injustice, corruption, racism, classism, and economic deprivation! Father, revive us as we return to you! Restore us as we repent before you! You are last and desperate and only hope! We long for you!

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14

July 10, 2020
THE TENDERNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: [Hosea 10-14](#)

In the midst of judgment, hope springs eternal. God loves His people with an everlasting love. He cannot abandon them to their fate. He cannot relinquish them or give them up. He cannot walk out on them. His love is steadfast. True. Loyal. Even in the face of betrayal and adultery and sin. I love how Hosea 11 describes God's love...

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son...it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up by their arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them." (Hosea 11:1, 3-4) One thing we must always remember when reading the Scriptures is that God has revealed Himself to us as Father. Abba. Daddy. This description is a precious one every parent can understand. We teach our children to walk. We watch them take those first steps. We hold them in our arms. Comfort them when they fall. Bandage up their nicks and cuts and "owies." We lead them throughout the course of their lives, always desiring what is good for them. We provide for them. Train them. Discipline them. Teach them. This is our calling as a parent and it is notable that God chooses this particular metaphor to describe His relationship with His people.

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. They shall go after the Lord; he will roar like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west; they shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, declares the Lord." (Hosea 11:8-11) How many of us as parents have watched our children go astray? Watch them wander off the path? Watch them choose self-destruction? How many times have I sat in my office across from parents trying to give them hope for their addicted son or estranged daughter? How many times have I prayed these very words myself over my own children? No matter what they do, I cannot give them up. I cannot hand them over. I cannot let go. I will always love them. I will always cherish them. I will always pursue them. I imagine the same is true for every parent reading these words today. Isn't a great comfort to know God feels this same way?

All those who believe in Jesus Christ are adopted as sons and daughters into the family of God. God becomes our Father. We, His children. Like Israel, we too have sinned. We too have gone astray. We too have chased after other gods. Idols in our lives. Whatever we wrap our lives around that is NOT God. Thankfully, our Father is merciful and gracious. He disciplines us in His love. And when we feel His discipline, what should our response be? Hosea 10:12, "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you." When we repent and turn back to God, we will find Him waiting with open arms. Ready to welcome us back home.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4

July 11, 2020
FAITH AND POLITICS

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

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.” (Isaiah 1:1)

The book of Isaiah begins with a political statement. Everything he says from this point forward (66 chapters!) must be viewed through a distinctly political lens. Uzziah. Jotham. Ahaz. Hezekiah. We know their stories. We've just read through their histories in the Kings and Chronicles. We know Uzziah reigned for over fifty years and for the most part remained faithful to God. However, at the end of his life he grew proud and brazenly entered the Temple to offer sacrifices. We know his son, Jotham, reigned for sixteen years and also remained faithful to the Lord but failed to address the nation's ongoing idolatry on the high places. We know Ahaz reigned for sixteen years and was an evil, faithless king. The entire kingdom suffered under his rule. We know Hezekiah returned to the ways of the Lord, experienced the miracle of healing, but also grew prideful and set his descendants up for disaster when he showed off his riches to the envoys of Babylon.

Isaiah presumably witnesses all of this. He sees it all go past. He lives it. His prophetic career begins at some point during the glory days under King Uzziah and ends at some point during the reign of King Hezekiah. Through it all, he watches his nation shift its allegiance from Yahweh to other gods. He watches his nation descend into cultural chaos as they abandon true worship and true righteousness. He watches the leaders of his nation attempt to reform and revitalize the country. He sees the ups and downs of their efforts. The successes and failures. He sees it all and then offers this Word from the Lord. It is honest. Real. Raw. No holds barred. He confronts. He speaks the truth. He calls out his own people. “Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, children who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged.” (Isaiah 1:4) “Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!” (Isaiah 1:10) “For Jerusalem has stumbled, and Judah has fallen, because their speech and their deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence.” (Isaiah 3:8)

At the same time, he offers hope. He calls them to repent. He begs them to return to the Lord to find grace and healing and mercy. “Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” (Isaiah 1:16-18) He directs their attention to the glorious day of the Lord when all flesh shall witness the appearance of our God. “It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:2-3) He calls them back to faithfulness. Back to loyalty. Back to a right relationship with God. “In that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, when the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and cleansed the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a spirit of judgment and by a spirit of burning. Then the Lord will create

over the whole site of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, and smoke and the shining of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory there will be a canopy. There will be a booth for shade by day from the heat, and for a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain.” (Isaiah 4:2-6)

One can easily recognize the parallels to our own time. We too live in a time of growing evil. A time where sin abounds. A time where each person does what is right in their own eyes. The result is injustice. Oppression. Rampant greed. Lust for power. Division. Hatred. Unrestrained rage. We lament these things. We lament the moral drift of our culture. We lament the pain and suffering we see all around us. We blame our politicians. We blame the other political party. We blame other races. We blame certain professions. But how many of us are willing to look in the mirror and blame ourselves? How many of us are willing to confess our own sin and complicity in helping create the world in which we live? How many of us are willing to examine our own lives? Our own hearts? Our own attitudes and actions? Sure, we can decry the lack of prayer in our schools. The erasure of the Ten Commandments in public spaces. But does prayer fill our homes? Are the Ten Commandments followed in our churches? Have we marginalized our faith by refusing to share Christ with our neighbors, friends, and co-workers? Are we not as guilty as the people Isaiah was speaking to? And are we willing to hear his words as the Word of the Lord to us? Are we willing to repent and return to God?

July 14, 2020
THE LORD IS OUR SALVATION

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

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)

“There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:1-9)

“In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:10)

Imagine living in the southern kingdom of Judah and watching in fear as the empire of Assyria rolls through Israel, destroying everything in its path. The people are scattered. The land is plundered. The leaders are killed. Nothing is left. All hope is lost. And you know you're next. It must have been a scary time. A time of national crisis. A time when the people cried out to God.

And God answers. Through the prophet Isaiah, He points His people to a glorious future. Though they walk in darkness, they will see a great light. Though they've been scattered to the four winds, they will be gathered back home. Though they have suffered and struggled, God will redeem them just as He once did when they were in Egypt. In short, God will bring salvation! Deliverance! He will usher in a new age under the reign of His Messiah.

A child shall be born. A son shall be given. Though the House of David has been cut down to a stump, a tender shoot shall emerge. The root of Jesse will stand as a signal for all people. The Messiah will be given all authority. His rule and reign shall be marked by peace and justice and righteousness. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him, giving Him wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might. He will lift up the poor and comfort the meek. His faithfulness shall know no end. He will put an end to all crying and suffering and pain. All wars and conflict will cease. Wolf and lamb. Leopard and goat. Calf and lion. Cow and bear. Toddler and cobra. All shall dwell together in peace in the Messiah's kingdom. The Lord of Hosts will do this! He will make this happen! He will bring about salvation!

What a glorious promise! I love how the people respond in Isaiah 12. "You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the Lord God is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: "Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. "Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." (Isaiah 12:1-6)

Here's the thing...God has fulfilled His promise! Jesus Christ is the Messiah! The child was born! The Son was given! All authority in heaven and on earth entrusted to His hands! He gathered a people to Himself! Jew and Gentile. Slave and free. Rich and poor. Male and female. He tore down the dividing walls of hostility that existed between us and made peace with us and between us by the blood of the cross. You and I no longer have to walk in darkness. We have seen the great light! We no longer have to go thirsty for we draw our water from the wells of salvation! We can live and walk in light of God's Kingdom! As we submit our lives to His Lordship, He brings peace. He brings justice. He brings reconciliation. He covers us with His righteousness. He is faithful to forgive. He is mighty to save. He grants us wisdom and knowledge and understanding. This is the promise of God fulfilled in our lives today!

Once again our world is in turmoil. Once again there is plague and sickness and death and violence and rage all around. Once again our nation faces a crisis. Will we cry out to God? Will we sing? Will we praise? Will we look to God for our salvation?

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4

July 15, 2020
DIVINE PARENTING

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

Many of us are parents. We have children we love dearly. We remember when we first held them in our arms. Fed them their first bottle. Changed their first diaper. We watched them learn to roll over, crawl, and walk. We listened with joy to those first words. As they grew, parenting became more challenging. As they developed their little personalities and their will started to clash with ours, they learned discipline. They took "time-outs." They were sent to their rooms. They were punished from time to time. They didn't like it. They cried. Screamed. Yelled. Threw their toys. It was hard to watch but we knew it was for their good. They continued to grow. Sometimes the conflict deepened. Their choices became more dangerous. More consequential. Skipping school. Getting involved in drugs. Running with the wrong crowd. Having violent altercations. Things got scary. We were forced to face our worst fears. It felt like we were losing our children. Sometimes things got so bad we had to ask them to leave the home. It was too dangerous for them to stay. They were kicked out of the nest. Forced to make their own way on their own. They went to the streets. Got involved with an even rougher crowd. Sometimes ended up in prison or jail. Our grief only deepened. Our prayers for their salvation never ceased. We begged God to help them hit rock bottom so they could turn back to Him. Back to us. Find the help they needed and begin to recover. Sometimes that happened. We watched with utter joy as the prodigal returned home. Entered treatment. Got a good job. Left their old life behind.

Now imagine you aren't talking about just one child but millions. Imagine you are God and your children - the nations of Israel and Judah - have walked away from you. They are greedy. Spoiled. Unjust. Violent. Oppressive. They are barely recognizable as Your people. They even worship other gods. You've sent them prophets to warn them. You've taken them through difficult experiences to discipline them. You've tried to draw them back only to have them walk out the door and slam it in your face over and over again. So you send them into exile. You use the nations of Assyria and Babylon to carry them off. Out of Jerusalem. Out of the Promised Land. With the hopes that they will hit rock bottom and one day return. You weep over them. You grieve over their choices. Your eyes fill with tears as you watch those you love suffer. But you know it is for their good. You know it is the only way they will ever turn back to You. You know you cannot protect them from themselves. They must learn the hard way. Their faces have to hit the pavement. They must come to the end of themselves. Recognize what they've done. Come to grips with all they've lost. Take responsibility for rejecting their Heavenly Father. Only when they hit rock bottom will they be ready for deliverance and salvation.

And that's exactly what you will do! For you will never abandon or forsake them. You will never leave them on their own. Like any parent, you long for their return. You wait expectantly at the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the prodigal. You run to them. You embrace them. You shower them with kisses. You put the signet ring on their finger. The robe on their back. And you throw the biggest party you can imagine to welcome them back home. Listen to how Micah describes it... "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide disputes for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore;

but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken." (Micah 4:1-4) It's a beautiful thing, is it not?

Now imagine you aren't talking about millions of people but billions. God has declared His love and adopted into His family children from every tribe, tongue and nation. No longer focused on national Israel, God has created a new Israel. A spiritual Israel. Having raised up children for Himself from the stones as John the Baptist once said. This new Israel is made up of Jew and Gentile alike. Founded on the Twelve Apostles. Governed by the Sermon on the Mount. Guided by the Great Commission that expands the Promised Land to the ends of the earth. Jesus is Her Lord. Her Messiah. Her King. And God is still at work disciplining His children. Confronting us. Convicting us. Challenging us. All to make us more and more into His image and likeness.

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7

July 16, 2020
WHAT IS GOD REQUIRING OF US?

Readings for today: [Micah 5-7](#)

“The Lord has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

There may not be a better verse for our time. Our nation is crying out for justice. Our world stands in desperate need of kindness. And humility before God is the key to it all. The people Micah was speaking to were going through all the right motions. They were bringing all the right sacrifices. Saying all the right prayers. Outwardly bowing before God in reverence. But God saw the hypocrisy of their hearts. He saw how their pious words didn’t match up with their actions. He saw the lack of integrity and the dis-integration of their lives. And they fell under His righteous judgment.

We have a choice, you see. Either we will do justice or God will. Either we will follow God’s ways and walk in obedience to God’s commands and live the lives He has created and called us to live or He will judge us for our sins. Friends, our sin impacts the world around us. It may be the people we live with. It may be the neighbors next door. The classmates at school. Co-workers at the office. Even people on the other side of the globe. Every word we say has a chance to give life or take life. Every dollar we spend has a chance to help or to hurt. Every vote we cast is a chance to bring God’s Kingdom a little closer or drive it further away. Every minute of every day is an opportunity to make an eternal difference in this world. Don’t buy it? Check out the studies on the impact of social media on mental health.

(<https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blog/centre-mental-health-blog/anxiety-loneliness-fear-missing-out-social-media>) Now scroll through your posts from the last week. Are your contributions life-giving or life-stealing? Take a look at your budget or your online check register. Where are your dollars primarily going? Yes, we all have bills to pay. But what about the disposable income? Who’s getting the lion’s share? Most American Christians are giving less now than they did during the Great Depression! (<https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2015/12/facts-christians-tithing>) And what about churches? What do they do with the dollars they receive? How many of them actually take those dollars and deploy them into the world to make a difference for the gospel? According to a survey by Christianity Today, most churches only give around 5% to missions outside their doors.

(<https://www.pnwumc.org/news/how-churches-spend-their-money>) Consider your voting record. Do you carefully consider the policy platform of the candidates you vote for or do you simply vote down the party line? Are you an advocate for policies that reflect God’s justice and mercy? Remember, God has entrusted the “dominion” of this world into our hands as human beings. He expects us to pursue justice in alignment with His will so that all creation can flourish under His divine love and care.

Of course, the temptation is to try to bring justice about in our own wisdom and strength. We see this happen all the time. We try to bring about God’s Kingdom without the king. Look at the public policies being proposed when it comes to the environment, policing, education, social policy, economic reform, etc. If you take a step back and think about it from a biblical perspective these policies sound a lot like heaven. Equal treatment for all. Equal justice for all. Equal access for all. Resource-sharing for all. No one left behind. Creation care. No need for any police. Surely all of us can affirm the hopes and dreams behind these aims? But we also know it’s unrealistic in a sinful world. We can pass all the laws and formulate all the policies we want but such things only restrain evil at best. They simply cannot change the human heart. The only way to drive out hate, anger, fear, and violence is to bow in humility before Jesus.

So here's the great news. If we humbly walk before God. If we commit ourselves to love kindness and mercy. If passionately pursue justice. God will hear us and forgive us and heal our land. Listen to how Micah ends his prophecy..."Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old." (Micah 7:18-20) How amazing is our God? His love is steadfast! His faithfulness never ends! His mercies are new every morning! He is our only hope in this world and the world to come.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28

July 17, 2020
A FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

Readings for today: [2 Kings 16-17, 2 Chronicles 28](#)

When I reflect on my journey of faith, I see two very distinct seasons. Because I was raised in the church, God has always been a part of my life. As far back as I can remember, I would pray to Him. Talk to Him. Cry out to Him when I was in trouble. I went to church. I got involved in youth group. I sang in the choir. I went on mission trips. However, during this season of my life, God was more of an accessory. He was someone I could turn to in a time of need. He was there in case of an emergency. I treated worship as just another activity on the long list of things I was already doing in my life. Playing sports. Studying for school. Working at my job. Going out with friends. Boy Scouts. I loved my life and was glad God had a small role to play in it.

But then I went to college. I was on my own. Trying to keep one foot firmly planted in my own world and one foot planted in the Kingdom of God began to tear me apart. I couldn't hold these worlds together. There was too much temptation. Too many distractions. And I pretty quickly found myself planting both feet in my own world. Gratifying my own desires. Pursuing my own dreams. Chasing after the wind. My face hit the pavement. I crashed and burned. After a year of heavy drinking, skipping class, partying, and sexual promiscuity; I discovered my world was pretty dark. Pretty lonely. Pretty depressing. Full of failure and pain and regret. So I went back to school determined to rekindle my relationship with God. He was what was missing in my life! If I could just get a little "god" back in my life, then maybe things would return to normal. Things would right themselves and I would be back on the fast track to success.

I put one foot back in God's world. I went to church. I attended a Christian fellowship group on campus. I joined a small group Bible study. For about three to four months, I tried everything I could to right my own ship. To no avail. I was still drinking heavily. Still skipping class. Still partying. Still failing. Then I read these words during Bible study one evening, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6) "But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) Slowly it dawned on me that there was no way for me to get to God by my own effort. No way for me to take my feet and place them in His Kingdom. No way for me to keep God as just an accessory in my life. It was an all or nothing deal! I still remember the spot where the living Christ confronted me with this truth the following morning as I walked through campus. In that moment, He took both my feet and placed them in His world. And though I am still prone to wander, He is always faithful to lead me back home.

I share all of this to illustrate what I believe is happening in our reading today. King Ahaz is evil because his heart is divided. He's trying to keep a foot in both worlds. On the one hand, he wants to worship Yahweh. He wants to maintain the traditions of his fathers. He doesn't end Temple worship or get rid of the priesthood or anything like that. On the other hand, he sees the success of the Assyrian king. He sees the power and wealth and authority and influence the Assyrians wield. He craves that for himself. So he copies their altar. He adopts their worship practices. He believes if he can just join the "winning team", life will return to normal. He will find success. Sadly, the opposite was true. "For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus that had defeated him and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they were the ruin of him and of all Israel." (2 Chronicles 28:23) Ahaz's attempts to syncretize his faith led to his destruction and the destruction of Israel. Ahaz's attempts to satisfy all parties. Worship all gods. Serve multiple masters

earn him an evil reputation. He is called evil. Faithless. And the eventual exile of his people is laid in no small part at his feet.

Is your heart divided? Are you trying to serve two masters? Trying to keep a foot in two worlds? Have you fallen into the trap of believing you can achieve both God's dream for your life and the American Dream? Fallen into the lie that you can truly "have it all?" Is God at the center of your life or is He relegated to the margins? Have you truly embraced Him or do you keep Him at arm's length? Honestly reflecting on these questions could potentially change your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17

July 18, 2020
WILL TO LOVE

Readings for today: [Isaiah 13-17](#)

“Give counsel; grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; shelter the outcasts; do not reveal the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab sojourn among you; be a shelter to them from the destroyer. When the oppressor is no more, and destruction has ceased, and he who tramples underfoot has vanished from the land, then a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit in faithfulness in the tent of David one who judges and seeks justice and is swift to do righteousness.”
(Isaiah 16:3-5)

Human beings are fearful creatures. We struggle with anxiety. We do not like feeling insecure. As such, we find ourselves coping in different ways. The great Viennese schools of psychotherapy - all founded by Jewish psychotherapists - suggested human beings deal with fear in one of three ways. Sigmund Freud argued for the “pleasure principle.” Human beings are oriented towards pleasure whether it be sex or drugs or some other activity that helps us escape our fears. The problem is we all know pleasure is fleeting at best and there tends to be a crash when we come down from our “high.” Alfred Adler argued for power. Human beings are oriented towards power in an effort to control their environment so they don’t have to be afraid. After all, if you can eliminate “threats” then perhaps you can eliminate fear. The problem is we all know such a pursuit is futile. History is littered with strong men and dictators and the power-hungry who eventually find themselves overcome by the same forces they unleashed. Viktor Frankl argued for meaning. Human beings are ultimately oriented towards meaning and if one can lay hold of some vision greater than themselves, one can endure just about anything. Forged in the fires of death camps like Auschwitz where all pleasure and power were stripped away, Frankl realized he needed something more. Something deeper to hold onto if he were going to survive without giving into despair or going insane. And while I appreciate Frankl’s approach the most, I think there is yet another approach to consider. The way of yet another Jewish “psychotherapist” - Jesus Himself. It is the way of love.

The words from Isaiah today are powerful. They present a vision that is foreign to us. Alien to the human experience. In our experience, thrones and dominions and kingdoms are founded on power. Authority. Control. It doesn’t matter whether one is talking about monarchies, dictatorships, socialist republics, or democracies. All human governmental institutions are established in power. They are maintained through power. They often come to an end because some other power rises up against them. This is the way of the world and it has been like this since the beginning. Furthermore, those in power tend to become corrupt. They begin using their power to pursue their own selfish ends. They chase pleasure. How else can one explain the rampant financial and sexual and criminal abuses that we so often see from our political leaders? Certainly not all of them succumb to such temptations but it must be hard to resist when so many are trying to curry favor. And, of course, the ones who do find the strength to resist are often successful only because they cling to a higher purpose. A greater meaning to their lives that gives them the strength to overcome.

Isaiah identifies that “higher purpose” for his people. It is love. When a throne is established in God’s love, justice and mercy naturally flow. When a kingdom is founded on God’s love, it becomes a light to the world. A beacon of peace and righteousness and goodness that shines for all to see. This was the whole point of the nation of Israel. To show the world a different way. To be a light to the nations around them. To be a country built on the foundation of righteousness and justice where steadfast love and faithfulness undergirded how they lived. In such a nation, outcasts would find refuge. Enemies

would become friends. Widows and orphans would find care. The poor would be lifted up. Oppression would cease. Destruction would end. Peace would reign. This is a picture of the Kingdom of God and it is what we pray for when we pray the Lord's Prayer together.

Jesus affirms this Kingdom. He came to establish this Kingdom on earth through His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is love. He is the love of God incarnate. He is the love of God made flesh and blood. And as He lays down His life for us, He defines love for us. It's not a feeling. It's not an attraction. It's not selfish or arrogant or boastful or impatient or unkind. It is self-sacrificing. Self-denying. It always puts the needs of others before itself. It always focuses on the welfare of others before it's own. It is costly. It is a high-risk endeavor. It never loses hope. Never gives into despair. It always endures. It always perseveres. It never fails because Jesus never fails.

Ultimately, a passage like the one we read today points us forward to Jesus. He is the One who gives counsel. Who grants justice. Who shelters the outcast and the fugitive. He is the One who puts an end to all oppression and destruction and brings peace. He establishes His throne from the cross, the place where perfect love and justice meet. He sits on His throne with faithfulness and is always swift to do righteousness and justice. As followers of Christ, we acknowledge Jesus is our King. We acknowledge Jesus as Lord. We acknowledge His authority over our lives. As such, we who are called by His name must align ourselves with His Kingdom. We must seek to incarnate His values in our lives. We must reject the ways of this world. The will to power. The will to pleasure. Even the will to meaning and instead find - in Christ - the will to love.

July 20, 2020
LOVE FOR ENEMIES

Readings for today: [Isaiah 18-22](#)

Egypt. The land of slavery. The land of oppression. The land of attempted genocide. For hundreds of years, the people of Israel labored under the whip. Beaten. Abused. Dying young. Their children born to a life of hard labor. Powerless. Helpless. Hopeless. It was a life of constant pain. Constant torment. Constant suffering. Even after they were delivered by God, Egypt continued to be a thorn in their side. Invading. Killing. A perpetual threat on their southern border. It's tough to overstate the hatred and enmity between these two nations. And yet, God loves the Egyptians.

Assyria. One of the most powerful and brutal empires in the ancient world. They fielded the world's first professional army. Developed advanced technology like iron weapons and war chariots. They weaponized terror as a military tactic. And they were absolutely ruthless when it came to putting down resistance. They would sack cities. Displace entire people groups. Employed horrific public torture as a means of psychological warfare. Israel hated them. Israel feared them. It's why Jonah ran to Joppa rather than go to Nineveh. He simply couldn't stomach the sight of his enemies. And yet, God loves the Assyrians.

The Book of Isaiah is often called, "The Gospel of the Old Testament" and today's passage is a good reason why... "In that day there will be an altar to the Lord in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the Lord at its border. It will be a sign and a witness to the Lord of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the Lord because of oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and deliver them. And the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the Lord in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the Lord and perform them. And the Lord will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the Lord, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them. In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance." (Isaiah 19:19-25)

This is an incredible passage pointing to an even more incredible reality. The unconditional nature of God's grace. It comes to us all. Jew and Gentile alike. Egyptian, Assyrian, and Israelite alike. Republican and Democrat alike. Progressive and conservative alike. Black, white, and brown alike. It is no one's possession. No one has a right to claim it for their own. No one is more privileged than another in the eyes of God. All have sinned and fallen short of His glory and all stand in need of His grace. This is why Jesus gives us this command... "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons and daughters of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:43-48) Jesus knows there are no "enemies" in His Kingdom. No "enemies" beyond His reach. No "enemies" beyond His salvation. Jesus knows there is not a single person or single power on this earth who can stand before His love. Jesus holds the power to turn mortal enemies into family. Jesus holds the power to overcome hate and anger and the desire for vengeance with mercy and forgiveness. Jesus holds the power to transform even the hardest hearts. The question is... do we believe Him? Do we trust Him?

And do our lives and our conduct and our speech and our interactions reflect this deep and glorious truth?

You may find yourself reacting in anger and rage at what you see on television or through social media. White supremacy. Antifa. President Donald Trump. Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Black Lives Matter. Defund the Police. Blue Lives Matter. Refund the Police. The temptation is to react in anger. Weaponize shame to attack those who disagree. Impose ideological purity tests on all relationships. Rest secure in one's own self-righteousness and reinforce one's beliefs by interacting only in the social and political echo chambers of our own making. Smugly and sarcastically put down the other side. Such attitudes and actions do not reflect the heart and character of Jesus. In fact, they are sure signs of a disobedient and rebellious heart. One refusing to bow to what Jesus demands. Following Jesus requires self-denial. It requires laying aside all allegiances except the only one that truly matters. Our world stands in desperate need of grace and Jesus has called us to be His agents of grace...will we answer His call?

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 23-26

July 21, 2020
RAW PRAYERS

Readings for today: [Isaiah 23-26](#)

Like most, I have good days and bad days. Days when I feel confident and my trust in the Lord seems strong. Days when I feel anxious and afraid and my trust in the Lord remains elusive. I have moments when I can see the silver lining in all we are going through and I have moments where all I see are dark, ominous clouds and I wonder how we'll make it. My dark days tend to follow rough nights when I don't sleep well for whatever reason. It could be my weariness over the COVID-19 virus. My worry for those impacted by the economic crash. Or the grief I feel over the divisions in our nation that have broken out into the streets. It could be my yearning for God's justice and my deep disappointment - even disillusionment - in our country as we continue to refuse to make a full confession of our corporate sins. It could be my frustration and anger towards those who would take advantage of the pain of this cultural moment to press their agenda. It could be my sadness for the good men and women who serve in positions of authority in law enforcement and politics who are demonized on a daily basis. It could be the burdens I carry pastorally for people I love. It could be that I've become over-saturated with all the bad news that scrolls across my social media and news feeds. Or it could just be that I'm tired of sleeping on the couch as we make a second attempt to crate-train our new puppy. ;-) Whatever it is, I woke up this morning tired. Weary. Discouraged. And I found myself praying a very raw prayer... "Father, we are such foolish creatures. Blind to our own ambitions. Blind to our own insecurities. Blind to our own failings. We so easily fault those around us. Those who are different than us. Those who don't look like us or think like us or act like us. We so easily criticize and hyperbolize and sensationalize what we see. Taking things to the extreme. We have become far too comfortable employing shame and fear to achieve our goals which is always power, power, and more power. We excuse the abuses of those on our side while we pretend to be shocked at the abuses of those on the other side. We are a nation of hypocrites. Father, bring us to our knees. Withdraw your hand that we may reap what we've sown. May the pandemic spread further and the economic pain last longer and the ethnic tensions burn hotter if that is what it will take to bring us back to you. We are so very proud. So very arrogant. Absolutely convinced of our own self-righteousness. Father, discipline us and then forgive us. Let us fall hard and then bind up our wounds. Break us and then mend us. This I pray in the name of Jesus."

It's a scary prayer. One vomited from the depths of my soul. After I wrote these words in my journal, I turned to our reading today and found similar sentiment in Isaiah. "Behold, the Lord will empty the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest; as with the slave, so with his master; as with the maid, so with her mistress; as with the buyer, so with the seller; as with the lender, so with the borrower; as with the creditor, so with the debtor. The earth shall be utterly empty and utterly plundered; for the Lord has spoken this word." (Isaiah 24:1-3) Turns out Isaiah also struggled at times to find hope. (Perhaps it had something to do with him walking around naked for three years?) He looked around at all the injustice. All the corruption. All the greed. All the selfishness. All the unrestrained violence and suffering and pain. And he cries out to God. Empty the earth! Make it desolate! Scatter her inhabitants! Plunder humanity! It's what we deserve. It's what we've rightly earned. It's just. It's righteous. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. All like sheep have gone astray. Each of us have turned to our own way. The Lord would be utterly just in condemning us all and starting over.

And yet He is faithful. To Himself. To His own divine nature and character. God is merciful and gracious. He will never break His covenant with us. He is steadfast in love. He is trustworthy and true.

He will never abandon us to our sin. So Isaiah continues...“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:6-9) In the midst of his discouragement, Isaiah finds hope and as I read these words this morning, I myself began to find hope. A glimmer of light pierced the darkness. My burdens lifted. My eyes looked up. Once again, I found my strength being renewed and soul revived.

How do we find hope in these dark days? How do we find encouragement in the midst of our despair? How do we cling to faith in the midst of our fear? Listen to how Isaiah concludes, “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.” (Isaiah 26:3-4) Put another way, we fix our eyes on Jesus. The author and perfecter of our faith. We look to Him and His example. We look to the cross where He bore the sins of the world on His shoulders...including the sins of the particular cultural moment we find ourselves in. Nothing we are going through is new to God. None of it is news to God. There is nothing about the human condition that surprises God. He’s been here before. He knows us deeply. Intimately. Inside and out. Backwards and forwards. And the great news is He loves us, warts and all. So keep your eyes on Him. Stay your mind on Him. Focus your thoughts and your energy on Him. Trust in Him. He is the everlasting rock who will never fail. Amen!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 18:1-18, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48

July 22, 2020
FULLY DEVOTED

Readings for today: [2 Kings 18:1-18, 2 Chronicles 29-31, Psalms 48](#)

Hezekiah is a remarkable man. The polar opposite of his father. Where his father was unfaithful, Hezekiah was faithful. Where his father was morally compromised, Hezekiah was pure. Where his father was evil, Hezekiah was good. One wonders where Hezekiah learned such faithfulness. What made him turn from his father's ways? Who taught him the ways of the Lord? How did he know to cleanse the Temple, re-institute the Levites, and celebrate the Passover? These things had been absent for decades. The Temple had been desecrated. The priests and Levites forgotten. And yet somehow Hezekiah's heart was not only stirred to seek the Lord in this pagan environment but God provided faithful teachers along the way to instruct and guide him. They remain nameless. Their identities known only to God. But what an impact they make through this great man!

Hezekiah is a great example of what can happen when key leaders seek the heart of God. God doesn't need our wealth. He doesn't need our power. He doesn't need our influence or position or authority. He simply needs our hearts. If we seek to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; His promise is He will use us to make Kingdom-sized impact on those around us. Hezekiah "trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel, so that there was none like him among all the kings of Judah after him, nor among those who were before him." (2 Kings 18:5) He dedicated his life to the destruction of idolatry. He tore down the pagan shrines that dotted the hillsides. He destroyed the bronze serpent Moses had made in the wilderness to save the people from poisonous snakes. He cleansed the Temple. He restored true worship. He sent messengers throughout the length and breadth of the nation to invite people to celebrate the Passover meal. And even though the people had forgotten how to cleanse themselves in preparation, Hezekiah interceded on their behalf, calling on God to honor the intent of their hearts. The impact of this time of celebration was so profound, the people asked to stay an additional seven days to keep worshiping! "And the people of Israel who were present at Jerusalem kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with great gladness, and the Levites and the priests praised the Lord day by day, singing with all their might to the Lord. And Hezekiah spoke encouragingly to all the Levites who showed good skill in the service of the Lord. So they ate the food of the festival for seven days, sacrificing peace offerings and giving thanks to the Lord, the God of their fathers. Then the whole assembly agreed together to keep the feast for another seven days. So they kept it for another seven days with gladness." (2 Chronicles 30:21-23) Once the feast was compete, the people - inspired by the worship of the True and Living God and Hezekiah's example - returned to their homes to continue to purge the nation of its idolatry. "Now when all this was finished, all Israel who were present went out to the cities of Judah and broke in pieces the pillars and cut down the Asherim and broke down the high places and the altars throughout all Judah and Benjamin, and in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had destroyed them all. Then all the people of Israel returned to their cities, every man to his possession." (2 Chronicles 31:1) This is nothing short of revival!

I know a lot of Christians who pray for revival. They pray regularly for a fresh movement of God's Spirit through their lives, churches, communities, and their nation. If that describes you...and I hope it does!!!!...I want to encourage you to follow Hezekiah's example. Don't wait! Don't delay! Simply begin to seek God's face right where you are! If you are a mother or father, seek God's heart for your home and children. If you are a student or employee, seek God's heart for your school or place of work. If you are a business, community, or church leader, seek God's heart for the people you serve. If you are a national leader, seek God's heart for your country. The secret to Hezekiah's success had very little to do with his authority as king. It had everything to do with his heart for God. "Thus Hezekiah did

throughout all Judah, and he did what was good and right and faithful before the Lord his God. And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.” (2 Chronicles 31:20-21)

I want to challenge you to pray 2 Chronicles 31:20-21 for yourself. For example, “Father, I want to do what is good and right and faithful before You. Every work I undertake at my job, in my home, with my friends, at my church I do in accordance with Your commands. I am seeking You, Father. I want to serve you with all my heart. May everything I do prosper in order to bring glory to Your great name.” Now you try. Insert your name. Insert your situation. Insert your circumstances and seek God with all your heart. Put Him to the test. Call on His faithfulness. I trust you will be amazed at what takes place.

The world has yet to see what God will do with a man or woman fully devoted to Him. Your spouse has yet to see what God will do with a husband or wife fully devoted to Him. You children have yet to see what God will do with a mother or father fully devoted to Him. Your boss or teacher has yet to see what God will do with an employee or student fully devoted to Him. Your community has yet to see what God will do with a church fully devoted to Him. Our nation has yet to see what God will do with a church fully devoted to Him! Consecrate yourselves, friends, to the Lord! Let Him use you for His purposes and His glory in the world!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-30

July 23, 2020
COVENANT WITH DEATH

Readings for today: [Isaiah 27-30](#)

“Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers, who rule this people in Jerusalem! Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement, when the overwhelming whip passes through it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken shelter...” (Isaiah 28:14-15)

What a time to be reading through Isaiah! To reflect on his words as he spoke to his people. There is much here that feels so familiar. Particularly as we think about where we find ourselves in this cultural moment. We too have made a covenant with death. Abortion. Suicide. Addiction. Violence. Depression. Riots. Police brutality. Racism. Classism. COVID-19. The symptoms are legion and they are further complicated by the lies we tell ourselves. The deliberate spin and falsehoods in which we too take shelter. Our refusal to acknowledge our sin. Our refusal to take an honest look in the mirror. Our refusal to humble ourselves before God is extracting a terrible price. Suffering. Pain. Heartbreak. Grief. Loss. Thousands are dying. Thousands more losing businesses and homes. There is a tidal wave of mental health needs beginning to break on our shores. And the full cost of this time won’t be known for years to come as our children struggle to overcome the social and educational losses they’ve suffered during this time.

It’s a lot to take in and if we aren’t careful, we will quickly be overwhelmed. We simply are not strong enough to meet the demands of this moment. We are not wise enough to chart a path through the pain. Thankfully, God is sufficient for the needs of this hour. His grace is more than enough. His mercies are new every morning. His faithfulness is greater than we can ever hope for or imagine. Israel knew this, of course, but she had forgotten God in her pride. So Isaiah reminds them in the midst of their national crisis to look to God. To return to the Lord. To remember His promises. “Therefore thus says the Lord God, “Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’ And I will make justice the line, and righteousness the plumb line; and hail will sweep away the refuge of lies, and waters will overwhelm the shelter.” Then your covenant with death will be annulled, and your agreement with Sheol will not stand...” (Isaiah 28:16-18)

Only God can annul our covenant with death. Only God can overrule and override our agreement with the grave. Death is the righteous punishment for original sin. Death is the righteous wage we earn as we sin each and every day. Our hearts are corrupt. Our desires disordered. Our loves disoriented. Our souls confused. This is true for us both personally and corporately. Our culture is obsessed with death as well. We see reflected public policy. We see it reflected in the laws we pass. We see it alive and well in our political discourse. So much selfishness. So much greed. So much hate. So much shame. Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely which is why we can never lift ourselves out of this death spiral.

Friends, our only hope is to turn to Christ. To make Him our goal. To make Him our aim. To make Him the telos of our lives and the supreme treasure of our souls. Only by submitting ourselves to Christ is the covenant of death annulled and judgment of death lifted. For He Himself took our place. Bore our sin. Paid the price in full. It is finished. The wrath of God was turned away. The justice of God was satisfied. The power of sin broken. Death was defeated. And all of this is ours through Christ Jesus. He is the foundation God laid in Zion. The precious cornerstone on which the Kingdom of God is built. He was tested and remain true. He was shaken but remained sure. He is the only foundation on which we can build our lives, our nation, and our world.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35

July 24, 2020
MOTION SICKNESS

Readings for today: [Isaiah 31-35](#)

I get seasick. Not just a little queasy but over the top, barfing multiple times over the side, green-faced seasick. The first time I realized this I was in Maine and had signed up to go deep sea fishing off the coast. It was a stormy day. We were in a small boat. The wave action was fierce once we moved beyond the breakers. I paid quite a bit of money - for a college student - to go out on this half day trip. I was hoping to catch something big. Have a great story to tell. Alas, all I did for five hours was throw up over the side. It was honestly one of the most miserable experiences of my life. Motion sickness is caused by the disconnect between what we see with our eyes and what we feel in our inner ear. If the two don't match, you're in trouble and the symptoms won't resolve until you find stability. Make it back to shore. Put your feet on solid ground.

Today, Isaiah describes a form of spiritual motion sickness. There is a spiritual disconnect between what God's people say and what they do. They worship God with their lips but not from their hearts. The result is judgment. The result is pain. The result is suffering. They are in danger of being exiled from the Promised Land. And it's not just them. Because Israel abandoned her calling to be the light to the nations, the world has been left in darkness. No one to show the pagan nations how to worship the True and Living God. So they too come under judgment. They too experience the righteous wrath of God. There is no place that is safe. Not Egypt. Not Assyria. Not Zion. All have sinned greatly. All have abandoned true worship. All have brought shame and dishonor to God and treated Him with utter contempt. The result is chaos. Instability. The earth reels and quakes beneath their feet at the sound of God's voice.

But all hope is not lost! God Himself provides a way where there is no way. A highway for the redeemed called the Way of Holiness. (Is. 35:8-10) It's a safe way. A secure way. A road for those who love the Lord with all their hearts, souls, and minds. It's a stable way for those who walk on it honor God for who He is. "The Lord is exalted, for he dwells on high; he will fill Zion with justice and righteousness, and he will be the stability of your times, abundance of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge; the fear of the Lord is Zion's treasure." (Is. 33:5-6) It's a peaceful way because those who walk on it hunger and thirst after righteousness. "And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever." (Is. 32:17) It's a noble way. A way of honor and glory and respect and privilege. "He who is noble plans noble things, and on noble things he stands." (Is. 32:8) And because it is all these things and more, the redeemed rejoice when they find it. "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." (Is. 35:10)

It's a beautiful vision, is it not? Don't you find yourself longing to walk there? To experience the abundance of peace, stability, justice, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, nobility and salvation that walking such a road promises? Doesn't your heart long to sing and rejoice and burst with everlasting joy? Believe it or not, the way is open to you even now! Jesus Christ says "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by Me." (John 14:6) All the promises of God are hid in Christ. All the riches of God are available to those who trust Christ. All the honor and glory of God is revealed in Christ and is available to those who would place their faith in Him. Those who profess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts God raised Him from the dead are saved. And walking in salvation means you are already walking this road! So don't be afraid to claim that which is already yours in Christ Jesus! To open your hands and heart to receive from Christ all He has promised! All He has won for you through His life, death, and resurrection!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-19:37, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalms 76

July 25, 2020
GODLY MOTIVATION

Readings for today: [Isaiah 36-37, 2 Kings 18:9-19:37, 2 Chronicles 32:1-23, Psalms 76](#)

”So now, O Lord our God, save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you alone are the Lord.” (Isaiah 37:20)

The southern kingdom of Judah didn’t stand a chance. Assyria was the greatest empire of her day. Sennacherib, her greatest emperor. Her armies blitzed through the Middle East conquering nation after nation. No one could stand against them. They had the only standing professional army of the time outfitted with the best tech human civilization had developed. They were literally undefeated everywhere they went. And now they stand outside the gates of Jerusalem. 185,000 strong. Hezekiah has no army to put in the field. Not even two thousand soldiers to ride a horse. They are helpless. Hopeless. All is lost. Except for God. When things are at their darkest, Hezekiah cries out to God for help. He cries to God for salvation. He cries out to God on behalf of his nation. And God answers him. Delivers him. Saves him. It’s a powerful story and one of the great miracles in human history.

Sadly, what’s often missed is Hezekiah’s motivation. Note that he doesn’t cry for God to make Judah great again. He doesn’t call on God to be faithful to the people He loves. He doesn’t give God a list of reasons as to why Judah deserves to be saved. He doesn’t talk about their righteous worship or righteous deeds or point to their illustrious history. No, at the heart of Hezekiah’s prayer is a desire for God to get all the glory. A passion to see God’s name lifted high. Hezekiah prays for this miracle - not so much so that Judah will be saved - but so all the world will know Judah’s God stands above all other gods. It’s an evangelistic prayer. Hezekiah wants all the nations of the earth to know the Lord and this is what drives him to his knees on behalf of his people.

We are living through a time of great social unrest. Our country is more divided than ever. More at odds than ever. Our national leaders are at each other’s throats. Different groups have taken to the streets to protest for sweeping cultural change. Some of those groups are violent. They burn. They tear down. They destroy. All of it captured on video for the world to see. There are political forces in play vying for influence, power, and control. Each with a different vision for the future of our country. Each claiming God is on their side. Many believers I know are praying for our country. They long to see God work a similar miracle in our day like He did for Hezekiah. But are we praying with the same motivation?

God loves America but He doesn’t need America. America is loved no more and no less than any other nation on earth. She is not exceptional in the eyes of God. She is fallen. She is sinful. She is broken. She is in need of redemption. Insofar as she aligns her laws and her ways with Him, she will find blessing and hope and peace. Insofar as she departs from Him, she will find judgment and violence and a curse. God will not be mocked. Nations rise and fall before Him. He raises them up and brings them down according to His sovereign will. As we grapple with the sins of our past and present, our only hope is to humble ourselves before Him. To repent of our wicked ways and return to Him. To honestly confess our national sins of abortion and racism and classism and obsession with selfishness and greed and ask for His forgiveness. As we publicly humble ourselves and pray and seek God’s face and turn from our wicked ways, the world will see and know that God alone is Lord.

I pray for our nation every single day. I pray for humility. For repentance. For transformed hearts. I pray for our leaders. I pray they will forsake their wicked, sinful ways. I pray they will lay aside their

ambitions and greed and lust for power and instead have a heart to serve the Lord. I pray for an honest reckoning of the sins of our past. I pray for a renewed passion for justice and compassion. I pray grace to replace anger. Mercy to replace vengeance. Love to replace hate. I pray God will do all these things for His glory not our own. I pray He will do these things for the sake of His great name not our own. I pray God will do these things to declare His greatness not our own. In short, I am trying to pray with the same motivation as Hezekiah for it is our only hope as a nation.

July 27, 2020
TESTING OF FAITH

Readings for today: [Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33](#)

“And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left Hezekiah to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.” (2 Chronicles 32:31)

Life is full of tests. We are tested in school in order to demonstrate proficiency in certain areas of study. We are tested physically when we exercise or participate in sports. We are tested mentally as we develop particular talents and abilities. Our hearts are tested when we enter into relationships with other people. The same is true with faith. Our faith is often put to the test. It could be through pain and hardship. It could be through success and achievement. There simply is no way to go through life without being pushed to your limits. And this is a good thing. It's actually what makes us stronger. When we work out, we build our muscles. When we work through conflict, we build our emotional resilience. When we practice, we develop our talents and abilities. When we turn and depend on God, our faith grows as well.

Some question why a good God would test His people? Such questions are based on the false assumption that a good God would protect us from all hardship. Protect us from all mistakes. Protect us from all pain. But that wouldn't make God “good” at all. In fact, such a God would be evil for He would be forever stunting our growth. He would be holding us back. He would be letting us down. God is no helicopter parent. He is not hovering over our lives to protect us from all harm. God is faithful. He knows pain is often life's greatest teacher. He knows hardship only makes us stronger. He knows tests are important so we grow in our understanding and knowledge not only of Him but of ourselves. How else can we know our limits unless we push them? How else can we fulfill our divine potential unless we are intentionally disciplined? How else can we grow and develop into fully functioning adults unless we are given the freedom to both succeed and fail?

Hezekiah was a godly king. His faith had been put to the test numerous times throughout his life. Most especially in his conflict with the Assyrian empire. Over and over again, Hezekiah passed his tests thus proving his devotion to the Lord. As he entered his later years, he grew sick almost to the point of death. He cried out to God yet again. Asking God for mercy and healing. Once again, God delivers him from certain death. Gives him fifteen more years of life. Hezekiah is healthy. He is wealthy. He is at the height of his powers. And God is faithful. He wants to make sure Hezekiah's heart stays true. So He sends another test. Envoys from an emerging empire to the east show up. They come bearing gifts for Hezekiah to celebrate his miraculous recovery. Hezekiah is flush with pride. He puts the wealth of his kingdom on display before them. Little did he realize these messengers had a secret mission. To help Babylon plot future conquests. Sadly, Hezekiah fails this final test and the consequences are tragic for those who come after him.

Testing comes in many forms. Make no mistake, success and achievement and wealth and honor may be among the hardest tests for us to pass. Consider the number of bankruptcies for lottery winners. The fleeting nature of fame. The ups and downs of the stock market. The lure of political power. These things test our character in ways we are often not prepared for and that's why so many fail. It's all too easy to start claiming the credit for ourselves much like Hezekiah. And in such times, God is faithful. Just as He is faithful to deliver us from pain and suffering, He is also faithful to deliver from pride and success. He will humble us so that we might learn to depend on Him again. Remember, God's goal for

us is not the “good life.” It’s not the “American Dream.” God’s goal for His people is to make us more into the image of Christ. To transform us from the inside out so we will love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Every test God brings our way is designed with this great end in mind. Embrace the tests as they come, friends! They are a gift! And by passing them, we earn eternal rewards!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

July 28, 2020
A PRESENT HELP

Readings for today: [Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46](#)

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. “Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!” The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.” (Psalm 46:1-11)

Our God is present. Our God shows up. Our God is with us though each and every circumstance of each and every day. He is never absent. Never too busy. Never asleep at the wheel. God never steps away from His throne. Never ceases to reign sovereign over all He has made. Never stops being in control. This is true when global pandemics rage. Racism rears its ugly head. Protests turn violent in the dark of night. It's true no matter who gets elected. No matter who gets investigated. No matter what nefarious plans get put in place. Nations rage. Kingdoms totter. Tyrants fall. The Lord laughs. Mountains crumble. The earth trembles. The ocean roars and foams. None of it touches God. None of it threatens His dwelling place. God is our stability. God is our security. God is our sanity in the midst of this crazy world.

God lives in heaven. The control room of the universe. The world turns at His command. The sun rises and falls according to His will. The winds blow from the east to the west, from the north to the south at His bidding. God prepares storehouses for the snow. God digs reservoirs for the rain. He tills the ground to make it fruitful. He causes the bird and fish and animals to multiply on the earth. He charts the path for every single human being and He sets the course for every human society. Nations rise and fall before Him. Kingdoms come and go. Kings and rulers, prime ministers and presidents are all like the grass that's here today and gone tomorrow. Only God is forever. Only God is eternal. Only God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

So be still. Rest in His presence. Be quiet. Let Him speak to your heart. Do not be anxious or afraid. He holds you in the palm of His hand. Do not fear. Your life is kept secure in the city of God. The holy habitation of the Most High. He will be your strength when you face challenges in this world. He will be a present help when you go through trouble. He will be with you when each morning dawns. You do not face this day alone. You are not going through this season alone. Your very life is not your own. God is exalting Himself even now in you and through you. God is making Himself known even now to you and through you. Everything we are facing is part of God's eternal plan. He will be exalted on the earth. He will be exalted among the nations. He will be exalted in His church. He will be exalted in your life and in my life!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

July 29, 2020
CREATED. CALLED. CONSECRATED.

Readings for today: [Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80](#)

God made you. He shaped you and formed you in your mother's womb. He knit you together. Bone by bone. Organ by organ. Muscle by muscle. He gave you talents. Abilities. Gifts. He brought you into the world. It's worth stopping just to think about this morning. The fact that you are fearfully and wonderfully made by God Himself. A unique, unrepeatable act of creation. "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." (Isaiah 43:1) God knows you inside and out. God knows every hair on your head. God knows every cell in your body. God knows you as intimately as you can be known. And the most amazing thing is He loves you. Loves every part of you. The whole parts and the broken parts. The fully developed parts and the undeveloped parts. The good parts and the bad parts. He loves you warts and all. He calls you by name. You are His child.

God called you. Not only by name but for a specific purpose. You were created for His glory. Created to bear His image into the world. Created to bring Him praise in everything you say and do. "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made...the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise." (Isaiah 43:7, 21) You were not a random act. You were not a mistake or an accident. You were not an afterthought or an add-on. God created you in order to make Himself known through you to the world. God created you in order to have an eternal relationship with you. God created you in order to dwell with you forever. This is why He is so faithful. God will never let us go. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." (Isaiah 43:2) God has declared that He will be worshiped by His people and He will not relent until we fulfill our divine purpose.

God consecrated you. Redeemed you. Saved you. Delivered you from the power of sin and death. God died for you. He took your place. Endured the punishment you deserved. Shed His own blood in order to satisfy the justice of God. You are no longer your own. You were bought with a price. He has claimed you. He has adopted you. He has brought you into His family. "Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.' "Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall be justified and shall glory." (Isaiah 45:21-25)

God has done what we cannot. He has lifted us out of the pit and set our feet on solid ground. He has given us a new song to sing and a new heart filled with His joy. He has broken the back of our rebellion. Driven us to our knees with His love and grace. Showed us mercy where we have failed. Covered us in His own righteousness. In the Lord we are justified. In Christ we are made new. God shaping us and forming us yet again for His praise and His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

July 30, 2020
LET GOD CARRY YOU

Readings for today: [Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135](#)

You have a choice. Either you carry your god or let God carry you. Either you load yourself down with the idols of your lives. Idols that are false. Dead. Cannot save. Or you let God bear you up on eagle's wings. I love how Isaiah 46 puts it, "Bel bows down; Nebo stoops; their idols are on beasts and livestock; these things you carry are borne as burdens on weary beasts. They stoop; they bow down together; they cannot save the burden, but themselves go into captivity. "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from before your birth, carried from the womb; even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save." (Isaiah 46:1-4) The picture Isaiah paints here is of the foreign nations carrying their gods around from place to place. They put their gods on carts borne by beasts of burden. They are heavy loads. The oxen have to strain to keep going. And all for naught as they are dead and empty. So the result is defeat. Exile. Captivity. Contrast this with the Living God of Israel. No idol can depict him. No statue or totem to carry. So strange was Israel's faith that many of their neighbors considered them atheist! Because they didn't appear to even have a god! And yet their God is real. Alive. Active. Bears them up from birth even to their old age. They didn't make him, He made them. They didn't bear him, He bore them. They didn't carry him, He carries them. They didn't save him, He saves them.

You and I are faced with this same choice everyday. Sure, our idols are not as obvious. At least that's what we tell ourselves. We don't have statues or totems or anything like that. Instead, we have bank accounts. Homes. Careers. Relationships. These are the things we place our trust in rather than the Living God. We place our faith in ourselves. We worship ourselves. All our energy and resources are directed towards making sure our needs, our wants, our desires are fulfilled. We are told we deserve this. We are told we've earned this. We're told we want this. That we would be nothing without it. Life is not worth living unless you have it all. Such lies place burdens on our shoulders too heavy to carry. They wear us down. They sap us of our strength. All of us know the rat race we're on is killing us. We cannot maintain the pace. So what's the answer?

Turn to God. Let Him bear the burden of your life. Trust the One who shaped and formed you in your mother's womb. Trust the One who gave you breath and life at your birth. Trust the One who endowed you with all gifts and talents and abilities you have. Trust the One who knows every hair on your head. If you'll let Him, He will lift you up. If you'll lean on Him, He will give you strength. If you trust Him, He will never let you down. He has made you. He has borne you. He has carried you. He will save you. This is his promise.

I have a dear friend from Nigerian named Nanpak. He is a young man around 24 years of age. He exemplifies what Isaiah is talking about. He has suffered unimaginable tragedy in his life. Boko Haram killed his parents and siblings and tried to take his life. He still bears the scars from the machete wounds on his back. He has a bullet in his side. But God saved him. God protected him. God delivered him. One would think such a man would be bitter and angry. One would think such a man might seek vengeance against those who killed his family. Not Nakpak. The gospel has set him free. And he believes God has a special plan for his life. He believes he's been called to fight the rise of infectious disease in his country. He has already achieved a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He will serve the next few years as a teacher in his country as part of a compulsory service program run by the government for those who graduate college. Then he plans on going back to school for a master's degree. Because his father was a pastor, Nakpak is also considering ministry or perhaps combining the two in some way in the future. His is one story among many that inspires because he shows me what it means to place my trust in God.

Readings for tomorrow: [Isaiah 50-53](#)

July 31, 2020
SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for today: [Isaiah 50-53](#)

One of the great blessings of my life has been to meet people like Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda. Bishop John writes and speaks powerfully on the subject of the genocide that horrified a watching world in 1994. He wrestles deeply with the question, “Where was God as over one million people were being slaughtered?” And he comes out the other side with this answer, “Where was God when a million innocent people were being butchered? Where was God when priests and pastors helped massacre the people in their churches? I’ll tell you where God was. He was alongside the victims lying on the cold stone floor of the cathedral. He was comforting a dying child. He was crying at the altar. But He was also saving lives. Many were saved by miracles. God does not flee when evil takes over a nation...God is the giver of eternal life, and He can bring great good out of any situation. He raises the dead; He can also raise the broken. He can restore their hearts and minds and lift their spirits to renewed life. In my country God is doing this today by the thousands. There is so much pain here, so many real tears, and so much guilt that our ministry is like preaching hope from the top of a pile of bones. From atop a mountain of mutilated bodies, we are stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and recovery.” (The Bishop of Rwanda)

I cannot fathom the journey so many in places like Rwanda have endured. The horror. The pain. The suffering. It’s immense. Indescribable. Beyond words. And yet, I would argue the forgiveness and reconciliation they have found is equally, if not more, profound. When I was there two years ago, I asked a woman if she was ethnic Tutsi or Hutu. “Neither” was her reply. “Here we are all Rwandan.” She went on to describe some of the hell she and her family had been through and the freedom they had found through forgiveness. Only Jesus could provide such grace. Only Jesus could give them such strength. How can I be so sure? Because Jesus knows the depths of human suffering. He experienced the absolute worst this world has to offer. He knows evil intimately and through his death defeats it once and for all. Listen to how the ancient prophet Isaiah describes the suffering of Jesus, some hundreds of years before His death and resurrection.

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed...He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth...Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand...Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:3-5, 7, 10, 12)

The same God who bore the sins of many. The same God who makes intercession for the transgressors. The same God who loved His enemies so much He died for them is the same God who is alive and active in our world today. Bringing about reconciliation through forgiveness. Preaching hope from atop a pile of His own bones. From atop His own mutilated body, He is stretching a hand upward to proclaim a message of transformation and grace. It’s truly incredible and it is available to all who

would place their trust in Him. Friends, if God can bring about reconciliation between the victims and perpetrators of genocide in Rwanda can He not accomplish the same in our lives as well? Can He not bring together husband and wife on the verge of divorce? Can He not bring back together children and parents who've been estranged? Can He not help Democrats and Republicans find common ground? Can He not heal the racial tensions in our own country?

What is required? Repentance. Confession. Truth-telling. Courage. Faith. Humility. Most of all, a deep and abiding and enduring trust in the power of the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54-58