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August 1, 2020
GOSPEL IN ACTION

Readings for today: Isaiah 54-58

“Why can’t you just stick to preaching the gospel?” I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve been asked this question over the last twenty years. Usually it comes after particularly challenging sermons preached to particular issues in particular contexts. Racism. Classism. Nationalism. Economic and social privilege. Human sexuality. Pro-life issues like abortion or the death penalty. The assumption behind the issue is that Jesus never engaged in social justice or structural reform so why should His followers? But such a perspective fails to take in the whole counsel of God revealed in the Scriptures. Further, it shows a lack of understanding of just how threatening Jesus was to the social and political order of His day.

At the same time, I do appreciate the sentiment behind the words. We must preach the gospel. We must preach the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Only Jesus saves. Only Jesus redeems. Only His death on the cross pays the full penalty for our sin and satisfies the demands of God’s justice. Only His resurrection defeats the power of sin and death and offers us victory. Only by the Word of God becoming flesh and blood and moving into our world are we given access to the Kingdom. Self-help. Social movements. Political organizations. These things simply cannot achieve what only God can do. Only those who have received Christ can give Him away. Only those who have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness can give forth light. Only those who have been set apart for God’s purposes can promote His Kingdom values of justice and righteousness and peace in our world. It’s the same point an ancient prophet named Isaiah once made to the nation of Israel...

“Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, if you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”
(Isaiah 58:6-12)

Jesus says, “If you love Me, keep my commandments.” If you love Me, follow in My footsteps. If you love Me, do not only as I say but also as I do. Show compassion to those who are lost. They are slaves to sin. They walking in darkness. They are blind and do not see. Do not be surprised when they embrace all kinds of selfishness and greed and anger and violence. This is to be expected from those who live in bondage. Hold accountable those who are found. Judgment begins at the house of the Lord. Those who have been set free should not turn and use their freedom for their own gain. They should not submit again to a yoke of bondage and act according to their former ways. They must relinquish the underhanded, manipulative, power-hungry ways of this world and instead pursue the way of Jesus. They must be salt, preserving all they can that is good and righteous and pure and true in our world. They must be light, exposing all that causes evil and suffering and pain and heartbreak. They must

serve as agents of God's justice and God's righteousness and God's peace not only individually but corporately in the systems and structures of our world, be it political or economic or social.

To who much is given, much is expected and we've been given the gift of the gospel! We've been given the greatest gift one could ever receive so with it comes the greatest responsibility a person could ever bear. To bring hope and peace and joy to a world full of despair, conflict, and deep sadness. Thankfully, we do not do this alone. Jesus has not left us alone. He has sent us His Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts, we find ourselves longing for the same things God longs for. Salvation. Justice. Righteousness. Peace. These are the values of the Kingdom of God that the world so desperately craves. So...Christian...it is time to answer the call! It is time to move to the front lines of our current cultural conflict! It is time to march! It is time to speak up and speak out! It is time to loose the bonds of wickedness! It is time to set the oppressed free! It is time share our bread with the hungry! Bring the homeless into our homes and into our lives! To clothe the naked and reconcile with our families! As we give ourselves way for the sake of the gospel - both individually and corporately as a nation - here's God's promise...

Our light will break forth like the dawn. Our nation will experience healing. Righteousness will go before us. The Lord Himself will have our back. When we cry out to the Lord, He will answer. When we stop oppressing, stop blaming, stop acting in selfish, greedy, power-hungry ways, then the Lord will satisfy our every desire and make us strong. He will make us a fruitful garden. He will rebuilt our ancient ruins. He will provide a foundation for future generations. But only as we seek to follow Him. Only as we seek to repair the breech and restore our streets and lift up the poor and powerless. This, friends, is the gospel in action.

August 3, 2020
THE HOPE OF A REDEEMER

Readings for today: Isaiah 59-63

I don't know about you but when I opened my Bible this morning and began reading chapter 59 of Isaiah, I could not help but read it as a Word from the Lord to our nation today. Yes, God's hand is not shortened. God's ability to save has not diminished in the slightest. God has not grown hard of hearing. His eyes are not blind to our suffering. So what is He waiting for? What stays His hand of salvation? What keeps Him from stepping in? God is waiting for repentance. He is waiting for us to turn to Him. Waiting for us to relinquish our wicked ways. Waiting for us to stop embracing sin as a means to our own selfish ends.

"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear. For your hands are defiled with blood and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies; your tongue mutters wickedness. No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, they conceive mischief and give birth to iniquity. Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace. Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not overtake us; we hope for light, and behold, darkness, and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope for the wall like the blind; we grope like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among those in full vigor we are like dead men. For our transgressions are multiplied before you, and our sins testify against us; for our transgressions are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning back from following our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart lying words. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede..." (Isaiah 59:1-4, 7-10, 12-16a)

When will we tire of the petty games we play? When has outrage, anger, hate, or violence ever produced anything positive? When has wealth and power not corrupted the human soul? When have all the lies and conspiracies and falsehoods and deceit led to truth? When has anything manipulative or controlling or underhanded or abusive ever served the common good? And why - after thousands and thousands of years - have human beings not progressed beyond such things? We are morally deformed. Spiritually bankrupt. Hypocrites one and all. And the never-ending social media news cycle simply reveals the darkness that lies in every human heart.

So where can we find hope? Only in God. Listen to how God responds to the evil in our world. Listen to how He describes the Redeemer who is to come. "Then the Lord's own arm brought Him (the Redeemer) salvation, and His righteousness upheld Him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on His head; He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped Himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will He repay, wrath to His adversaries, repayment to His enemies; to the coastlands He will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of the Lord from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; for He will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the Lord drives. "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord."

One would think we should cower in fear. Tremble at the coming of the Redeemer. This passage, along with many others, convinced many in Israel that the Redeemer would come in power to execute judgment on the enemies of Israel. This is what was so confounding about Jesus. He came as the Suffering Servant. He took God's vengeance on Himself. He turned aside God's wrath at His enemies. He repaid the debt of humanity. He satisfied God's justice once and for all. Such amazing grace! It is why the name of the Lord is lifted up from the East to the West! It's why His glory rises like the sun! And one day soon He will return. Like a rushing stream. Like the winds that blow. He will come to Zion and He will sit in judgment over the earth. On that day, every knee will bow before Him. Every tongue will confess that He is Lord. All the games we play will come to an end and He will render to each according to His sovereign will. Those who love Him will be saved. Those who hate Him will be destroyed. The Kingdom will come to earth and all things will be made new.

If you have yet to place your trust in Jesus, friends, now is the time. Today is the day of salvation! Don't let another moment slip by for we do not know the time of the Redeemer's coming! Though He has tarried thus far, it may be that today is the day of His return. Spread the news! Share the gospel! Tell everyone you know about Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 64-66

August 4, 2020
POTTER'S HAND

Readings for today: Isaiah 64-66

I have this vivid memory from two years ago when Kristi and I got the opportunity to eat dinner with some new friends at a rooftop restaurant overlooking Kigali in Rwanda. It was a beautiful evening spent eating great food and having great conversations. Jason and Kimberly Peters were our hosts that week. Jason serves as the CEO of Hope Haven and lives there off and on with his family. Pastor Jimmy and his wife Sharol lead Potter's Hand Church in Kigali and Pastor Jimmy was instrumental in helping build Hope Haven due to his civil engineering background and experience in construction.

During the course of the meal, Pastor Jimmy shared his story with us and it has stuck with me. He is a trained civil engineer who has worked all over Rwanda. He has advanced degrees from more than one university. He has not only led many projects but consulted on many more and is very well-respected. In fact, prior to getting involved in ministry, he had an opportunity to go to work for some large construction firms in overseeing some of the key infrastructure work in his country. However, God had a different plan for Jimmy's life. At the same time his professional career was taking off, he was serving part-time as an assistant pastor in his church. They had a crisis of leadership. It was extremely painful and resulted in many people leaving, including several of their key leaders. Jimmy was asked to fill the gap. He had a decision to make. Should he take the exciting, lucrative job offer from the government or take the difficult, low-paying job of helping his church recover? As he prayed, God led him to verses like this one from Isaiah 64:8, "But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."

Jimmy knew the call had come. He was to serve the church. He gave up his position and power and wealth and political influence to serve a church broken by conflict. A church struggling to make ends meet. A church that was coming apart at the seams. He gathered the elders and leaders together and shared the verse God had given him. They renamed the church "Potter's Hand." I wish I could tell you some great story of success. Some great story about how God has honored Pastor Jimmy's choice by bringing prosperity and rapid growth to the congregation. What I can tell you is the story Jimmy shared with me. The story of God's abiding faithfulness to a small group of people hungry for the gospel with a passion to serve God's Kingdom. Pastor Jimmy has led his congregation well. Much healing has taken place. The church is growing. God is moving. But it is long, hard work. There are leadership challenges. Financial challenges. Ministry challenges. And yet, the verse God gave Pastor Jimmy before he stepped into this ministry continues to guide them. He is the Potter. We are the clay. The clay doesn't ask the Potter, "Why have you made me like this?" The clay doesn't question the Potter's plans for its life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

It's an ancient insight that still holds true today. What was true for the prophet Isaiah has held true for Pastor Jimmy. CEO Jason. Pastor Doug. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God is the master potter. We are his clay. He has us right where He wants us...on His wheel...and He is shaping us to serve His purposes in this world. We have no need to ask Him, "Why?" No need to question His plans. We simply are called to trust and obey. To let the Potter do what the Potter does best. What is the Potter doing in your life today? How is He shaping you? How is He forming you? Where is He at work in you? Give Him thanks no matter what season you find yourself in.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

August 5, 2020
RATIONALITY OF EVIL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 21, 2 Chronicles 33

No one sets out to be evil. No one wakes up in the morning thinking to themselves, “How many bad things can I get away with today?” No parent raises their child to love evil. No child sets out to stick it to their parents by becoming as evil as possible. No one starts out loving evil and no one makes evil their life goal. So why then is evil so prevalent in our world today?

Evil is what happens when we set our hearts on something other than God. As soon as we displace God in our hearts, evil becomes far more rational. For example, as soon as I set my heart on loving someone other than my wife, adultery becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on achieving some position or some promotion, lying about other candidates becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on wealth, greed becomes rational. As soon as I set my heart on political power, corruption becomes rational. With me so far? Any time we set our sights on something lower than God. Something lesser than God. Something other than God, we are opening the door to evil. When we set our hearts and minds on God, we naturally follow God’s will because we know it is the only way to arrive at God’s purpose for our lives. To pursue any other end. To chase any other dream. To set any other goal means we must find another way. We must take another path. We walk a different road. And that road - by definition - leads to sin and evil and death.

Consider the case of Manasseh. A young man raised by a godly king in the lap of luxury in Jerusalem. He became king at the very young age of twelve. He reigned for over fifty years. And during that time, he engaged in all manner of evil. Why? Why would a young man, raised on the stories of his faithful father and the miracles God had wrought, turn to idolatry? One clue comes in 2 Kings 21:2 where it says, “Manasseh did what was evil in the sight of the Lord according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” You say, why would he want to do that? Perhaps he could sense the coming demise of his own kingdom. Perhaps he looked around at some of the other nations and coveted their power and wealth. Perhaps he wanted to fit in. Wanted to be esteemed in the eyes of his royal peers. After all, his father had this fatal flaw, right? Showed the Babylonian envoys all his wealth in order to impress them? Whatever it was, I seriously doubt Manasseh got up one day after being crowned king and did a U-turn. I doubt he set out to do evil. I doubt he thought to himself, “How can I become the most evil king in Israelite history?” Again, no one sets out to do evil. Evil is what happens when you’re on your way to somewhere else.

So where is your life headed? What are your life goals? If someone were to challenge you at whatever stage of life you find yourself in to write them down, where would God fall on your list? Seriously. Be honest with yourself. No senses in hiding. It’s not like God doesn’t already know. If someone were to look at your calendar. Look at your checking account. Look at your social media feed. Look at the way you vote and the causes you advocate for and why you advocate for them. If they were to interview your spouse. Your children. Your close friends. What would they find? What would these sources reveal? Would they show a strong commitment to the Lord or would they tell a different tale? Remember, “evil” is defined by God as putting anything before Him in your life. It’s not just a term reserved for the Hitlers of our world. So where do you stand? If you find yourself on the “evil” side of the ledger, don’t lose heart. Manasseh repented and God answered his prayer. Trust me when I say God will answer your prayer as well if you but turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Nahum 1-3

August 6, 2020
JEALOUS GOD

Readings for today: Nahum 1-3

“Behold, I am against you, declares the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face; and I will make nations look at your nakedness and kingdoms at your shame. I will throw filth at you and treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle.” (Nahum 3:5-6)

Some things you can't unsee. Like the time I ran my first Bolder Boulder several years ago and saw the male belly dancers around mile four! :-) On a more serious note, now that I've become aware of the “honor/shame” dynamic running through all of Scripture, it seems like it's everywhere. Why does God judge Nineveh with such harshness? Why is He not just content to have the victory but goes further, grinding them into dust? Why does He put their nation to open shame? Lifting their skirts. Exposing their nakedness. Demonstrating before the whole world their powerlessness? Why does He go as far as to throw excrement at them and make them a spectacle? Because God is a jealous God. Jealous for His honor. Jealous for His glory. Jealous for His name.

The nation of Assyria has enjoyed their time in the sun. Their chariots have rolled all over the Middle East like an ancient blitzkrieg. Their empire is great. Their power limitless. Their military without equal. But they've grown proud. They've exceeded the limits God set for them. They've become drunk with their success. Though they served as the rod of God's anger against the northern kingdom of Israel, He must now bring them to heel. He must again demonstrate His sovereignty over ALL the nations. Remember the words of the Assyrian commander to King Hezekiah when they besieged Jerusalem? How they dared to compare Almighty God with the small tribal gods of the pagan nations? It's worth going back and re-reading the story from 2 Kings 18 again. Such disdain and disrespect draws God's ire. Not because it hurts His ego but because it offends His sacred and holy honor. God will not be mocked! The Creator will not allow His creatures to treat Him this way. They will learn to honor God. They will learn to respect God. They will learn to submit to God. He will bring them to their knees one way or the other because there is one thing God cares about more than the creatures He made in His own image and that is Himself. His glory. His honor. His fame. His name WILL be great upon the earth!

“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.” (Nahum 1:2-6) Assyria will learn this lesson in spades. As will the other nations who dare defy the Living God.

But what about God's people? What is our response to this God? How should we approach this God? With fear and trembling? On some level, yes. With humility and submission? Certainly. With terror and dread? Absolutely not! Why? Because our God is also good. And He loves His people. He is faithful to His people. “The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him.” (Nahum 1:7)

So...are you living a life of humble submission before the Lord? Or prideful rebellion? Is God an ever-present reality in your life or does He seem distant? Someone to call on in case of emergency? Do you seek to love God with all your heart or are you apathetic towards His commandments? What about His honor and glory? Do these things cross your mind when you work? When you parent? When you're among friends? When you relate to your husband or wife? When you vote? When you engage in the public square? Is your worship focused on praising God and pleasing God or are you more concerned with your personal preferences? These are critical questions, friends, in light of what Nahum shares with us today. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God!

Readings for tomorrow: Zephaniah 1-3

August 7, 2020
GODLY HUMILITY

Readings for today: Zephaniah 1-3

I once met a man who gave up a six figure income in the US to return to his native country of Rwanda where he did not draw a salary for three straight years. He went from being in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest people to the bottom 1% of the world's poor. He gave up security and safety to live in danger and place his family at risk. He gave up power and influence and privilege in one of the world's most significant NGO's to work among those who have been forgotten. When I expressed my admiration for such a sacrifice, his response was confusion. "What sacrifice?" he said. "My life is not my own. My life has never been my own. My life is in the hands of God to do with as He wills." This, friends, is godly humility.

"But I will leave in your midst a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord..." (Zephaniah 3:12) It is hard to overstate the importance of humility to the Christian faith. Humility is what keeps us grounded before the Lord. Humility is what keeps us dependent on Him. Humility is what opens our hands and our hearts, allowing us to release those things in which we too often place our trust. Wealth. Health. Power. Privilege. Status. Authority. Pride. We are fools to place our trust in these things and yet it is so hard to resist temptation. We who have so much actually fall prey to our own desires. Our ability to gratify those desires instantaneously only serves to tighten our bonds. Thinking we are free, we choose to become slaves and there's nothing more pitiful than a free man or woman choosing to remain in bondage. Nothing more heartbreak than sitting in a cell with the door wide open, refusing to leave. This is the state we find ourselves in today. Our culture has made "Self" a god and the result is entitlement. Narcissism. Selfishness. Greed. Self-protection. Far too many of us worship at this altar and it is leading us to destruction.

So how do we resist this temptation? How can we uproot Self out of the center of our lives and re-focus our devotion around God? Humility. The fundamental recognition that my life is not my own. My future is not mine to determine. My hopes are not set on the limited horizons of this world. My happiness does not come from chasing temporal pleasures. Humility honors God as sovereign over all of life, including my own. Humility submits. Humility surrenders. Humility bows before the God of the universe and willingly entrusts Him with all that we are and all that we have. This is the secret that my friend understood. He owned nothing. Not his house. Not his salary. Not his job. Not his family. Not his lifestyle. Not his degrees. Not his professional success. Not his future. None of it was his to hold onto. All of it came from God and all of it was used by God as He wills for His good pleasure. So when God called him to leave Colorado Springs and move to Kigali to help his people recover from the genocide, he went. No questions asked. The Master called. My friend answered. The King issued a command. My friend obeyed. The Father made an appeal. My friend responded in faith. Though life has been much harder. Much more difficult. Much more painful and heartbreak. He has no regrets.

Humility. Not just an attitude of the heart. Not just a thought process in the mind. But a way of life. It means holding onto the things of this world loosely, knowing the Lord may require them at any time. It means holding onto our hopes and dreams loosely, knowing the Lord may change course at any time. It means holding onto even our pain and heartbreaks and suffering loosely, knowing the Lord often leads His people through such experiences to teach them of His sufficiency. It means holding onto our strength and safety and security loosely, knowing the Lord may demand even our lives at any time.

Now all this may sound very scary. Very frightening if this has not been your path. Here's the good news. God doesn't ask for blind obedience. He doesn't require us to step into the great unknown. He gives this promise to all who walk humbly before Him..."The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival, so that you will no longer suffer reproach. Behold, at that time I will deal with all your oppressors. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you in, at the time when I gather you together; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes," says the Lord." (Zephaniah 3:17-20) God can be trusted. God is true to His Word. His faithfulness never ends. His love never fails. Simply believe and let God take you by the hand today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

August 8, 2020
SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Readings for today: 2 Kings 22-23, 2 Chronicles 34-35

Josiah is one of my favorites. So much so, I named my son after him. His heart is pure. He seeks the Lord. He humbles himself when he hears God's Word. He obeys God's commands. He purges the land of idolatry and evil. He re-institutes right worship. It's amazing. His faithfulness to the Lord spawns a revival in the land. The people follow his lead. And Israel staves off disaster for yet another generation.

As a pastor, I've been blessed to part of such spiritual renewals. I saw it in seminary when I worked in New Jersey State Prison. The inmate church loved the Word of God. They had godly leaders like Nathan and Philip and Rich and Sam and so many others. Black, white, and brown. All passionately committed to the Lord and the results were incredible. I saw it in my first church in Mobile. A group of people who loved Jesus and His Word and loved each other and who were willing to take the risk to follow a young, naive preacher into some crazy ministry. They had godly leaders like Buddy, Daisy, Bill, Sissy, Deb and so many others. All passionately committed to the Lord and the results were incredible. I've seen it in my current church. A people who love the Word of God and each other and our community. We have an unbelievable number of godly leaders from all walks of life. All passionately committed to the Lord and the results we're seeing are incredible.

Does it mean there aren't challenges? Of course not. Spiritual renewal never progresses in a straight line. It's not always up and to the right. Not everyone accepts it. Not everything goes well. There are always setbacks along the way. Fighting idolatry is hard. Fighting ingrained behavior is hard. Fighting the naturally selfish and sinful heart is hard. But if godly leaders remain faithful to the Lord. Preach and teach His Word. Obey His commands. Revival comes. Renewal comes. Not always in the way we expect. Not always according to our measures for success. But it comes nonetheless because God shows His favor on those who passionately seek Him.

This has wide implications not only for us as individuals or for the local church. Josiah is the leader of a nation. His example sets the tone for all of God's people. He uses his influence to change hearts and minds and lead his people to a closer relationship with the Lord. The same could be true for every community. Every city. Every county. Every state. Even for our entire nation. But we need godly leaders to show us the way. Godly character is the most important quality in an elected leader. A heart after God. A heart that is committed to Him with a passion to serve Him and to see all peoples be blessed in His name. This is what our world needs and it begins with each one of us. Are we such leaders? In our homes? In our schools? In our neighborhoods? In our places of work? Are we such leaders in our churches? In our communities? In our world? How are we leveraging our godly influence in order to bring spiritual renewal to our land?

August 10, 2020
A CONVERSATION WITH GOD

Readings for today: [Habakkuk 1-3](#)

Sometimes it's easy to miss the forest for the trees. We find ourselves deep in the weeds when we read and lose sight of the larger message. Today's book is a good example. Habakkuk is an obscure prophet. Not much is known about him. There is no biographical information listed. This is the only work attributed to him. But careful study of the book suggests he was living in Jerusalem around 612 B.C. which locates him towards the end of the reign of King Josiah. The Babylonian (Chaldean) empire is on the rise and will soon sweep in to destroy Jerusalem thus fulfilling the prophecy given to Hezekiah who proudly showed off the treasure of his nation to Babylonian envoys decades earlier. This whole book is a prayer. A conversation between God and his prophet. As such, it represents an invitation. God inviting us to engage in a similar conversation with Him over our nation today.

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.” (Habakkuk 1:2-4) I don't know about you but I can relate to these words. I look around at the brutality and racism so many of my friends of color endure. I see the abuse heaped upon law enforcement as they try and stand between rioters and the destruction of private property. I watch as our leaders incite violence by their actions and inaction. I watch as evil is called good and good is called evil. It does feel like the law is paralyzed. It does feel like justice is not just delayed but denied. It does feel like the righteous are an ever-dwindling number. What is God's response?

“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.” (Habakkuk 1:5) God is at work in our world. He is raising up His church in places like South America and Africa and Asia. Millions are coming to Christ in these places and the center of Christianity is shifting. It is dying in the West. Europe is fully post-Christian. America is quickly hastening in the same direction. Thankfully, God doesn't need us. He moves on. He moves in and among a people who will seek Him with all their hearts. And while it's heartbreaking to live through times of decline. Times when it seems like our spiritual heritage is being squandered. It is nothing new. Christianity has always tended to “die” when it achieves cultural dominance and it tends to grow exponentially in places where it is persecuted and oppressed. This has been true throughout history.

“Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof...I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.” (Habakkuk 1:12, 2:1) Habakkuk accepts God's judgment. He doesn't fight it. He understands God's ways are higher than his ways. God's thoughts are higher than his thoughts. God's purposes transcend the fate of nations...even the fate of Israel! God's judgments are always righteous and true. So rather than fight or complain or question, Habakkuk simply and humbly and faithfully takes up his post. He is a watchman for Israel. He will warn them of the coming judgment. He will stand as witness of the wrath to come. Most importantly, however, he will be a beacon of hope for he knows God will keep faith with Israel and redeem them in the end.

“And the Lord answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith...For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea...But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.” (Habakkuk 2:2-4, 14, 20) God will never abandon His people completely. He will never break His covenant of faithfulness with us. He loves us which is why He disciplines us. He cares for us which is why He refuses to let us persist in our sin. He is passionate and fierce and jealous for us so He will not let us wallow in our own mess. His judgment is always right. The pain and suffering He allows is intended to purify. Sanctity. Bring us back to Him. At the end of the day, God cares most for His glory. The mandate issued at creation will be fulfilled. The earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord! The earth will bow in silence before Him as He enters His temple!

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.” (Habakkuk 3:17-19) This is why Habakkuk ends with a song. He sings praises to His God. He knows God is faithful. God is true. God is good. God is glorious and will bring His will to pass on the earth. Habakkuk doesn’t need to worry. Habakkuk doesn’t need to be anxious. Even as he watches God’s judgment come on God’s people, Habakkuk knows God’s love never fails.

We are living through such challenging times. Like Habakkuk, we look around us and it seems like the fig trees aren’t blossoming. There is no fruit on the vines. The harvest has failed and our flocks are dying. People are getting sick. Businesses are closings. Savings are drying up. Retirement funds are disappearing. Everything we have spent our entire lives working for is being lost. So what do we do? Will we rejoice in the Lord? Will we take joy in the God of our salvation? Will we rely on God who is our strength?

Readings for tomorrow: Joel 1-3

August 11, 2020
APOCALYPSE NOW

Readings for today: [Joel 1-3](#)

We live in apocalyptic times. If you listen to the media or to the conversations happening on social media feeds, it seems like the world is coming to an end any day now...unless we vote for their candidate. All politics and social policy is now cast in terms of good and evil. We're fighting a zero sum game in a never-ending culture war. "Re-elect President Trump and the world goes to hell." "Elect Vice President Biden and the world goes to hell." Or so we hear. America's perch as the world's leading superpower is being threatened by China and Russia. The great American experiment in democracy seems to be teetering on the brink. Capitalism which has driven wealth-creation on a scale never before seen in human history is broken. Any trust we once had in the institutional strength of the checks and balances of the different branches of government is gone as we watch Congress continue to flail about. It's hard to live in the twilight of an empire. Compound it with a global pandemic, ethnic strife, and a complete lack of any kind of godly leadership and we end up resonating with what the prophet Joel was going through as he watched the sun set on the southern kingdom of Judah...

"What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten. What the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten, and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten." (Joel 1:4) King Josiah was dead. The brief flicker of hope had gone out. The locusts were on the march. The Babylonians were on the move. No one would escape. Swarm after swarm. Army after army would march through Israel, burning everything to the ground. Jerusalem would be destroyed. The Temple razed. Not a stone would be left on top of another. So what are the people of God to do? Send out a Twitter blast? Riot in the streets? Overturn the government? Burn down the establishment? No...

"Consecrate a fast; call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God, and cry out to the Lord... Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster." (Joel 1:14, 2:12-13) The appropriate response is always repentance. Always humility before the Lord. Turning to Him with all our hearts. Relinquishing any sense of control. Letting go of our anger. Refusing to cling to whatever power and privilege we have left. Resisting the temptation to play the blame game. Looking in the mirror to see how we have contributed to the mess we are in. Honestly acknowledging our sin. Yes, it feels like disaster is on the horizon. Yes, there is so much fear and anxiety in our world. Yes, we have become prideful and arrogant and entitled and spoiled. We have forgotten our first love. We have abandoned true worship of God in favor of idols. We have taken all the blessings God has given us for granted. We deserve our fate. And yet...

"I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." (Joel 2:25) There simply is no end to God's grace. No matter how many times we fall. No matter how many times we fail. No matter how corrupt and selfish and greedy we become, God is quick to forgive if we will be confess our sin before Him. If we will express but grieve over what we have done or what we have left undone. God's mercies are new every morning. His faithfulness is great. His love never fails. This is our hope! This is our joy! This is our peace! But God doesn't stop there. He doesn't just restore us, He actually sends us out to declare this same gospel to the nations...

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.” (Joel 2:28) God’s grace is not something we keep to ourselves. It is a gift designed to be given away. A blessing we offer to others. Something we share with the world around us. God poured out His Spirit on His people at Pentecost. It’s like He turned on the faucet and left it running for two thousand years. There is no end to the Spirit of God which is why billions around the world today call on His name. If you are a Christian, you have been drenched in His life-giving flow. You have been indwelt by His life-giving power. You have been filled by His life-giving presence. This sets you apart. This makes you different. You are now the salt of the earth, called to help preserve her from all evil. You are the light of the world, called to help put an end to darkness. Our hope, friends, is not in the coming election but in the Spirit of God working through the people of God to proclaim the gospel of God to a dead and dying world.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 1-4

August 12, 2020
THE SUFFERING OF GOD

Readings for today: Jeremiah 1-4

Jeremiah is a hard book to read. Especially if one gets in touch with the pain present throughout. Not only Jeremiah's pain as he watches his people and his nation struggle and suffer and eventually be destroyed. But God's pain as well as His people betray Him by chasing after other gods. So intertwined is the pain of God with His prophet that it is often hard to know who's speaking. For example, Jeremiah 4:19 says, "My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent, for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war." (Jeremiah 4:19) Traditionally, these words have been ascribed to Jeremiah himself because we simply cannot fathom God saying such things. However, when one looks closely at the text, it is clear God is speaking in verse 18 ("Your ways and your deeds have brought this upon you. This is your doom, and it is bitter; it has reached your very heart.") and in verse 22 ("For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not.") Is it possible that we are so uncomfortable with the idea that God might feel pain that we automatically bracket this reading out of the text?

We're going to see this dynamic pop up over and over again throughout this book and it forces us to come to grips with how we see and understand God. Classically, the question goes to the "impassibility" of God. The idea that God doesn't have "passions" or "pathos" which has to do with suffering. Some have interpreted this to mean God doesn't have emotions but that's clearly not true. God expresses a whole range of emotions all throughout the Scriptures. More specifically this idea has to do with the suffering of God. Can God suffer? Does such suffering suggest a change in God? Does it threaten the immutability of His nature and character? Historically, the answer has been "yes" which then forces us to find other explanations for what we read in texts like the one before us today. But what if God suffers? What if God chooses - in His freedom - to be the kind of God who moves towards suffering? Who embraces suffering? Who welcomes suffering without it changing who He is? Is this not the heart of the gospel? Is this not part of the mystery of the Incarnation? Eternal God choosing to take on human flesh? With all its weaknesses and struggles and hardships? Is this not the heart of the passion of our Christ? God suffering with us and for us even to the point of death?

It seems to me that we lose nothing by embracing the pathos of God if we understand God has embraced such pathos according to His own will and good pleasure. Certainly, suffering is not forced on God. It doesn't take God by surprise. It doesn't enact a change on God's experience. God is beyond all these things. He truly is immutable or unchanging. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. There is no shadow or turning in Him. But at the same time, God has revealed Himself in a particular, one might even argue, peculiar kind of way. He is a God who embraces a broken creation. A God who covenants with a broken people. A God who is steadfast and faithful and loyal and true even in the face of evil. He is a God who likens His relationship with His people to a marriage and the faithlessness of His people to adultery. He frequently uses the language of betrayal and heartache and pain to express His dismay over the sinful choices His people make. No one forces God to remain faithful. No one makes God forgive. No outside force can drive God to do anything He Himself has not already chosen to do in complete freedom. Which makes passages like the one we read today and others like it throughout the book of Jeremiah so intriguing.

What if God is in anguish over us? What if being in relationship with us breaks God's heart? What if God's choice to love us from before the foundations of the earth involved Him choosing unimaginable suffering? Would this change how you relate to Him? Change how you see Him? Change how you experience Him? Change how you love Him?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 5-8

August 13, 2020
THE GOD WHO WEEPS

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 5-8](#)

“My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me. Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved." For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" “Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people! Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah 8:18-22, 9:1-3)

Admittedly, I am pushing into tomorrow's reading with today's devotional but this passage from the end of Jeremiah 8 is one of the most poignant in all of Scripture and it bleeds into the beginning of chapter 9. Most English translations put these words in Jeremiah's mouth. Primarily because of how uncomfortable we are with God experiencing deep, heartbreakng grief. As Western Christians we are heavily influenced by Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

But what if we were willing to embrace a different understanding of emotions? A deeper understanding? Again, it is without question that God experiences emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration. Joy. We read about them over and over again and they are not simply anthropomorphisms. (A way for God to express Himself in human terms we can understand. Ex. “The arm of the Lord...”) What if our understanding of God could be expanded to include the full range of emotions? What if us having emotions is part of being made in God's image? What if our “emotionalism”, which breeds the feelings of instability and unpredictability, is actually a result of sin and brokenness? What if God, because He remains untouched by sin, is able to experience all emotions without being driven by them?

This brings us back to the passage cited above. God is expressing the deepest, most heartbreakng grief possible. “My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick within me.” God is experiencing an incredible sense of loss. His people have betrayed Him. They have abandoned Him. And then they have turned around and blamed Him. “Behold, the cry of the daughter of my people from the length and breadth of the land: "Is the Lord not in Zion? Is her King not in her?" They refuse to bow the knee. Refuse to repent and return to Him. Refuse to humble themselves before Him. Quite the opposite. They brazenly continue in sin. "Why have they provoked me to anger with their carved images and with their foreign idols?" This is a stiff-necked people. A foolish people. A rebellious people. They take their relationship with God for granted. They are entitled. They are spoiled. They assume God will come to their rescue despite their unwillingness to walk in His ways. "The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

The perspective shifts back to God. “For the wound of the daughter of my people is my heart wounded; I mourn, and dismay has taken hold on me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?

Why then has the health of the daughter of my people not been restored?" "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" Again, one pictures deep, heavy sobs. God weeping a flood of tears. God experiencing unimaginable pain. Because He has freely joined Himself in an unbreakable covenant with His people, their wounds become His wounds. Their pain becomes His pain. Their heartbreak becomes His heartbreak. Things get so bad, God wishes He could leave. Abandon them to their fate. Leave the Temple in Jerusalem and return to the wilderness. To the time when He tabernacled with them on the Exodus journey. "Oh that I had in the desert a travelers' lodging place, that I might leave my people and go away from them! For they are all adulterers, a company of treacherous men. They bend their tongue like a bow; falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me, declares the Lord." But the Tabernacle is gone. There is no lodging place in the desert God can run to. He is stuck. He is committed. He will endure. This is the great faithfulness of our God! It is costly. It is hard. It is painful. But it remains true.

Really, God is being faithful to Himself here. Faithful to the promise He has made. To be our God, come hell or high water. This was the message He communicated through the covenant He first made with Abraham in Genesis 15 and sealed through the death and resurrection of His Beloved Son Jesus Christ. His steadfast love establishes the fundamental reality of our lives. The bedrock on which we can build our lives. Without fear. Without shame. Without worry that somehow, someway there will come a day when God will finally lose patience and abandon us. God will not leave us or forsake us for in doing so He would be unfaithful to Himself. Let this truth be your firm foundation today, friends!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 9-12

August 14, 2020
Conspiracy Theory

Readings for today: Jeremiah 9-12

Truth is a rare commodity in our day and age. Fake news. Outright lies. Conspiracy theories. Ideologically-driven news cycles. It's hard to discern what is true and what is false in our world. Add to that the commercially driven lies our culture sells about beauty, identity, happiness, fulfillment, etc. and we find ourselves swimming in a cesspool of deceit. Social media has only thrown gas on this fire. Exacerbating a phenomena that threatens the very fabric of our society. Sadly, the church has fallen prey to these same forces. Trading in the truth of the gospel for something more palatable, more therapeutic that fills the seats, sells books, and makes rockstars out of megapastors. But it's not just the megachurches who fallen for these lies. I cannot tell you the number of small churches who've allowed themselves to be defined more by the culture wars raging around us than the truth of the gospel. I cannot tell you the number of churches who care more about one's political affiliation, one's musical preference, one's theological camp, or one's denominational label than the truth God lays out for us in Scripture. I cannot tell you the number of individuals I meet who claim to be Christian but whose lives exhibit little, if any, evidence of a commitment to the Way, the Truth, and the Life of Jesus. Left without a champion, truth is lost and our world descends into chaos.

Jeremiah faced a similar situation, living as he did in the final days of the kingdom of Israel. "Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother, for every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer. Everyone deceives his neighbor, and no one speaks the truth; they have taught their tongue to speak lies; they weary themselves committing iniquity...Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully; with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him." (Jeremiah 9:4-5, 8) It sounds strikingly familiar, does it not? Those who disagree are not just wrong, they are evil. Those who are different are corrupt. Those who will not toe the line when it comes to ideological purity cannot be trusted. Their motives are suspect. They must have a hidden agenda. Surely there is a conspiracy afoot!

"Again the Lord said to me, "A conspiracy exists among the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem..." AHA! There it is! Confirmation of the deep state! Confirmation that those who don't agree with us are plotting to take over! Confirmation of the most nefarious intentions of our enemies! SEE! It's all right there in the Bible! But then Jeremiah confronts us with the hard truth. The "conspiracy", as it were, exists not "out there" but "in here." Inside every human heart. Deceit. Fake news. Blatant falsehoods. Hidden agendas. Guess what? They're all right here. In my heart. I fight them every single day. My entire life is a battle against such evil. Listen to Jeremiah's own words, "They have turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who refused to hear my words. They have gone after other gods to serve them. The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers." (Jeremiah 11:9-10)

The reality, friends, is much more complex than we want to acknowledge. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There is none who is righteous. Not a single one. All of us are like sheep who have gone astray and it is only the love of the Good Shepherd that keeps us from destroying ourselves. Left to our own wisdom, we will become confused. Left to our own strength, we will fail. Left to our own riches and resources, we eventually will run out. And this is why God says to Jeremiah, "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I

delight, declares the Lord."(Jeremiah 9:23-24) Truth can only be found in God. The only way to discover truth is through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Only after our dead hearts have been revived by the Holy Spirit can we discern what is true and false about our world and about ourselves. Only as we continue to surrender our own agendas, our own ideas, our own thoughts, our own opinions, our own truth to our Lord will we come to see His Truth for what it is and rejoice. Only as we fix our eyes on Jesus will we be able to see through all the lies and deceit this world has to offer. And it is only as we cling to the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way that we will find the Jesus Life!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 13-16

August 15, 2020
CLING TO GOD

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 13-16](#)

“For as the loincloth clings to the waist of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, declares the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.” (Jeremiah 13:11)

It's a weird scene. God tells Jeremiah to buy a loincloth. Wear it. Bury it. Dig it up. All in an effort to illustrate for His relationship with Israel. I don't know about you but I feel for these prophets. They are often called to do the strangest of things. I often wonder what their friends and family thought of them. I wonder what kind of ridicule and abuse they suffered. How isolated and alone they must have felt. I think of John the Baptist who was described as the “lone voice crying in the wilderness.” It had to be such a hard life. At the same time, I love the message God sends through Jeremiah. The picture of God clinging to us like an undergarment. Clinging to us in the most intimate of places. Clinging to us and never letting go. Why would God do such a thing? Especially when His people harden their hearts and refuse to listen?

God has a plan for your life. How many times have you heard that message? It's true! From the beginning, God has made His plan clear. Humanity's purpose is to fill the earth with the glory of God. Fill the earth with the image of God. Fill the earth with the praise of God. This is why God made us in the first place. This is the condition Adam and Eve were born into in the Garden of Eden. This is what all of us will one day experience when heaven comes to earth. No matter what we do or where we go or how much we sin, God's plan never changes. He never relents from His purposes. He never stops working to bring about His will in our lives. Though we may resist Him. Though we may run from Him. Though we may rebel against Him. God refuses to let go. His grip remains tight. His love steadfast and true.

I think of when my children were younger. How I would scoop them up in my arms at times and try to hold them close. Sometimes they would arch their backs and try to wiggle from my grasp. Sometimes they would fight me and try to push me away. But in the end they always laid their head down on my shoulder and snuggled in close. I think of the teenagers I live with and how upset they get at times. They yell. They cry. They say hurtful things. One of the things I've learned is not to fight them but simply hold out my arms. Wait for their emotions to calm down and give them a big hug. Then we talk things out. I think God is like that.

If you are a Christian, you are part of God's people. You have been given His name. You were created for His praise and glory. You are not insignificant. You are not worthless. You are not hopeless. You are not lost. You are not alone. You are not on your own. God is with you. He clings to you even now. He is as close as a loincloth around your waist. Engaged in the most intimate spaces of your life. Stop running. Stop resisting. Stop fighting. Turn and embrace the One who loves you more than you can ever know. Cling to God even as He clings to you.

August 17, 2020
THE TRUE PANDEMIC

Readings for today: Jeremiah 17-20

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9)

One cannot help but look at the history of humanity and be troubled. We are - by nature - a violent, greedy, selfish people. Ever since the fall of humanity from grace in the Garden of Eden, we have been at war. Alienated from God. Alienated from ourselves. Alienated from one another. Alienated from creation itself. It's why we have so many problems. It's why - no matter how hard we try - we never seem to make the progress our souls desire. Utopia seems forever beyond our grasp. Justice and righteousness forever slipping through our fingers. The Kingdom of God always just beyond the horizon.

Jeremiah looks around and the diagnosis seems clear. Humanity is desperately sick. We are all infected with a deadly disease. It's a heart condition. One that cripples us from conception. One that corrupts us from birth. One that keeps us from becoming the people we were created to be by God. Our hearts are deceitful. We lie to God. We lie to ourselves. We lie to those around us. We simply cannot and will not face up to our true condition. We are broken beyond repair. We are totally depraved. We are sinful creatures through and through. God says, “I, the Lord, search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.” (Jeremiah 17:10) It's why every single one of us will eventually die. It's God's righteous judgment on our sin. It is the penalty we pay for our crimes. No one escapes.

Jeremiah's words still ring true today. Think about all we are going through in our nation. Political division. Ethnic tension. Economic instability. Global pandemic. A culture of outrage and hate fostered by political leaders and furthered by a complicit media. And yet, the answers they offer only promise to treat the symptoms not the disease. They only address the downstream issues and fail to attack the root of the problem. The stark reality is we want the Kingdom without the King. We want all the blessings of heaven but we don't want to follow the only One who can get us there. We refuse to obey His commands. We refuse to submit to His will. We refuse to walk in His ways. And our society continues to descend into chaos and anxiety and fear. I love how Pastor Charlie Dates put it in a recent devotional I read on the root of the ethnic tensions we currently face, “The germ of injustice lives in all of us. We can hear the dream of exceptionality in our indignation. We see those troubling images and videos and think we would never do anything wrong like that. Our tweets are rightfully angry, but often unrighteously condescending. Even those who claim the name of Christ have forgotten that if it were not for the grace of God we too would do to others what we hate to see them do to someone else.” Without minimizing the seriousness of COVID-19, sin is the true pandemic afflicting the human race.

So what can do we do? How shall we respond? Again, I love how Dates puts it, “We human creatures are not all bad, but all of us are bad. The Bible teaches that all have sinned and fallen short of God's righteous standard. None of us escapes sin's reach. And what's worse is that we cannot remedy our world in our own power or fix ourselves. The Gospel is the only message that can cure the problems it diagnoses. Until you recognize that you are susceptible to the lure of sin, you cannot fully enjoy the gift of redemptive grace.” I think Jeremiah would agree. In fact, I believe this is exactly what Jeremiah is getting at when he says, “A glorious throne set on high from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary. O Lord, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you

shall be written in the earth, for they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living water.” (Jeremiah 17:12-13)

Friends, through Christ, the way to the throne is open. In Christ, we can approach the throne of grace in confidence to find mercy in our time of need. So look to Christ! See Him seated on the glorious throne! Place your trust in Him and invite His Spirit to do His sanctifying work in you, healing you from the affliction of sin. Delivering you from the power of sin. Only faith in Christ can save us from the pandemic of sin.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 21-24

August 18, 2020
WAR WITH GOD

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 21-24](#)

Today's reading makes me so thankful for Jesus. Jesus died in my place. He took the full wrath and fury my sin had earned on Himself. He endured the suffering. The pain. The horrors of hell that I may live. Without Christ, I would be lost. Rightfully condemned. At the mercy of God's judgment. Just like the people of Israel. It also makes me thankful Jesus is returning to make all things new. To put an end to oppression and injustice and the corrupt ways of the nations of this earth. Only in Jesus' Kingdom will we find perfect justice and righteousness forming the foundation of His throne. Until that day, we live in a broken world inhabited by broken creatures with broken longings in their hearts that constantly lead them astray.

"I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath." (Jeremiah 21:5) These might be some of the scariest words in all the Bible. Can you imagine what it must be like to be at war with God? To be in complete rebellion against your Creator? Not just ignoring His will but consciously, intentionally, even eagerly seeking to disobey? The sons of Josiah knew full well what they were doing. The priests and prophets of Jeremiah's time were fully aware of their actions. The people of God who lived in the cities and villages were not ignorant of the commandments of God. They simply chose to ignore them. They simply chose to reject them. And the consequences of their actions are devastating.

Israel will go into exile in Babylon. They will lose their land. They will lose their homes. Their Temple will be raised to the ground. Their glory pounded into dust. Even worse, their God was now fighting on the side of the Chaldeans! No longer their Protector. No longer their Warrior. He who was for them is now against them. Who can resist His might? "I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls...I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. They shall die of a great pestilence...I will give Zedekiah king of Judah and his servants and the people in this city who survive the pestilence, sword, and famine into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion." (Jeremiah 21:4, 6-7) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God!

And yet, even amidst this national catastrophe, Jeremiah sounds a note of hope. There will come a day when the sins of Israel have been paid and the Lord will visit His people once more. "I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord. "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" (Jeremiah 23:3-6) As is so often the case in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament; things are always darkest before the dawn. The promise of a Messiah rises out of the ashes of Israel's sin like a phoenix spreading its wings. David will not be abandoned. A righteous Branch shall come from his line. A king who will reign with justice and righteousness and wisdom. One who will restore the fortunes of God's people. One who will defeat their great enemy once and for all so they may finally dwell secure. He will even have a name...**וְיְהוָה צְדָקָה יְהוָה!**... "The Lord is our righteousness."

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. Furthermore, He died not only for me but for the sins of the world. The broken systems of this world. The oppressive and corrupt structures of this world. By His wounds, we are healed. By His brokenness, we are made whole. By His chains, we are set free. By His death, we are given new life.

The reality is all flesh is at war with God. The desires of our hearts are bent towards evil. Our thoughts and attitudes and actions are corrupt. And God is at war with us. His Spirit waging a battle for our hearts. He has invaded our world. Invaded our hearts in order to cleanse us. Purify us. Refine us. He is a consuming fire. He will not rest until our lives reflect His glory. And the more we surrender. The more we submit. The more we cooperate with the work of the Spirit, the more we will experience the freedom Christ promises. This is no easy task. The flesh and its desires must be crucified. Put to death. There can be no safe harbor for them in our souls. We must allow the Spirit to "save to the uttermost." We must open ourselves up fully and completely to His work. Only then will we be truly set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 25-28

August 19, 2020
TRUE PROPHETS VS. FALSE PROPHETS

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 25-28](#)

“Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word. It may be they will listen, and every one turn from his evil way, that I may relent of the disaster that I intend to do to them because of their evil deeds. You shall say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, and to listen to the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently, though you have not listened, then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth.’” (Jeremiah 26:2-6)

So many in our world claim to speak for God. Political leaders. Social leaders. Religious leaders. They come from all walks of life. They come from all different backgrounds. They come from all different ethnicities and cultures and nations. They hold all kinds of different credentials. So how is one to know who is true and who is false? How is one to discern the difference between a true prophet and a false prophet? Someone who actually is speaking for God vs. someone who is speaking for themselves?

In recent years, the church of Jesus Christ has endured scandal after scandal. I think of the systematic coverup in the Roman Catholic Church of the priests who abused thousands of children over decades across the country. I think of the scandals that have rocked the evangelical world as leaders like Bill Hybels, Ted Haggard, Mark Driscoll, and James MacDonald among many, many others are exposed for their hypocrisy. I think of the failure of church boards and episcopal governing structures in addressing these problems head on. Their enablement of the abusers only increasing the trauma of the victims. I wish I could say such incidents are rare but they are not. There are far too many false prophets running around these days. They masquerade as end times prophets, health and wealth preachers, and sexual predators who prey on their congregations. They are cult leaders. Religious charlatans. Purveyors of hate. They defend the indefensible. They justify their abuses. They claim special anointing and protections from the Lord himself. And they lead many astray with their lies. Unfortunately, the religious life seems to attract shady characters. Men - and it is almost exclusively men - whose character is utterly corrupt and who see the church as an easy mark. A soft target because of the grace she proclaims. Frankly, it all makes me want to vomit.

Sadly, it seems like such has always been the case. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we have encountered many a false prophet. People claiming to speak for the Lord who are, in reality, seeking to hold onto their power. The man we meet in today’s reading - Hananiah - is simply the latest in a long line of court prophets who seek to advance their position by flattering the king. Hananiah’s message to Zedekiah is that he will defeat the Babylonians. God will break the yoke from their necks and set them free. It is clear pandering designed to maintain political privilege and power and it bears a striking resemblance to the many pastors of our day who sell out the gospel for a place at the political table. Both progressives and conservatives alike are guilty. I think of Al Sharpton and Robert Jeffress and many others we could name. These are the kind of men of whom God speaks when He says, “I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied.” (Jeremiah 23:21)

Friends, God will not be mocked. When Hananiah falsely prophesied a great victory over Babylon, Jeremiah foretold his doom. “And Jeremiah the prophet said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says

the Lord: 'Behold, I will remove you from the face of the earth. This year you shall die, because you have uttered rebellion against the Lord.'" In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died." (Jeremiah 28:15-17) Over the course of my short life, I have seen this pattern repeated over and over again. Those who speak falsely in the Lord's name are eventually exposed for the religious hucksters they have become. They fall into disgrace and the examples are legion. God will not allow His name to be spoken in vain. God will not be manipulated for our purposes or bent to our will. He will not share His glory with another and woe to any man or woman who declares falsely a Word from the Lord! Woe to any man or woman who calls evil "good" and good "evil!" Woe to any man or woman who would subvert the Word of God and twist it to serve some other purpose! God is watching! He sits on His throne even now! He will expose what is done in secret! He will bring to light the sinful agendas of every human heart! Nothing is hidden from His sight!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 29-32

August 20, 2020
GOD'S PLAN FOR US

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 29-32](#)

“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11)

If only I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard this verse quoted at a graduation, wedding, seen it on a t-shirt or coffee mug. It has become cliche. A platitude we like to use to support the fulfillment of our dreams and desires. It’s why proof-texting is a dangerous business.

Jeremiah 29:11 is a verse embedded in a story. A tragic story. The story of Israel’s exile. They have lost their home. They have been forcibly removed. (Think Trail of Tears or something like it...) Their leaders have been tortured and put to death. All of their cultural icons - including the Temple of God itself - have been razed to the ground. In short, their collective identity as the people of God suffered a massive hit, leaving behind an emotional and spiritual crater that will not be easily filled. Especially not as they rebuild in a foreign land.

Think about the collective shock we’ve felt during this COVID season. Public health models predicting millions of deaths. Hospitals filling up. Cities on lockdown. A robust economy crashing to a halt. Businesses shuttered. Jobs lost. As the weeks turned to months, frustration reaches a boiling point. Then George Floyd is killed. Thousands of protests fill the streets. Peace gives way to violence as the sun set in many of our cities. Looting. Rioting. Burning. At times, it feels like society is on the verge of collapse. As bad as the last several months have been, imagine what would happen if groups like Antifa or the Proud Boys or some other extremist group had their way? Imagine anarchy breaking loose not just in a small autonomous zone in Seattle but across the country. Imagine what would happen if their rhetoric actually became reality? Our political and social leaders imprisoned, tortured, and killed. (After all, anything is justified in the fight against pure evil.) The systematic destruction of every monument we’ve ever built. Washington. Lincoln. Jefferson memorials all destroyed. Arlington. Mount Vernon. Monticello. All burned to the ground. Imagine them trying to erase “America” from the face of the earth. (It’s actually not all that hard is it?) This is what the Israelites experienced and as they begin to settle into captivity. Into slavery. Into their new lives as strangers and foreigners in a new land...they receive this letter from Jeremiah...

“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.” (Jeremiah 29:5-6) In essence, live your lives. Do what you’ve always done. Don’t spend your days looking back at where you’ve been but forward to the future.

“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7) Pray for your enemies. For those who destroyed your way of life. For those who killed your loved ones. Conquered your land. Burned your cities. Destroyed your nation. And don’t just pray. Actively seek to bless them. Bless their city. Bless their communities. Be salt and light in this new place.

“For thus says the Lord: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.” (Jeremiah 29:10) Settle in for the long haul.

This is not going to quick or easy. You will be in exile for generations. Your children and children's children will be born here. You may actually never return home yourselves.

It is only AFTER all these difficult things have been said that Jeremiah pens the words we love to quote so much, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." (Jeremiah 29:11-14)

Friends, the hard truth we don't like to think about very much is that God's plans for us often include exile. Suffering. Hardship. Pain. God uses things as tools to knock off the rough edges of our lives. To refine out all the impurity. To strain out all the sin. His "good" plans for us that give us a future and a hope include taking us through the fire so that we can be made pure and holy as He is pure and holy. Seeking God with all our hearts means trusting Him with the direction of our lives...even when that direction doesn't appear to be comfortable or safe. It means letting Him lead and guide us into dark valleys where all we have is His presence. It means trusting the Good Shepherd to eventually find us green pastures and still waters though the journey may be long and arduous to get from here to there. This is what Jeremiah is trying to communicate to his people as they start their heartbreakng, gut-wrenching exile in Babylon. God is with them. He has not forgotten them. He will eventually redeem them. This is their hope! This is their future! And though they themselves may not actually get there, they can trust God will bring their descendants home.

Readings for tomorrow; Jeremiah 33-37

August 21, 2020
THY WILL OR MY WILL?

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 33-37](#)

God's grace is truly amazing. No matter how bad things get. No matter how far we fall. No matter how fast we run. God is always quick to forgive. Quick to relent of the judgment our sin rightfully deserves. Jehoiakim is another in a long line of evil kings. Kings who reject the will of God. Kings who worship idols. Kings who seek their own glory and power instead of humbly serving God. Judgment is coming. Jeremiah has been sent to proclaim the impending doom. The sins of Israel are many and have piled up over the years, creating a mess God intends to use Babylon to clean up. It's going to be ugly. It's going to be tragic. It's going to be painful. Many will suffer. Many will die. All they hold dear will be destroyed as God's justice rolls down on the earth.

But even now at the eleventh hour, there is hope. God's mercy makes one last appearance. God commands Jeremiah to speak a word of grace to the nation. To speak words of life instead of death. He gives them one last chance to repent and turn from their wicked ways. "Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the disaster that I intend to do to them, so that every one may turn from his evil way, and that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin." (Jeremiah 36:2-3) Jeremiah obeys. He writes everything down on a scroll and gives it to his servant, Baruch, to proclaim. Baruch goes to the Lord's House and reads it in the presence of all who've gathered. Officials from the king's household hear the news and they ask Baruch to come and read the scroll to them. Eventually, the scroll makes its way into the king's presence for one final hearing. The tension builds. How will the king respond? Will he repent? Will he turn back to the Lord? Will he humble himself and bow the knee? Sadly, the answer is no. He takes out a knife and cuts the scroll to pieces as each line is read and then proceeds to burn it in his fire pit. His rejection of the Word of God is complete and final. So is his doom.

One cannot so easily dispose of God's Word. It has a power all its own. Coming from the Holy Spirit, it is eternal. Unquenchable. Unflammable. Unbreakable. The grass may wither and the flower may fade but the Word of God endures forever. (Isaiah 40:8) So again the Word comes to Jeremiah. Only this time, judgment has replaced grace. Justice has replaced mercy. God's wrath is about to be fully unveiled. "Thus says the Lord, You have burned this scroll, saying, "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and will cut off from it man and beast?" Therefore thus says the Lord concerning Jehoiakim king of Judah: He shall have none to sit on the throne of David, and his dead body shall be cast out to the heat by day and the frost by night. And I will punish him and his offspring and his servants for their iniquity. I will bring upon them and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem and upon the people of Judah all the disaster that I have pronounced against them, but they would not hear." (Jeremiah 36:29-31)

It is a serious matter to reject the Word of God. To disobey His commands. Whether by ignorance or by deliberate defiance, we rebel against God to our own peril. God takes our sin seriously. Far more seriously than we know. He is so holy. So righteous. So just. His nose cannot bear the stench of sin. His eyes will not behold the stain of sin. His presence will not endure even the appearance of sin. It must be dealt with. It must be done away with. A price must be paid. A sacrifice offered. It will either be us or it will be Christ. Either you receive Christ as your perfect sacrifice. Receive Christ as your perfect substitute. Receive Christ's atoning death on your behalf or you will bear the punishment yourself. You

will receive all the judgment and righteous anger of God. It will be eternal and unending because the depth of your sin and rebellion is eternal and unending.

I know this sounds harsh. I know this doesn't feel good. What about God's love? It is there! In Christ! One cannot separate Christ from the love of God for Christ Himself is the love of God! "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 John 4:10) God has provided a way for you to escape the coming judgment just as He provided a way for Jehoiakim to escape his coming judgment! Repentance! Faith! Accepting the perfect sacrifice God Himself has offered on your behalf! Do not reject the Word of God, friends! Receive Christ and live!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79

August 22, 2020
DISAPPOINTED WITH GOD

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 38-40, Psalms 74, 79](#)

Have you ever been disappointed with God? Ever feel like He let you down? Ever wonder how His plans for you could be good when so many bad things are taking place? Ever feel like the Psalmist from today's reading? "O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?...How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand? Take it from the fold of your garment and destroy them!" (Psalm 74:1, 10-11)

I imagine King Zedekiah and all his court must have felt like God was letting them down. The king hoped against all hope for an 11th hour rescue. He simply could not believe God would abandon His people. Abandon His city. Abandon His Temple. He fundamentally could not bring himself to believe things had gotten that bad. He knew his history. He could look back and tell you story after story about God relenting from disaster as the last possible moment. He heard every word from every sermon Jeremiah preached. But then he watches in horror as the Babylonians storm a breach in the wall. He tries to escape only to be captured and endure unbelievable trauma as his sons are executed in front of him. It is the last thing he will ever see as his eyes are the next things to go. He is then shackled in chains and carried off to exile. It's a tragic ending to a tragic story.

But we've seen this before, have we not? Is this not the human story? Our story? After Adam's fall, God raises up Seth only to watch as humanity descends into chaos. He raises up Noah and rescues him from the flood only to watch Noah's descendants rebel and build a tower to the heavens. He scatters them and then raises up Abraham only to watch his descendants end up in slavery in Egypt. God raises up Moses and delivers them from bondage. Brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey only to watch them forget Him and do what is right in their own eyes. So he raises up David. The man after God's own heart and sets him on the throne. But now David's descendants have followed the same path and ended up in the same place as those who've come before. In each case, I am confident the people of God believed God would never leave them or forsake them. I am confident they believed God would remain steadfast, loyal, and true. And I imagine they were incredibly disappointed when judgment came.

The reality is our disappointment with God is often grounded in entitlement. We make the mistake of taking God's grace for granted. We treat His commandments with disdain. We presume on the unconditional nature of His love. We fail to acknowledge the seriousness of our sin and refuse to take responsibility for the selfish choices we make. Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." Grace without cost. Love without sacrifice. Relationship without rules. Unfettered freedom which isn't really freedom at all. This is what Zedekiah believed that led to his destruction. This is what Israel believed that led to their destruction. And this is what far too many of us believe if we're honest.

Friends, we cannot blame God for the consequences of our sinful choices. We cannot blame God for our rebellion. I love how the late, great Gardner Taylor once put it, "It is the smallest, narrowest, cheapest religion which tries always to make God spiteful, vengeful, and every affliction the result of wrongdoing. Now, with a shudder, we must remember that our wrongdoing brings its own punishment, inner or outer. God does not have to do that!" The reality is that God has warned us over and over again what will happen should we choose to reject His ways. We cannot claim to love God and not follow His commands. The two always go together. Yes, we are saved by grace. Yes, Jesus loves us with an

everlasting, unconditional love. Yes, God's forgiveness is always within reach. But only for those who repent. Only for those who confess. Only for those who acknowledge their sin and who actively seek to turn from their self-centered ways. This is the truth of the gospel! Grace and demand hang together. Only those who believe obey and only those who obey believe. Or as the old hymn puts it, "Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus."

August 24, 2020
SPIRITUAL BLINDNESS

Readings for today: 2 Kings 24-25, 2 Chronicles 36:1-21, Jeremiah 52

The final days of the Kingdom of Judah and the end of Zedekiah always gets to me. It's a pretty gory picture. The King of Babylon captures him as he tries to escape. Makes him watch while he slaughters his sons and then puts out his eyes. It's that last detail that really makes think. Why does it appear so many times in these readings? Jeremiah mentions it twice in chapters 39 and 52. The historians mention it as well in 2 Kings 25. Perhaps it's just a painful reminder of how utterly broken Zedekiah had become before the judgment of the Lord.

As I ponder this little detail, I begin to wonder if there wasn't something more symbolic at work. After all, Zedekiah had been spiritually blind for years. He reigned for eleven years in Jerusalem but did evil in the sight of the Lord. He did not honor God. He did not walk in God's ways or according to God's commands. He disdained the Word of the Lord and rejected the worship of the Lord. So perhaps his physical blindness is simply the logical consequence for his spiritual blindness and that's why it's mentioned so many times?

I remember well my own spiritual blindness. I was raised in the church. My parents were faithful to take me to worship every Sunday. I sang in the choir. I hung out at youth group. By all outward appearances, I was incredibly engaged. However, my heart was hard. Selfish. Locked in sin. I was blinded by my own desires. My own fears. My own doubts. I could not see God. Could not hear God. Did not want to follow God. This was all exposed my freshman year of college. Once outside of the protective rhythms and accountability my parents set, I floundered. I was lost. I wandered aimlessly. I drank heavily. Skipped class. Avoided God. When confronted, I blamed others. I blamed my professors. I blamed my friends. I was so blind I could not see the wretch I'd become.

I think of the blindness of our society. How can we not see the connections between our rebellion against God and the injustices we struggle with in our world? How can we not draw the straight line from our moral relativity to the brokenness of abuse, alienation, oppression, pain, and heartache that has become so commonplace? Our foundations are built on sand. Our land is desecrated by our unbelief. We pay lip service to the notion that we are "one nation under God" but the reality is we left God behind decades ago. We desperately need a revival. A fresh movement of the Spirit to open eyes and hearts!

I remember when Jesus first opened my eyes. He confronted me on a sidewalk right outside the UMC on the campus of the University of Colorado. It was like I was seeing the world for the very first time. The light was blinding. The exposure painful. All my sins were laid bare before Him. There was no escape. I was overwhelmed by sorrow. Overwhelmed by grief. Overwhelmed by the depth of my sin. The road back to health was not easy. It was one tentative step after another. It required facing the consequences of my actions. The brokenness of my relationships. The anxiety of my failures. But Jesus was faithful. He was the light for my feet. The lamp for my path. Because my eyes had been opened, I could actually see the way He laid out for me.

I have no idea where you find yourself this morning. If you are blind or if you can see. Perhaps you are like Zedekiah or like I was prior to receiving Christ. Groping in the dark. Stumbling around in the shadows. Blinded by your desires. Fears. Doubts. Failures. I pray you come to Jesus! The One who specializes in restoring sight to the blind! Let Him open your eyes! Let Him show you His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 41-44

August 25, 2020
THE WAY OF DEATH

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 41-44](#)

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.” (Proverbs 14:12)

We have come to the end of the nation of Israel. There is nothing left. Everything is destroyed. The remnant scattered. God has executed His righteous judgment on His people. The testimony of the histories of the Old Testament clearly demonstrate how patient God is with His people. For generations, He called to them. Longing for their return. Longing for them to repent of their ways. Over and over again, He sent prophets to teach them. To show them the way home. Jeremiah is simply the latest in a long line of God’s messengers who end up being ignored.

Judah has been conquered. The Babylonians have set up a provisional government under the leadership of a man named Gedaliah. His charge is to pacify the territory in the name of Nebuchadnezzar and extend Babylonian influence and power over the region. Naturally this creates resistance. Bands of freedom fighters who seek to disrupt and perhaps even overthrow Babylonian rule. A man named Ishmael leads them and succeeds in assassinating Gedaliah along with many of his supporters. The body count is so high it fills a massive cistern built in defense of the city. Loyalists hear the news and raise their own forces. They pursue Ishmael and his followers, eventually catching them and defeating them.

Now comes the test. They ask Jeremiah what the Lord would have them do. The answer is clear. “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your plea for mercy before him: If you will remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I relent of the disaster that I did to you. Do not fear the king of Babylon, of whom you are afraid. Do not fear him, declares the Lord, for I am with you, to save you and to deliver you from his hand. I will grant you mercy, that he may have mercy on you and let you remain in your own land. But if you say, ‘We will not remain in this land,’ disobeying the voice of the Lord your God and saying, ‘No, we will go to the land of Egypt, where we shall not see war or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread, and we will dwell there,’ then hear the word of the Lord, O remnant of Judah. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: If you set your faces to enter Egypt and go to live there, then the sword that you fear shall overtake you there in the land of Egypt, and the famine of which you are afraid shall follow close after you to Egypt, and there you shall die. All the men who set their faces to go to Egypt to live there shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence. They shall have no remnant or survivor from the disaster that I will bring upon them.” (Jeremiah 42:9-17) Stay and I will keep you safe. Flee and I will see you destroyed. Place your faith in Me and I will not fail you. Place your trust in the kings of this earth and you will fall.

You and I face the same choice in our lives as well. Will we trust God or will we trust ourselves? Will we place our faith in Him or will we place our faith in our own ability? Our own resources? Our own social, economic, and political policies? Will we choose the way of life or the way of death? Jesus clearly says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Following Jesus means surrender. Submission. Relinquishment. It means seeking to serve rather than be served. It means losing our lives in order to find them. It is the way of self-denial not the way of self-indulgence. It involves great risk because it requires us to walk by faith not by sight. To place our lives and livelihoods in God’s hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

August 26, 2020
AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER?

Readings for today: Obadiah 1, Psalms 82-83

It's one of the oldest deflections in the Book. Am I my brother's keeper? Those words were first uttered by Cain when he was confronted by God over the murder of his brother Abel. Sarcastic. Dismissive. Heartbreaking. They reveal how far humanity had fallen even in those early years. We see such brotherly feuds throughout the Old Testament. Cain and Abel give way to Isaac and Ishmael who in turn give way to Jacob and Esau who in turn give way to Joseph and his brothers. Sadly, what begins as sibling rivalry ends in tribal warfare. Enmity lasting generations.

Obadiah is a short little book. Barely makes a blip on the radar screen. And yet, the prophet declares God's judgment over Edom. Edom, for those keeping score at home, is the tribal nation founded by Esau. They are his descendants and essentially cousins to Israel. As such, one would expect them to defend and support their family over and against the nations that came against them. Though it has been centuries since Jacob and Esau reconciled and then went their separate ways, God has not forgotten their family ties. Tragically, Edom abandons their filial responsibilities and instead joins Israel's enemies. They take advantage of the chaos to press their own advantage and thereby fall under God's judgment.

"Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; do not boast in the day of distress. Do not enter the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; do not gloat over his disaster in the day of his calamity; do not loot his wealth in the day of his calamity. Do not stand at the crossroads to cut off his fugitives; do not hand over his survivors in the day of distress." (Obadiah 1:10-14)

I cannot help but think of the current state of our nation. Brother is divided against brother. Sister against sister. Republican against Democrat. Black vs. white vs. brown. Rich vs. poor. Hetero vs. LGBTQ. Identity politics is literally killing us. No longer tolerant of difference, we consider those who oppose us to be evil. Beyond redemption. Worthy only of scorn. We pursue scorched-earth political policy where the goal is to deny the other side any semblance of victory. The results are tragic. Our nation continues to descend into chaos. Truth is sacrificed on the altar of power. Compassion is long forgotten. Grace and forgiveness are no longer part of our national vocabulary. We are fools if we think we can escape the judgment of God.

Am I my brother's keeper? Am I my sister's keeper? When fellow Americans tell story after story of injustice, how do I respond? When law enforcement officers put their lives on the line over and over again, how do I treat them? When I meet those of a different political persuasion, how do I react? Am I truly advocating and working towards a more perfect union? Or am I seeking to gain the upper hand over my so-called enemies? How willing am I to utilize the tools of oppression to achieve my own personal political ends? These are critical questions for Christians as we head into the fall and what promises to be an absolutely brutal, no holds barred election season. How will we answer God's ancient question? Will we be our brother or sister's keeper regardless of their ethnicity, socio-economic status, or political party? Will we truly be one nation under God?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 45-48

August 27, 2020
BLESSED?

Readings for today: Jeremiah 45-48

Sometimes I wonder if God really is all that interested in my life. Of all the billions of people who live and have lived on this earth, how in the world does God have time for me? I'm not all that important. I'm not all that significant. My life is pretty mundane as a general rule. I get up. Brush my teeth. Take a shower. Go to work. Come home. Eat dinner. Watch some Netflix or read a good book. God has a cosmos to run. He has a universe to rule. He's got nations to raise up and take down. Why in the world would He take an interest in me?

Then I read this Word today for Baruch in Jeremiah 45. In the middle of one of the major prophetic books of the Bible which details the future empires and nations, God takes time out to address Baruch. Jeremiah's scribe. His secretary. A man who barely makes a blip on the radar screen. We don't know much about Baruch other than he was devoted to Jeremiah. He served as his scribe. His disciple. His faithful friend. He sticks with Jeremiah through thick and thin. Through all the ups and downs. He must have loved Jeremiah very much to share in his sufferings. According to Josephus, an ancient Jewish historian, Baruch was a member of the Jewish aristocracy. A chamberlain in King Zedekiah's court. He was clearly a courageous man as he often acted as Jeremiah's messenger and mouthpiece. He risked all kinds of danger to make known the Word of God. And God recognized his efforts.

"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, to you, O Baruch: You said, 'Woe is me! For the Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest.' Thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord: Behold, what I have built I am breaking down, and what I have planted I am plucking up—that is, the whole land. And do you seek great things for yourself? Seek them not, for behold, I am bringing disaster upon all flesh, declares the Lord. But I will give you your life as a prize of war in all places to which you may go." (Jeremiah 45:2-5) Baruch clearly went through times of depression. Times of deep discouragement. I am sure he despaired as he looked around at what was happening to his country. But God was faithful. He let Baruch know how and why these things would come to pass but also promised to preserve his life. No matter where Baruch went, God would be with him. He would protect him and provide for him. He would be blessed. (By the way, Baruch literally means "blessed" in Hebrew.)

What about you? How are you feeling as you survey the landscape of our nation today? What emotions rise up in your heart as you watch the news or scroll through social media? How has the ongoing pandemic, economic turmoil, struggle for ethnic justice, and social unrest impacted you? Have you found yourself like Baruch crying out to God saying, "Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain. I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest." I know I've been battling my own feelings of despair as I consider the mountain of gospel work that must be done in my own life. In my church family. In my community. In our nation. Around the world. It is daunting to say the least! I believe God is breaking down what He has built and plucking up what He has planted in order to draw the world to Himself. In the midst of all that is happening, do I trust God to be faithful? To protect and preserve my life for as long as He wills? Do I trust God to be with me as we walk through this valley of the shadow of death? Do I see myself as blessed? Am I willing to put the work in to be a blessing even if that means confronting the powers and principalities of our own world just as Baruch confronted the powers and principalities in his?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 49-50

August 28, 2020
THE NATIONS RAGE...

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 49-50](#)

Exile from the Garden. Death in the Great Flood. Confusion at the Tower of Babel. Plagues in Egypt. Conquest of Canaan. What do all these biblical events have in common? God's perpetual war against evil. God has made it clear from the beginning of time that He will not allow humanity to persist in sin. Just as He did not allow Adam and Eve to stretch out their hand and eat of the Tree of Life in the Garden after their sin, so He will not allow us to go on living in idolatry. God hates sin. He hates the idolatry of our hearts. He hates unrighteousness. He hates evil.

Now I want to be very clear here. Just because God hates sin DOES NOT mean He hates sinners. Just because God hates idolatry DOES NOT mean He hates those who make the idols. God loves the world. God loves His creation. God loves those made in His image. And because His love is fierce and loyal and steadfast and true, He hates what sin does to us. He hates how it corrupts us. He hates how it breaks us. He hates how dehumanizes us. In this way, God's "hatred" is strangely comforting. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would die on a cross for me. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He would send His Spirit to indwell me and sanctify me from within. It is strangely comforting to know God hates my sin so much He gives me the opportunity to repent and return to Him an almost infinite number of times. And what is true for me is also true for entire communities. Cities. Nations.

God sets out to destroy the Ammonites. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But the section ends with a strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of the Ammonites. God sets out to destroy Elam. To punish them for their sin. The discipline of God is harsh and brutal and terrifying. But again, there is this strange promise. God will restore the fortunes of Elam.

God set out to destroy His own people. The nation of Israel in both its northern and southern kingdoms. "Israel is a hunted sheep driven away by lions. First the king of Assyria devoured him, and now at last Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has gnawed his bones." (Jeremiah 50:17) He punished them for their sin. The discipline of God was harsh and brutal and terrifying. But now the tables turn. The very instruments God used to bring about His discipline now come under His judgment. Where is the might of Assyria? What happened to her? Her meteoric rise in human history was matched by her sudden fall. The same is true for Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was the mightiest ruler of his time but his empire would not last. Why? Because he did not just battle with Israel. He went to war with God Himself.

Psalm 2:1-6 says, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." No one can resist God's power. No one can match His might. It is God who holds the fate of the nations in His hands. God who directs their paths. God who sets their courses. It is God who causes them to rise and fall according to His will and His plan. No one escapes God's judgment. No one can hide from His sight. No one can run from His presence. God is on the march! He will not rest until the whole earth is cleansed. He will not relent until the whole earth repents and turns to Him. He will not let up until sin and evil is utterly defeated and destroyed.

Friends, what was true for the Ammonites and the Edomites and the Elamites. What was true for great city-states like Damascus or tribal nations like Kedar and Hazar. What was true for world empires like Babylon will also be true for us. God still sits enthroned on high. God still reigns over every square inch of the earth. God still rules the nations of the earth. He is at work even now bringing about His justice and righteousness. He is fighting to end racism in our nation. He is fighting to end economic injustice in our nation. He is fighting to end to reform systems and structures so they better represent His sovereign will and plan. He is fighting in every human heart to put an end to fear. An end to rage. An end to hate. Of course we fight Him for every square inch of territory. We riot. We loot. We hurt. We kill. We resist. We refuse to bend the knee. God only increases the pressure. His hand grows even more heavy upon us. He will not relent until He has it all. Every heart. Every home. Every church. Every business. Every political system. Every governing structure. He will never stop until our nation finally bends her knee to Him again.

So how should we respond? Humility. Confession. Repentance. Joy. For this same God has promised to make all things new If we will but submit to Him. He has promised one day to wipe away all our tears. Eliminate all pain and suffering. Gather His children to Himself in glory to live forever safe and secure in His loving arms. Turn to God, friends. Suffer under His discipline no longer. Pray for our nation! Pray for God's Spirit to cleanse us and sanctify us and give us a heart that beats for Jesus alone. Amen?

Readings for tomorrow: Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137

August 29, 2020
SEEING PAST THE PRESENT TO GOD'S FUTURE

Readings for today: [Jeremiah 51, Psalms 137](#)

Preachers often talk about “calling.” We talk about discerning God’s call. Hearing God’s call. Responding to God’s call. We believe we are different. Set apart. Anointed in a special way to serve a specific purpose in God’s Kingdom. (By the way, I actually believe this is true for every Christian not just preachers.) However, underneath the sacred language we use is often a false assumption. The false assumption is that if we remain faithful to God’s call on our lives, we will be rewarded. We will lead fruitful ministries. Lead many to Christ. Transform entire communities in the name of Jesus. Yes, we expect there to be challenges along the way but none that are insurmountable. We have this hidden expectation that we will be financially taken care of and the churches we lead will grow. This is why so many pastors burn out after a few years. The reality of the work simply doesn’t measure up the expectations we hold so dear in our hearts.

This is why I love Jeremiah so much. His calling is traumatic. He’s called to lead God’s people during a time when they are at their most rebellious. He is called to speak God’s Word at a time when they are deaf to the divine. He is called to do ministry in a time when everything is falling apart. God is plucking up. God is tearing down. God is scattering His people all over the earth. Jeremiah will never lead a large church. Never see the fruits of his ministry. Never know the comfort of a beautiful building or flush bank account. His retirement will take place in exile. He will be ignored. Mocked. Spit on. Thrown into a pit. Dragged all over the place against his will. I can’t even begin to imagine the pain and hardships he had to endure.

And yet, Jeremiah never takes his eyes off of God. Never takes his eyes off of the coming of God’s Kingdom. Despite the chaos and destruction and violence and suffering he sees all around him, he is able to look beyond it to a time when God will have the final word. “The word that Jeremiah the prophet commanded Seraiah the son of Neriah, son of Mahseiah, when he went with Zedekiah king of Judah to Babylon, in the fourth year of his reign. Seraiah was the quartermaster. Jeremiah wrote in a book all the disaster that should come upon Babylon, all these words that are written concerning Babylon. And Jeremiah said to Seraiah: “When you come to Babylon, see that you read all these words, and say, ‘O Lord, you have said concerning this place that you will cut it off, so that nothing shall dwell in it, neither man nor beast, and it shall be desolate forever.’ When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, ‘Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted.’” Thus far are the words of Jeremiah.” (Jeremiah 51:59-64) What an act of faith! Jeremiah takes all the words God has given him to preach. Writes them down in a book. Hands it to Seraiah to take to Babylon. Tells him to read it to the exiles once they arrive and then throw it in the river. It’s like the ultimate mic drop!

Friends, we are living through incredibly difficult times. The world around us is on fire. God is plucking up what’s been planted. Tearing down what’s been built. Scattering all that we’ve tried to gather for hundreds of years. He is exposing the underbelly of our sin. The things we’ve tried to keep hidden all this time is now coming to light. The hatred in our hearts is on full display. The anger and outrage is spilling over from social media into our streets. The lack of moral leadership is obvious. We have sown the wind. Now we are reaping the whirlwind. What is our calling as the people of God in a time like this? To see past the present into the future God has secured for those who love Him. Friends, we must never believe there are circumstances or conditions that lie outside God’s authority or control. God will bring order to our chaos. God will build up what we tear down. God will plant where we have plucked up. God will repair what we have broken. God is able and those who place their trust in Him will be “more than conquerors through Christ who loved us.” Amen?

August 31, 2020
LAMENT

Readings for today: Lamentations 1-3:36

As a general rule, we do not like grief. We try to avoid the experience of loss. We are afraid of embracing our pain. Lament does not come naturally to us. As a pastor, I see it all the time. Someone we love passes away but we tell people we're fine. Someone we care about breaks up with us and we tell people we've moved on. A relationship breaks down and we tell people we're better off. It's all a lie, of course. We are hurting. Heartbroken. Suffering in silence. We go home at night to an empty house or climb into an empty bed and the tears start to flow. Memories get triggered sometimes quite unexpectedly and the grief hits us yet again like a ton of bricks. Special days like birthdays or anniversaries come and go and our hearts ache for the one we loved and lost.

This is true for communities as well. I think about the collective grief of our nation in the midst of this COVID season. Our collective grief as we've watched videos of African-Americans being unjustly murdered. Our collective grief as we see police officers get injured in the line of duty trying to protect property and people in the face of riots. Life is hard. Pain is real. And the mature believer in Jesus Christ is not afraid to embrace lament as a regular spiritual discipline. Crying out to God is a good thing. Expressing to God our deepest emotions is a good thing. Telling God our fears and failures and heartaches is a good thing.

Traditionally, Jeremiah is considered to be the author of Lamentations. The angst he feels as he watches the destruction of his city cannot be overstated. The grief must have been overwhelming. Furthermore, Jeremiah clearly considers the destruction of Jerusalem to be at the hand of God. His righteous act of judgment on His people for their sin. The words he uses to describe what God has done are terrifying. The Lord has "cast down from heaven to earth", "swallowed up without mercy", "cut down in fierce anger", "poured out His fury like fire", "laid waste", "scorned", "disowned", and "determined to lay in ruins." God is relentless. He will not rest until there's nothing left. His judgment is complete and final. And what is Jeremiah's response? Lament. And what does lament look and feel and sound like? "My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out to the ground because of the destruction of the daughter of my people, because infants and babies faint in the streets of the city...Arise, cry out in the night, at the beginning of the night watches! Pour out your heart like water before the presence of the Lord! Lift your hands to him for the lives of your children, who faint for hunger at the head of every street." (Lamentations 2:11, 19) It is almost too painful to read. In fact, I bet most American Christians have never read Lamentations for this very reason.

But pain is the reality of our existence. There is no escaping it. The more we try, the worse things get. The more we avoid, the worse we feel. We are so wrapped up in always "feeling good" that we lose touch with reality. We believe it is our inalienable right to be happy. All the time. But perpetual happiness is a fantasy. An illusion. Life is full of discomfort and pain. Life is full of heartache and heartbreak. Life is full of disappointment and failure. One cannot truly live and love without experiencing these things. This is why a healthy theology or system of belief must include lament. Your faith in God must be big enough to handle disappointment and failure and existential pain. This is the lesson God wants us to take away from Lamentations. From the prophet Jeremiah's example. In the midst of all he suffers. In the midst of all he sees his people suffer. He still holds onto faith...

"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." (Lamentations 3:21-26)

Readings for tomorrow: Lamentations 3:37-5:22