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Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

December 29, 2020 SECOND ADVENT
Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

December 30, 2020 SEALED. SAVED. SENT.
Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

December 31, 2020 NEW HEAVENS. NEW EARTH. NEW LIFE.
Readings for today: Revelation 11-22

January 6, 2020

CREATION

Readings for today: Genesis 1-2

”In the beginning God…” Before God does. God is. Before God speaks. God is. Before God acts. God is. God is the fundamental reality of all existence. The universe and all that is in it are contingent realities. They are temporal realities. They have a beginning and they will have an end. Not so with God. He is. He was. He will be. I am reminded of how God reveals Himself to Moses in the burning bush. He says, “I AM who I AM.” A statement which in English can be rendered a number of different ways including “I WILL BE who I WILL BE.” It signifies the timelessness of God. The eternity of God. God is the one constant in the universe. The true North Star. The firm foundation on which all of reality rests.

Remarkably, God creates. God creates everything in heaven and earth. He dumps it all out on the floor of his workshop where it lies formless and void. Darkness on the face of the deep. The waters of chaos swirling and churning while the Spirit hovers over everything. Then God speaks. Interestingly enough, J.R.R. Tolkien (author of the Lord of the Rings trilogy) imagined God singing at this point. Singing light into darkness. Singing matter into being. Singing life out of lifelessness. The song of creation crescendos with the creation of human beings. Creatures made in God’s own image. Bearing His own likeness. Male and female together.

God blesses all He has made. Declares it good and righteous and pure. God has brought order to chaos. He has created a home to live in. A Temple to dwell in. And then He turns to humanity. Ordains them as priests and priestesses over all He has made. They are to be fruitful. Multiply. Bear His image over all the earth. They are to care and cultivate all He has made. They are to exercise dominion. Responsibility. They have the authority to reign and to rule in His name. It’s a truly astounding picture. The grandeur and scope of all God has done takes our breath away.

This is the vision of God from the beginning and it’s critical not to lose sight of it as we move forward from here. This was God’s plan. This was God’s design. This is what God is working towards even today. He wants to reclaim that which was lost. He wants to restore that which was broken. He wants to redeem that which was lost. And God is eternally consistent. Just as He entrusted His creation into our hands at the beginning, so that call continues to this day. He will not allow us to abdicate our responsibility. He will not allow us to relinquish our high priestly role. Christ is our forerunner. He serves as the Second Adam. The Faithful Adam. Adam as he should have been. And those who are found to be in Christ also become priests. Revelation 20:6 says, “They will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.”

Friends, this our eternal destiny! But it’s not something that begins the moment we cross from this world to the next. It actually begins the moment we receive Christ. As soon as we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we become Temples of the Holy Spirit. God sanctifying us from within so that we may fulfill our high calling to serve as His priests to the world. What does this mean for our lives? It means everything we do comes weighted with glory. Freighted with meaning and purpose. There is nothing mundane about your life. No interaction that is insignificant. For you are a high priest of the Living God! An image-bearer of the King of kings! Called forth into the world to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: John 1:1-3, Psalms 8 and 104

January 7, 2020

CHRIST OUR CREATOR

Readings for today: John 1:1-3; Psalm 8' Psalm 104

”In the beginning was the Word…” Before God does. Jesus is. Before God speaks. Jesus is. Before God acts. Jesus is. Jesus is the fundamental reality of our existence. He is the Word. The Divine Logos. The Word that is God. The Word that was God. The Word that was with God in the beginning. He is the firstborn over all creation. Pre-eminent over all God has made. Through Him all things came into being. Nothing was made that has been made except through Jesus. The universe and all that is in it are contingent realities. Jesus is eternal. The world with all of its fullness is temporary. It has beginning and will have an end. Jesus is the Alpha and Omega. The beginning and the end. The first and the last. He is the great I AM.

Why jump to John after reading Genesis 1 and 2? Because the apostle is deliberately evoking the creation narrative. He wants us to understand Jesus is not just the Son of God…He is God. He didn’t come into being at His birth but rather became one of us. The eternal entering the temporal. Immortal becoming mortal. Imperishable, perishable. Jesus exists from eternity in perfect communion with the Father and the Spirit. One God. Three Persons. Forevermore. Jesus is not a created being. He is the Creator. Jesus is not a human being. But a being in which both human and divine natures come together. Jesus is not just an enlightened teacher. Not just an extraordinarily good person. Not just a miracle worker. He is God incarnate. As such, He was present when all things came into being and an active participant with the Father and Spirit in creation.

This is the heart of the Christian faith. If we don’t have a right understanding of Christ, we cannot worship God for who He is. If we don’t have a right understanding of Christ, we cannot know God. If we don’t have a right understanding of Christ, we will remake God in our own image. Reduce Him down to our size. Attempt to manipulate or control Him. Belittle Him. Ignore Him. Forsake Him. If Jesus is not God then there is no Christian faith and we’re all just making it up as we go along. We are among men to be most pitied as the Apostle Paul will later say.

Friends, to have a relationship with Christ is to have a relationship with the Creator of the universe Himself. To know Christ is to know God in all His fullness. Christ is the image of God. In Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. There is no God beyond Christ. No God behind Christ. No God outside of Christ. All other gods are idols. All other conceptions of god are false. All other ideas about god are foolish. Everything we can say about God, we can say about Christ. Everything we will learn about God as we read the Old and New Testaments, we can attribute to Christ. He is the Word of God. He is with God. He is God! And so we sing with the Psalmist, “O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, Who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens!” (Psalms 8:1)

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 3-5

January 8, 2020

THE FALL OF HUMANITY

Readings for today: Genesis 3-5

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? It's an important question. A close reading of Scripture reveals several things. First and foremost is the ability to procreate. Not just biologically but relationally and creatively. The first command God gives us is to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. This is the creation mandate given to humanity. Second, dominion. What separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom is that we are given responsibility. The authority to rule over all God has made. And we are called to exercise this call in God's name and for God's glory. Thirdly, it means community. It is not good for man to be alone. We don't do well when we are isolated from one another. So we get married. We build friendships. We have a longing deep inside our hearts to connect with other human beings in a deep way. Fourth, we are endowed with a free will. We are given real choices to exercise in our lives and because those choices are real, they come with real consequences. Good, bad, or otherwise. God created us in order to have a relationship with us. But in order for relationships to be real, they must be chosen. No one can force you to love. Love must be freely given.

So God creates Adam and Eve in perfection. He places them in a beautiful Garden where they will work and live and begin to exercise the call He has placed on their lives. Who knows how long they lived in paradise? Who knows how long they walked with God in the cool of the day? But God also had to take a risk. In order to have the relationship He desired with humanity, He had to give them a choice. They must be free to choose love or else it's not love at all. So He plants a tree in the Garden. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree represents a test for Adam and Eve. Will they love God or will they love Self? Will they choose God or will they choose Self? Tragically, they choose Self and the result is a cascading series of events as they, and the world they were given responsibility for, descend into violence, chaos and ruin.

The first thing that happens is they die spiritually. Their souls literally wither inside. Their hearts grow cold and hard. Their desires become disordered. Their wills become enslaved. Their thoughts are reoriented around themselves. As a result they feel shame. They feel fear. They feel pain. They feel anger and rage. They are disconnected from God. From one another. From the creation they were given charge over. Now the very ground will fight them. They will fight each other. And they will fight the very God who created them in the first place. Furthermore, their decision impacts their descendants as their sinful condition is passed down biologically to each successive generation. So Cain kills Abel and lives the rest of his life in fear. Tubal-Cain creates instruments of bronze and iron for war. Lamech kills a man for insulting him. Humanity descending further and further into evil and violence and hate. This is what's wrong with us. This is what's wrong with the world. This is the Bible's diagnosis of humanity's condition.

Psalms 51 declares that we are born into sin. Conceived in iniquity. All of us are corrupted. None of us escape. There is no such thing as an "innocent" human being. There is no such thing as a "pure" human being. We all rightfully deserve an eternity apart from God. An eternity east of Eden. An eternity of exile and separation and isolation and pain. And this is not some arbitrary or capricious judgment by God but the result of the very real, sinful choices we all make on a daily basis. We are

responsible for our own condition. We are suffering the consequences of the choices we've made. And the only hope we have is God's mercy and grace. His passion to pursue us despite our rebellion. His willingness to lay down His own life in order save us from our sin. Without God, we are lost. Without God, we are helpless. Without God, we are dead in our trespasses and sin. Completely unable and unwilling to fulfill the purpose for which we were created.

This is why we call what happened the "Fall." It was a fall from grace. A fall from glory. We "fell" out of love with God. Out of love for each other. Out of love for the world. And what we see happening around the world today is simply the ripple effect of that first tragic decision.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 6-7

January 9, 2020

THE CANCER OF SIN

Readings for today: Genesis 6-7

"What about the half-demon dudes?" I was in a small group men's Bible study in college when I first heard about the Nephilim. I had never read Genesis 6 before and was completely confused. Who were the sons of God? Who were the daughters of men? Were we simply talking about the contrast between the descendants of Seth and the descendents of Cain? Is this the first injunction against intermarriage between the godly and ungodly that we see so often repeated in the rest of the Old Testament? Could it even be an oblique reference to Homo Sapiens intermarrying with Homo Neanderthalus? Or is there something more going on? Why were their offspring so special? Mighty men of old? Men of renown? The word "Nephilim" literally means "giants" so these folks were potentially a different breed than the rest of humanity. Could this perhaps be the origin of the myths and legends we see in so many cultures of half-human, half-divine heroes running around? An embellishment on stories passed down through the generations from the pre-Flood time period?

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 8-9, Psalms 12

January 10, 2020

COVENANT RENEWAL

Readings for today: Genesis 8-9; Psalm12

God is faithful. Human beings are unfaithful. God is good. Human beings are evil. Evil being defined as "self-centeredness" instead of God-centeredness. God is holy. Human beings are corrupt. Over and over again, we will see this dynamic played out throughout the Bible. It's critical to keep this fundamental understanding clear in our minds. Human beings are not innocent. Human beings are not sinless. Human beings are not good people who make occasional bad decisions. We are cosmic criminals who deserve the death penalty for our many, many crimes against our Maker. God, on the other hand, is not like us. He is not arbitrary or capricious. He does not act on a whim or lash out in a rage. He is always consistent. Unchanging. Eternal. As such, He does not answer to us. He does not hold Himself accountable to our standards. His ways are higher than our ways. His thoughts higher than our thoughts. He is the Creator of the universe and is beyond any flawed human conceptions of justice, righteousness, or fairness.

How else can we understand the Great Flood? The deluge that caused the death of every living thing outside the ark? An act of "uncreation" as God hits the reset button. Imagine Noah walking off the ark for the first time. What did he see? An earth that had become "formless and void" again. An earth that was desolate and ruined. Nothing alive. Nothing but rot and ruin. Nothing like the Garden where Adam and Eve first dwelt. But God isn't finished. Creation will be renewed. The creation mandate is restored. God will re-create but it will be in and through His image-bearers. His priests and priestesses. The people made in His image who are once again commanded to be "fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth" with the glory of the Creator. He once again gives them dominion over all He has made. He once again sends them out to cultivate and care for creation. He once again promises to establish His covenant with them and their offspring forever.

"And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it." "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth." God said to Noah, "This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth." (Genesis 9:1-3, 6-7, 9, 12-17)

This is an astonishing decision by God. To entrust His creation to a creature He knows is untrustworthy. To hand the world He loves so much into the hands of a creature who is self-centered and self-serving.

To give this creature a second chance to fulfill the calling for which they were created, all the while knowing they will fail. Most of all, God binds Himself to this creature in relationship. Establishes His covenant with this creature for all eternity. He commits Himself to this creature and in so doing, freely and willingly opens Himself up to a world of pain and disappointment and heartbreak. Such grace! Such love! Such compassion! Our God is a God of steadfast love and faithfulness. His mercies are new every single morning. His loyalty never ends. His zeal for us never changes. His pursuit of us is relentless. He will never let us go.

You and I are just like Noah. If I had been on that ark and watched the world be destroyed, I can pretty much guarantee the first thing I'd do is plant a vineyard and drink myself into oblivion! If my son "uncovered my nakedness" (an ancient near east euphemism for rape and one of the many horrific ways men demonstrated their power over one another in ancient cultures), I'd wake up cursing as well! We simply cannot escape ourselves. Man's inhumanity towards man knows no bounds. We all know this is true. We see it on display ever single day. From the hatred and rage on Twitter to the racism of white supremacy to our fascination with guns and violence to the terrible, inhumane treatment of immigrants and refugees to the rapacious greed that causes us to exploit not only the earth but one another. Humanity is a brutal species. Her divine calling gone horribly wrong. The exercise of her dominion becoming tyrannical as sin has its way. The only hope we have is God. The only antidote to our condition is Christ. The only way to break free from our bondage to sin is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God for His salvation! Thanks be to God for Christ who is the "ark of our salvation!"

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 10-11

January 11, 2020

TOWER OF BABEL

Readings for today: Genesis 10-11

"I don't understand." If only I had a dollar for every time I've heard that phrase come out of one of my child's mouths. Usually it's a response generated by a request from either myself or their mother for them to do something. Homework. Chores. Dishes. Taking out the trash. We ask them to sit down and finish their work. We ask them to put aside their devices so they can focus. We ask them to work first so they can play later. They resist us, of course. They want to do what they want to do. They want their own way. They want to be in control of their own lives. They struggle to submit to any kind of authority be it their parents or their teachers at school. However, they are smart enough to know they can't just refuse so they tell us they "don't understand." It's a crafty play, I'll give them that! But as we gently but firmly ask questions to tease out what they mean we tend to almost always land on the fact that they just don't want to do what we're asking them to do. Any parents out there want to give me an "Amen?" ;-)

It's the first thing I think about when I read the Tower of Babel story. I can almost hear humanity drawing in a collective breath and saying to God, "I don't understand." What do you mean you want us to "be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth?" What do you mean you want us to "exercise dominion over all you have made?" What do you mean you want us to bear your image into all creation? What do you mean, God? Why can't we simply stay together? Stay safe? Stay comfortable? Don't you value family, God? Isn't family our "first ministry?" Think of all the things we can do for you right here, God! We all speak the same language. We know each other really well. Look, we can even build a tower to the heavens!

It's not about understanding, of course, it's about obedience. My children don't need to always understand why I ask them to do the things I ask them to do though I do try to give them as much information as possible. Humanity doesn't always need to understand why God commands us to fulfill the creation mandate. We simply need to obey. I am quite sure the descendants of Noah were suffering from deep-seated, historical trauma. Their entire world had been destroyed in a great flood. The echoes of that terrifying natural disaster would have rippled out across the generations. No wonder they wanted to stay together! No wonder they wanted to build a tower that stretched to the heavens! It would serve as a fixed point on the horizon of their lives. It would help them feel safe. Secure. No matter how far away they got, they could always look back and see the tower they had built. Not only that but it boosted their collective self-esteem. Their collective self-image. Their collective self-confidence. They were not at the mercy of their elements! They were not at the mercy of the natural world! They had shaped and formed a tower so immense it would rise above any future flood that may come. It would protect them. It would serve as a place of refuge in case something terrible happened.

Friends, this is our fundamental problem. We want to trust in ourselves rather than God. We want to do things our way rather than God's way. We want to be in control. But God demands obedience. Not because He is capricious or arbitrary or mean but because He has a plan. He has a purpose. He has a design for our lives and He knows we will find our greatest joy, our greatest hope, our greatest peace in serving Him. "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. Exercise dominion over all I have made. Bear

my image into all of creation." This is the mandate given to humanity and every time we resist it. Every time we push back against it. Every time we refuse to obey, there will be judgment. Not because God delights in punishing us but because God has entrusted us with great authority and great responsibility to be His priests and priestesses over all the earth. You are more powerful than you can ever imagine. You have more influence than you can ever know. If you are a Christian, you are God's Temple. God's Spirit lives inside you. And now He sends you out to bring His glory to the world.

Readings for tomorrow: None. Enjoy worship with your church family!

January 13, 2020

CALLING

Readings for today: Genesis 12-13

“Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3)

A lot of Christians believe God has placed a “call” on their life. Most of the time what we mean by that is that God has a plan for us. A good plan. A hopeful plan. A plan that involves blessing. In the American church today, God’s “call” is always positive. It is closely aligned to worldly success. Leading a growing church. Getting that promotion at work. Making more money. Becoming an influencer. Making a greater impact. Personally, it means remaining healthy. Building a healthy marriage. Launching our children into life successfully and well. Very few people I meet believe God “calls” them into hardship. Suffering. Difficulty. Uncertainty. Pain.

Because the “health and wealth” gospel has so ingrained itself into our consciousness, it’s challenging for us to put ourselves in Abram’s shoes. We tend to read his life backwards to forwards. We look at where he ended his life. A child of his own. Incredible wealth, power, and a good reputation. A promise from God that from him would come a great nation. We make some false assumptions. We assume everything Abram touched turned to gold. We assume following the call of God was easy. We assume Abram was faithful and therefore never suffered or struggled or wrestled with doubts and fears. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Acts 7 tells us that Abram first received his call from God while living in Ur. God told him to take his family and “go to the land I will show you…” This would present a number of problems right at the start. First and foremost, Abram is not the leader of his clan. His father is still alive so Terah would need to sign off on the move. Second, they would be intentionally leaving all their family and tribal and social connections behind. Businesses were not portable. Skills were not necessarily transferable. They would literally risk their lives to start over in a new community where they knew no one. Third, it meant saying goodbye to friends and family forever. People you love whom you would never see again. Fourth, they were moving sight unseen. They didn’t know where the journey would take them. They had no idea what life would look like in the land where they were going. They didn’t know what they would find there. They only knew God was calling them so they went.

It’s a remarkable step of faith. And though the Bible doesn’t tell us much, we know they suffered along the way. Abram’s brother, Haran, died in Ur before the journey even got started. His father Terah died while they lived in Haran. Once they arrived in the Promised Land, they were immediately met with a life-threatening famine. They went to Egypt where Abram’s wife was essentially “trafficked” into Pharaoh’s harem. Upon their return to the Promised Land, conflict flares up between his servants and Lot’s servants forcing them to separate. Lot choosing the better, more fertile land on which to graze his herds and build his wealth. Throughout this time, of course, Abram and Sarai continue their struggle with infertility. As painful as that struggle is today, it was much, much worse in ancient times

where the future of one's family rests on the ability to produce heirs. All of this is part of the "call" God put on Abram's life.

This presses an important question for all of us. What is God's call on our life? Do we even think in those categories? Is it possible for God's call to include suffering, hardship, failure? How would you respond if God called you like Abram and Sarai to a journey involving uncertainty, fear, and anxiety? Would you walk by faith like they did?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 14-16

January 14, 2020

THE PROMISE OF GOD

Readings for the day: Genesis 14, 15, 16

A few years ago, I went to Ethiopia. The day we arrived marked the end of several days of unrest. Conflict. Protests that often grew violent. Our Ethiopian partners were visibly uncomfortable taking us to Gojo where we were to conduct our church planter training and medical clinic. They wanted to make sure we stayed safe. We eventually loaded up the Land Rovers and headed out on our four hour plus trip. As we traveled, we passed right through where the riots had been just a day or two before. Large rocks littered the road. Burned out vehicles had yet to be cleared. A large semi-truck had been set on fire and flipped over. And while we were never in any real danger, we were reminded of the political realities on the ground in this country we love so much.

The conflict in Ethiopia is tribal just like the conflict in Abram's day was tribal. All these different kings led different tribes and they often fought as they sought to expand their power and influence. If one lived in those days, one might have been tempted to believe this is where the real action was taking place. The kings of Shinar, Ellasar, Elam, and Goiim making war with the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela. One might be tempted to think something significant rested on the outcome of their battle. But the Bible almost treats their conflict as an afterthought. Reading the passage, one gets the sense that the only reason this story is included at all is because Lot got caught up in it, forcing Abram into action. You see, the real action in these chapters has nothing to do with kings (even Melchizedek) and tribes and nations and their power struggles. No, the real action. The real drama. The real conflict involves an old man and his barren wife and their struggle to have children. It has to do with God and His promise to Abram and Sarai that they would have a son to carry on their family name. The real struggle is God telling Abram to look up into the heavens and number the stars of the sky, for so shall his offspring be.

And what is Abram's response? Faith. He believes. Even crazier than taking 318 men and defeating four kings as they returned victorious from battle is old, childless Abram looking up into the night sky and believing God's promise. That's why God declares him righteous. Because of his faith. And what is faith? The Apostle Paul will later say Abram was "fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised." (Romans 4:21) That's the definition of true faith.

But God's not done. He not only gives Abram this promise, He seals it by making a covenant with him. In the ancient near east, these ceremonies were common. Vassals would approach their kings and promise on their lives to fulfill the terms of the covenant they were making. The crazy thing about Genesis 15 is it flips the whole ceremony on its head! Instead of Abram approaching God, it is God who puts Abram to sleep and approaches him! God is the one who makes His way through the halves of the animals, essentially declaring to Abram that He will fulfill the conditions of this covenant or cease to exist! It never ceases to shock me every time I read it!

Furthermore, as we have already seen, God's faithfulness is unconditional. Even when Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands - as in the case of Hagar and Ishmael - God is there to turn it for His good purpose. Because God has committed Himself to Abram and his family, He will never let

go. No matter what they say. No matter what they do. God will remain faithful to the end. He must because He has pledged His own life to this covenant.

Can you begin to fathom the fact that in Christ, we see the fulfillment of Genesis 15? God sacrificing His own life for the sake of Abram and his descendants? God sealing a new covenant by giving His body and shedding His blood? Do you understand the great faithfulness of God to His people? The lengths to which He is willing to go for the sake of those He loves? Abram. Sarai. Hagar. Ishmael. You and me. It's amazing!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 17-19

January 15, 2020

BY FAITH

Readings for today: Genesis 17-19

"The world has yet to see what God can do with a man fully consecrated to Him!" These immortal words, spoken by British revivalist Henry Varley at a tent meeting one night in Dublin, Ireland, ignited a fire in a young man named D.L. Moody that wouldn't stop raging until two continents had heard the gospel and over a million souls come to Christ. It's one of my all-time favorite quotes and it describes Abram perfectly.

Just consider the life of this great man. He was the youngest of three brothers but first in pre-eminence. He lived the first seventy years of his life in Ur where he worshipped idols. (Joshua 24:2) God appeared to him during that time and called Abram to take his first steps of faith. (Acts 7:2) "Leave Ur", God said, "And go to the place I will show you." And Abram went. He lands in Haran for five years where he loses his father. His brother stays behind. At age 75, Abram leaves Haran for the place God had yet to show him, eventually coming to Canaan. There he experiences famine, danger, violence, conflict. He gets caught up in tribal wars and meets kings. He amasses his wealth and possessions and influence. He builds altars and worships God. He struggles with his family, having to separate from his nephew and mediate a conflict between his wife and her servant. At age 86, he fathers his first child Ishmael. He receives a new name at age 99. He also gets circumcised! He observes the complete and total destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities he knew with people he loved like Lot and his family whom Abram (now Abraham) never saw again.

What drives a man to live such a life? Faith. Complete surrender to God. Throughout the course of his life, Abraham received all kinds of promises from God. The Promised Land. Innumerable offspring. Blessings untold. A lot of which would not happen in his lifetime. Not that it mattered all that much because according to Hebrews 11:10, Abraham had his eyes set on a much greater prize. "To the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."

So I take issue with Henry Varley. As much as I like his quote and as much as I love D.L. Moody. The fact is the world HAS seen what God can do with a man fully consecrated to Him. All one has to do is look at the life of Abraham. And when you look, look closely. It's not a perfect life. It's not a safe life. It's not an easy life. Abraham is given far more than he can ever handle. He is pushed further than he himself would ever choose to go. God never stops demanding, never stops commanding. And he just keeps walking by faith. Putting one faltering foot in front of the other. Over the course of a lifetime, Abraham learns to trust God. He builds a deep relationship with God. He is called God's "friend" (James 2:23) and the father of God's chosen people. (Psalm 105:6)

Friends, all of "creation is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the sons and daughters of God." (Romans 8:19) The world doesn't need perfect people. The world doesn't need safe people. The world doesn't need rich and powerful people. What this world needs are men and women, young and old, from every tribe, tongue and nation who will dedicate every waking hour of every day to the advancement of God's Kingdom on this earth! Are you such a person? Do you want to be such a person? Then claim this promise from 2 Chronicles 16:9 for your own, "The eyes of the Lord run to

and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” Believe Him! And trust in His grace, love and power!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 20-23

January 16, 2020

FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Genesis 20-23

Fear is a powerful motivator. Often driving us to do things we wouldn't otherwise do. Make choices out of desperation rather than faith. Lot's daughters, for example, from yesterday's reading were afraid they would never find a husband which during that time period would have meant a death sentence. So they got their father drunk and slept with him. Abraham's afraid someone might kill him and try to steal his wife so he tells Sarah to lie about their relationship. (By the way, does it seem strange to anyone else that Abimelech would want a ninety year old woman in his harem?) After Isaac is born, Abraham is afraid of the budding conflict between Sarah and Hagar and the potential of a divided household so he lets Sarah throw Hagar and Ishmael out. I imagine if we sat and reflected for a moment, we can all think back to choices we've made that we regret that were driven by similar fears.

The most common command in the Bible by far is "Do not be afraid." God doesn't want us to walk in fear. He tells us 1 John 4:18, "Perfect love casts out fear." He tells us 2 Timothy 1:7 that He has "not given us a spirit of fear but of power, love, and discipline." At the same time, there is one fear we are called to embrace. The fear of the Lord. I love what the prophet Isaiah says, "But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." (Is. 8:13) Now I know we don't like to think of God in these categories. We are deeply unsettled at the idea that we would "fear God." At the same time, what I've learned in my own life is when I fear God, I fear nothing else. And this is what Abraham learned as well.

One of the most famous stories in all of Scripture is the sacrifice of Isaac. It has been the subject of the most incredible artwork throughout the centuries. It has influenced the plot lines of famous works of literature. There is something deeply compelling about this story for believers and non-believers alike. An old man taking his son. His only son. The son whom he loves and offering him as a sacrifice. In our minds eye, we can see them climbing the mountain together. Abraham with the fire and knife. Isaac carrying the wood. As we picture the scene, we can almost hear Isaac poignantly questioning his father - such a tender scene -"My father!" And Abraham said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." I imagine Abraham answering Isaac with tears in his eyes. They get to the top of the mountain. Abraham builds an altar. Binds his own son. Lays him down. Raises the knife. And that's when God steps in. "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

I've often wondered what kind of impact this experience had on Abraham and Isaac? What did this do to their relationship? And yet, even the father/son relationship is not as important as Abraham's relationship with God. He must fear God above all else. He must trust God above all else. He must honor God above all else. He must have faith in God above all else. The writer of Hebrews, as he looked back on this story and reflected on Abraham's faith, says Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise Isaac from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Heb. 11:19) No matter what, Abraham knew God had promised him a son. He knew Isaac was that

son. He knew the future rested on this son. And he trusted God even when it seemed like His commands put everything at risk.

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

What are you afraid of today? What's driving the choices you make? Is it fear of what others might say? Fear of facing the consequences of your actions? Fear of losing something you love? Fear God, friends! Honor Him as holy! Look to the Cross and consider the great love He has for you! As you fix your eyes on Jesus, you will feel the fears that so often drive us loosening their grip. Fear God and you will fear nothing else!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 24-26

January 17, 2020

ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

Readings for today: Genesis 24-26

God will fulfill His promise. God will be faithful to His covenant. God will make sure His mandate is followed. From the beginning of Genesis we have seen a common theme appear over and over again. Be fruitful. Multiply. Fill the earth. Exercise dominion over all God has made. This is God's plan for humanity. This is God's plan for His people. This is the direction given to Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. And now it comes to Isaac and Rebekah.

However, an important grammatical change has taken place. Instead of humanity being responsible for fulfilling this mandate, God Himself takes the responsibility on. "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and to your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father. I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed…And the Lord appeared to him the same night and said, "I am the God of Abraham your father. Fear not, for I am with you and will bless you and multiply your offspring for my servant Abraham's sake." (Genesis 26:3-4, 24) God will not let His covenant be broken. God will not let His promises fail. Despite the mistakes and missteps we make along the way - like claiming our wives as our sisters or conflict with our neighbors - God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes. Remember, God has committed Himself to us. He walked through the halves of the animals to signify the gravity of His resolve. The plan of God cannot fail because God will not fail.

This truth is life-changing. For people. For churches. For anyone who calls on the name of the Lord. God may not fulfill all your desires. He may not grant all your wishes. He may not answer all your prayers. But if you seek Him, He will make you fruitful. He will multiply your reach and influence. He will bless you so that you fill the earth with His glory and His image. He will give you dominion over whatever spheres of influence you find yourself in. Not so you will be healthy and wealthy. Not so you will never experience suffering or hardship. One cannot measure God's faithfulness using worldly means! No, this is about God's Kingdom. God's glory. God's honor. God's plan from before the foundations of the world. God will have His way on earth. God will have His way with us. God will not rest until His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

So what is our role? Worship. Note Isaac's response to God's promise in his life. "He built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord and pitched his tent…" (Genesis 26:25) God simply wants our worship. Our love. Our adoration. He simply wants us to thank Him. Praise Him. Glory in all He is doing on our behalf. He simply wants our submission. Our obedience. Our trust that His way is the best way - really, the only way - to live. God loves you, friends! God is for you! God is with you! God is working even now to bring His plan to pass in your life. Will you walk before Him like Abraham? Will you seek Him like Isaac? Will you submit your way and your will to Him like our forefathers and foremothers in the faith?

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 27-29

January 18, 2020

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

Readings for today: Genesis 27-29

Our readings today highlight some very important truths. God meets us where we are but refuses to let us remain there. God accepts us as we are but doesn't affirm all we do. God loves us unconditionally and works through His relationship with us to grow us spiritually.

The family of Abraham's a mess. Rebekah takes advantage of her blind and disabled husband to promote the cause of her favorite son. Esau continues to despise the responsibilities that come from being the firstborn of the household. Selling his birthright. Marrying outside the family. Jacob's a momma's boy who uses deceit to get ahead. Not only does he steal the blessing his brother rightfully deserved, he also deceives Laban in order to gain wealth and privilege and status. Granted, Laban returns the favor but it doesn't make it righteous. Jacob even tries to manipulate God. When God appears to Jacob to renew the covenant promise He made to Abraham and Isaac, Jacob tries to make a deal. "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." (Genesis 28:20-22) He tries to make the unconditional covenant of God conditional. It's stunning in it's boldness and ignorance.

And yet, how many times do we try and do the same? You and I are no different than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are no different than Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. We are all broken people seeking to become whole. We are foolish people seeking to become wise. We are sinful people seeking become righteous. We look for love in all the wrong places. We place our hope in all the wrong things. We ground our identities in temporary realities that fade so quickly. As Jesus put so well, "We're building on sand." And when the storms of life blow. When the ground shakes beneath our feet. When the trials and tribulations come - as they always do - everything we've built for ourselves comes crashing down around us.

God is faithful. Faithful to His promise. Faithful to His covenant. How can He stand the deceit of Jacob? The favoritism of Isaac and Rebekah? The foolishness of Esau? Why does God work with such sinful people to accomplish His purposes? Surely these men and women are no more or less sinful than the people around them? What makes them so special in God's sight? Simply this…God chose them. God elected to save them and not the others. God determined to use them for His purposes in the world. And the same remains true for us today. Why does God not step in and save every single human being on the planet? Why does God not step in and eradicate evil once and for all? Why does God not step in and set our world to rights? What is God waiting for? Perhaps even better, why did God choose me? Why did God save me? What purposes does God want to use me for in this world?

Ultimately, I have no idea why God chooses some and not others. Why He puts up with some and judges others. I only know God has made us a promise. He has made a covenant with His people. He will never break it. Never abandon it. Never let it fail. He has staked His very existence on it. The covenant of God is eternal. Unchangeable. Fixed in the timeline of heaven. It rests on His immutable

character. It stands on His unfailing love. It is driven by His amazing grace. To be sure, I am a mess but thanks be to God that He is making something beautiful out of my life.

January 20, 2020

WRESTLING WITH GOD

Readings for today: Genesis 30-33

Jacob is one of my favorites. He and I are so alike. I can remember when I was young making all these pacts with God. If God would take care of me. If God would provide for me. If God would come through for me. Then I would be faithful. Then I would serve Him. Ultimately, of course, I was asking God to bless my plans. I was treating God like a genie in a lamp. I wanted Him to meet my needs. I wanted Him to give me what I desired. And I never thought to ask Him what His desires were for my life. Nor was "submission" in my vocabulary. So I went about my life trying to make it all happen on my own. In my own strength. According to my own wisdom. There was a lot of manipulation and scheming and lying in those days. I hurt a lot of people I loved. Eventually, it all caught up to me and I found myself in a very dark place. That's when I first wrestled with God.

Jacob begins this journey to Laban's household by making a similar pact with God. Genesis 28:20-21, "Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God..." And for the next two decades, he worked hard at life. He got married. He had children. He amassed a fortune. He thought he was doing it all on his own. And he's not the only one. Everyone involved in the story seems to think they are in charge. Leah and Rachel battle over who gets to sleep with Jacob, each trying to win Jacob's affections by having as many children as possible. Leah even "buys" a night with Jacob from Rachel with mandrakes (an ancient aphrodisiac)! Laban and Jacob try to outscheme one another as they compete for the flocks of goats. Laban removing a certain number. Jacob countering this (or so he thinks) by superstitiously having his goats breed in front of certain trees that have been peeled, etc. It's all very humorous in a way and I actually think we are meant to laugh along with the story as it unfolds.

Of course, the impact of all this scheming and manipulation is brokenness. Jacob's relationship with Laban deteriorates to the point where he realizes he needs to flee. For seven days, Laban chases him until God comes to him in a dream warning him not to touch Jacob. But that's not the worst of it. Jacob has gone from the frying pan into the fire as he knows he will have to face his brother Esau again. Esau, the man who wanted to kill him. Esau, who is bringing four hundred men to meet him. Jacob's scared. Anxious. Afraid. He's trapped between Laban and Esau. Two men who hate him for what he's done. He cannot escape. But he does the only thing he knows how to do. He puts together a plan. He divides his camp with the hope one can escape. He puts together a large gift and sends it on ahead hoping to ease Esau's anger. And after he has completed all his preparations, he finds himself alone. Alone with his fears. Alone with his anxiety. All alone in the dark.

That's when God shows up and He begins to go to work on Jacob. Wrestling with him. Struggling with him. Forcing Jacob to come to grips with himself on a lot of levels. Forcing Jacob to face his past, his sin, his fear, his brokenness. But Jacob is a strong and stubborn man. He fights God all night long. He doesn't want to give in. Doesn't want to surrender. Finally, God dislocates his hip. And Jacob is defeated. But even in his defeat, Jacob won't let go. Not until God blesses him. So God gives him a new name. Israel. Meaning "God contended". For Jacob fought with God and with man and prevailed. Not that he beat God but that he beat himself. He finally came to grips with who he is before God. Something he confirms in 32:30 when he says, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has

been spared." Jacob is humbled. He's finally surrendered. He's submitted himself to God and one can see his heart change in his reconciliation with Esau.

What's your relationship with God like? Is it transactional? Meaning, you scratch God's back and He scratch's yours? Do you find yourself asking God to bless your plans or are you seeking His plan for your life? Have you ever wrestled with God like Jacob? Have you ever been humbled by God? Broken by God? I certainly have been at several points in my own life. It's part of the discipleship process. We must learn to surrender our own will to His and it's not an easy or always pleasant process.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 34-37

January 21, 2020

GOD IS OUR REFUGE

Readings for today: Genesis 34-37

One of the things that makes the Bible so hard to read and understand at times are the actions of God's people. They are chosen. They are set apart. They are sacred. They are supposed to be God's light in the world. They are supposed to set godly examples. As such, we expect more from them. We expect them to be good people. Holy people. If not perfect, we certainly expect them to be a cut above the rest. But then we read a story about the sons of Jacob taking out their anger and rage on an entire city of people. We read about them killing scores of people in cold blood. Murdering them in their beds. Yes, the rape of their sister is horrific but their violent response is disproportionate. In our minds, they should have just killed Shechem. Not his entire family, clan, and tribe. Furthermore, we get even more confused with God's response. Rather than judge them or leave them to face the consequences of their actions, God provides a refuge for them. God protects them. God gives them sanctuary. "God said to Jacob, "Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau." (Genesis 35:1)

What is God doing? How can He overlook the sins of His people? Treat them differently than the pagan nations that surround them? It doesn't seem fair or just or righteous. A just response would be God leaving His people at the mercy of the Canaanites and Perizzites who surround them. Here is where we have to remember the character and nature and covenant promise of God. God is just. God is righteous. God is holy. As such, He has every right to consign every single human being who has ever lived to hell. He has every right to destroy this planet and everything with it. He has ever right to scour the earth and start all over. This is what we have rightfully earned through our sin and rebellion. There is no such thing as an innocent human being. No matter how young or old. All are guilty. All deserve death. This is the fundamental premise undergirding all of Scripture. God is also merciful. And out of His great mercy, He chooses a people through which He will make Himself known. He chooses these people not because they are more holy. Not because they are wonderfully moral and righteous people. Not because they are somehow a cut above the rest. He chooses them purely out of grace. His choice is sealed by a covenant. The covenant He made with Abraham. The scene from Genesis 15 where God walked through the halves of the animals. On that day, God bound Himself to His people. Made them a promise He will never revoke. He would be their God. They would be His people. Come hell or high water, God is committed.

God's people are like anyone else. They sin. They rebel. They lie. Deceive. Steal. They murder out of anger and rage. They act in all sorts of unrighteous and unjust ways. This was true for Israel. This is true for us. We are not better than our non-Christian neighbors. We are not more righteous. We are not more holy. We don't always make better choices. We don't always hold to a stronger moral center. We are broken. We are messy. Our only hope is that God remains our refuge and strength. A very present help in times of trouble. God is as committed to us as He was to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is as faithful to us as He was to His people. God is gracious to us. Merciful to us. God disciplines us and punishes us. God will not rest until we fulfill the calling He has placed on our lives to be His covenant people. Until that day comes, He will work with us, in us, and through us. He will use despite our sin and brokenness. And in this way, He remains faithful to Himself. Thanks be to God!

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 38-40

January 22, 2020

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

Readings for today: Genesis 38-40

God is sovereign. God stands outside time and space. He is not bound by the constraints of this world. Not human history as it unfolds. Not the laws of physics He set in motion. Not the choices of His people, sinful or otherwise. God is sovereign. God is sitting on His throne in heaven even now. His hand at the controls. He moves according to His will and purpose. He acts in accordance with His character and nature. He is faithfully guiding all of history according to the plan He made from eternity.

We see this on display in the story of Judah and Tamar. Judah makes all the wrong choices in this passage. He marries a Canaanite woman. Two of his three sons are put to death for their sin. Judah reneges on his promise to Tamar. Withholding his third son out of fear of what might take place. He sleeps with someone he believes is a temple prostitute. He hypocritically accuses his daughter-in-law of sexual immorality once it's discovered she's pregnant. Finally, he repents when he realizes his own sinful choices have led him to this point. Still God uses it for His glory. Still God bends even Judah's sinful choices to His sovereign will. The twins Tamar bears will become important markers in the line of Jesus. Tamar herself will gain a mention in the Savior's genealogy.

We see God's sovereignty on display in Joseph's life as well. Arrogant and prideful, he is despised by his brothers. Sold into slavery for a profit, he ends up in Potiphar's household where he finds great success as an estate manager. Falsely accused of attempted rape, Joseph is sent to prison where he continues to find ways to bless those around him. When Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker become his cellmates, he interprets their dreams. God is slowly but surely orchestrating all things for Joseph's good. Including the evil he's endured. Including his suffering and pain and hardship. Joseph will eventually rise to become almost as powerful as Pharaoh himself. He will use his position and influence to save his family. What his brothers intended for evil, God uses for good.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is still sovereignly at work, orchestrating all things according to His divine purpose and will. Yes, our choices are real. Sinful. Godly. Otherwise. Yes, our suffering is real. So is our success. Yes, our pain is real. So is our joy. Yes, our heartbreak is real. So is the love we experience. God promises to use all these things for our good if we but love and trust Him. He doesn't promise us an easy life. Doesn't promise us a pain-free life. In fact, following Christ in this world will often result in the opposite.

This world is not our home. This world is not what God intended it to be. Humanity is broken. Deeply flawed at a fundamental level. But God still loves humanity. God still intends to work through humanity to bring about salvation to the earth. God will not give up on humanity. He will not give up on you. He will not give up on me. He is at work even now to bring to completion the good work He began in us in Christ. No matter what you are going through. No matter how many switchbacks you take in this life. Know that God is with you. God is leading you. God is guiding you. He wastes no part of your life. He will use it all to bring about your good and His glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 41-43

January 23, 2020
NOTHING BUT A DREAMER

Readings for today: Genesis 41-43

A few years ago, I was in Ethiopia when I met a man whom God had visited several times in a dream. We were in the middle of a training session of several hundred church planters in a village called Gojo up in the highlands of the country. Four and a half hours away from Addis Ababa in a pretty remote area. About halfway through the week, a few of us were walking through the village from where we were staying to our training center when a man approached us. He was dressed head to toe in traditional Muslim tribal garb. Long flowing robes. Head scarf. And he had a long scimitar belted to his hip. We weren't sure what to make of him except that he didn't seem aggressive so we sent for a translator. He told us the most amazing story. Several months previous, he had been visited by Jesus in a dream. Jesus shared the gospel with him and he woke up and gave his life to Christ. He then went around his village preaching Christ to anyone who would hear and the whole village - about 80 people - came to faith. Then he had another dream. Jesus told him to come to this town called Gojo where he would meet people who could teach him the ways of the gospel. So he started walking. And walking. And walking. Turns out he traveled two or three days to get to Gojo where he "happened" to arrive the exact same week we were conducting our training session. It was crazy!

God often speaks to us in our dreams. If we have the ears to hear and the heart to listen. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they tell the future. Sometimes those dreams are prophetic in that they convict us of sin. Sometimes dreams bring to light anxiety and fear that we need to bring to our Heavenly Father. Sometimes our dreams affirm us or reveal the deepest desires of our heart. Joseph was a dreamer. Sheaves of wheat. Stars in the sky. Sun and moon. Clusters of grapes. Baskets of bread. Fat cows and thin cows. And somehow Joseph is able to make sense of it all. Why? Because God was with him!

Over and over again throughout the Joseph "cycle" in Genesis, we see this refrain. "The Lord was with Joseph." "The Lord caused all he did to have success." "The Lord showed steadfast love and gave him favor." Despite all that happens to Joseph, God never leaves his side. And Joseph is faithful in return. "Do not all interpretations belong to God?" "It is not in me, God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer." "God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do." Joseph never claims his gift as his own. He always acknowledges God. He always gives all the glory and honor to the Lord. And this blows Pharaoh away. "Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?" You see, the dreams are really beside the point. They are simply the signposts that point to the greater reality of God!

The same is true of Joseph's life. Yes, he faces hardship. Yes, he experiences tragedy. Yes, he is the victim of injustice. Yes, he languishes in prison. Yes, he also experiences success and wealth and great honor. But again, all these things are really beside the point. Joseph's life - and this is what he really grasps on a deep, deep level - is itself a signpost that points to the greater reality that is God! Joseph's life is itself simply a tool God is using to reveal His steadfast love and faithfulness! All that happens to Joseph is not just for Joseph's sake but for the sake of the greater glory of God, the greater good of God's people, and even the greater welfare of the pagan Egyptians!

So what dreams is God giving you these days? Not just when you are asleep? What dreams and desires has He placed on your heart? Where is He calling you to step out for His greater glory? Your greater good? And the welfare of those around you? As you look back over the course of your life, ask the Spirit to give you the eyes to see where He has been faithful. Where He has been with you. Where He has taken the good, the bad, and the ugly and used it for His purposes.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 44-46

January 24, 2020

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Genesis 44-46

Perspective. The right perspective. God's perspective. A young man is notified he is being fired from a job he doesn't really like. He is anxious. He's afraid. His pride is hurt. But two months later, he lands a great job. One he loves far more than the one he lost. A young woman just misses the cut at her dream school. She applies over and over again to no avail. She switches gears. Finds a new speciality. Ends up loving what she does. A husband and wife struggle with infertility. For years they try to get pregnant. They go through all the treatments. Nothing seems to work. They adopt. Four beautiful children later, they cannot imagine their family any other way. A single guy longs to be married. He goes on a lot of dates but never seems to find the right woman. Meanwhile, he travels the world preaching the gospel and bringing hope to thousands in the name of Christ. He realizes singleness is a blessing. All these stories are real. All of them involve pain and heartbreak as well as joy and celebration. For some reason, these folks have a resilience about them that allows them to not only survive but thrive. The key is perspective.

For as many people as I've met who seemingly have been able to take lemons and make lemonade, I've met just as many if not more who tend to squeeze the lemon juice into their eyes. They struggle. They battle. They wrestle. Their lives are filled with heartache and suffering and pain. Their decisions end up backfiring. Their choices lead them down the wrong path. Their plans go awry. For every step forward, they take two steps back. And when they come into my counseling office and tell me their stories, I almost never hear God's perspective. That's usually when I tell them the story of Joseph. Joseph had literally been through hell. Sold by his brothers. Falsely accused and imprisoned. Forgotten and left for dead. He could have played the victim. He could have given up. He could have lost hope. Chucked his faith in God. I am sure Joseph suffered. Struggled. Doubted. Grew anxious and afraid as the days passed in prison. (Ancient near east prisons were no joke!) But Joseph persevered. He trusted God. And when he was finally rescued and raised to a powerful position in Egypt and given the perfect chance at revenge…he forgives. He relinquishes his bitterness and anger. He lets go of any need for "eye for an eye" justice. How? He looks at life with God's perspective. "And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 45:5-8)

Jesus is clear. In this life we will face trials. In this life we will face hardship. In this life we will suffer and struggle and go through pain. We are fools if we think otherwise. The only way to maintain hope is to keep our eyes fixed on God. To see the world as He sees it. To see life as He sees it. To love as He loves. To serve as He serves. To give our lives as a ransom for many. Just like Jesus. After all, this world is not our home. We are strangers and aliens in this dimension of life, destined for a greater world we can't begin to fathom. When we understand life from God's perspective, everything - including the most difficult experiences of our lives - seems to fall into place. And as much as it hurts, it doesn't have to consume. As much as it confuses, it doesn't have to confound. No matter what you may be going through, let me encourage you to follow Joseph's example. Believe in God. Trust in Christ. Know

that God is at work and He will bring to completion what He is doing in your life for your ultimate good and His ultimate glory.

Readings for tomorrow: Genesis 47-50

January 25, 2020

A FRESH START

Readings for today: Genesis 47-50

Life has consequences. We all have to face them. We cannot escape them. Yes, there is forgiveness with the Lord. Yes, God's grace is greater than all our sin. Yes, we are accepted and loved unconditionally. But none of that means we escape justice. None of that means we escape the consequences for our actions.

Jacob appears before Pharaoh and when asked to describe his life, he remarks, "The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning." A lifetime of scheming and manipulating have come back to haunt Jacob in his later years. Yes, he's been forgiven. Yes, God is with him. Yes, God loves him but life has taken a toll.

Jacob's sons appear before him on his deathbed to receive their blessing. Reuben loses his preeminence as the firstborn because he slept with his father's concubine. Simeon and Levi lose their opportunity to lead the family because of their unrestrained violence against Shechem. Authority now passes to Judah who has repented of his actions against Joseph so long ago. After Jacob dies and they return from his funeral, the brothers still live in fear of what Joseph might do and once again beg for forgiveness. Again, they are forgiven. Again, God is with them. Again, God loves them but their actions have consequences. On some level, there will always be fear. Always be shame over what they have done.

The same is true for us. We live our lives before God. Whether we realize it or not, He is always there. And His grace is amazing. His love is unconditional. He mercy knows no end. He loves us for who we are in the midst of all of our imperfections. But sin still has consequences. Our choices impact not only ourselves but those around us. The decisions we make often result in brokenness and pain. The actions we take, the emotions we express, the words we say do have an impact for good or for evil.

Forgiveness doesn't mean pretending those things haven't happened. Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. No, biblical forgiveness means choosing to no longer hold a person's sinful choices against them. It's an intentional decision to look past the pain, past the heartbreak, past the brokenness into the future. To take a step back and see what God is doing in the midst of it all. This is what Joseph offers his brothers. A fresh start. Not a clean slate. A fresh start.

Where do you need a fresh start today? Who do you need to forgive? Who in your life is suffering from the consequences of their sinful actions and how can you come alongside them? When you look in the mirror what do you see? Does the pain and shame from your past threaten to overwhelm? Perhaps the person you need to forgive is yourself?

January 27, 2020

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

Readings for today: Job 1-5

Where is God in the midst of suffering? Why does He allow it? Is He complicit in it? Is there a point to it all? These questions are universal. Every single human being from every culture in every time and place has asked them. And all of the religions of the earth have attempted answers. The pagan witch doctors I've met in Ethiopia believe suffering happens because we displease the gods. We fail to make the right sacrifices. Fail to say the right magical incantations. Fail to humble ourselves before the right gods at the right times in the right ways. So they grow angry and they punish. The gods of the fields withhold their crops. The gods of the weather withhold the rain. The gods of the earth shake the very ground. On the flip side are my Buddhist friends for whom suffering is more of an illusion. A sign we are too tied to the cravings of this world. The way we deal with suffering is meditation which leads to a nirvana-like state that places us beyond suffering altogether. So how do Christians handle suffering?

The Book of Job is one, long extended answer to this important question and it forces us to confront some uncomfortable truths. First, God is sovereign. The Book of Job ultimately is not about Job. All agree Job is righteous. All resonate with Job's suffering. All feel Job's pain. He is us. We are him. Everyone who has experienced deep suffering in their lives can identify with this man. But the Book of Job makes it clear that Job's suffering is not the primary point of the story but rather how his suffering points us to the greater reality of God. It forces us to grapple with God's nature and character. It implicitly and intentionally raises fundamental questions like is God sovereign? And if He is, can He be trusted? Job's life is indeed marked by incredible sorrow and pain. He loses everything he has seemingly overnight. All that he has worked his entire life for is gone in an instant. Including his precious children. It's a brutal scene that plays itself out to this day all over the world. Tragedies strike. Natural disasters hit. Lives are lost and livelihoods go up in smoke. So what are we to make of these things? We certainly struggle to make any sense of them in this world so what Job does is give us a glimpse beyond the dimensions of this life into the dimensions of heaven where a scene is playing out that brings us face to face with the sovereignty of God.

Satan appears before God's throne. He has come from walking to and fro on the earth. Destruction and devastation in his wake. We catch a glimpse here into this fallen angel's pride and arrogance. The very fact that God doesn't obliterate him where he stands is itself stunning. But God has a greater end in mind. A greater purpose. He is going to use humankind (as He always does) to demonstrate His glory and power and victory over Satan and sin and death. So He baits Satan by asking him about Job. Satan takes the bait hook, line and sinker. God, in His majestic sovereignty, allows Satan to go after Job but always within limits. "Behold all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." "Behold, he is in your hand. Only do not take his life." And Satan plays his part with gusto. Relentlessly taking away all that Job has. Relentlessly attacking Job's health and well-being. Job's suffering is so great, his own wife tells him to "curse God and die." His three closest friends don't even recognize him. And yet in all these things, Job did not sin.

What we will learn throughout this book is that what Job treasures most - even amidst his anguish and pain and suffering and anger and questions and doubts and fears - is God Himself. More than his possessions. More than his children. More than his marriage. More than his health. Job treasures God.

Job worships God. As John Piper writes, in the suffering of Job, “the superior worth of God becomes evident to all.” What God cares most about is His own glory and our primary role as human beings - creatures made in God’s own image - is to bring Him glory and declare His praises in this world and the next. And lest we think we are simply caught up in some divine ego trip, let’s remember God is not like us. His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts. He is infinite and we are finite and He sees things from His perspective that we simply cannot know or ever understand.

So where does that leave us? At the mercy of a cold and uncaring God who will strike at us at a whim? No. God loves us. Deeply. Dearly. Completely. And we bring Him great joy when we remain steadfast in our faith amidst our suffering. We bring Him great glory when we praise Him amidst our pain. Imagine the scene in heaven when Job utters his cry of victory, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." Imagine the utter shame of Satan as he stands before Lord and the throngs of heaven join Job in his declaration of praise! Imagine his horror as all his evil plans come to naught in the face of true faith! Satan has been defeated!

Now fast forward several centuries. Imagine the same scene playing out before God as Satan comes to test His Son. Imagine the Father giving His Son over into Satan’s hands. This time without limits. This time no holds barred. Imagine Satan’s delight in the Garden as the Son begs for another way. Imagine Satan’s joy as he watches the Son suffer on the Cross. And then imagine Satan’s horror as the Son cries out, “It is finished! Into your hands I commit my spirit!” The cry of victorious faith coming at the point of death! Satan is defeated! This time once and for all! As Tim Keller has put it, Jesus is the greater Job who takes on our suffering in order to bring ultimate glory to the Father. And the Father vindicates the Son by raising Him from the dead just He will vindicate Job by restoring all he has and more.

Where you are you struggling today? What suffering have you had to endure in your life? How are you clinging to faith in the midst of it all? Would your perspective change if you saw your life as a trophy through which God displays His glory and grace? Do you believe God is sovereign over your pain? Do you believe God can be trusted even when you suffer?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 6-9

January 28, 2020

READING THE BIBLE RELATIONALLY

Readings for today: Job 6-9

"Christianity isn't about rules, it's about a relationship." I cannot tell you how many times I've said those words. And I believe them with all my heart. However, it wasn't until I started reading the Bible "relationally" that I really began to grasp the depth of what I was trying to say. One of the real issues we have - and I struggled with it for years myself - when we read the Bible is we tend to approach it from a moralistic perspective. We describe it as a "manual for life" or "God's playbook" or a roadmap to get your "best life now." We make the false assumption - down deep - that if we just follow what it says, God will love us. God will be proud of us. God will bless us. The result is we flatten the text. We make it two-dimensional. We become the worst kind of literalists. Instead of reading the Bible for all its worth. Plunging into its emotional depths. Climbing the heights of its majestic poetry and prose. Exploring all the nooks and crannies of every genre. We take and dissect it in a lab. We atomize it and reduce it to its component parts. We rob it of its mystery and glory. This is true for conservatives and progressives alike. They weaponize the text against one another. Proof-texting one another to death. Performing all sorts of exegetical gymnastics to make the text say what they want it to say. God must be shaking His head.

Job - more than any other book - shows us the best way to read the Bible. Job spends his whole life worshipping God. He is blameless before the Lord. He is scrupulous in his behavior. He is as upright a man as they come. He even makes sacrifices on behalf of his children just in case they stumble and fall. Through it all, Job is building a deep and abiding relationship with God that will hold up under the harshest of tests. Job's life is upended in ways many of us cannot even fathom. The loss of all his children and grandchildren. The loss of all his wealth and power and privilege. The loss of his health and well-being. (By the way, this book puts a stake in the heart of prosperity preaching!) Job loses everything. His own wife encourages him to curse God and die.

But Job understands something his wife and all his friends do not. He has a relationship with God. A real relationship. An authentic relationship. The kind of relationship where one can say anything. The kind of relationship where one can question and doubt and struggle and wish to die. Job trusts God with the rawest of emotions. Job trusts God with his anger and fear. Job trusts God enough to question his justice and demand an account. Like Abraham before him and Moses after him, Job understands what God wants is not a rule-follower so much as a friend. Someone to speak with face to face. Someone to walk with in the Garden in the cool of the day just as He once did with Adam.

Friends, God's love forms the foundation of our relationship with Him. God's faithfulness makes our relationship secure. God holds us in the palm of His hands and He promises nothing can separate us from His love. God sealed this promise with Abraham when He walked through the halves of the animals to establish the covenant. God stayed true to this promise when He sent His own Son to die on a cross. He will never, ever let us go!

Because God's love is so fierce and loyal and true, we can be ourselves with Him. Our truest and most authentic selves. We can share anything with Him. We can get mad at Him. We can weep with Him. We can crawl into His lap when we are afraid. We can run to Him after we fall. We can come to Him

when we sin. We can be demanding and spoiled and proud and foolish and God will never stop loving us. Never stop embracing us. Never cut off His relationship with us.

We will not always understand why things happen the way they do. We will not always know the reasons why God allows bad things to happen to good people and good things to happen to bad people. We do not need to try to justify God or defend God or speak for God like Job's friends. He is perfectly capable of doing those things on His own! Our responsibility is to follow Job's example. Be real. Be honest. Be authentic before the Lord and then ultimately trust and surrender and submit to His sovereign will.

The only reason Job was able to endure the test is because he spent his whole life building his relationship with God. He spent his whole life in worship. He cultivated an awareness of God in his everyday. He intentionally walked with God on a daily basis. How does this look in your life? In what ways are you intentionally walking with God? Are you spending time with Him everyday? Do you gather with His people every week? Do you have a small group you can be real and honest with about your sin? Do you find ways to serve? A relationship with God is built the same way all relationships are built. Time and intentionality. If you haven't already, begin making time for God today!

Readings for tomorrow: Job 10-13

January 29, 2020

THE POWER OF LISTENING

Readings for today: Job 10-13

Job's friends were doing so well. Word gets out about all Job has suffered and they come running. They grieve with him. They weep with him. They sit with him in the dust and ashes of his tragic life. For seven days, they silently keep vigil. For seven days, their presence is a comfort. For seven days, they faithfully love and care for their dear friend. Then they open their mouths…

What is it about us that makes us so prone to rush to judgment? To refuse to hear someone out? To listen to their story in full? What is it about us that feels the need to jump in? Cut people off? Interrupt? I remember when my wife first met my family. One of the first things that struck her was how often we interrupted each other. Arguing was our love language. Three strong-willed brothers going at it all the time, pontificating on every subject imaginable. Most of it was hot air, of course. We were clueless. Ignorant. Foolish. Even when we were correct, it didn't matter, because our goal was to be right. To win the argument. To pump our own tires and make ourselves feel good.

I think about my brothers when I read the Book of Job. When I hear the arguments Job's friends make in response to Job's heartbreaking cries. They are more interested in correcting his theology than comforting his soul. They are more interested in defending God than demonstrating love. They feel compelled to justify Job's suffering as if getting to the root cause will ease his pain. I see it all the time. In the midst of great tragedy or crisis, so many people want to know why? Why did this happen? Why now? Why me? Why didn't God protect me or those I love? When I was young and foolish, I tried to answer these questions. I would sit with grieving families thinking my theological answers would bring them peace. Thankfully, I learned quickly from my mistakes. The better approach was simply to listen. To put my arms around them. To simply sit in the ashes and resist the temptation to offer explanations.

Regardless of what people say, the question they really are asking is where is God? Is He with me in the midst of my pain? Is He here with me at the bedside of the one I love? Is He in the room? Does He hear my cries? Does He weep with me? The central truth of Christianity is this…God is with us. Jesus is Emmanuel. We are never alone. God traveled the vast reaches of our universe to be with us. He left heaven and came to earth to become one of us. He entered human history. Became flesh and blood and moved into our neighborhood. All so that we would know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are loved.

Friends, you are blessed. You have access to a truth Job could only long for. You have Jesus. He is with you in your pain. He is with you in your heartache. He is with you in your grief. He is with you in suffering. He's not here to blame. He's not here to condemn. He's not here to put the burden on you or remind you of the consequences of your actions. He is here to hold you. He is here to comfort you. He is here to offer you grace.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 14-17

January 30, 2020

RESURRECTION HOPE

Readings for today: Job 14-17

The hope of a Christian is resurrection. Our physical bodies rising from the ground. A life after death. Even more, a life after life after death. A day that dawns when our souls indwell our bodies once more and God raises us imperishable and indestructible once and for all. Without this hope, death wins. Without this hope, it is tough to endure the struggles of this world. Without this hope, we despair if we're completely honest. And this is where Job finds himself this morning.

"But a man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he? As waters fail from a lake and a river wastes away and dries up, so a man lies down and rises not again; till the heavens are no more he will not awake or be roused out of his sleep." (Job 14:10-12)

"My spirit is broken; my days are extinct; the graveyard is ready for me…My days are past; my plans are broken off, the desires of my heart….If I hope for Sheol as my house, if I make my bed in darkness, if I say to the pit, 'You are my father,' and to the worm, 'My mother,' or 'My sister,' where then is my hope? Who will see my hope? Will it go down to the bars of Sheol? Shall we descend together into the dust?" (Job 17:1, 11, 13-16)

The Bible is written as a progressive revelation. God doesn't reveal everything about Himself and His plan on the first page. As God's people interact with God over time, they learn. They grow in their understanding of who He is and what He's about. They also come to an understanding of who they are and what they are about. Resurrection is a later development in Jewish theology. It doesn't truly come to it's fullest expression until the "intertestamental" period or the period between the Old and New Testaments. The apocryphal books of the Maccabees bear witness to a growing belief by the Jews as they face severe persecution under the pagan Antiochus Ephiphanes that if Yahweh chooses not to rescue them in this life, it's because He is planning to rescue them in a life to come.

Resurrection was a matter of debate even in the 1st century. It was a particular point of tension between the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection which is why they are "Sad U See." :-) The Pharisees, on the other hand, held to a robust belief in the resurrection of God's people. When Jesus rose from the dead, it sent shock waves through the Jewish community. The empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances combined to launch a new Jewish sect called Christianity. Unlike the Sadducees, Christians believed in the resurrection from the dead. Unlike the Pharisees, Christians believed Jesus was the "first-fruits" of the resurrection to come and those who followed Him were filled with His resurrection power.

Why does this matter? What difference does it make? Well, if you don't believe in the resurrection, it makes suffering unbearable. Useless. Pointless. If we are just atoms and dust then there is no meaning or purpose to life. Not really. There is no such thing as good or evil. Not really. Such ideas are merely cultural constructs that carry no eternal weight. The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection so they became the primary collaborators with Rome. Active participants in the oppression of their own people. The Pharisees did believe in the resurrection so they did everything they could to keep the Law of God and remain ritually pure. They were some of Rome's fiercest critics and refused to

compromise lest they put their eternal fate in jeopardy. Christians knew the resurrection was real and therefore willingly laid down their lives for the sake of the poor and marginalized and sick and dying. They understood this life was but a shadow of the life to come and didn't hold onto the things of this world. They freely gave away all their wealth. Freely shared all they had. Freely gave of themselves.

The reading from Job today presses the question…where do we find hope? Is it in this life? Or the next? Do our lives reflect a deep and abiding trust in God to redeem? To rescue? To save? How tightly do we hold onto our health and wealth and reputation? Do we see these things for the temporary realities that they are and dare we live for eternal rewards?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 18-21

January 31, 2020

MY REDEEMER

Readings for today: Job 18-21

In the midst of his terrible suffering, Job holds fast to three fundamental convictions...

God is sovereign.
God is good and just.
Job is faithful.

These convictions give him the strength to resist his friends when they offer their simplistic, superficial, and ultimately heretical explanations. They also give him the courage to stand before the judgment seat of God, trusting the Lord for vindication. We see this reflected in what are perhaps the most famous verses in the Book of Job, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!" (Job 19:25-27) Job, of course, has no idea who Jesus is. The life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God will not be revealed for many centuries. But Job does have faith. He looks forward, as do all the Old Testament saints, to a future yet to be revealed, trusting in a God who will make all things right and all things new.

Job's suffering resists all logic. It resists any and all attempts to make sense out of it. It resists the formulaic notions we have about cause and effect. Blessing and curse. Health and wealth. It forces us to grapple with the hard truth that the righteous do suffer. The unrighteous do prosper. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to evil people. There is no rhyme or reason to these things. Time and chance happen to us all as the writer of Ecclesiastes once wrote. The world we live in is broken. Utterly. Completely. It is a world enslaved to the power of Sin. A world ruled by the tyrannical fear of Death. If things happen to go well for us in this world, it is not because we are good or because we earned it. It is far more likely that it is random chance. This is why we cannot set our hearts on the things of this earth but on things above.

A friend of mine recently watched a show where the Book of Job was featured. The conclusion of the character who was wrestling with the text was that ultimately all Job received in the end was new children and a case of PTSD. That's actually a common interpretation of the text both in our culture today and in many churches. Like Job's friends, it's a far too simplistic approach to the text. It betrays our unwillingness to really sit and take the time to "hear" Job. To marvel at his courageous faith. To wonder at his steadfast, some may call it stubborn, refusal to let go of the goodness and justice and sovereignty of God. Why doesn't Job ever throw in the towel? Why doesn't Job do what his wife suggested at the beginning? Why doesn't Job curse God and die like so many have throughout the centuries and like so many do today? Because Job believes. Job has faith. He knows his Redeemer lives! He knows he will meet God face to face after he dies! He trusts God to be faithful! Trusts God to be sure! Trusts God to be true! Trusts God to be good! And though it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God, Job ultimately trusts God for his vindication.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 22-24

February 1, 2020

REFINING FIRE

Readings for today: Job 22-24

"Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold…But he is unchangeable, and who can turn him back? What he desires, that he does. For he will complete what he appoints for me, and many such things are in his mind." (Job 23:8-10, 13-14)

How many of us love to quote the verse from Jeremiah 29? About the plans the Lord has for us? Plans for blessing and hope and a future? I love those words. I love those promises. But what we too often fail to consider is the path we have to take to get there. The path to God's blessing is often filled with pain. Often filled with suffering. Often filled with struggle and heartbreak. It is lonely at times. It is rocky and steep and exhausting. Why? Because God's blessings cannot come to us until we are empty. Until we have come to the end of ourselves. Until we have finally and fully and completely surrendered our stubborn wills to His will. How does this happen? There is only one way attested by Scripture. We must go through the refiner's fire.

There are many ways to read Job. Most of the time, we read it from Job's perspective. We feel his anguish and pain. We take his side. We question God's judgment and justice alongside him. But do we ever stop to ponder the accusation of the enemy and whether or not it may be true? Does Job fear God for no reason? Is Job's faith the result of the blessings in his life? Is it dependent on good things happening to him? Will it survive poverty, deprivation, tragedy, trauma, grief, sickness, and despair? There is really only one way to find out. Job must walk what may Christians down through the ages have called the "dark night of the soul." A period of testing so great that it takes us to end of our own strength. The end of our own desires. The end of our own faith. It takes us into the darkness. Into the unknown. Into the silence. It is a terrifying journey but one we must take if we are to truly test our faith and find out if it is real.

Many know the name Andrew Brunson. Andrew is an EPC pastor and missionary to Turkey for over twenty years. A few years ago, he was picked up off the street and put in prison. He became the pawn in a political showdown. He was kept in solitary confinement. Denied access to those he loved. Held in miserable conditions. Tried in kangaroo courts. It was a terrifying experience for him. This past summer he shared his experiences with us at a national meeting. He talked about feeling the utter absence of God in his suffering. He talked about getting angry with God. Feeling let down by God. Abandoned by God. As he shared, my first thoughts went to Job. This is how he must have felt! When Andrew descended to the point of deepest despair. Contemplating suicide in his cell. He found himself crying out one name over and over again. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. And from that moment, his faith began to be restored.

Each of us has to endure the refiner's fire. The details will look different. My dark night of the soul looks nothing like Andrew's and little like Job's. It involves the loss of a child. The implosion of a ministry. Almost losing my family. Coming face to face with my deepest fears and anxieties. In the darkness and silence of those experiences where I too felt the absence of God, I found myself saying over and over again on some level…Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. And my life has never been the same.

God will complete what He appoints for me. What a terrifying and comforting promise! Come what may. Come hell or high water. Through sacrifice and suffering. On the heights of great mountains and in the depths of deep valleys. God will carry me through. I will become what He has ordained me to become. I will be conformed to the image of His Son. This is what He does for Job. This is what He's doing for Andrew. This is what He's done for me and will do for all those who seek Him.

February 3, 2020

WISDOM

Readings for today: Job 25-28

Our world is filled with knowledge. We have so much knowledge we literally do not know what to do with it. So much information coming at us from every angle. The average person is inundated with well over a hundred emails every day. Not to mention texts. Phone calls. Social media interactions. A single issue of the New York Times contains more information than a person a hundred or so years ago might have learned in an entire year. The news is relentless. The fake news endless. Technology ubiquitous. We cannot escape. We cannot rest. And what has all this knowledge gained us? Rising rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Rising rates of fear, violence, and hate. All this in a world that is demonstrably improving with each passing year. Why? What are we missing? What is the source of our persistent discontent?

Wisdom. Wisdom is the key. We simply do not know the path to wisdom or we refuse to take it. Today's reading from the Book of Job is on point. "Surely there is a mine for silver, and a place for gold that they refine. Iron is taken out of the earth, and copper is smelted from the ore…Man puts his hand to the flinty rock and overturns mountains by the roots. He cuts out channels in the rocks, and his eye sees every precious thing. He dams up the streams so that they do not trickle, and the thing that is hidden he brings out to light. "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its worth, and it is not found in the land of the living." (Job 28:1-2, 9-13) Human beings are capable of great things. We literally move mountains. We climb to the highest mountains. We delve in the deeps of the earth. We've learned to fly. We've explored the depths of the oceans. We know how to do so very much. But for all our strength and power and knowledge and ability, we have yet to find the path to wisdom. We didn't find it on the mountaintops. We searched for it in vain in the trenches of the seas. Despite our vast wealth we could not find a vender who sold it.

We live in a world awash in desire. A world enslaved to feelings and emotions. A world adrift in an ocean of chaos. How else to explain heartbreaking insanity that passes for truth these days? We reject any kind of sexual boundaries and are shocked when it leads to abuse, objectification, disease, and violence. We reject our bodies and are shocked when it leads to depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. We selfishly exploit the resources of the earth and are shocked when it leads to pollution and sickness and war. We refuse to repent over past oppressions and are shocked when it leads to racial conflict. We refuse to restrain our greed and are shocked when it leads to class warfare on a social and political stage. Our unwillingness and inability to follow the ways of Jesus leads us into all kinds of pain and suffering and heartache which we then turn around and try to pin on God. We are fools.

Only God knows the path to wisdom. Only God knows how to take all of our knowledge and order it in such a way that it leads to blessing and human flourishing. "From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, 'We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.' "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place…and he said to man, 'Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding." (Job 28:20-23, 28) Fear the Lord. Submit to His ways. Surrender to His will. Let Him guide and direct your steps. This is the path to wisdom. God's promise to those who would follow Him is that He will lead us to green pastures and beside still waters. To places of peace where our souls will be restored. Job understands we cannot find these places on our own. We cannot get to these places in our own strength. Our knowledge is simply not enough. We must let God take us by the hand. We must trust God with our lives and our future. We must have faith that He knows best.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 29-32

February 4, 2020

FINDING TRUE FAITH

Readings for today: Job 29-32

Why do I love God? Why do I trust God? Why do I believe in God? Is it because of the blessings He's given me? Is it because of the benefits I've received? Is it because of the ways He has touched my life? Is God worthy of my love regardless of these things? Is He worthy simply because He is God? I remember being challenged by this thought in college. I was in a Bible study on Job and the teacher asked me if I would hold fast to my faith even if there were no rewards. I have to admit I didn't have a ready answer. I think at that point in time - if I were honest - I would have said no. My faith would fail if there was not some kind of benefit to me personally. But life goes on. I've suffered many things. I've seen ups and downs. I lived in plenty and in want. I've experienced hardship and loss. I've gone through the dark night of the soul more than once. And what I've discovered at the end of it all is that God is enough. God is sufficient. God is my reward.

Job is struggling mightily with this idea today. He wishes with all his heart he could go back to the days of joy. Days of plenty. Days when he was respected and esteemed. "Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head, and by his light I walked through darkness, as I was in my prime, when the friendship of God was upon my tent, when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were all around me…When I went out to the gate of the city, when I prepared my seat in the square, the young men saw me and withdrew, and the aged rose and stood; the princes refrained from talking and laid their hand on their mouth; the voice of the nobles was hushed, and their tongue stuck to the roof of their mouth." (Job 29:2-5, 7-10) He wishes he could go back to the days when he cared for the poor, the widow, and the fatherless. When he lifted up those who were struggling. Comforted those who were hurting. Came alongside those who were grieving. Job didn't just live his life for himself. He lived his life righteously. For others. For his community. He did all he could to be faithful and he received great rewards as a result.

But now the tables have turned. Everything he held dear has been taken away. He has lost his wealth. He has lost his health. He has lost his family. He has lost the esteem of his community. "But now they laugh at me, men who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock." (Job 30:1) He even feels abandoned by God Himself. "God has cast me into the mire, and I have become like dust and ashes. I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me. You have turned cruel to me; with the might of your hand you persecute me. You lift me up on the wind; you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm. For I know that you will bring me to death and to the house appointed for all living." (Job 30:19-23) It's a cry of utter despair. A cry of utter dereliction. It sounds much like Jesus' cry from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet even in his despair, Job reaches out for God. Even in the darkest part of the darkest night of his soul, Job clings to faith. "Yet does not one in a heap of ruins stretch out his hand, and in his disaster cry for help?" (Job 30:24)

At the end of the day when we have come to the end of our strength. The end of our hope. The end of our faith. We find God there waiting for us. God must be the treasure of our hearts. He must hold the highest place. He must have our deepest loyalties and our greatest allegiance. He alone must become our reward. The only way we discover true faith is through testing. Suffering. Hardship. Pain. It is there in the darkness as we stumble about with no resources to bring to bear and no moves to make that we discover if we really believe. What have the trails of your life revealed about your faith in God? Where have you turned in the time of your greatest suffering? Do you - like Job - reach out your hand in midst of the ruins of your life to God?

Readings for tomorrow: Job 33-36

February 5, 2020

REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

Readings for today: Job 33-36

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

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

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

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

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

“Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for God is greater than man. Why do you contend against him, saying, 'He will answer none of man's words'? For God speaks in one way, and in two, though man does not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings...Remember, they had no Bible. No written records. So the Word of God would come to them in visions and dreams. Why? To punish? To judge? To wound? To destroy? No...So that God may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword. This is deeply significant as it adds a new layer of meaning to the story.

God does allow suffering but it’s for our good. He uses suffering to purge the pride from us. The pride Job himself suffers from. Yes, Job is a righteous man. Yes, Job is a blameless man. But Job is also a sinful man. Though he has a heart after God, he is not perfect and God will use his suffering (as we will see at the end of the book) to cleanse the depths of Job’s soul.

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

This understanding squares with what Christians have said throughout the centuries. Martyrs facing their death without fear. Those who suffer enduring for the sake of something greater. They understand God is at work even in the middle of their pain. They understand suffering to be part of this broken, ruined, created order. Ultimately, they embrace suffering as part of following Christ who Himself suffered on behalf of all humanity. Viewed from this angle, suffering is hard but good. God using it to bring about His will and His glory while also continuing to sanctify and purify own hearts in the midst of it all. The reality is Job needs to be humbled and indeed will be humbled before the Lord of Hosts. We need to be humbled as well. This is one of the most important lessons from the Book of Job for all of us.

Readings for tomorrow: Job 37-40:1-5, Psalms 19

February 6, 2020

GOD IS GOD

Readings for today: Job 37- 40: 5; Psalm 19

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Job 40:6-42:17, Psalms 29

February 7, 2020

FEAR OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Job 40:6-42:17; Psalms 29

I am often asked about the “fear of the Lord.” After all, the Bible says it is the key to wisdom. The key to understanding. The key to a life well-lived before God. But what does it look like? Are we supposed to tremble in terror before God? Are we supposed to pass out in fear? Does it relate to reverence? Awe? Humility? What does it look like to fear the Lord? I think Job gives us the perfect picture.

“Then Job answered the Lord and said: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:1-6)

God is God and we are not. This is the fundamental truth of our existence. Who are we to question God? Who are we to challenge God? Who are we to doubt God? We are the clay. He is the potter. We are the instruments. He is the maestro. We are the tools. He is the craftsman. Thankfully, because God is gracious and merciful, He condescends to speak with us. Meet with us. Reveal Himself to us. He certainly doesn’t have to. He is not bound to. He is under no compulsion except that which He sets for Himself. He is not effected by any force outside His own will. He is perfectly free to do whatever He pleases and the good news is this…it pleases Him to dwell with us! It pleases Him to be in relationship with us! It pleases Him to give His life for us!

What a glorious truth! This same God who spoke to Job out of the whirlwind. The same God who confronted Job to answer the most profound questions of creation. The same God who allowed Job to suffer so much. This same God suffers even more for us. Jesus willingly lets go of the wealth and riches of heaven. He empties Himself of His divine knowledge and wisdom. He gives up His glory and honor as the only begotten Son of God. He gives the full measure of His devotion on the cross where He suffers and dies the most horrific death imaginable. All to save. All to deliver. All to rescue those He loves so much.

In the face of such love, all we can do is repent. Fall on our knees before Him in awe and wonder. Gaze at the Son as He suffers for our sins. Feel our hearts filled to overflowing with gratitude for this great gift. Sing praises to His great name. Lift up our lives before Him as living sacrifices. Offer all that we are and all that we have to Him as an act of worship. Truly we have uttered words too wonderful for us! Spoken of things which we did not understand! Seen things which we had no right to see and experienced things we did not deserve! All praise be to Jesus! King of kings! Lord of lords! God of gods! Beloved of my soul!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 1-4

February 8, 2020

EXTRAORDINARY POWER OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

Readings for today: Exodus 1-4

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

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

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

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

February 10, 2020

DELIVERER

Readings for today: Exodus 5-9

"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord."(Exodus 6:6-8)

I remember sitting in a seminary classroom listening to a professor discount the Exodus. He decried it as a mythological story. An event that never took place. At least not in the way it's told by the Bible. Instead, he suggested all kinds of replacement theories of his own. Each one more strange than the next. He argued it was a propaganda piece designed to give a group of people an identity. He argued the original Hebrews were a migrant, nomadic people who needed to give themselves political justification for settling down. He argued the Exodus never happened as a mass event but a series of migrations over time. All this sounded well and good until one student raised their hand and asked, "How can we describe God as deliverer if He never actually delivered anyone?" Silence. The professor began to stutter and stumble but the damage was done. His lofty arguments brought low by the simple, profound truth that propaganda pieces simply do not have the staying power he suggested. The fact that Israel has been telling and re-telling this story for centuries is strong evidence for it's historical veracity. Furthermore, the fact that so many marginalized and oppressed people have found inspiration and hope in this story suggests it must have a basis in truth. And perhaps most damningly, how in the world can we honestly believe in God as deliverer if He never actually acted within human history to deliver His people?

Thankfully, the overwhelming testimony of history stands against those who would seek to diminish this story. Just the fact that the Jewish people still exist when so many other tribal people groups disappeared should stand for something. After all, Israel was never a powerful empire like Egypt. Never attained cultural hegemony like Greece. Never exerted a powerful military presence like Rome or Babylon or Persia. At best, even under King Solomon, she remained a regional power, taking advantage of the lulls between the much greater empires that surrounded them. Secondly, arguing from the "silence" of the archaeological record has never been persuasive. Those who decry the lack of evidence in the Sinai peninsula for a mass migration of people have to acknowledge the difficulty of uncovering evidence that is over 3,000 years old. After all, they are finding military equipment in Sinai from the 1973 Yom Kippur War buried in over 52 feet of sand! Thirdly, it is important to read the Bible honestly. The author of the Exodus is clearly writing from the perspective of a Jew. As such, he had no interest in presenting an unbiased account. This doesn't make the story any less true but it does mean we have to read critically, lest we miss the overarching point. God is God.. Pharaoh is not. God is sovereign even over the greatest empires on the earth. God does what He wills. When He wills. For the primary purpose of promoting His own glory. Some would say this makes God an narcissist. Quite the contrary. It's part and parcel of what makes Him God.

The truly incredible part of the story to me is not even the deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It's the fact that God chooses to reveal Himself at all. If there is a God who stands outside time and space. A God who creates and rules over all He has made. An omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Being who exists eternally in perfect relationship within Himself. Then He has no need of me. No need

of us. No need of a people to call His own. This God has no need to enter history. No need to reveal Himself. He is not beholden to us. He doesn't owe us a thing. But what the Exodus makes clear is that this God desires a relationship with us. He makes Himself known to us. Not only that but He makes Himself known to us in a particular way. He is deliverer. He is redeemer. He is savior.

As seminal an event as the Exodus is for the people of Israel, it is but a foreshadowing of the "Exodus" that will take place on the cross. As Jesus hangs between heaven and earth, all of the "plagues" God stored up against the sin of humankind are poured out Him. He cries out in anguish. He thirsts. He suffers. He is in tremendous pain. He feels the lash of the whip. He endures the harsh words of the taskmaster. By becoming sin for us, Christ delivers us. He rescues us. He breaks the power of sin and death and rescues us from spiritual slavery to the devil. In short, He sets us free. This, friends, is how God chooses to make Himself known to the world. As a God who delivers! A God who redeems! A God who saves! May you place your trust in Him today!

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 10-13

February 11, 2020

DOES GOD HARDEN HEARTS?

Readings for today: Exodus 10-13

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 14-18

February 12, 2020

WALK BY FAITH

Readings for today: Exodus 14-18

Christians are called to walk by faith and not by sight. But what does this mean? For Israel, it meant taking a literal journey through the wilderness. It meant placing their lives literally in the hands of God.

They are camped at the shores of the Red Sea. Celebrating their newfound freedom. But then they hear the warhorns of the Egyptians. They see the dust from the chariots rising on the horizon. They feel the ground rumble beneath their feet. They cry out in fear. In anguish, they look to Moses who points them to the salvation of God. “Fear not! Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord which He will work for you today! For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see them again. The Lord will fight for you and you only have to be silent.” Trembling, Israel takes their first steps at the water’s edge only to watch it miraculously divide in front of them. They move through on dry ground. Once on the other side, they watch in awe as God brings the sea back together, consuming the Egyptian host. Moses and Miriam record one of the oldest songs of praise in the Bible.

They begin their journey to the Promised Land but quickly run out of water. They are parched. They are thirsty. They are afraid of dying. When they finally find water, it is bitter and poisoned and makes them sick. Again, they cry out in fear. They look to Moses who points them to the salvation of God. He throws a log into the well and the water became sweet. Not only that but he leads them to a place called Elim where the water is plentiful. An oasis in the desert.

They set out yet again. Into the wilderness. Into the desert. Food is scarce. They are hungry. Their stomachs are empty. They afraid of dying. They cry out in fear. They look to Moses and Aaron who point them again to the salvation of God. Manna will rain from heaven on a daily basis. God will provide for His people. God teaching His people to walk by faith and not by sight. “In the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord…” They wake up. Quail covered the camp. A fine, flake-like substance covered the ground. They gather. They eat their full. It is an effort they must repeat each day as God teaches them to rely on His daily bread.

What does this look like in your life? As I think back over the years, I can see where God was at work teaching me to walk by faith. I have experienced success and failure. I have been to the top of the mountain and in the darkest of valleys. I have seen pain and suffering. I have experienced hurt and heartbreak. I have been afraid. I have cried out to the Lord. Every time He has come through. Not always in the way I wanted. Not always in the way I thought best. Not always according to my plan. But always with enough to get me to the next step. Walking by faith in this world is not about never having a need. It’s not about the fulfillment of all our desires. It’s not about us living in health and wealth and abundance. It is about learning to rely on God each and every day. Trusting Him for every step in the journey. Believing Him even when things seem bleak and circumstances dire. God is with us. God is teaching us to depend on Him. Open your hands. Open your hearts. Listen to Him. Learn from Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 19-21

February 13, 2020

FORMING A PEOPLE

Readings for today: Exodus 19-21

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 22-24

February 14, 2020

DIVINE RHYTHMS

Readings for today: Exodus 22-24

One of the few things everyone seems to agree on these days is the growing mental health crisis in America. So much is made of the levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions that erode our quality of life and seem to present insurmountable barriers to human flourishing. Sadly, too many turn to pharmaceuticals for answers. Opioids. Psychotropics. Pot. Now let me be quick to say I am not against taking medication to correct chemical imbalances. I myself have been taking a pill every day since I was about 23 to correct my thyroid condition. So I get it on some level. However, it is clear to many that we are an over-medicated society. We seem unwilling to make the kind of lifestyle changes necessary to protect our physical, mental, and emotional health. One of the main areas we see this is in our addiction to work.

"Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant woman, and the alien, may be refreshed." (Exodus 23:12)

Imagine you are an Israelite. You've just been set free from slavery. From an existence where you were forced to endure a life of hard labor. Seven days a week. Four weeks a month. 52 weeks a year. Never a day off. Never allowed to rest. Never allowed to take a break and a breath and just relax. This is the only life you've know and it is the only life your ancestors have known for generations. It would be tempting to assume this is just how life is. You're born. You work. You die. But God has a different plan for His people. He doesn't view His people primarily as cogs in a machine or tools to be used or commodities to be used up but as creatures made in His image. As such, they literally have hardwired into their DNA a divine rhythm. A way of life modeled after the life of God. God works six days and rests. Human beings work six days and then rest. On a very practical level this is what it means to follow God.

Most psychologists will tell you the root of our mental health crisis begins with our lack of sleep. Human beings are biologically designed to get 7-8 hours of sleep a night. Furthermore, we are not robots. We were not made to work 24/7. We must get rest. We must take a break. We need downtime. When we don't get these things, we end up anxious and afraid. We end up depressed and struggling with despair. Left unchecked, we engage in self-harm and entertain thoughts of suicide.

What solution does God offer us in the midst of our addiction to work and busyness? Sabbath. Rest. One day a week where we refrain the work we do the other six days. A break. A day dedicated to worship and rest and restorative practices. A day devoted to recovery. Mentally. Physically. Emotionally from the toil and trials of the rest of the week. What does it look like? Depends on the person. Jesus said, "Sabbath is made for man not man for the Sabbath." In other words, Sabbath is a gift. It is given to us to use for our own benefit. As such, it will look different for every person.

God is passionate about us keeping a Sabbath because God is passionate about the health of His people. He longs for us to experience rest. Relaxation. Peace. Hope Joy. These are the fruits of a Sabbath lifestyle. So take a moment and examine your life. Do you take one day out of every seven to rest? To relax? To refrain from the activities you do the other six days? Do you intentionally set aside time for worship? For yourself? For those activities that fill your soul? How are you seeking to maintain the divine rhythm hardwired into your soul?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 25-28

February 15, 2020

FINDING OURSELVES IN THE STORY

Readings for today: Exodus 25-28

So many reading plans start to crash at this part of the journey. Making our way though the latter parts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers is a real struggle. It's easy to breeze over the blueprints of the tabernacle. Skim through the thread counts of the priestly garments. Get lost in the weeds of all the laws in Leviticus. And then stop reading altogether once we hit the statistical reports in the Book of Numbers. I've been doing this for over twenty years. I get it. The readings start to feel boring. Pointless. Worthless.

But perhaps that's because we read the Bible selfishly. Perhaps it's because we read with a desire to "get something out of it" rather than read ourselves into it. Perhaps it's because we project our own experiences and biases and cultural understandings back onto the text which makes it feel so foreign and strange. We look at all this detail and we can't understand it. We wonder why God's so concerned about the furnishings of the sanctuary or what His people eat or what they wear. We struggle to grasp the significance of all the offerings the people bring and why God demands such things in the first place. We start to wonder if the God of the Old Testament truly is capricious and arbitrary and not worthy to be trusted.

This is why it is so important to pay attention to verses like Exodus 25:22. "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel." It's important to stop. Ponder. Pray over verses like this that we will find sprinkled throughout the text. It reminds us that everything God does has a purpose. And that purpose is to make it possible for His people to be in relationship with Him. Take a step back for just a minute. The omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent God of the universe is under no obligation to interact with His people. God could just as easily washed His hands of this whole human mess when Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden. He has a universe to run. Surely He has better things He could be doing with His time? And yet, He chooses to love us. He chooses to reveal Himself to us. He chooses to meet with us. Dwell with us. Live in covenantal relationship with us. It's astounding!

Sin causes us to forget our place. We are not the center of the universe. So in order to read the Bible for all its worth, we have to set aside our natural, sinful inclination to make it all about us. These books were not written so that we could get something out of them. Some nugget of wisdom or inspiration to put on a coffee cup or post on Twitter. The Bible was written to describe the history of God's interactions with the people He had chosen from among the nations of the earth. This is their story. This is their history. And we only "get something out of it" if we seek first to immerse ourselves in it.

What does that look like? Here we have to exercise our imaginations. Imagine being a young Israelite child. Each night before bed you see the scars on your father's back from the whips he endured in Egypt. Your mother, now in her late twenties, looks ancient because of the physical, psychological, and sexual trauma she's endured. Your older siblings tell you very real horror stories of what life was like when you and your family were slaves. Each day is a struggle for survival. You barely have enough to eat. Barely have enough to drink. Your legs are tired from the miles you've walked. Your back hurts from the burdens you've carried. And now you find yourself at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The summit surrounded by smoke and fire. The ground shakes occasionally. Thunder rolls. Some of the older people tell you it's the voice of God. You've seen His power firsthand. The plagues. The pillar of fire.

The parting of the Red Sea. But you don't know this God. You've never met this God. You have idea if you can trust this God. All you know is that He seems to be on your side…for now.

How would you learn more about this God? How would learn to love this God? How would you learn to worship this God? Only if He chose to teach you. Only if He chose to reveal Himself to you. Only if He chose to dwell with you. So Moses and Aaron start to give you instructions on how to build a sanctuary. A place for God to dwell. You start to meet with this God. You learn to recognize His voice. You learn to follow His will. A relationship begins to form. You feel loved. Protected. Cared for. Watched over. Then Moses and Aaron start to issue laws that will govern your collective life together. A national identity begins to take shape. You realize you are part of something bigger than yourself. Part of a not only a family and a clan and a tribe but a nation that God Himself has chosen out of all the nations of the earth. And as your heart fills with gratitude and love for all God has done for you and your people, you begin to bring Him offerings. Silver and gold and the finest animals of your flock. Not because you have to but because you want to return back to Him the best of what He's given to you.

As you read over the next several days and weeks, keep pushing yourself to become part of the story. Don't just read for information. Don't even read for inspiration. Read with a desire to find yourself in the story. Read with a desire to come alongside and experience life with our spiritual fathers and mothers. Read with a desire to understand what life must have been like for them as they were learning all about this new God. And as you walk in their sandals a bit, trust God to reveal Himself to you in new and fresh ways.

February 17, 2020

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Readings for today: Exodus 29-32

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

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

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

Moses is quick to respond. And he prays one of the most important prayers in human history. "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them out, to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your burning anger and relent from this disaster against your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them, 'I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your offspring, and they shall inherit it forever.'" And the Lord relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people." (Ex. 32:11-14) Moses is quick to remind God whose people He's really talking about. These are God's people. They are the people God delivered by His own hand. If God were to destroy them, God's reputation would suffer. The Egyptians - before whom God has made Himself known - would begin to doubt and question Him. The promise God had given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would become null and void. This is an incredible prayer of faith. An incredible prayer of trust.

Trusting God to stay true to His character. Trusting God to stay faithful to His promises. There is no question in Moses' mind that God will remain true to Himself so Moses prays in confidence and faith. .

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 33-36

February 18, 2020

REVELATION

Readings for today: Exodus 33-36

Imagine you are an ancient Israelite. Camping out at the foot of Sinai. You've spent generations enslaved in Egypt. All you know about God is what you've seen and experienced. Unbridled power over the heavens and the earth. Terrifying plagues. Pillars of fire and cloud. Seas parting. Manna falling. Smoke and fire and thunder and earthquakes emanating from the top of a mountain. Swift and harsh judgment when you crossed this deity. This God is certainly not safe. He is certainly not tame. He is certainly not domesticated to your needs, wants, and desires. You probably have a lot of questions about this God. Can He be trusted? Will He be faithful? Will He keep His promises?

You look to Moses. The man who speaks with this God face to face. The man who seems to know this God intimately. The man who intercedes with this God on your behalf. Moses, tell us about this God. Moses, who is this God? Moses, does this God even have a name? Yes. His name is YHWH. I am who I am. He is "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) Ahhh. Things are now starting to come into focus. This God is not simply omnipotent. He is benevolent. He is gracious. He is merciful. He is faithful. He is true. He abounds in steadfast love. And though His justice will be meted out over three to four generations, His favor will last forever. This is good news! This is great news! This is the God of Israel! The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! Now we see! Now we understand! Now we worship not just in fear but in awe and wonder at all God has done!

As I shared the other day, you have put yourself into the story. You have to put yourself in the sandals of an ancient Israelite. They do not have the benefit we do of looking back post-resurrection. They do not know anything about a Messiah. They haven't yet seen the Promised Land. The kingdom God will forge under David's leadership is still generations away. There have been no prophetic warnings. No psalms written. No proverbs issued. They haven't even been given the Levitical Law. No wonder they struggle. No wonder they rebel. No wonder they complain. They have so little to go on here.

Not so with us. We have the full revelation of God. As the Apostle John says so beautifully, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4) John is referring to Jesus, of course. The perfect revelation of God. The perfect icon of God. The perfect image of God. The Word of God made flesh and blood and come to dwell among us. In Him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. In Christ is the wisdom and power of God. In Christ is the joy and peace of God. Christ is the mercy of God. The grace of God. The faithfulness of God. The steadfast love of God. What God first revealed to Moses up on that mountain comes to its fullest expression in a manger in Bethlehem. "And we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

How did Moses respond when God revealed Himself to him? He bowed his face to the ground in worship. How did Israel respond when God revealed Himself to them? They bowed their faces to the ground in worship. How do we respond to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? We bow our faces to the ground in worship. Friends, we worship a jealous God. A God who cares deeply about receiving the worship He deserves and the worship He demands. How are you living your life today as an act of worship?

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 37-40

February 19, 2020

STAYING IN OUR LANE

Readings for today: Exodus 37-40

"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys." (Exodus 40:34-38)

An atheist accidentally broke Twitter the other day when he/she posted, "Christianity is a belief that one God created a universe 13.79 billion years old, 93 billion light years in diameter (1 light year = approx 6 trillion miles), consisting of over 200 billion galaxies, each containing an average of 200 billion stars, all to have a personal relationship with you." What they intended for snark, Christians naturally picked up and retweeted like crazy as a great description of what our faith believes. It's truly astounding to consider. The God who created all things. The universe and all that is in it. The earth and all that is in it. The God who knit each of us together in our mother's wombs. Who calls each star by name. Who sets the planets in motion. Who governs the universe by His Word. This same God desires to have a relationship with us. Desires to dwell with us. Desires to have a people to call His very own.

Perhaps this puts everything we're reading into proper perspective. I know it's easy to get lost in all the details of the tabernacle. It's easy to wonder why God cares so much about the furnishings of the place where He will dwell. It's tempting to project on God our own issues of greed, jealousy, envy, etc. (Why does God need all the gold and opulence?) Sometimes we even take the step of placing ourselves in judgment over God as we question His motives, doubt His intentions, and challenge His authority. But then we have to take a step back and remember who it is we are talking about. We are talking about the same God who created everything listed in that atheist's tweet above. So perhaps His ways are higher than our ways? Perhaps His thoughts are higher than our thoughts? Perhaps He is under no obligation to explain Himself to us? Perhaps He doesn't answer to us? Perhaps He is so far above and beyond us and we should remember our place?

Sally McFague once defined sin as a "refusal to remain in our place." We aspire to be gods. We aspire to be like God. We refuse to stay in the role of a servant. We refuse to remain in our place as God's instruments of blessing in this world. We want more. We want it all. We want to reign and rule and exercise our own dominion over all God has made. In our pride, we believe we should be the masters of our own destinies and the captains of our own souls. In our ignorance, we believe we have the right and the standing to challenge God on His terms. We are fools.

What's the answer? Humility. Submission. Giving God the worship He deserves and the worship He demands. Trusting God's character. Knowledge. Wisdom. Understanding. Ultimately, it's about knowing our role. Staying in our lane. Remaining in our place. As we do that, we find incredible freedom. Perfect peace. Surpassing joy. All because we are embracing the role God designed us to play within the context of His larger creative purposes.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 1-4

February 20, 2020

SURVIVING LEVITICUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 1-4

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

The first thing we need to understand as we approach this book is that much of what it talks about has to do with the different kinds of law that governed Israel. There were the ceremonial laws. Laws governing sacrifice. Laws governing worship. Laws governing what is holy and unholy, clean and unclean. Most of these laws were fulfilled once and for all by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. (In fact, all of the sacrifices we'll read about in Leviticus foreshadow the sacrifice of the Messiah.) Because the ceremonial laws were fulfilled, Christians no longer are required to keep them. Another set of laws contained in Leviticus had to do with the national life of Israel. Taxation. Property. Commerce. That kind of thing. Because those laws were tailored to the theocratic rule of ancient Israel, they are no longer binding on Christians today. Because the bulk of Leviticus has to do with ceremonial and national laws, it is tempting to dismiss the book as some antiquated piece of history not worth our time. That would be a mistake! For embedded in this book are important tenets of what we call the "moral" law which IS still instructive and binding on us today. The key is to know which is which and how to discern between the three types of law.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 5-7

February 21, 2020

GRAVITY

Readings for today: Leviticus 5-7

Gravity. It's the force that holds all things together. It's the attraction between two bodies. It's what keeps our feet on the ground. It's what holds the planets in orbit around the sun. The more massive an object, the stronger it's gravitational pull. Now think about God. He is the most massive being in the universe. He is the creator. The author. The sustainer of all things. As powerful as our sun is sitting at the center of our solar system. Keeping planets in their orbit. Extending it's will throughout the galaxy. It simply cannot compare to God. God holds the universe together. God holds every star. Every planet. Every comet. Every living thing. All of it in the palm of His hand.

What does any of this have to do with the sacrifices we're reading about in Leviticus? I'm glad you asked! :-) Just as God designed our solar system with the sun at its center, so God designs human life with Himself at the center. Everything we say and do should revolve around God. Everything we say and do should be oriented around God. Everything we say and do should flow from God. The Exodus from Egypt represented a new birth for Israel. Before God delivered them, they had no identity. No national consciousness. No idea who they were and - more importantly - whose they were. They were lost. Wandering. A nation without a god. But then God saves them. Rescues them. Baptizes them as His people in the Red Sea. Provides for them like newborns with manna and water in the desert. And now He begins to teach them His way of life. He begins to show them what life looks like when it revolves around Him. It's a life of worship. A life of sacrifice. A life of almost daily covenant renewal. It's a life designed to exert a gravitational pull on their hearts so they feel constantly drawn back to Him.

Sin offerings. Grain offerings. Peace offerings. Guilt offerings. The fires at the Temple would have been burning day and night. The smell would have drifted over the entire camp. The reminder that everything Israel possessed belonged to the Lord. Everything they had achieved was made possible by God. They had been bought with a price. They had been purchased. God had set His love upon them and they were now His chosen people. As such, their entire way of life would now revolve around Him. No detail would be too small to escape His notice.

The same is true for us. Just as the planets in our solar system revolve around the sun so our lives are designed by God to revolve around His Son. Christ exerts a will and a force all His own. He pulls us into His orbit. He refuses to let us go. Once He's captured us, we cannot escape. And this is a good thing! We were not made to be the center of our own little worlds. We were not designed to carry the weight of a god. We are not strong enough. We are not wise enough. Left to our own devices, we will spin out of orbit and drift aimlessly through life like a rock drifting aimlessly through space. Sure, we may have some fun along the way. Sure, we may do some good things. We may make somewhat of an impact. After all, our lives do exert some measure of gravitational pull on those around us. But we will not find the peace we all long for. We will not experience the depth of love we were made for. We will not share the joy God intends for us to experience. Not without Him at the center.

Christianity is as much a way of life as it is a belief system. Centering your life on Christ requires the practice of certain spiritual disciplines that will orient and re-orient your heart every single day. Just as the Israelites brought sacrifices to God, so we should bring sacrifices of praise. Daily. Weekly. Annually. This is why spending time with God each day is essential. Worshipping with God's people each week a must. Celebrating the great feasts of our faith on Easter and Christmas vitally important as we seek to remain in Christ's orbit. Frankly, it's why we feel that pull on our hearts. That tug on our souls. It's not guilt that drives us to worship God. It's His Spirit. Calling to us. Reaching out for us. Exerting a gravitational pull on our lives to draw us in.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 8-10

February 22, 2020

STRANGE FIRE

Readings for today: Leviticus 8-10

I love this quote from Annie Dillard. “On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?” I tend to agree. We do not have any appreciation for the sheer power and utter holiness of the One we approach Sunday after Sunday. We treat Him far too casually. We get far too wrapped up in musical preference, liturgical style, the personality of the preacher, or “getting something out of the sermon.”

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

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

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

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

February 24, 2020

THE MIRACLE OF HEALING

Readings for today: Leviticus 11-14

One of humanity's deepest fears is disease. Pestilence. Plague. Something unseen that steals life. We've all felt it. We've all struggled with it. If not personally then with those we love. Unseen proteins build up in the brain, robbing us of our memory. Unseen plaque builds up in our arteries, causing our hearts to fail. Unseen blood clots break loose, laying us low with a stroke. Unseen cells go haywire and we've got cancer.

I think of the rising anxiety and panic in the gay community in the early 1980's as a mysterious disease began appear in different clusters around Los Angeles, New York City, and San Francisco. A new epidemic had been born that seemingly attacked the human immune system. As gay men began to die in ever-increasing numbers, the reaction was tragic. Preachers called it God's judgment on immorality. The government put quarantines in place and began stopping the infected at the border. Those exposed to the disease were isolated and ostracized as our society gave into her homophobic instincts. Thankfully, there were many who fought their fear and took action. Raising awareness and funds for research. Lobbying the government to institute more humane public policy. Developing more effective treatments that allowed those with the disease to live relatively normal lives and put an end to the stigma that isolated them from society.

More recently, consider the H1N1 scare a few years back. This one hit us personally. One of our twins contracted it when she was four years old. The doctors told us to keep her hydrated and at home. The health clinics and hospitals didn't want the infection spreading so they asked people to be cautious and treat themselves. I remember watching my daughter get sicker and sicker and finally took her to our doctor and demanded she be seen. She was admitted to the hospital with life-threatening double pneumonia. Ugh. Now, I don't blame our doctors or healthcare professionals for what happened and thankfully our daughter made a full recovery. However, the fear that almost kept her from getting the care she needed continues to this day. Just look at the current global response to the coronavirus. There is something primordial about our fear of disease.

The ancient Israelites were no different. They too struggled with all kinds of anxiety over disease. They feared what they could not see. What they could not understand. They had firsthand experience watching a plague burn through an entire village. They knew what could happen should disease be left unchecked. So they were meticulous. When someone's skin erupted, they were sent to the priest. When someone's home showed signs of mildew or rot, they were quick to respond. When mold started to grow on clothing, they wasted no time. Please note the goal was never to marginalize the sick. Never to tear down a home or burn a garment. The hope was always to restore. To trust God for healing and provision. However, there were times when extreme measures had to be taken to protect the rest of the village or community.

Thankfully we live in a time where medical miracles have become the norm. Modern medicine. Surgical techniques. Treatment options. These are signs of God's Kingdom breaking into our world. It is part of the dominion God originally intended for human beings. We were designed to be healers. To care for all creation. To mend that which is torn. To restore that which is ruined. To make the broken whole. This is why so much of Jesus' own ministry was one of healing. One of restoration. One of purifying the unclean. God desires that all should be saved and salvation impacts the whole person. God desires our healing from disease. Our healing from isolation and loneliness. Our healing from marginalization and ostracism. Yes, such healing may not come this side of heaven but it is always what God is working towards. It is what we should be working towards as well. This is the heart that beats behind the words of Leviticus.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 15-18

February 25, 2020

SEXUAL PURITY

Readings for today: Leviticus 15-18

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

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

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

All one has to do is look around our culture today to see the consequences of unfettered sexual freedom. Sexually transmitted disease. Sexual abuse and assault. Unwanted pregnancies. The

objectification of the female and male bodies. Rampant divorce and infidelity. The breakdown of families. Depression and anxiety and fear surrounding every potential sexual encounter and/or its aftermath. It's heartbreaking. God's desire is for us to repent and commit ourselves to holiness. Holy sexuality is expressed in celibacy in singleness and intimacy in marriage between a man and a woman. I realize taking a traditional, Biblical position on sexuality in our world today will draw scorn and even accusations of bigotry. However, I believe when one takes a step back and looks objectively at the empirical data surrounding the consequences of pursuing a sexual ethic divorced from the Bible, one can easily conclude God probably knows better. We would do well to trust Him in this area of our lives and submit our sexuality to His Will as revealed in His Word.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 19-22

February 26, 2020

LIFE TOGETHER

Readings for today: Leviticus 19-22

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 23-25

February 27, 2020

SPEED BUMPS

Readings for today: Leviticus 23-25

We had some neighbors over for dinner a few years back. A young couple with two young children. We had a delightful time getting to know them. We laughed. We shared. We ate good food. Our kids played well together. But in the course of our conversation they let us know they had NEVER been over to another person's house for dinner. Crazy, right? So we started asking them about their lives. The husband travelled almost 300 days a year for work. The wife woke up early every morning to take her daughter to softball training. Dropped her son off at before care at his school. Went back to get her daughter to take her to school. Went to her job. Had her parents pick up both kids after school. Dropped by her parent's house to get the kids on her way home from work around 6 pm. Took them to their softball and baseball practices respectively. Tried to grab a quick bite to eat and some quick snatches of conversation along the way with her kids. Finally got home around 9 pm every night. This was their life in some form seven days a week. 52 weeks a year. Occasionally, they would get a vacation here and there but always in and around their kids' sports schedules. It was brutal. Unsurprisingly, they didn't make it. They got divorced about a year later.

Sadly, this is normal life for a lot of people. They work hard. They play hard. They drive their kids hard. They barely get enough sleep. Barely get enough to eat. Barely get enough time together. Their relationships fracture. Their friendships are non-existent. They suffer from anxiety and depression. But rather than slow down. Rather than pump the brakes on life. They medicate. They act out sexually. They crash and burn. It's heartbreaking.

Contrast this way of life with God's ways in Leviticus 23. Sabbath. One day out of every seven where we refrain from work. One day out of every seven where we slow down. Focus on worship. Focus on each other. Focus on the relationships that are most important. Passover. An annual celebration intentionally focused on the salvation of God. Firstfruits. An annual celebration intentionally focused on God's abundant provision. Weeks. An annual celebration of God's revelation of Himself to His people though His Word. Trumpets. Another celebration of God's provision at harvest time. Day of Atonement. One day set aside each year for national and individual confession and repentance of sin. Booths. An annual celebration designed to remind God's people of their utter dependence on God as they wandered in the wilderness. Taken together, these weekly and annual feasts serve to slow God's people down. They act as spiritual speed bumps in life. They remind us life is more than what we produce. Life is more than what we achieve. Life does not depend on us and our strength and our willpower. Life is God's. He gives. He takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Friends, we must face reality. The American way of life is killing us. Literally. It is bad for our mental, physical, and emotional health. We were not built for the pace we're trying to keep. We were not designed for the race we're trying to run. We were not created for the life we're trying to live. We were made for a different world. A different life. An eternal existence. Something so deep and meaningful and purposeful, the garlands of this world come off withered by comparison. In the face of all God has planned for us, the trophies of this world lose their shine. As the old hymn says so well, "the things of earth grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace."

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 26-Numbers 2

February 28, 2020

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Readings for today: Leviticus 26-Numbers 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 3-5

February 29, 2020
CREATION MANDATE

Readings for today: Numbers 3-5

The first command given to human beings in the Bible comes from Genesis 1:28. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Human beings were set up by God to serve as His priests and priestesses over all creation. To serve as His instruments of blessing and glory in the world. They were given His image and called to bear that image into all the earth. Essentially, they were called to lead all of creation in worship and praise of the Living God. As they cared for and cultivated and nurtured all God had made, each living thing would live in peace and harmony with one another and with the One who had created them. I love how the Westminster Confession puts it, “Human being’s chief end is to worship God and enjoy Him forever.” And I would simply add we are not just to do this for ourselves but to lead all God has made to this same chief end.

Fast forward several generations. Past the Fall. Past the Flood. Past the call of Abram and Sarai. Past the Exodus. Now God’s people stand on the cusp of the Promised Land. And God is revealing Himself to them once again. Reminding them of His claim on their lives. Reminding them of the role He has called them to play. It is so easy to read through Numbers and get lost in the weeds. Lost in all the genealogies and details over how many silver plates and how many animals to bring to sacrifice. But if one pauses and takes a step back, one can see how God has fulfilled His original command. Israel has been fruitful. Israel has multiplied. Israel is filling the earth. Israel is beginnng to exercise dominion. It’s remarkable! In fact, it’s miraculous what God has done. From one family, He is filling the earth. From one promised son, He has brought many descendants. They truly outnumber the stars and the sands on the seashore. Out of brokenness, God has brought redemption. Out of slavery, God has brought freedom. Out of despair, God has brought hope.

Why would God do all these things? Because God remains committed to His original mandate. God’s great desire is to fill the earth with His glory. He will have the worship He deserves and the worship He demands. So He sends us - His people - out to the ends of the earth. To bear His image. To bear His likeness. To give the world a picture of what life looks like in the Kingdom. He sends us out to fulfill our original calling. To serve as priests and priestesses for the world. To lead the earth and all that is in it - every living creature - in praise of the One who created us. God wants us to enjoy Him! God wants us to delight in Him! God wants us to treasure Him above all else! This is why were created. This is why we were called. This is why we were saved. To declare His praises among the nations.

Friends, how are you fulfilling your priestly calling? Do you intercede in prayer regularly for those God has put in your life? Do you encourage them and lift them up? Do you lead them to worship God in spirit and in truth? Do you invite them into a relationship with Jesus Christ? And how are you cultivating your own relationship with God? Do you delight in Him? Do you enjoy being in His presence? Do you seek His face? Do you believe God wants to make you fruitful? Multiply your influence? Send you out to proclaim His gospel to all the earth? Give you dominion over all He has placed in your care? It’s a sacred trust. The implications are enormous. It means everything you do carries eternal weight and significance. God wants to use you right where He has you for His glory in the world. Believe this! And trust His grace to see you through!

March 2, 2020

WAITING ON GOD

Readings for today: Numbers 6-9

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 10-13, Psalms 90

March 3, 2020

THE LEADERSHIP BURDEN

Readings for today: Numbers 10-13, Psalm 90

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

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

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

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

to help lead and guide the people. They are filled with the same Spirit. They are given some of the same gifts. They will lighten the load.

Why is leadership so hard? Because we too often go it alone. I've known too many pastors who crash and burn because they have no friends. No colleagues to share their burdens with. I've known too many moms and dads who refuse to let others come alongside them and help. I've known too many business leaders who think their business cannot survive without them. Too many teachers who believe the success or failure of each child rests on them.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

March 4, 2020

TREASON

Readings for today: Numbers 14-16, Psalm 95

One of the hardest ideas to get our minds around when we read Scripture is to remember our position before God. God is God. He is the Creator. The Ruler. The Sustainer of all things. He holds complete and total authority over life and death. His will is perfect. His character is holy and righteous. His desires are always pure. He is not a man that He should lie. He is not a man that He should change His mind. He is not given to fits of emotion nor is He ruled by His passions. He is not like us. He is wholly other. His ways are not our ways. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. As far as the heavens are above the earth so far is God's understanding beyond our own. He dwells in unapproachable light. He exists outside time and space. He lives in a dimension all His own. He cannot be questioned. He cannot be challenged. To disobey Him is to invite judgment. The very fact that He doesn't just wipe out all creation and start over is an act of pure mercy and grace. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

I love how pastor and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, once put it, "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood." It's a sobering reality when we stop to think about it. It rightfully engenders fear in our hearts. The righteousness and holiness of God's justice should cause us to fall on our faces before God in humble submission and deep gratitude for the mercy that stays His hand.

God is faithful. He delivered His people out of Egypt. He rescued them from slavery. He provided for them in the wilderness. He guided them right to the brink of the Promised Land. And there…standing on the brink of the fulfillment of all God's promises…they rebelled. They turned away. They refused to go in. Not only did they refuse to go forward, they actually made a plan to go backwards. Back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to bondage. They rejected Moses. They rejected Aaron. They wanted a new leader. A new direction. A new vision that didn't include God. It's heartbreaking to read. And it rightfully stirs God to righteous anger. The reality is the people of Israel were walking the razor's edge. Putting God to the test. Would He remain true to His nature and character in the face of their persistent and stubborn rebellion?

Thankfully, God is faithful. It's critical to note that when Moses makes intercession, he makes no excuse for the people. Instead, he calls on God to be faithful to Himself. "And now, please let the power of the Lord be great as you have promised, saying, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Numbers 14:17-18) And God answers Moses' prayer. He pardons His people but by no means clears the guilty. They will fall in the wilderness. None of them shall see the Promised Land. An entire generation shall die in judgment. But God is also merciful. He will take their children into the Land. They will possess it. They will see the fulfillment of God's promise.

Friends, it is hard to come face to face with God's righteous judgment. Hard to see His wrath on display. Hard to watch as His people suffer the consequences for their rebellion. Hard because it reminds us of the harsh reality of our sin. Sin is not just a small mistake. It is not just an error in judgment. It is not just a poor decision. To commit sin is to commit treason against our divine King and Master. And the penalty for treason is always death. This is the judgment all of us have earned by our

action and inaction. None of us is righteous. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. None of us is worthy of salvation. And yet God still loves us. He is steadfast. Loyal. Faithful. True. Nothing can separate us from His love and He seals this promise with His own blood. Returning to the Edwards quote above, God turns the arrow towards Himself. Shoots it into the heart of His only begotten Son. Jesus takes the punishment we deserved. Jesus endures the wrath we rightfully earned. Jesus pays the price for our treason. Thanks be to God for the gift of His Son!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 17-20

March 5, 2020

BLAME SHIFT

Readings for today: Numbers 17-20

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21-24

March 6, 2020

THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE

Readings for today: Numbers 21-24

When I was in college, I used to go to lunch at Daddy's Bruce's Pit BBQ. It was a little hole in the wall place near the campus run by one of the most godly men I have ever met. "Daddy Bruce" - as he was affectionately called – was a larger than life African-American man who loved Jesus with all his heart. His father - the original Daddy Bruce - had become famous in Denver for serving the homeless a turkey dinner each year for Thanksgiving. The Daddy Bruce I knew followed in his father's footsteps, often serving those in need alongside paying customers. The first time I met Daddy Bruce, he found out I was a Christian. From that point forward, every time I showed up I had to have a Bible verse memorized in order to get my food. Daddy Bruce taught me to love the Scriptures. He told me story after story from the Bible. I am convinced he had most of it memorized. As I would sit at his little bar and eat my BBQ, he would get more and more wound up. He'd start preaching up a storm and the whole restaurant would stop to listen. It was amazing. Daddy Bruce had a way with words. He was a gifted orator. Steeped in the rich black preaching tradition, his preaching was verbal art. I still remember him introducing me to the story of Balaam. "Doug", he said in his thick southern accent, "when you come in here I don't want to hear no Footprints in the Sand. I don't want to hear 'bout some Prayer of Serenity. Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that's in the Bible!" Oh, how I miss that man!

The story of Balaam is a significant one in Scripture. Believe it or not, it becomes a sort of cautionary tale that is referenced throughout the Old and New Testaments. Over and over again, God's people are warned to avoid the sins of Balaam. And what are those sins? Divination. Sorcery. Fortune-telling. Balaam was a hired gun. He would bless or curse others for money. He was an ancient witch doctor with a powerful and fearsome reputation in that part of the world. So when Israel comes up out of Egypt and threatens Moab, the king sends for him. "Come now, curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them from the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." (Numbers 22:6) The idea being that Balaam will fire the first salvo in the coming battle and weaken Israel so Moab might prevail. Shockingly, the Lord speaks to Balaam through his pagan rituals, warning him off. But Balak knows Balaam's greedy reputation so he sends more princes and more money and Balaam relents. This stirs the anger of the Lord. So He essentially tells Balaam, "Thy will be done" and sends him on his way. However, the Lord isn't finished. He's not going to let Balaam off the hook quite yet. Under no circumstances will Balaam be allowed to curse Israel. So God sends an angel to oppose Balaam. To stand in his way. To humble Balaam. And thus we have this strange conversation between Balaam, his donkey, and the angel of the Lord.

Sometimes God uses the "foolish things of this world to shame the wise." I can think of many times over the course of my life where God has used my children to teach me things I was too proud to see. I can think of many times over the course of my life where the simple faith of desperately poor men and women showed me things about Jesus that I – a trained theologian - had forgotten. I can think of many times over the course of my life where God has confronted me in my pride, privilege, relative wealth and power. In each case, He used something simple. Something weak. Something the world might easily dismiss to show me the error of my ways. No, my dog has never spoken to me! But God forbid I ever get to the place where he would have to! Instead, I pray daily for the humility to not think more highly of myself than I ought or less of my self than I ought but simply to think of my "self" less.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 25-28

March 7, 2020

WHOLE-HEARTED DEVOTION

Readings for today: Numbers 25-28

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

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

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

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

Unfortunately, this temptation is common to us all. I cannot tell you the number of people I have married over the years who engaged in premarital sex but then wanted God's blessing on their relationship. I cannot tell you the number of people over the years who shared with me God told them to get divorced. I cannot tell you the number of people who told me they felt God blessed their adultery. And it's not just sex. I've heard the same arguments from parents who try to justify putting

their child's activities above everything else in their life, including their marriage and the worship of God. I've heard the same arguments from individuals who justify their climb up the corporate ladder, no matter the cost to their family and friends. And I've heard similar arguments from addicts who justify their dependence on pills or alcohol or pot or some other drug that numbs all their pain. We seem so eager and willing to sacrifice everything on the altar of self-gratification, self-indulgence, and self-promotion. It's like we're still worshiping the Baal of Peor!

Friends, God will not be mocked! God will not tolerate our sin. We cannot pretend there won't be consequences for our rebellion. It may not be Phineas with his spear but it could be much, much worse. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) What sin are you indulging in your life right now? What thoughts do you entertain? What feelings are you holding onto? What activities are you engaging in that will bring down God's judgment? A man by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr once argued that too many Christians want to believe in a "God without wrath bringing men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross." If you have fallen for this lie, you need to repent. If words like "judgment", "sin", "wrath", etc. have fallen out of your vocabulary, you are in danger of missing out on the heart of the gospel. Yes, God is love. But because God is love, He hates our sin. Because God is love, He sent His Son to die. Because God is love, He bore the wrath we deserved. Paid the price we owed. Satisfied the judgment we earned. God's love is not some warm fuzzy. It is fierce. Jealous. Loyal. Steadfast. True. And it will not tolerate any rivals.

March 9, 2020

HOLY WAR

Readings for today: Numbers 29-32

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

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

You may remember the 2nd Commandment. “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,” (Exodus 20:4-5) God is jealous for His divine name. Jealous for His divine glory. Jealous for His relationship with His people. He makes clear over and over again throughout the Scriptures that He will tolerate no rivals. So when Israel begins to worship the Midianite gods, God takes action. First, he punishes Israel as I mentioned above. Then He calls for holy war. He commands His people to attack Midian and “execute the Lord’s vengeance.” Vengeance not in the sense of God losing control and lashing out but vengeance in the sense of the righteous execution of God’s justice. Israel is successful. They kill all the males that come against them. They take the women and children hostage. They plunder their possessions. Then they go one step further. As an act of ritual purity, they kill all the male children and any women who is not a virgin. It is brutal. It is horrifying. It is judgment. The women were just as guilty as the Israelite men in the sin of idolatry at Peor and their guilt conveys to their male children as well who - if left alive - might seek their own revenge against Israel in the future. (Blood feuds between tribes and clans were common in ancient times and could last generations.)

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn’t square with our culturally notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how our God could ever act in such ways. This is where we come face to face with God’s holiness. God’s righteousness. God’s justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He does not let it go. He does not overlook our sin. He does not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. This is why the cross is itself so brutal and horrifying. There God pours out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on His Son. Satisfying the demands of divine justice through Jesus’ suffering and death. On the cross, the truly innocent One dies in our place.

So what is our response? Repentance. Repentance is the only appropriate response of the creature when confronted by the Creator and this is the lesson we must all take away. God will not be mocked. Not back then. Not now. Not in the future. God is a God of love and mercy and grace but He is also a God of holiness and righteousness and justice. He is quick to forgive the sin of those who repent but He is also faithful to judge those who persist in their rebellion. Humble yourself before the Lord before it is too late. Embrace the Son and what He has done for you. Give your life to Christ that you might be saved from the coming judgment.

Readings for today: Numbers 33-36

March 10, 2020

THE RIGHTS OF GOD

Readings for today: Numbers 33-36

I read a news report this morning out of St. Louis about a family who ignored a quarantine to go shopping, hit the gym, and get their nails done. It seems their daughter had recently returned from Italy where she was exposed to the coronavirus. But instead of following the directions of the CDC, this particular family believed they had the right to go where they pleased. The result is a potential outbreak that could result suffering and death for certain, immunocompromised members of their community.

Sounds about right, doesn't it? Americans as a general rule believe we have been given certain freedoms. Inalienable rights. Guaranteed us by our Constitution. Among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion. In short, we believe no one has a right to tell us what to do or where to go or how to act. If we ever feel those rights are being threatened, we take action. We fight back. We sue. Nothing, it seems, will stop us from pursuing our own self-interest.

Can you imagine what would happen if God chose to do the same? After all, His rights were violated the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. His rights are violated every time a human being engages in sin and breaks His law. His rights are violated when we worship idols and images of our own making. Ascribing to created things the glory due our Creator.

One of the real challenges in reading Scripture is to keep in mind the rights of God. God has the right to literally wipe out the entire universe and start over. God has the right to kill every man, woman, and child on the earth for their sin. God has the right to judge the nations and destroy them for their greed and lust for power. God has the right to do all this and more. So what stays God's hand? His endless mercy. His amazing grace. His unconditional love. His great faithfulness.

We are nearing the end of the Torah. The great story of the formation of God's people. The birth of a nation. God has rescued them from slavery in Egypt. He has exposed the emptiness of the idols of the greatest empire on earth. God has utterly broken Pharaoh who set himself up as a god. God is demonstrating His power and authority over all He has made and He is about to do the same as Israel enters the Promised Land. God is faithful. He will not let this world go. He will have His way among us. He will have the glory He deserves. He will make Himself known to the pagan nations of the earth. This is why God commands Israel to "drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you and destroy all their figured stones and destroy all their metal images and demolish all their high places. And you shall take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given the land to you to possess it." (Numbers 33:52-53)

God has a right to our worship. God has a right to our total allegiance. God has a right to our faithful obedience. He wants nothing more than our whole hearts. Nothing less than our full devotion. Nothing else but our very souls. Turn and embrace the God who loves you so much, friends! Give Him the glory He is due! Humble yourself before His throne! Submit yourself to His sovereign authority over your life! Trust Him with all that you are and all that you have! He is faithful. He is true. And He loves you with an everlasting love.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 1-3

March 11, 2020

ONE LAST SERMON…

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 1-3

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 4-7

March 12, 2020

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 4-7

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 8-10

March 13, 2020

SPIRITUAL ALZHEIMER'S

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 8-11

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 12-15

March 16, 2020

THE TEST OF LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 16-19

I'm watching a press conference from the White House and reflecting on the reading from today. As we read, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers —it is to him you shall listen— just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the Lord said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." (Deuteronomy 18:15-18) Please understand I am not suggesting our president is God's prophet nor Dr. Fauci nor anyone else in particular for that matter. But I am thinking about how godly leaders seem to rise to the moment. They rise to the crisis. They become the mouthpiece of God. They speak the words God gives to them. And I am thankful for our leaders and the way they are handling themselves in this unprecedented hour.

Now more than ever we need God's prophets. We need godly leaders who will spread calm in the midst of our crisis. They will be voices of reason in the midst of all the hysteria. They will be measured and thoughtful and wise in their approach. They will resist panic. They will resist stoking fears and anxieties. They will seek real solutions and good outcomes and privilege good information over bad. Data over feelings. Truth over lies. Most of all, I hope and pray they seek God's guidance for this cultural moment. We are living in unprecedented times. This is a unique crisis requiring a unique response and we need God's wisdom if we are to make it through. Thankfully, God promises to give wisdom generously to all who seek Him and I am praying for our president, vice-president, senators, congressmen and women, governors, and political leaders up and down the spectrum.

But I am also praying for each one of you. Each one of us is a leader of some kind or another. The question we have to ask ourselves is will we be God's prophet? Will we seek and speak His truth? Will we be guided by His Spirit? Will we act in accordance with His will? Will we do our best to spread the peace of Christ? To be calm in the midst of this crisis? Will we lead our families well during this time? Will we lead our churches well? Our businesses well? All those who fall under our influence well?

How does one do this? Well, one has to start with one's own heart. One has to be at peace with Christ to spread the peace of Christ. One has to be calm in order to spread calm. One has to be wise in order to spread wisdom. This is where our personal spiritual disciplines come in. How much time are we spending before the Lord in prayer? How much time are we spending in God's Word? Now is a great time to begin journaling simply to process what you are feeling and perhaps hearing from the Lord. Make sure to spend time in silence. Turn off your device. Refrain from too much social media engagement. Get outside if you can. Take a walk. Get more rest. Get more sleep. Do what you can to care for yourself and to let the Lord fill your tank in this season. We do not know the future, friends, but we can be confident in the One who does!

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 20-23

March 17, 2020

ANCIENT WISDOM

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-23

Good morning! If you are just joining us…welcome…but what a day to jump in on! All kinds of confusing stuff in today's reading from Deuteronomy. Holy war. Jihad. The massacre of innocents. Strange regulations regarding unsolved murders and intermarriage with female prisoners. Inheritance rights. What to do with rebellious children. And then a whole string of random laws governing livestock, agriculture, and fashion. Followed by an extended section on sexual immorality and ritual purity. Then another string of random laws governing slavery, banking, and sacred vows. It's enough to make one's head spin!

What do we make of it all? Well, first and foremost, we must acknowledge many of these laws are specifically directed at ancient Israel and therefore have no real application for today. They are designed specifically for a cultural context with which we have no familiarity. They may seem barbaric at times and odd at other times but they held real purpose for an ancient people who were just getting started as a nation. However, this doesn't mean we have nothing to learn from this section of text. God is communicating something about Himself to us through these ancient words. For example, purity. Notice how God restricts the sowing of two different kinds of seed or the mixing of fibers in clothing or forbids cross-dressing. God is clearly concerned with keeping things distinct and orderly and "according to its kind" much like He did in the creation narrative in Genesis 1. Second, holiness. Why does God demand Israel kill everything in the pagan cities they conquer? He's concerned anyone or anything left over will become a snare for Israel. He's concerned they will be tempted to worship other gods. He even says as much in Deuteronomy 20:18, "that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God." This sounds incredible harsh and unyielding and unfair in our ears but God will not tolerate any rivals for our affections. He is serious about the sin of idolatry. And for those who might be tempted to dismiss the Old Testament God in favor of the New Testament God, please remember Jesus' words about the final judgment. God will separate the believers from the unbelievers. Heaven and hell are eternal realities. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Reading this text today can expose our natural bias. We typically come to the text with a "hermeneutic of suspicion." Which is to say, we come to the text demanding that it prove itself to us. Prove it's worth by giving us something to apply to our lives. We have this natural tendency to want to turn the text into a self-help manual. A roadmap to our best life now. We want the text to speak to our cultural moment. We want to "rub" the text like a lamp and treat God like a genie. Instead, texts like the one for today demand something from us. Demand that we take God seriously. Demand that we treat the text on its terms and not our own. It forces us out of our cultural arrogance and chronological snobbery as we come face to face with the holiness of God.

Does that mean it's all doom and gloom? Does that mean there is nothing here for us to hold onto for hope? Quite the contrary. We just have to keep digging. Keep praying. Keep seeking. Keep searching. Dig down deep enough below the surface regulations and what do we discover about God's nature and character? He loves His people. Fiercely. Loyally. Stubbornly. He does not want to see them fall into temptation. Our God is a God of reconciliation and forgiveness and atonement even in situations where justice cannot be served because the murderer cannot be found. Our God is a God of mercy and compassion which is why He graciously welcomes those women captured in battle - who in ancient times were often treated brutally - as part of His people. He orders society for the good of all,

protecting property and inheritance rights. Protecting the poor from predatory lending and providing for them by allowing them to glean in the fields. He is concerned about the pain and suffering that comes from rampant sexual immorality so He places protections around the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman. All of this is in the best interest of His chosen people. All of this to set them apart from the rest of the pagan world.

Now consider our current cultural moment. How are we set apart as Christians? How are we acting in alignment with God's character and nature? Are we acting with love and grace? Are we seeking to build up rather than tear down? Are we spreading the peace of Christ amidst all the fear? Are we taking daily steps of mercy and compassion to those around us who may be in need? Bringing it down to brass tacks…will we share from our abundance with those in need? (Yes, even our beloved toilet paper!) Will we submit to our government and pray for our leaders out of a desire to honor God? Will we resist the temptation that comes during a time like this to give into hate or anger or violence? Are we using this time to build up our marriages and families and to deepen our relationships with those we love?

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 24-27

March 18, 2020

ECONOMICS OF A PANDEMIC

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 24-27

By now, the news is beginning to settle in. The stock market is plunging. Jobs are being lost. People are being laid off. The economy is bracing for a deep recession. And while we are all praying for a quick resolution to the national crisis we face, experts like Francis Collins are telling us it could be June before things begin to calm down. I don't know about you but that feels like an eternity to me. Reports are trickling in from my own congregation and the people they are connected to regarding the financial vulnerability of so many. It's scary. And it's tempting to turn inward. To hoard. To become selfish.

Perhaps that's why I love the words from Deuteronomy today to a people who were no strangers to hardship. To a people who had experienced plague and famine and drought and disease without the resources we enjoy in the 21st century. As the people of God prepare to enter the Promised Land and establish a new way of living, God directly addresses the economy.

"When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord your God." (Deut. 24:10-13) God is concerned with the dignity of a person. Fortunes rise and fall and so much of what we go through economically depends on forces outside our control. What is in our control, however, is how we treat one another. And God wants us to be as merciful and gracious as possible with those who are facing hardship.

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns. You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin." (Deut. 24:14-15) God is a God of justice. He is a God of righteousness. He demands that we treat one another well. He will hold us accountable for how we treat one another. Especially the poor in our midst. He will also honor the sacrifices we make on behalf of those who are under-resourced or less fortunate than us.

"When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this." (Deut. 24:19-22) God stands against greed. God stands against hoarding. God stands against price gouging. God stands against those who would use this time for their own economic gain rather than look to assist the needs of others. The people of Israel were to be intentionally generous. They were to remember their plight in Egypt and, as a result, make sure to play their part in making sure everyone had what they needed to survive.

It begs the question, doesn't it? What can we do to bring relief for those who need it most in the midst of our current crisis? What can we do to relieve the financial burdens so many bear? Are we able to provide rental assistance? Make a grocery run? Help with a few bills? Are we checking on our

neighbors to see what they need and doing all we can to help out? What about our food service workers who've been laid off? Or those in the entertainment or sports industry? I've been so thankful that so many companies are making huge sacrifices to keep their employees on the payroll. I believe God will honor such decisions and I'm praying their example inspires all of us to help out in whatever way we can.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28-30

March 19, 2020

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28-30

The difficulty with today's readings is how we tend to "externalize" them. We read through all these blessings and curses and almost immediately jump to the conclusion that they are not fair. They are not right. They are arbitrary and capricious. Our baseline assumption is that human beings are generally good people who occasionally make bad decisions and we question what right God has to judge us so harshly.

But what if understood these blessings and curses to be more like logical consequences than the actions of a volatile deity intent on our destruction? What if these blessings and curses are really God letting us know what will happen as a result of our actions in this world? For example, consider our current crisis. If we will obey the government and abide by the social distancing regulations there is a fair chance our healthcare system will not collapse and we can slowly get on top of this virus. However, if we choose to ignore the social distancing restrictions and do our own thing - see the videos of college students on spring break - the disease will spread and more lives will be lost. This is the logical consequence when human beings fail to love their neighbor as themselves.

So perhaps the judgment of God is less about Him flying into a rage and laying waste to humanity and more about Him simply withdrawing His protective hand? Perhaps it's God withdrawing His protection and giving us over to the logical consequences of our decision-making? Consider another real-life example. I was in southern Ethiopia two years ago with a team. They were suffering from a drought. Crops were dying. Herds were dying. People were suffering tremendously. This broke the hearts of the members of our team. I remember speaking with one of them as we began our long journey back home. "How can God allow such suffering?" She asked. "Can I respond to your question with another question?" I said. "Sure," she replied. "Why are we so quick to pin this on God? The World Bank estimates it would take 150 billion to bring clean water to the world. The World Economic Forum suggests it would take 267 billion to end world hunger. These are very realistic goals if human beings simply would follow the words of Jesus and love their neighbors as themselves." Add to this the fact that the United States uses 25% of the world's energy so we can live in large homes and drive SUV's and fund relatively extravagant lifestyles. One can easily see how the natural propensity human beings have for selfishness directly contributes to the suffering of the least resourced in our world.

So what's the answer? Global communism? The Socialist Green New Deal? The destruction of capitalism? Corporate or political give-aways? No. Again, human sin will always corrupt even the most idealistic of social programs. The answer is Jesus Christ. Only through Christ are we given a new heart. And with a new heart comes a fresh desire to glorify God and serve our neighbor. Only Jesus can solve the most fundamental problem we face in the world today…the total depravity of the human condition. And thankfully, God offers His Son freely and graciously to all who would place their trust in Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 31-34

March 20, 2020

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 31-34

“Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the Lord your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:6)

Put yourself in Joshua’s sandals. You’ve grown up in Egypt. Felt the sting of the whip on your back. Lived under brutal oppression. You’ve walked through the Red Sea. You’ve eaten the manna from heaven. You’ve drunk water from the rock. You’ve seen Mt. Sinai burst into flame. You’ve heard the thunder of God’s voice. You’ve seen firsthand the miracles of God performed by this amazing man named Moses who’s become your mentor and spiritual hero. And you’ve been faithful as well. You’ve served Moses most of your adult life. You were one of the faithful spies who brought back a good report. And now the time has come for you to lead. Moses is dying. The torch is passing. The mantle is falling on your shoulders.

The burden of leadership had to be heavy. You are being called to lead the conquest of the Promised Land. A land filled with tribes of pagan people who worship others gods and who will not go quietly. Furthermore, you know the fickle hearts of the people you lead. You’ve watched them shrink from God’s call time and time again. You’ve endured their grumbling on so many occasions. You know their hearts are easily stirred to fear. Your only hope is to trust in the promises of God. To be strong and courageous as you look to Lord. To trust in His abiding presence. To know He will never leave you or forsake you.

It’s actually not all that hard to imagine in our current crisis, is it? I think of the doctors and nurses and other healthcare workers I know who are working long hours in the fight against the coronavirus. I think of the sanitation workers who are cleaning the streets, washing down the operating rooms, wiping down everything from door knobs to tile floors to toilet seats to public garbage cans all in an effort to keep us safe. I think of the business owners - large and small - who are doing all they can to keep people employed. I think of the staffers in capital buildings across America working on local, state, and federal levels to implement plans to slow the virus down. I think of the decision-makers. Our president and congressional leaders. Our governors and mayors and town council leaders. The burdens they carry are enormous and every decision has a ripple effect on so many levels. It cannot be easy. I’m praying they place their trust in the promise of God.

And then I think of you. I think of the burdens you must be carrying. Homeschooling children. Upending your life to work at home. Wondering if/when the layoff might come. Maybe some of you know someone who is sick. A loved one. A friend. A neighbor. A co-worker. Maybe you have friends and family who are engaged on the front lines of this fight and you worry for their safety. Maybe this self-quarantine has exacerbated some underlying issues in your marriage or family that have now burst out into the open. This promise from God is for you as well.

Be strong and courageous, friends. When a plague strikes without warning. When the economy begins to shut down. When schools close. When a shelter in place order is given. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid. Do not dread for God is with us! He never distances Himself from us! He will never leave us nor forsake us!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 1-2, Psalms 105

March 21, 2020

WAITING FOR SPRING

Readings for today: Joshua 1-2, Psalms 105

March 19th marked the first day of spring. It was a surreal day in a lot of ways. Here in Colorado, snow was falling. Almost blizzard like conditions. Meanwhile, orders went out in New York and California requiring residents to "shelter in place" as the nations battles the coronavirus. The fight got personal for me as I got news that people I love in different parts of the world had contracted the disease. So what is normally a day of hope. A day of joy. A day to celebrate because winter has passed and new life is emerging fell flat for me. It feels like I'm caught in a bit of a time warp. Like I'm experiencing the same day over and over again. Like nature hit the "snooze" button and we're in for a few more weeks of winter this year.

Winter is not all bad, of course. Despite appearances, winter is not a "dead time." It is simply a time where life goes dormant for a while. Trees that may look dead on the outside are churning on the inside as life gets ready to burst forth again. I think the same is true for us. As we self-quarantine and socially distance, there is a churning inside. A growing hunger for connection. A growing desire for face to face relationship. And I imagine once the immediate danger of the virus passes, new life will burst forth more glorious than ever before!

So how can we best use the time we've been given? How can we prepare for that great and glorious day when the quarantine is lifted and restrictions are loosed and we are set free? I love what Joshua 1:8 says, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." The reality is we've all been given a kind of Sabbath. A rest from our normal activity. Like it or not, we've been forced off the hamster wheels on which we were running and now have plenty of time slow down. We have plenty of time to spend with those we love and this includes God. God is waiting for us in this time to turn to Him. To meditate on His Word. To talk to Him in prayer. To share all the fears and anxieties of this season with Him. This situation didn't catch God by surprise. As "novel" as this virus may be to us, it is not new to God. God is still sovereign. God still reigns from His throne. God is at work even now through the creatures He made in His image to bring an end to this deadly strain.

How can we be sure of such things? Listen to Psalms 105. Look at what God has done! Remember His mighty acts! Remember His saving ways! God is deliverer. God is rescuer. God is savior. God will never leave or forsake His people. God will never distance Himself from our pain. God has a "Promised Land" ready for all those who call on His name. This is the truth of the gospel, friends! And it forms the foundation of our hope in these fearful and uncertain times.

You know, I imagine Joshua felt much the same way we do today. As he stared across the Jordan River into the Promised Land, he knew there were no guarantees. He knew the future would be hard. He knew the people of Israel simply didn't have the strength or the fortitude to make it on their own. Their only hope was God. Their only path to victory was with God. Their only way forward was to trust God. So he pointed them to their history. Drew on the experiences of their forefathers and mothers. Encouraged them with the testimonies of God's goodness from their past. And this gave them the courage to face the challenges of their day. As you consider the current challenges we face in our time, what brings you hope? What testimonies do you lean on during these difficult times? How are you turning to God's Word to find courage and strength as we wait for spring?

March 23, 2020

BEAUTY FROM ASHES

Readings for today: Joshua 3-6

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

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

I wonder what “altars” we will build when this pandemic passes? Will we name the vaccination after the scientists who discover it? Will there be a wall with all the names of the healthcare workers who gave their lives carved in stone? Will there be special days or special seasons where we will step back to mark the time for future generations? And what about the young people living through this cultural moment? Will this be their version of the “Great Depression” or “World War 2?” Will it have that kind of profound effect on them and shape how they live their lives?

What about the church? How will she respond? Will this finally break us of our dependence on buildings and programs? Will we finally lay hold of the biblical pattern to carry out discipleship in every home? Will we stop investing so much in ourselves and instead seek to give all we have away for the sake of the world?

This feels like a paradigm-shifting moment for us all. As the days turn into weeks and the weeks turn into months, I don’t see us every going back to the way things were. Instead, I believe God is calling us to chart a new future. One where life truly is centered around community. Where relationships become the highest value and time the most precious currency. I believe God using this cultural moment to slow us down. To enforce a Sabbath rest. Please note, I did not say God created this virus or caused this plague to happen. COVID-19 is simply the product of a fallen world. I simply believe God’s promise from Romans 8 to use all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. That includes hardship and suffering and pain and yes, even death. For death is not the end to God but merely a new beginning. So let’s all commit to letting the old life die with all of its built in stress and anxiety and exhaustion and let’s look to God as He brings beauty from the ashes.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7-10

March 24, 2020

IN GOD WE TRUST

Readings for today: Joshua 7-10

“At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, "an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool." And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.” (Joshua 8:30-35)

Times of national crisis often lead to times of national repentance. Periods in history where the people of a nation come to the end of their own strength. The end of their own resources. The end of our their own abilities. And come face to face with God. It involves a recognition that unless the Lord is with them, their efforts will be in vain. Unless the Lord fights for them, their chances of victory are nil. Israel has experienced this truth over and over again. They have watched much larger and stronger tribes fall before the power of God. They have just seen the walls of one of the strongest cities in southern Israel fall with a shout. They realize they do not have the power to conquer the Promised Land. The people are too great. Their power too much. They feel like grasshoppers in the face of giants. (Numbers 13:33) But they also believe the Lord is with them. They believe the Lord has made them a promise. They will conquer and occupy this land. God will be faithful to the covenant He first made with Abraham to give him the Promised Land. So here they now stand. They’ve crossed the Jordan. They’ve won their first few battles. The generation who left Egypt and heard God’s voice at Sinai and wandered in the wilderness has fallen. A new generation rises. And before they begin the hard work of carving out a new nation, Joshua brings them face to face with Lord once again. To renew the covenant.

We are living in a time of national crisis. The hopes of an early end to the viral pandemic have faded and we are now facing really hard choices. The wave of infections is increasing exponentially, threatening to overwhelm our healthcare system. Our economy is tanking as more and more indefinite shelter-in-place orders are given. Businesses are failing. Jobs are being lost. People are getting sick. Some are dying. It’s a no-win scenario. There literally is no way for us to meet this crisis in our own strength. We are rapidly running out of resources. We are rapidly running out of time. We are in a battle against an unseen enemy that strikes fear in all our hearts. So how will we respond? Will we respond like Israel and seek the Lord? Will we stop worrying about whose political side wins and instead get on the Lord’s side? Will we trust in His promise to be with us? To give us the wisdom we need to fight this deadly disease? Most importantly, will we wake up and realize this world is not our home? America is not the Promised Land? This life is not all there is! In fact, God has promised us an eternal life with Him in a home He’s created with His own hands in preparation for His people.

Friends, here me clearly, I am not trying to diminish the very real sufferings of this life. The struggles of this world are real. Disease. Plague. Famine. Drought. Joblessness. Homelessness. Hardship of every kind. These are realities we are now coming face to face with each and every day. Sickness. Death.

Despair. Depression. Hopelessness. These are signs we are coming to the end of ourselves. These are signs the harsh reality of this life is setting in. And such national grief and mourning hopefully leads us to repentance. Puts us on our knees before the Lord. Brings us to a place where we renew our cries to Him. One day this will be all over. The virus will pass. People will recover. The economy will come back. But there will be a significant cost. One that will be felt for years to come. My prayer is that in the midst of all our fear and anxiety, we will capture this moment to humble ourselves before the Lord as a people. As a community. As a state. As a nation. May the words of our national motto, “In God We Trust”, be more true now than ever!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 11-14

March 25, 2020

PERSPECTIVE

Readings for today: Joshua 11-14

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ancient Near East writings. The Biblical authors were not "objective" either. They were believers. They were fervent and devoted to their faith. They believed they were on God's side and justified in

their actions. They also wrote in typical ancient near east style which involved lots of hyperbole. It was a common rhetorical device in their day. In fact, we know from the Biblical text itself that the Israelites did NOT actually kill everything that breathed because at the end of Joshua God will warn them against making any alliances with the people who are left. Most likely, the Israelites "devoted to destruction" all the males of a particular city along with their buildings and religious icons. Furthermore, the numbers reported are almost certainly estimations, perhaps even exaggerations, more than an actual body count and were meant to communicate the overwhelming nature of their victories. So we cannot get lost in the details. What's important and true is that God's people conquered the Promised Land in fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham and that their battles against the tribes they drove out were an act of divine judgment for the horrific idolatries those tribes practiced which often included child sacrifice.

Humility. I need to read with humility because I do not know all the answers. Nor will I ever. There is much that is lost in translation due to my inability to see and understand things from an ancient near east context. Having said that, my questions and fears and doubts are real but I may not find satisfaction this side of heaven. That's okay. If there is a God who rules and reigns over the universe and if this God is good then I can ultimately trust Him. I can trust He sees things I cannot and He is orchestrating things to His own ends which ultimately are just and holy and righteous.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15-18

March 26, 2020

HAS GOD'S PROMISE FAILED?

Readings for today: Joshua 15-18

Today's reading highlights a very important reality as we read Scripture. God's promises are always sure. Always true. Always good. God's great desire for His people is that they would dwell securely in the land He had promised them. At the same time, God's people are not perfect. They are not faithful. They are not whole-hearted in their devotion. Their strength fails. Their resolve weakens. Their obedience is not complete. The result is an incomplete conquest. A delay in the fulfillment of God's promise. Does this mean God has failed? Absolutely not! It means God has remained true to Himself. True to His plan and purpose for the world. True to the creature He first made in His image.

In the beginning, God gave human beings dominion over all He had made. We were created to work the "garden" that is this world. We were created to cultivate and help it flourish. We were entrusted with this responsibility. We were given agency so we might freely choose to serve God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength. We were given a will that was free which means our choices are real and result in real-life consequences. So when human beings in China withhold information on a growing epidemic in their own country, it breaks out into a worldwide pandemic that is difficult to stop. When human beings in America live beyond their means in unsustainable ways, it disproportionately impacts the global poor. When human beings in Africa funnel money intended for development into their personal coffers, it destroys families and lives for generations.

Israel was entrusted with the Promised Land. Each tribe allotted a specific portion by lot. They were to conquer that territory and drive out the pagan inhabitants. But Israel failed in her mission. They were unsuccessful in their attempts to fully subdue the land. They allowed certain Canaanite tribes to co-exist. And even though they forced them to do hard labor, they were setting the stage for future uprisings and conflict. From this point forward, Israel would struggle to remain faithful to Yahweh. Struggle to resist the temptation to worship other gods. Struggle to maintain their control over the land. Struggle to rest in the promise of God. Again, this is not because God somehow failed! Not at all! It is Israel who failed to remain faithful thus setting the stage for generations to come.

You and I are no different. Created in God's image. Given dominion over all God has entrusted into our hands. Our time. Our talent. Our treasure. Our influence. How are we stewarding all God has given us? How are we laying hold of the promise of God for today? How are we walking in obedience even in the midst of our current cultural crisis? The choices we make in this cultural moment carry real consequences for good or for ill. The agency we exercise is real as is the responsibility we bear for ourselves, our families, our neighbors, and the human race as a whole. What tone are we setting for future generations? What legacy are we leaving to our children and grandchildren? When they look back at this moment in history, what will they say? Will they see Christians responding with faith over fear? Peace amidst all the anxiety? Grace in the face of all the outrage and judgment? Sacrificial love in a world full of selfishness and greed? You and I will be held personally and corporately responsible for how we respond in this moment. May we respond like Christ!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 19-22

March 27, 2020

WITNESS

Readings for today: Joshua 19-22

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

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

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

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

Now, more than ever, the world needs a witness. The world needs the church to stand forth as a witness to God’s continued grace and mercy and miraculous strength. The world needs a witness from the church that is humble and servant-hearted. The world needs to experience the witness of the church as kind and generous. Perhaps most of all, the world needs to see the courage and boldness of the church in this time of fear and anxiety. They need to see a group of people over whom fear has no hold for their confidence is in the perfect love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Friends, in times like these throughout history the church has shined like stars in the nighttime sky. My prayer for you. My prayer for us. My prayer for PEPC. My prayer for all the churches I have the privilege of partnering with in our community, in our denomination, and around the world is that we would be witnesses of “imposing size” during this challenging time not for our sake but for the glory of God!

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 23-34, Judges 1

March 28, 2020

LOVE AND OBEDIENCE

Readings for today: Joshua 23-24, Judges 1

“Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God.” (Joshua 23:11)

These are among the final words Joshua spoke to the people of Israel. Love the Lord your God. With all your heart. All your mind. All your strength. All your soul. Love the Lord your God in all you say and do. Love the Lord your God in your worship. Love the Lord your God in your life. Love the Lord your God in your relationships. Love the Lord your God in your home. In your neighborhood. At your work. Love the Lord your God.

We get so confused about love. We think it has to do with a feeling. An emotion. A physical, hormonal response to another human being. We falsely equate love with physical attraction. We falsely equate love to the complex interactions of neurochemicals in our brains. This is why people fall “in” and “out” of love. It’s how people justify cheating on their spouses or getting a divorce and breaking up their family. It’s why people see no problem with having multiple sexual partners over the course of their lives or perhaps even at the same time.

The Bible defines love differently. Love is a choice. It’s a conscious decision we make to live in covenant faithfulness with God and with each other. It’s not dependent on emotions. It’s transcends our feelings. It’s a commitment that overrides our hormones. This love is not selfish but selfless. It takes as its highest good the needs of the other. It considers others more important than oneself. It takes commitment seriously. Even eternally. It is modeled after and flows from the love God has for us. God’s love never fails. God’s love is not capricious. It is steadfast. Loyal. True. God’s commitment to His people never ends. God’s faithfulness to His people knows no bounds. He is with them forever and as such, He has every right to expect the same kind of commitment from us.

What does such commitment look like? Obedience. Keeping God’s commandments. Just as God kept every word of His promise to us so we should endeavor to keep every word of our promise to Him. Listen to how Joshua puts it, “Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left…” (Joshua 23:6) Or as Jesus will later put it, “"If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (John 14:15) Keeping God’s commands is not optional for the Christian. It is part and parcel of our love for God. One cannot say we love God and ignore what He says. One cannot claim to love God and do the opposite of His commands. One’s love for God is intrinsically wrapped up in one’s obedience.

Now does this mean we will obey perfectly? Of course not. Nor can we love perfectly. There is only one perfect love and that is the love of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ. In Christ, perfect love and perfect obedience meet. In Christ, perfect love finds perfect form in a perfect life lived on our behalf. Loving Christ means placing our faith in His finished work or complete obedience even unto death on a cross for our sins. It means trusting His love to be sufficient in our weakness. His faith to be sufficient in the face of our fears. His grace to be sufficient for our doubts. His mercy to be sufficient for our failings. Loving Christ means surrendering to Him over and over again. Each and every day. For as long as we are given breath on this earth.

March 30, 2020

TESTING

Readings for today: Judges 2-5

The Bible talks a lot about how God uses the circumstances of our lives to test the veracity of our faith. Do we believe God is who He says He is? Not just in the good times but in the bad as well? Do we praise God only when times are calm or are we able to praise Him in the storm? Do we consider it all joy - as James 1 says - when we face trials of various kinds? Do we understand in those moments that God is up to something in our lives? Can we see how He uses all things - even worldwide pandemics - for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose? Do we trust God enough to let the testing of our faith produce in us a steadfastness that actually leads to a deeper, fully, richer, more complete faith?

The beginning of the Book of Judges makes it clear that Israel has failed. She has not followed through. She has not driven out the nations who occupied the Promised Land. This will become a massive problem for her in the years ahead but God is faithful. He will use even their disobedience for His sovereign purposes. Yes, their presence will become a thorn in Israel's side. Yes, their gods will seek to ensnare Israel along the way. But rather than break faith with Israel. Rather than abandon the covenant He had made. God turns what they meant for evil for their good. He uses the pagan nations of the earth to test His people. Refine them. Strengthen them. Bring them to repentance. "These nations were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses." (Judges 3:4)

I do not believe God created COVID-19. I do not believe God sent COVID-19 to punish our country for our sins any more than He's sent it to any other country to punish them for their sins. There is plenty of sin to go around. The world is full of disobedience. In what will become a common refrain in the Book of Judges, "everyone does what is right in their own eyes." However, I do believe God is sovereign. I do believe God is omnipotent. I do believe God is omniscient. I do believe God is using this cultural moment as means of drawing the world back to Himself. The more we repent. The more we cry out to God. The more we reach out for Him in the midst of our grief and suffering and pain, the more He will make Himself known to us. After all, He promises He is with the "broken-hearted and those crushed in spirit." (Psalms 34:18)

So the question for us today is this…will we allow God to use this testing to shape us more into the image of Christ? Or will we stubbornly cling to our self-sufficient ways? Will we trust God to use even our pain for His purposes? Or will we accuse God of falling down on the job? Will we believe God when He says He is with us always even to the end of the age and that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will one day be revealed in us? Or will we cling to the things of this world with all our might? Will we have faith to walk with open hands before the Lord? Or will we clench our fists in fear and frustration?

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 6-9

March 31, 2020

HUMILITY

Readings for today: Judges 6-9

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

I think we can all agree humility is a virtue sorely lacking in our world today. Even in the face of a life-threatening pandemic, too many of us still cling to our pride, arrogance, entitlement, and self-indulgence. I think of the young kids ignoring the danger to party on the beaches of Florida during spring break. I think of the politicians who simply cannot help themselves and use this crisis to score political points against the opposition. I think of the blame game the media engages in as it attempts to stoke our fears and outrage. I think of the pastors who still gather their churches in defiance of the best advice our public health officials have to offer. It's heartbreaking. It's sinful. It's the spirit of self-righteousness that God hates so much. And none of us are immune. Sure, we know how to say the right things. "God is first in my life!" "I love God the most!" "God is my all in all!" We sing songs that declare these truths. We sit through sermons where these truths are proclaimed. We tell these things to our Christian friends. But one look at our schedule. One look at our bank account. A glance at our Twitter feed, Instagram, or Facebook account. A moment of honest self-reflection. All these conspire to reveal what we really believe. We are our own gods.

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 10-13

April 1, 2020

LIVING SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Judges 10-13

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

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

Here's a second piece of context as well. When we travel to Ethiopia, we often head into the rural areas to visit village churches. As we walk along the dirt paths, we pass home after home. Most of them are mud huts surrounded by a little brush fence. In the evenings, we see children driving whatever livestock (donkeys, chickens, goats, etc.) the family owns into the enclosure. This keeps the animals safe and the house warm. It's a common custom all over the Middle East even to this day. So when Jephthah made his rash vow, he fully expected the first thing to greet him when he returned home to be a goat or a sheep or some other animal. He most certainly did NOT expect it to be his daughter! So when she comes dancing out of the home with her tambourine, he tears his clothes. He instantly regrets the vow he made. But he feels trapped. After all, his honor is now on the line. The honor of his family. And in his own limited understanding, the honor of his God. His daughter understands this as well which is why she willingly lays down her life to preserve her family's honor! She willingly gives her life to help her father save face! She willingly accepts her fate and believes her family's reputation – and her God's reputation - is worth her sacrifice.

It's a story that baffles us on a lot of levels. How could Jephthah go through with it? How could he sacrifice his own flesh and blood? How could Jephthah's daughter willingly lay down her life? And where is God in all of this? Is He pleased? The cultural distance between this world and our own is almost insurmountable. However, a key to understanding is provided from the letter Jephthah sends the king of the Ammonites in Judges 11:23-24, "So then the Lord, the God of Israel, dispossessed the Amorites from before his people Israel; and are you to take possession of them? Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us, we will possess." You see, everyone in the ancient near east believed in the gods. Dagon for the Philistines. Chemosh for the Amorites. Molech for the Ammonites. Every tribe had their own deity. And every deity demanded honor. Demanded worship. Demanded sacrifice. If you made the right

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 14-17

April 2, 2020

HOLY DESPAIR

Readings for today: Judges 14-18

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Judges 19-21

April 3, 2020

MADNESS

Readings for today: Judges 19-21

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

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

Horror. It's a good word to describe what we read today from the book of Judges. There simply is nothing redemptive in the story. Nothing good. Nothing godly. Man's inhumanity to man is on full display. It's dark. It's evil. It's terrifying. Sadly, we see some of the same dynamics in play in our world today. Even amidst a global pandemic, some of our political leaders can't stop lying. Can't stop attacking one another. Can't stop trying to tear each other down in order to make themselves look good. It's horrifying. But it's not just them. It's us as well. Twitter is still full of rage and anger and hate. Racism is alive and well as people target Asian-Americans simply because the virus happened to originate in China. Ignorant and foolish people are being charged with assault for purposefully spitting on others. Greedy, self-serving opportunists try to make a quick buck by purchasing needed supplies in bulk to sell off at a profit. Hoarders strip the shelves bare of necessities leaving the most vulnerable among us to fend for themselves. And we haven't even begun to see the worst. The next three weeks promise to be among the most difficult we've ever faced as a nation. People will get sick. Loved ones will die. Jobs will be lost. Businesses will close. Fear and anxiety will only increase. And that's just here in the United States. What about those nations where the crisis is just beginning? Nations who do not have the benefit of first world resources? A national healthcare system? Access to technology? Doctors? Medicine? I shudder think of what this virus might do to the slums of Addis Ababa and others like it. Horror, indeed.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Ruth 1-4

April 4, 2020

ALWAYS HOPE

Readings for today: Ruth 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

April 6, 2020

REVIVAL

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 1-3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 4-8

April 7, 2020

MIRACLES VS. MAGIC

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 4-8

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 9-12

April 8, 2020

THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 9-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Samuel 13-16

April 9, 2020

WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION

Readings for today: 1 Samuel 13-16

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 10, 2020

TRUSTING GOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 11, 2020

THE SHELTER OF THE MOST HIGH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 13, 2020

PRAYING THE PSALMS

Readings for today: Psalms 7, 27, 31, 34, 52

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me! Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily! Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me!" (Psalm 31:1-2)

"When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all." (Psalm 34:17-19)

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

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

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

April 14, 2020

RESILIENCY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 15, 2020

LOVING OUR ENEMIES IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 17, 2020

EPITAPH

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

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

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

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

So back to us? What will future generations say about you when you're gone? The writers of the Chronicles were looking back at their history. They looked back at their leaders and they judged them primarily based on their fidelity to the Lord. How did they respond in good times? How did they respond in hard times? How did they act in times of plenty? How did they cope in times of want? I think about our cultural moment. The pandemic has exposed the cracks in our society. It has shined a bright spot light on the underlying issues that threaten to tear our nation apart. But I also know the same thing is happening deep inside each of us. What do our fears tell us? What do our anxieties reveal? How are we coping and where are we looking for help in this time of trouble? Is it to the Lord? Or something else? And after this season passes into the pages of history, what will people remember about how we handled things? Saul will forever be remembered by his epitaph in 1 Chronicles 10:13-14. David will forever be remembered as the "man after God's own heart." Who are you?

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

April 18, 2020

PSALMS OF ASCENT

Readings for today: Psalms 121, 123-125, 128-130

Psalms of Ascent. Psalms 120-134. Many believe these were the songs Israel sang as they ascended to Jerusalem to keep the three annual festivals detailed in Deuteronomy 16. They are songs of worship. Songs of praise. Songs of thanksgiving. They express the deep gratitude the people feel towards God for all He has done for them. They sing them together. They sing them as they gather. They sing them in good times. They sing them in bad times. One can almost imagine thousands coming to Jerusalem all singing these songs with one voice. It must have been a powerful, moving scene. In addition, many scholars believe these were the songs Israel sang at different high points in their history like the dedication of Solomon's Temple or the rebuilding of the walls during Nehemiah's time. Over and over again, Israel returned to these psalms to express their faith and trust in God.

Christians have built on this tradition. Many churches throughout the world sing these psalms in worship. The Eastern Orthodox Church sings these psalms every Friday during Vespers. The Roman Catholic Church schedules these psalms to be sung during daily prayer. The goal is to remind Christians we are on our own pilgrimage to a Heavenly Jerusalem and these psalms build the spiritual intensity of the worship service as we prepare for the reading of the gospel. It's a powerful thing to experience.

These psalms are favorites among believers. Especially in times of trouble. In times of plague and pandemic. In times of national or personal crisis. In such times, we cling to the language of God protecting us. God guiding us. God providing for us. God helping us. "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Psalms 121:1-2) "To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens! Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maidservant to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he has mercy upon us." (Psalms 123:1-2) "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people, from this time forth and forevermore." (Psalms 125:1-2) There is something special that happens when we gather to sing these praises. Something deeply transformative. Something life-changing. We are encouraged. We are strengthened. We are blessed by the experience of being in God's presence together and given the strength to endure.

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

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

when other diseases have ravaged the earth. I know many of us worship Jesus daily on our own. I know many of us experience Jesus profoundly as we hike or hunt or spend time in nature. But neglecting the worship of God with the people of God places us at risk. Especially in a time like this. Furthermore, it places us out of step with thousands of years of Christian history. It places us out of step with the will of God as revealed in Scripture. It's frankly arrogant and prideful and foolish to claim we don't need the church. God loves His bride. God loves His children. God loves having His family together. God loves hearing His people sing. God loves meeting His people in the sacraments. God loves teaching His people through His Word. Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20)

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

April 20, 2020

GODLY LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 21, 2020

REAPING THE WHIRLWIND

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

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

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

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

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

This brings us face to face with the fundamental reality of our own sinful existence. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of us are guilty of selfishness and greed and lust. All of us have turned aside. Each to our own way. Each one of us does what is right in our own eyes. "The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one." (Psalm 14:2-3) Do we not all deserve judgment? Are we not all guilty? Have we not all rightfully earned death and an eternity separated from God? At the end of the day we do have to come to grips with the fact that either we will say to God - Thy will be done - or He will say to us - thy will be done. Either way, we will face the consequences of our decision.

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

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

April 22, 2020

FAMILY TREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 23, 2020

NO-WIN SCENARIO

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 3-5

April 24, 2020

THE POVERTY OF PROSPERITY PREACHING

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 3-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 25, 2020

RESTING IN GOD'S PROMISE

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

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

"Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds. Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; your judgments are like the great deep; man and beast you save, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light. Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your righteousness to the upright of heart! Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie fallen; they are thrust down, unable to rise." (Psalm 36:5-12)

April 27, 2020

SPIRITUAL CRISIS

Readings for today: Psalms 81, 88, 92, 93

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 7-9

April 28, 2020

BIBLICAL FEMINISM

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 7-9

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 29, 2020

THE POWER OF UNITY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

April 30, 2020

TRUE WORSHIP

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

May 1, 2020

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

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

I am a “one” on the Enneagram. For those of you not familiar with the tool, the Enneagram helps a person grow in self-understanding. It helps you identify your basic fears, drives, and desires. It gives you a pathway to health, virtue, and holiness. It also reveals your susceptibility to particular temptations, vices, and stress. So, again, I am a “one” on the Enneagram. A perfectionist whose primal fears are corruption, deceit, imbalance, and immorality. These fears lead to stress which creates anxiety. When I am anxious, I tend to be resentful, even angry. My buttons get pushed and I literally can feel my blood begin to boil inside. In the face of these feelings, my temptation is to deny them. Play the hypocrite. Not acknowledge my anger because it is not morally good and therefore must be rejected. This results in continual self-condemnation. The critical voices in my head rise to a cacophony of shame as I fail to live up to my own high ideals. It’s frankly exhausting.

“O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart...” (Psalms 15:1-2)

“Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.” (Psalms 24:3-4)

“Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you.” (Psalms 25:20-21)

This stuff is music to a “one’s” ears. It speaks my love language. Goodness. Righteousness. Moral uprightness. Holy perfection. All good things. All important things. And yet, none of these things actually lead me to health. They do not assuage my anxiety. They only serve to feed my fears. They throw me back on my own strength. My own effort. Which I already know is never enough. So what’s a “one” to do? Continue playing the hypocrite? Continuing pretending he or she has it all together? Continue presenting an image to the world that is good and upright and moral?

By no means! The “one” must instead cling to message of Psalm 23. One of my favorites, by the way. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.” (Psalms 23:1-3) Peace comes as I trust in the Lord. Serenity comes as my soul rests in Him. All my stress. All my anxieties. All my fears fade away when I let the Lord be my shepherd. He takes care of all my wants. He makes me lie down and rest in green pastures, beside still waters. These words are balm to my soul.

Every morning when I wake, I find my heart ”reset” to its default position. As soon as I open my eyes, the voices in my head start clamoring for attention. “Get up! You have so much to do! So much to accomplish! You’re already behind! You’re already letting people down! You’re already failing!” As I said above, my temptation is to argue. To fight. To try to silence those voices through my own Herculean efforts. But God charts a different path for me. The path of grace. And His Words became my words as I pray, “To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame; let not my enemies exult over me...He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant

and his testimonies...The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him, and he makes known to them his covenant...Oh, guard my soul, and deliver me! Let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you." (Psalms 25:1-2, 9-10, 14, 20) As God's voice fills my head and heart, I find the other voices retreating into the background. Yes, they are still there but it's more of a murmur than a roar and I can now go about my day filled with God's peace.

We are living through a very stressful time. A time of great fear and anxiety. And the temptation will be to let this season drive you to the darker corners of your heart. Longing to numb the pain or regain control, you may find yourself acting out in ways that are self-destructive or painful for those around you. You may find your relationships starting to strain. The key is NOT to work harder or longer or more efficiently. The key is to rest in the arms of the Good Shepherd. Let go of control. Let go of the need to succeed. Let go of the need to have it altogether. Ask for help if needed. Reach out to those who can come alongside. Make a call to a mental health professional or your pastor and ask for an appointment. Trust God has provided these means for the well-being of the sheep of His pasture.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107

May 2, 2020

THE WORSHIP GOD DEMANDS

Readings for today: Psalms 89, 96, 100, 101, 107

Human beings are naturally selfish creatures. We are self-centered. Self-promoting. Self-protective. Self-indulgent. If you have any doubts, take a scroll through Instagram or Facebook sometime. Selfies. Humble brags. Carefully curated authenticity. Scripted messiness. Real life edited down into a series of highlight reels. Flip open Twitter and what do you see but a platform for "call-out" and/or "cancel" culture. People throwing out their often ill-informed opinions on just about every subject. Perfecting the blame game. Throwing around self-righteous accusations. Setting themselves up as a modern day Pharisees as they seek to "police" other people's content. Of course, our media is no different. Driven by particular agendas, they report only those facts which support their pre-determined narratives. They spin inconvenient truths out with the hope that their audience won't notice the verbal misdirection. This game is played by politicians, media moguls, titans of industry, social influencers, you name it. Why? Because we're all human. And - back to my original premise - to be human is to be self-centered. Self-promoting. Self-protective. Self-indulgent. We just have this innate tendency to make life all about us.

The same is true in the church. We might even be the worst offenders. Why would I ever say such a thing? Well, it's one thing to have a political hot take. It's another to take a stand on social issue. If we're honest, all our selfies and humble brags are pretty superficial and trivial in the grand scheme of things. But to twist the worship of the Living God and make it about us is serious business. To dare to impose our own preferences or judge based upon whether we "got something out of it" is arrogant in the extreme. To assume we know what's best or to make the mistake of thinking worship is about us getting our needs met, our wants fulfilled, our desires granted is foolishness. Worship is not about how we feel…though we should experience a range of feelings during the experience. Worship is not about what we think…though our thinking should be challenged on any number of levels as we sit under the authority of the Word of God. Worship is not about what we get…though if we are humble we'll receive any number of blessings for having been in God's presence. Worship is not about us. It is about God.

One of the most challenging Biblical truths for Christians to grasp is that God's highest priority is Himself. God's greatest passion is for His own glory. God's deepest love is for Himself. And if you find yourself thinking that makes God sound like a narcissist, let me humbly suggest you take a step back and think it through. In the beginning. Before time and space. Before the universe came into being. There was God. He existed eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in perfect communion. There is no lack in God. No deficiency in God. No void God needed to fill. God could have gone on existing in perfect communion with Himself for all eternity and not missed a thing. God doesn't need us. God isn't incomplete without us. God is all-sufficient in Himself. But God did choose to create. God created a universe and filled it with all kinds of beauty and artistry and splendor. He created the dualities that mark our existence like light and dark. Sun and moon. Earth and sky. Male and female. Finally, God made a special creature in His own image. It was an act of pure grace. He gave us agency and creativity and responsibility that mirrored His own. His plan was to live in unbroken fellowship with us forever. Inviting us to share in the perfect love He has in Himself. But we rejected His plan, of course. We went our own way. We wanted to be like God. Self-sufficient. Self-governing. Self-propagating. We wanted to be in charge of our own lives. We wanted to be the captains of our own destiny. The masters of our own fate. The rulers of our own souls. So, in a supreme act of love, God let us go. God let us go our own way, knowing it would end in self-harm and self-destruction. God let us go our own way, knowing we would turn His beautiful creation into a means to feed our own selfish desires. God let us go our

own way, knowing we would reject Him at every turn as we tried our hand at self-rule. And all God knew and feared would happen took place. It broke His heart.

But God wouldn't let go. To do so would be to act against His own divine character. So God rends the heavens and comes to earth. God - in some sense - rends the Trinity to come to earth. Sending His beloved Son to become one of us. Sending His beloved Son to suffer and die for us. Sending His beloved Son to deliver us out of the mirrored prisons in which we live - where all we can see is Self - and set us free to love and serve Him again as He planned from the beginning. And yes, God did this for us but more importantly, He did it for Himself. He did it to remain true to who He is. To do anything else would be to deny His very nature and character. Even in our salvation, God's highest commitment remains Himself. God's highest priority remains His own glory. And this is why we worship. We worship God not for how He makes us feel. Not for what He's done for us. Not for the eschatological "goodies" that await us in the life to come. We worship God simply because He is God. He alone is worthy. He alone is deserving. This is what we were created for in the first place.

So listen again to the words of Psalm 96. Lift your voice again in praise. God is God! Let's give Him the worship He deserves and the worship He demands! "Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples! For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength! Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts! Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth! Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity." Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness." (Psalm 96:1-13)

May 4, 2020

LET THE LORD BUILD YOUR HOUSE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 7, 1 Chronicles 17, Psalms 1-2, 33, 127, 132

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.” (Psalms 127:1)

One of the things I struggle with the most is my desire to be successful. To make my life count. To do something significant. To strive to be the best. These are values ingrained in me from an early age. They are not necessarily bad in and of themselves. The problem is I too often let these good things become ultimate things in my life. I start to pursue success at the expense of my relationship with God or those I love. I focus on the future rather than finding contentment in the present. I covet what I don’t have rather than be thankful for what I do have. I know I’m not alone. I see these values reflected across all sectors of society.

A few years ago now, the Lord spoke to me during a time of prayer. It wasn’t an audible voice or a lightning bolt from heaven or anything like that. It was simply an impression in my heart. A feeling in my gut. A few random thoughts in my head that suddenly coalesced into a message I needed to hear. It was a short message. Three simple words. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. I was journaling and these three words started ringing over and over again in my head. Obscurity. Anonymity. Insignificance. Over the years I’ve learned to pay attention to these kinds of things in my prayer time so I sat back from my keyboard and asked the Lord to give me further insight into what He was saying. God said, “I want you to labor in obscurity. Embrace anonymity. Pursue insignificance.” To be honest, my first thought was, “Wait a minute! That doesn’t sound right! Frankly, it sounds unAmerican!” God’s answer? “Exactly.” :-)

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.” King David has a desire to build God a house. It’s a godly desire. A good desire. One that is affirmed by Nathan the prophet. But it is not the Lord’s will. “But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in?...'Thus says the Lord of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house.When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” (2 Samuel 7:4-5, 8-13) I love how God flips the tables on David here. It is not David who will build God a house but God who will build David a house! It is not David who will make His own name great but God who will make David’s name great!

Unless God builds the house. Unless God builds David’s house. Unless God builds our house. We all labor in vain. This was the message God was sending me during my devotional time. I was spending so much energy working so hard to be successful. To stand out among my peers. To be faithful to God. And yet all the while God was calling me to rest. To trust. To stand back and let Him do the “building”

of my life. Let Him guide and direct my path. Let Him have the glory for the success I was seeking to achieve.

Recently, I've been learning more about the meaning of those three, God-given words in my life…

Obscurity - Over the years, I've been asked to consider many different ministry positions. Some at much larger churches. Some involve greater denominational influence. But I love where I am. I love the people I serve. I love the team I get to serve alongside. We are not the largest or fastest growing or most "successful" church but we are a family. We serve God faithfully. We are producing gospel-fruit on a regular basis. Lives are being changed. People are being transformed. And God has confirmed my current call over and over again.

Anonymity - One of the best things about serving at PEPC is I get to simply be "one of the pastors." We have a great team, each with different gifts. This releases me from the pressure to perform. To succceed. To self-promote. No one needs to know my name. This work isn't about me. I love the fact that I don't always have to be up front. Don't always have to preach. Don't always have to be in charge. And I can't wait to finish my career as part of the volunteer cleaning crew!

Insignificance - My work around the globe is humbling. It makes me deeply aware of how truly insignificant my contributions to the Kingdom of God are in the grand scheme of things. The reality is I will be completely forgotten within a generation or so of my death. My own family won't remember who I was or what I did. All my accomplishments and achievements will quickly turn to dust. And that's okay. Because my significance is not found in what I do but in who God is and I am content simply to serve Him in whatever way He sees fit.

Friends, unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord builds your house and my house, our labors are in vain. Unless the Lord builds our nation's house, our collective labor will be in vain. As we continue to struggle through this season of social distancing and stay at home orders, the pressure builds inside all of us to get to work "building our own house." Protecting our own future. Securing our own lives. Don't fall prey to that temptation! Take a step back and let God do the work. Engage in some self-examination to find those areas of your life where you need to hand over the tools, stop working so hard, and let God take over. Make sure you are working from His blueprint in your life rather than your own.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

May 5, 2020

THE KINDNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 8-9, 1 Chronicles 18

“And King David said, "Is there not still someone of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God to him?" (2 Samuel 9:3) It’s hard for us to imagine how radical this action would have been. David lived in a brutal world. A world full of violence and suffering and pain. A world where one’s family. One’s tribe. One’s nation was everything. It was a world where honor was paramount. Shame to be avoided at all costs. There were strict cultural expectations regarding how one acted when one was treated dishonorably.

Saul shamed David before Israel. He unjustly accused him. He sought to kill him. He pursued him in the wilderness. He tried to discredit him. He did all he could to destroy him and his family. Now the tables are turned. And the expectations are clear. Everyone in ancient Israel knew what was coming. David would destroy Saul’s family to the last person. He would eradicate Saul’s name from the earth. He would leave no stone unturned. No one behind lest that person become a seed of discontent and rebellion in the future.

But once again, David defies his culture’s expectations. Instead of seeking to destroy the house of Saul, he seeks to forgive. To bless. To honor. So he asks his servants if there is anyone left of Saul’s family. There is. A grandson. A crippled man named Mephibosheth. Even better, he is a son of David’s beloved friend, Jonathan. David has him brought in. Honors him by restoring all Saul’s lands and property to him. Gives him a place at the king’s own table. It’s a stunning act of kindness, mercy, and generosity. And it communicates to the entire nation that David is no ordinary, ancient near east king.

What motivated David? The kindness of God. David was humble at this point in his life. He knew his life was a testimony to grace. David was a shepherd. He fully expected to live his life as a shepherd. But God - through His great mercy - had raised him up to be king. And having been on the receiving end of God’s kindness, David now extends it out even to his enemies.

What about us? The greatest poverty in our world today is the poverty of grace. The poverty of kindness. The poverty of mercy. We are so quick to judge. So quick to become enraged. So quick to attack others. In my experience, very few people engage in any sort of honest self-reflection. Very few people actually acknowledge their biases and privilege and short-comings much less confess their sin. Very few people make themselves vulnerable to the point of revealing their own weaknesses. Sure, people talk about how they’ve been hurt. Wounded. Abused. Those terms - sadly - have almost become cliche. But they almost never talk about how their choices contributed to their own pain. And because they perceive themselves to be the victim, they do not forgive very easily.

But what if we saw ourselves as God sees us? What if we honestly acknowledged the fact that we are as sinful as anyone else. Just as capable of hurting others as we are of being hurt. Just as capable of wounding others as we are of being wounded. Just as capable of inflicting pain as we are of experiencing it. What if we looked in the mirror and saw both perpetrator and victim? And what if - in that moment - we turned to God rather than self-condemnation? What if we experienced the grace and mercy and kindness of God even for sinners such as ourselves? Perhaps then we would be able to extend that same grace and mercy and kindness out to others. Even those who have hurt us. Even to our enemies.

Sadly, I find such faith in short supply these days. And I believe it exposes a fundamental flaw in our relationship with God. We cannot give to others what we have not received ourselves. And too many of us believe the lie that God will bless us because we are “good.” Too many of us believe the lie that God affirms us without reservation. Too many of us believe the lie that we deserve God’s love. In short, we do not believe in grace. We do not believe we’ve done anything to merit God’s mercy. We believe God has to be kind to us or else. And so we live largely graceless, merciless, intolerant lives especially towards those who are not like us. Those who have hurt us. Those we consider to be our enemies. Sure, we are gracious and merciful and kind to those we love and like but woe to them if they should ever betray our trust or speak ill of us or refuse to affirm us. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you…For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the sinners do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the unbelievers do the same?” (Matthew 5:44, 46-47) Grace. Mercy. Kindness. These are not intellectual ideas but eternal realities. They flow from a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus. They are only made possible through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. May you seek these things from God today.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

May 6, 2020

#AHMAUD ARBERY

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 10, 1 Chronicles 19, Psalms 20, 53, 60, 75

"May the Lord answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion! May he remember all your offerings and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices! May he grant you your heart's desire and fulfill all your plans! May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners! May the Lord fulfill all your petitions! Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright. O Lord, save the king! May he answer us when we call." (Psalm 20:1-9)

These words have deeper meaning for me today. Especially as the news breaks about the young African-American man who was lynched in broad daylight in Georgia. Ahmaud Arbery was out running in a neighborhood when two armed white men in a pickup truck pursued him and shot him in cold blood. Assuming he had been part of a robbery that had taken place earlier, they believed it was their right to chase him down and execute him. Tragically, this is just the latest example of how we continue to be haunted by our racist past here in America. And it comes in the midst of a pandemic that is killing African-Americans at much higher rates. The US Census Bureau reports that African-Americans represent 13.4% of the general population but counties with higher concentrations of blacks account for more than half of all COVID cases and almost 60% of deaths. Furthermore, we've known for a long time that African-Americans are disproportionately targeted by our justice system. 37% of the general prison population is African-American men. 22% African-American women. Clearly, we still have a race problem in our country.

One of the things I love most about reading the Bible in a year chronologically is how it reminds us to combine our prayers with action. In our readings for today, David sends emissaries to the Ammonites to offer condolences for the death of their king. His desire is to build a friendship with the heir to the throne. His plan is thwarted, however, by the princes of the Ammonites who would rather sow suspicion and create a pretext for war with Israel. Tribal conflict, you see, is nothing new in human history. So they publicly shame David's messengers, gather an army, and set out to destroy Israel. At first, it appears their efforts will be successful. They actually are able to surround the army of Israel. But Joab and his mighty men fight free and end up routing the enemy. In the wake of this great victory, David pens the words to Psalm 20.

I think it's critical to note that David cried out to God. He cried out to God in the midst of his trouble. He cried out to God in the midst of his fear. He cried out to God for salvation. David knew the battle belonged to the Lord. David knew the fight would be fierce but with God he would prevail. David acknowledges his own strength is not enough. He is humble. He is heartfelt. He is sincere. At the same time, David prepares his army for battle. He arrays his forces as best he can. He devises strategies and implements his plan. The result is a great victory for God's people.

Now apply those same principles to our situation today. Yes, our thoughts and prayers are with the Arbery family. Yes, our thoughts and prayers are with the African-American community as they continue to suffer from the scourge of white supremacy. Yes, we join our voices together to call on the Lord to answer them in these days of trouble. Protect them from evil. Send them help from His sanctuary. Fulfill their desire for salvation. Yes, we humbly acknowledge that only Christ can purge the

evil of white supremacy from our midst. Only Christ can deliver us from the sin of racism. Only Christ can transform hatred into love.Yes, we cannot place our trust in “chariots and horses” or in “legislative powers” or “social reforms.” But that doesn’t mean we ignore them completely. They are simply tools in God’s hand to accomplish His will on earth. Just as David deployed chariots and horses to defeat the Ammonites so we must deploy laws and reforms to defeat white supremacy. We must tear down systems and structures that continue to create uneven playing fields and deny access to people of color. We must hold our political leaders accountable for how they use racism as a tool to retain power and influence and wealth and privilege. We must hold ourselves accountable for the things we say and the ways we think and the ways we act that unwittingly foster hostile attitudes towards those of a different color. We must be proactive in building friendships across racial lines. Actively listening to one another’s experiences and suffering with those who have suffered rather than pre-judging them. We must work towards a more just, more gracious society where no one has to be afraid to go on a jog through a neighborhood.

So I am praying Psalm 20 differently today. Not for myself. Not for my tribe. Not for my community. I am praying for God to fulfill the desire of my heart and deliver us from the sin of racism. I am praying for the day when we can celebrate and rejoice in the diversity God has created rather than perceive one another as a threat. I am praying for the day when God will deliver us from the worst of our fears and prejudices and lust for power. And I am working towards those ends as well. Listening. Serving. Voting. Advocating. Trusting the Lord to use my meager efforts for His just purposes in this world.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

May 7, 2020

HOPE

Readings for today: Psalms 65-67, 69-70

Yesterday, despair got to me. I woke up to a horrific video of a young African-American man being hunted and gunned down in broad daylight. I scrolled endlessly through the feeds of my friends of color lamenting, raging, demanding justice. As I prayed, I lifted up my own lament to God. Along with my rage and anger. Shaking my fists at the heavens. How long, O Lord? I don't understand how such things can happen in 21st century America. I don't understand why the two men who committed the crime aren't in jail tonight. I don't understand why - as Dr. Bryan Loritts and Dr. Eric Mason pointed out yesterday - why black men are murdered while eating Skittles in Florida. Sitting in a church in South Carolina. Sitting in a car with a girlfriend and young daughter in Minnesota. Eating ice cream at home in Dallas. Playing video games with a nephew in Fort Worth. Jogging in a neighborhood in Georgia. I don't understand why there isn't justice. I then broadened my appeal to God. I don't understand why synagogues are attacked. I don't understand why mosques are vandalized and burned. I don't understand why LGBTQ nightclubs are targeted. I don't understand. I don't understand the greed that feeds off the backs of the poor. I don't understand why power tends to corrupt. I don't understand why we human beings always seem to have to find an enemy to fight. A group to organize against. I don't understand why so many of our ideologies include hate. I was soon overwhelmed. It led me to the point of despair and my soul bore that weight throughout the day. I crashed into bed exhausted and could barely get up this morning.

Then I read the Psalms. I was reminded that David too felt overwhelmed at times. David too knew hardship and injustice and suffering. David too struggled to make sense of it all. And yet he praised God. He praised God for hearing our prayers. Praised God for creating the heavens and the earth. Praised God for each sunrise and sunset. He praised God for the goodness of the earth. The fruit of the vine. The abundance of blessings. He praised God for His mighty acts of deliverance. Cutting a path through the Red Sea. He praised God for His steadfast love and faithfulness. For His grace and tender mercies. He praised God for His righteousness and holiness and justice. He praised God for His forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. David was not sticking his head in the sand. He was not given to sentimentalism or naive piety. David faced the horrors of this world with eyes wide open. And still he believed. Still he trusted. Still he found hope in God.

I don't know where life finds you today. People read this blog from all over the state. All over the nation. All over the world. They come from different backgrounds and cultural traditions. Different races and socio-economic classes. Each of you has a story to share. Each of you has seen your share of suffering and pain. Each of you is wrestling in your own way with the crisis we are facing. And maybe, just maybe, you've found yourself like me feeling overwhelmed. Exhausted. Fearful. Anxious. Afraid. Weighed down by the weight of it all. Friends, each new sunrise is a gift. A reminder that God's mercies are new every morning. He is steadfast. He is faithful. He is true. He is at work. He is coming. He will set all things right. He will make all things new. Let Him restore your hope today!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalm 51

May 8, 2020

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 11-12, 1 Chronicles 20, Psalm 51

”Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” 2 Samuel 12:7

Imagine you are Nathan. You are David’s closest advisor and friend. You’ve risen to power alongside him. You are the most trusted member of his court. You’ve watched him pile up victory after victory. You’ve seen his heart for the Lord firsthand. He’s confided in you. He counts on you. He trusts you with his most intimate thoughts and desires like when he came to you to ask advice on building God a house. Such a project would have been sealed his fame forever. It would have established his reputation as a mighty king. It was something every significant ancient near east monarch did at some point during their reign. And you sought the Lord for David. And you gave David the Lord’s answer which had to be disappointing on some level to him. So you are the man David relies upon to have the courage to speak the truth he doesn’t want to hear.

Now you watch as David falls. You grow anxious as David stays home during the season when kings normally head off to war. David is not meant for a life of ease. He is a man of action. And he’s missing the fight. He’s missing the challenge of leading his men into battle. Perhaps he even feels guilty or ashamed for not being on the frontlines. He prowls around the palace. He can’t sit still. His mood growing darker with each passing hour. One day he finds himself on the roof. Surveying all he has made. He’s vulnerable. He’s weak. He’s become blind to his own lusts and desires. Then he sees Bathsheba bathing. He sends for her. He rapes her. She gets pregnant. Ashamed, he takes matters into his own hands. Seeks to cover up his terrible sin. He calls Uriah home from the front. One of his mighty men. A man who has fought by his side through thick and thin. But Uriah refuses to sleep in his home. Refuses to enjoy the company of his wife while his fellow soldiers are sleeping in the fields. David’s shame only grows. He knows he should be following Uriah’s example. So he sends him back to the front. Premeditates his murder. All so he can steal his wife and escape judgment for his adultery. It’s a brutal, horrifying episode in David’s life.

You’ve watched all this come to pass and now you know what you have to do. You must confront David on his sin. You must call David to account. You must remind David that even kings are not above God’s law. This will mean taking your life into your hands. After all, David’s already killed one man who stood in his way. So you approach the throne. You approach the man you once considered a great king and even greater friend. You come before him in fear but also with courage. You know what needs to be said. You know it’s for the greater good. The greater good of David. The greater good of the nation of Israel. The greater good of all involved. The truth must come to light. Righteousness must have its day. David must be given the opportunity to repent. You know David well. You know the shame he must be feeling. And you know he will most likely over-compensate for his sin. So you tell him a story. About a rich man who unjustly robs a poor man. David in his righteous indignation calls the man to judgment. Nathan replies, “You are the man.”

I try to imagine the silence that must have settled over the court in that moment. You must have been able to hear a pin drop. David half off his throne in anger. Nathan standing calmly before him with his finger outstretched. The rest of the court holding their breath to see what will happen. David’s speechless so Nathan continues. Delivering the Word of the Lord with clarity, conviction, and power. With each word, you can almost see David shrink back into his seat. What he thought to keep secret has

now been shouted from the mountaintop. Everyone now knows. The word is out. There's no going back. David repents. Nathan delivers the final blow. Their child will die. And then goes home.

Would that we had a Nathan today! A godly man or woman willing to speak truth to power! Willing to speak God's Word to presidents and governors. Congressmen and women. State legislators and local community officials. Where is the Nathan who refuses to play partisan games? Where is the Nathan who refuses to promote their own political agenda? Where is the Nathan who refuses to represent any party but God? Sadly far too many pastors, priests, and other religious leaders have been captured by the lure of political influence. They've sacrificed their integrity before God for a seat at the table. They go on cable news and justify their party's social policy positions by cherry-picking Scripture. Rather than serving as court prophets, they become court jesters in their twisted attempts to prop up their particular candidate. It happens on both sides of the aisle.

I think the closest we've come to a Nathan is Billy Graham. He consulted with presidents over several decades with no fanfare. No photo ops. Just came and went and made himself available for counsel. No one will ever know the content of those conversations but I imagine most would agree that Billy spoke for the Lord in each and every situation. He pushed our presidents to become better leaders and even better people. He challenged them to seek the Lord's wisdom and to follow the Lord's ways. He cared for them just as Nathan cared for David. And we can do the same by praying fervently for all our leaders regardless of political affiliation. We can love them by seeking to serve them and care for them in whatever ways we can. We can send them messages of encouragement. We can resist the temptation to tear them down publicly. We can celebrate and support them when they make godly decisions. And if God does give us influence, we can make sure we do all we can to represent Christ in the halls of power where we've been called.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122

May 9, 2020

MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

Readings for today: Psalms 32, 86, 102, 103, 122

The more I spend time with people, the more I am convinced that eminent Jewish psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, was right. So much of our pain and heartache and struggle is because we do not truly understand who we are. We have a distorted self-image. We look in the mirror and we are blind to the true nature of the person looking back at us. I love what he wrote at the end of his classic work, Man's Search for Meaning, "We have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord's Prayer or the Shema Yisrael on his lips." In other words, all of us are capable of great good or great evil. This is why reading and re-reading and re-reading Scripture is so important. Within the pages of this precious book, God teaches us the deepest truths about ourselves and how we can find salvation. The narrative runs something like this...

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) You and I were designed to live in a world of perfection. A paradise called Eden. We were made in the image of God so that we might show forth the glory of God. We were given dominion and authority and power to rule over all God has made as a kind of vice-regent or undershepherd.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalms 51:5) We abandoned our vocation. We rebelled against God. We aspired to be gods ourselves. In so doing, the image of God was marred. Corrupted. Poisoned. Every single human being since Adam and Eve's fall has been born in brokenness. Born in sin. Conceived in iniquity. From the moment the sperm fertilizes the egg, we are lost.

"Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." (John 3:3) We are lost but we are not hopeless! Out of love, the Father sent His only Son into the world that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish in their sin. All who believe in Christ are born again. Born a second time. This time of the Spirit.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) Being born of the Spirit literally changes our DNA. Changes the fundamental reality of our existence. Gives us a new nature. A new heart. A heart of flesh sensitive to the leading of God to replace the heart of stone that was so rebellious and resistant. The image of God is now restored. Our vocation renewed. The commission re-issued. Go. Make disciples of all nations. Baptize. Teach. Fill the earth. Subdue. Have dominion. Share my glory with all of creation.

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:52) The final promise. Jesus will come again. On the last day, a trumpet shall sound. The heavens will open. The dead will rise. And we shall be changed from one degree of glory to another. The imperfect shall be made perfect. The perishable shall be made imperishable. Sin and death will be destroyed. Eternity sets in. We are home.

This is the fundamental worldview of the Psalmist. It's the fundamental narrative they are singing about though the revelation of Jesus as Messiah still lies far off in the future. They trust in the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father to bring about His will on the earth. They also understand this side of

heaven that we are broken, sinful, corrupt creatures in desperate need of God's grace. And grace only comes as we confess. As we repent. It's more than feeling bad. More than feeling guilty. More than feeling ashamed. It's about turning from our sin. Turning towards God. Making the necessary changes in our lives in response to all God has done for us. "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered...I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin." (Psalms 32:1, 5)

What do you need to confess today? Where have you fallen short? Where do you feel enslaved? Afflicted? Ashamed? Guilty? In what areas of your life has the Spirit brought conviction? Is it your thoughts? Attitudes? Actions? Feelings? The life of a believer in Jesus is one of constant confession as we come before the Lord acknowledging our sin, receiving His grace, and learn to follow in His ways. Does this mean we should live our lives in constant guilt? Live our lives in constant shame? Absolutely not! God's love is everlasting! And His promise is sure! "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." (Psalms 103:11-12) Cling to the love of God, sinner! Let His love be the cornerstone of your life! Let His grace set you free! Trust in His faithfulness to save you from depths of your sin!

May 11, 2020

DYSFUNCTION

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 13-15

All families live with some level of dysfunction. Dysfunction occurs where unhealthy behavior (rage, addiction, abuse, neglect, etc.) is normalized, leading members of a family to make unhealthy accommodations rather than pursue repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Left unchecked, dysfunction leads destructive patterns of behavior that often impact generations as unhealthy coping skills are passed down from parent to child. Breaking generational cycles of sin is extremely difficult and requires incredible courage as well as sacrifice as dysfunctional family systems often violently resist change.

One of the things I love most about the Bible is it's raw honesty. It doesn't attempt to whitewash the sins of God's people. Consider the family of King David as the pre-eminent Biblical example of a dysfunctional family system. Of course, his situation was made much more complex by the cultural practice of polygamy which led to many children by many different wives and concubines, all seeking to ascend the line of succession. Dynastic considerations complicate what we read today but many lessons can be drawn that are helpful in our own lives. Amnon is the oldest son of David and heir apparent to the throne. As such, he has grown accustomed to power and privilege and simply taking what he wants when he wants it. His treatment of Tamar, his half-sister, is horrific in its own right but probably emblematic of how Amnon lives his life. Absalom is not much better. What begins as a noble desire to protect his sister from public shame ends in murder and a coup attempt against his own father. Who knows what prompted Absalom's move against David but it clearly was pre-meditated and even assisted by some of David's closest confidants. David doesn't help matters much. As king, he should have punished Amnon for his crime but instead appears to give him a pass. Once Absalom takes matters into his own hands, David appears both relieved and appalled. He refuses to forgive and reconcile with Absalom which only isolates him further and divides the royal household. David chooses to ignore the growing conspiracy until its almost too late and thus has to flee into exile. His family shattered. His kingdom divided. His country on the brink of civil war.

I think of my own family system. We've spent considerable time in counseling as we try to break patterns of sin that have not only been passed down but reinforced by our own sinful choices. I have had to learn to deal with my anger issues. Wrestle with my own fears and failures and disappointments. I've had to face the fact that I have caused my children pain through the choices I've made in how I've responded to the difference circumstances we've had to face as a family. I've had to take a long hard look at myself through Christ's eyes and repent. Ask for forgiveness. And pursue reconciliation. It's not easy. It requires humility and sacrifice. I've had to relinquish my need for control. My need to protect my kids from the consequences for the choices they make in life. My need to project "success" to the world around me. I've had to come to grips with the fact that my family is as broken as any and I am a major contributor to that brokenness because of my own sin issues. Honestly, it's a painful journey. Then again, dying to self is always painful.

What about your family system? If your family's story was included in the Scriptures, what would others see? What failures? What successes? Would they see patterns of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Or would they see pride, neglect, abuse, addiction, and rampant conflict? Or perhaps a mixture of both? Where is Christ at work in your family right now? What areas do you need Christ to pay particular attention to in order to bring healing, wholeness, grace and peace? Are there particular family members you need to be praying specifically for? Who are they? What are the issues? How are

you contributing to the pain? Ask Christ to help you chart a different path. One that leads to true transformation.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

May 12, 2020

SLEEPLESS NIGHTS

Readings for today: Psalms 3-4, 13, 28, 55

“But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.” (Psalm 3:3)

“In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.” (Psalm 4:8)

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.” (Psalm 13:5)

“The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him. The Lord is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed.” (Psalm 28:7-8)

“Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” (Psalm 55:22)

I needed all these words this morning. Last night was a sleepless night. I tossed and turned for much of it. My heart burdened for those I love. Those I serve. I think of my friend who lost his mother yesterday. I think of another friend with advanced MS who is fighting for his life against COVID-19. Still another friend who lost their job and despairs of any prospects. And other friends who have had to take dramatic pay cuts or lay off most of their employees. I think of the family of a well-known pastor who took his own life last week. I think of the mother whose son was murdered in cold blood. I think of my own children. Their hopes and dreams. Their struggles and frustrations. How I wish I could save them from all the pain! How I wish I could protect them from the hardships and suffering of this world!

I love the Psalms. They give voice to my deepest feelings. The Psalmist invites me to share openly and honestly and transparently before the Lord. The Psalmist reminds me I do not need to be afraid before God. He will not shame me. He will not dismiss me. He will not ignore me. He is faithful and true. Steadfast and loyal in His love. He will never leave me or forsake me. He is with me in the valley of the shadow when sleep is scarce. In the dark hours of the night as I lay my burdens before the Lord, He listens. He hears my prayers. He receives them and lifts them from my shoulders.

As I process my pain. My fear. My anxiety. My worry. My stress. The Psalmist eventually turns my heart to the Lord. To the source of my life. To the source of my strength. To the source of my salvation. He reminds me that though I cannot shield those I love from the brokenness of this world, the Lord can. Though I cannot keep those I love safe from the trials and tribulations of this world, the Lord can. Though I cannot save those I love from the pain and suffering and heartbreak, the Lord can. Though my strength often fails, the Lord’s never does. Though I am weary and heavy-laden, the Lord will give me rest. These promises renew my hope. Even in the midst of this crisis. Even in the midst of all we are going through right now. God is present. He is our help. He is our refuge. He is our sanctuary. May we rest in His everlasting arms.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 16-18

May 13, 2020

HUMAN NATURE

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 16-18

In my devotional reading this morning, I came across these words, “Deep in every human life there is somehow that which defiles it.” Written in 1943 in the midst of World War 2 by a prominent pastor in New York City. He saw firsthand the impact “crisis” made on people. He came of age during World War 1. He began his ministry in the Roaring Twenties. He served through the Great Depression until the end of World War 2. He was a national voice. He helped our nation process their pain. And the one thing he kept coming back to over and over again was how all these different crises revealed the “de-formation” of humanity’s soul. We just couldn’t get out of our own way. We kept striving in our own strength. We kept turning to our own wisdom. But it was clear to Rev. Scherer that the world’s resources were now played out. The highest ideals of secularism had descended into the horrors of the Holocaust. Science produced fearful and terrifying weapons of mass destruction. Set free from the shackles of religion, humanity pursued it’s own end with tragic consequences. All that was left was what Nietzsche called, “the will to power.” Millions died as a result. Millions experienced systematic abuse and oppression. Millions suffered the consequences of our collective anger and hate.

I was struck by how little has changed in our reading today. Humanity just hits the “repeat” button with every generation. The people of Israel abandon David. The once-great hero is now on the run for his life. All the power dynamics of this particular ancient near east society are thrown up in the air. Allegiances change overnight. Everyone casting their lot with the person they believe will eventually prevail. Ziba makes a play for his master’s wealth. Shimei takes the opportunity to take out all his frustrations. Abishai reverts to type, thinking he can solve every problem with violence. Ahithophel is so ashamed when his advice isn’t taken, he goes home and takes his own life. Joab seizes the opportunity to kill Absalom against the specific orders from his king. David weeps over the death of his son. Israel will return to David but nothing will ever again be the same. Violence and suffering and warfare will mark the rest of David’s reign. There is just something dark and deep in our nature that continues to defile us.

Now consider our own situation. A pandemic rages across the world. It seems highly infectious. It is dangerous as well especially to those who are vulnerable in terms of age or health conditions. The pandemic exacerbates the highly charged political divisions that already exist. Polarization deepens. The chasm between people widens. Distrust flourishes, fed by corporate and social media platforms who are more committed to their own agendas rather than truth. The flames of fear and anxiety are fanned higher and higher. We are facing the very real consequences of our decisions both personally and politically. More people are getting sick. More people are dying from COVID-19. More people are losing jobs. More businesses are shutting down. The mental health crisis only grows. Domestic violence is on the rise. Substance abuse increases. There is no win here. There is only the hope of mitigating as much loss as possible. But still we look for someone to blame. Still we look for someone to attack. Still we look for a scapegoat. There is something dark and deep in our nature that continues to defile us.

Where can we find hope? Only in Christ. Christ gives us compassion to walk in another person’s shoes. Christ gives us grace to allow people to make mistakes. Christ gives us love for those we disagree with or those whom we call our enemies. Christ gives us joy even in the midst of our trials. Christ gives us strength to persevere through our suffering. Christ gives us humility to ask for help. Christ gives us wisdom to make as good a decision as we possibly can with the limited information we have available

to us. Christ gives us peace in the midst of the storm. Friends, we have reached the horizon of our lives. We have reached the end of our resources. No amount of government intervention can possibly save any of us from the effects of this pandemic. Only Christ can deliver us. May we turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

May 14, 2020

LEARNING TO PRAY

Readings for today: Psalms 26, 40-41, 58, 61-62, 64

What is prayer? Communion with God. On our knees. Folded hands. Eyes closed. Forming thoughts in our minds and sending them upwards like sparks from a fire? Is it a conversation or more of a monologue? A task we have to complete each day if we want to stay on God's good side? Something we do before meals or before bed? Is it the recitation of memorized words learned as a child and carried through to adulthood? "Now I lay me down to sleep..." "Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen." "God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for this food." "Our Father, who art in heaven..." What is prayer?

The Psalms are the prayerbook of the Bible. 150 different prayers written by different people on different occasions as they wrestled with life. Readers of the Psalms are always struck by their raw honesty and transparency. The beautiful way they express the deepest emotions of the human heart. The vivid descriptions of God and His great faithfulness. They are marvelous and great teachers when it comes to prayer.

One of the biggest things I've learned in the years I've spent meditating on the Psalms is that prayer comes more from the heart than the head. Prayer is less about me forming thoughts or saying words or reciting texts and more about laying before God the deepest emotions of my heart. Deep prayer doesn't require much in the way of words. Just letting the feelings flow and trusting God is hearing what's behind them. This is what makes David such a great Psalmist. He doesn't seem to stop to think about the "appropriateness" of his feelings. He doesn't seem to "judge" his emotions. He just lets them fly up to God and trusts God is big enough and great enough to make sense out of the chaos.

It's why he can express contradictory emotions all in the same prayer. "I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked...O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells." (Psalms 26:5, 8) He feels no need to try to make sense of it all. He trusts God can sort it out.

He can express his anger and desire for vengeance against those who hurt him. "O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord! Let them vanish like water that runs away; when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted. Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun...The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. Mankind will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth." (Psalms 58:6-8, 10-11) And almost in the same breath, be so tender. "Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us." (Psalms 62:8)

Ultimately, the Psalms give us permission to be real and authentic before God. To truly be ourselves. To put aside all pretense and performance and let drop the masks we so often wear.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 38, 42

May 15, 2020

AS THE DEER

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 19-21, Psalms 5, 38, 42

Human beings just seem hardwired to divide. Perhaps I'm just jaded from what I see happening in our community and country and around the world today. People arguing over whether or not to wear masks. People arguing over the proper response to viral outbreak. Politicians taking advantage of the moment to pus their own agendas. The ubiquity of fake news and false reporting that spreads like wildfire of social media. Our ideologies seem impenetrable. Our tendency towards confirmation bias unchangeable. Our partisan commitments unshakeable.

The same is true for Israel. The civil war is over. Absalom is dead. David is grieving. The nation is mourning. They face an uncertain future together. What will David do? How will the king respond to the betrayal? How will Israel deal with its national shame? It's not clean or neat or easy. There is more violence. More rebellion. More division. More suffering. More pain. Political enemies are assassinated. Tribal tensions exploited. Israel's enemies sense weakness and attack. David is almost killed. It's a reminder of how brutal and unforgiving this life can be. Small mistakes can lead to devastating consequences especially when you are a person of power and influence. Furthermore, today's reading reminds us that even people who have a heart for God are fallen. Broken. Sinful human beings who often make mistakes.

So where can we find hope? Where do we find our unity amidst all the divisions? Is there a force powerful enough to bring us together? Yes. It is God. "Let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exalt in you." (Psalm 5:11) "But for you, O Lord, do I wait; it is you, O Lord my God, who will answer…Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!" (Psalm 38: 15, 21-22) David looks to God in the midst of his crisis. David looks to God for strength to face his enemies both within and without. David looks to God for hope as he seeks to re-unite Israel and lead the nation back on a path to peace and prosperity. David recognizes his desperation for God. "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." (Psalm 42:1-2)

I don't know your unique circumstances. I know some of you are struggling with your health right now. Some of you are struggling with the loss of a job. Some of you are struggling in your marriage. Your relationship with your children is coming apart. Some of you just got news you will have to move to stay employed. Some of you may be in danger of losing your homes. Some of you will have to put off retirement. For others of you, the stay at home orders have put your life at risk either because of abuse or starvation or something just as dangerous. And perhaps the hardest part of all this is we don't know when it will end. We don't know when a vaccine will be developed. We don't know when the virus will mutate and run its course. We don't know how long herd immunity will take and the very real human costs involved. There are so many unknowns still out there and that causes fear and anxiety in our hearts. We too are becoming desperate for God. Like a deer pants for water. Thankfully, when we come to the end of ourselves, we find God. "Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and waves have gone over me. By day, the Lord commands His steadfast love, and at night He sings over me…Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, my salvation and my God." (Psalm 42:7-8, 11) May you find your hope renewed in Christ today and may it bring you closer to those you love and live among!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 22-23, Psalms 57

May 18, 2020

WORD OF GOD SPEAK

Readings for today: Psalms 97-99

Sometimes no commentary is needed…

“The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad! Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory. All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols; worship him, all you gods! Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O Lord. For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods. O you who love the Lord, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!”

“Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody! With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord! Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.”

“The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. Exalt the Lord our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called upon his name. They called to the Lord, and he answered them. In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them; they kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them. O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. Exalt the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy!”

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

May 19, 2020

THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Readings for today: 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21-22, Psalms 30

Today's reading presents us with several challenges. Did God or Satan incite David to perform a census? Why was census-taking so bad? What sin had kindled the wrath of God? Why was the punishment so severe? What does this passage reveal about the character and nature of God? Of course, the nature of the punishment hits very close to home as we too are watching tens of thousands die all around the world as a result of a virulent plague.

First and foremost, today's reading forces us to read not just for content but for comprehension. 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles are written by two different authors. These two authors are describing the same incident but from different perspectives. The author of 2 Samuel wants to highlight the sovereignty of God over all human affairs. Including our sin. This doesn't make God the author of sin but it does acknowledge that He will bend even our sin towards divine justice. The author of 1 Chronicles wants to highlight the author of sin who is Satan. The accuser. An evil spirit allowed by God torment God's people. (Remember the example of Job?) However, the author also reminds us that even Satan lives under God's sovereign power and God will not give him free reign to wreak havoc forever.

Second, why was God angry with Israel? This is where the Bible's chapter and verse divisions can trip us up if we aren't careful. In the original language, there is no break between what has come before and what happens in our reading today. They are all part of the same story. So Israel has just come out of a civil war. Israel's leaders are engaging in power struggles and even outright, cold-blooded murder. (Joab) This is obviously not the way God wants His people to live. They are failing in their calling to be a light to the nations. So God rightfully judges them for their sin.

Why the census? What was so bad about it? Well, again, consider the situation. You are David. You just survived a coup. You want to know who's with you and who's against you. You send your mightiest warriors out to take a census. To remind everyone who's boss. It's a show of force meant to intimidate as much as anything else. It's also an act of self-preservation. David is placing his trust in his own strength. His own ability to project power. His own authority as king. This is not God's will for David. God wants David to rely on Him. To trust in Him. To place his faith and his life in God's hands.

Finally, the plague. This one - as I said above - hits close to home. Are plagues a sign of God's judgment? Maybe. Is COVID-19 a sign of God's judgment on our world? Perhaps. The reality is we will never know. What we do know for sure is that God is still sovereign. The plague will come to an end when He decides it will. He will end it just as surely as He ended the plague in David's time. That end may come through a vaccine. It may come through natural means. God uses any and all measures to accomplish His will for our lives. In the meantime, plagues such as these should cause us to repent. To fall on our knees before the Lord. To humble ourselves and cast our cares on Him. God is good. God is righteous. God is holy. God is compassionate. God is gracious. God is with us even in the midst of this plague and He will hold us fast as we persevere through these difficult times.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 108-109

May 20, 2020

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Readings for today: Psalms 108-109

"Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth! That your beloved ones may be delivered, give salvation by your right hand and answer me! God has promised in his holiness: "With exultation I will divide up Shechem and portion out the Valley of Succoth. Gilead is mine; Manasseh is mine; Ephraim is my helmet, Judah my scepter. Moab is my washbasin; upon Edom I cast my shoe; over Philistia I shout in triumph." (Psalm 108:5-9)

Today's reading reminds us of God's sovereignty. God reigns over all the earth. Over all human affairs. Over all the nations. Over all the princes and kings and presidents and prime ministers. God reigns over all of nature. His throne sits high above the heavens. The earth remains his footstool. God exalts Himself over creation and there is nothing that escapes His notice. Nothing operates outside His sovereign will. Nothing catches Him by surprise. Nothing lies outside His power and authority.

Yes, that includes viral pandemics. Wars and regional conflict. Just and unjust governments alike. Corrupt politicians and those who hold fast to their integrity. Rich and poor. Educated and uneducated. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation. All exist under His sovereign hand. If this is true, it creates the ultimate conundrum. If God is sovereign, how can He be good? There is just too much evil in the world. Too much suffering. Too much pain. Too much death. If God truly is sovereign, He must not care. He must not be good. He must be arbitrary and capricious. Cold and distant. Disengaged and uninvolved. Or…perhaps He is good but just not sovereign? Perhaps He's all-loving and all-gracious and all-compassionate but simply not powerful enough to confront the forces of darkness that afflict our world? Perhaps this is why plagues run amok. Wars never seem to cease. The most corrupt and power-hungry politicians seem to win. The gap between rich and poor gets wider. The social divisions only become more pronounced. These truths are difficult to hold together in our finite, human minds. How God be both sovereign and good when we look at the state of the world He supposedly rules?

It's a thoroughly modern problem. David, obviously, didn't have such issues. He had no problems holding in tension in his own heart and mind the sovereignty and goodness of God and the brokenness of his world. He fundamentally believed in the Biblical story. The good and sovereign God had created a good and perfect world. Into that good and perfect world, God put a good and perfect creature made in His own divine image. The charge to that creature was to care for and nurture and act as God's agent in that good and perfect world to help it become fruitful and beautiful and lovely as God originally planned. However, the good and perfect creature grew proud. It disobeyed. It stretched out its hand in an effort to be like God. And the good and perfect world fell into ruin. Sin and death now reigned. But the good and sovereign God's plan remained the same. He would work in and through the creature made in His image to restore the world to it's pre-Fall condition. Thus, Adam's call came to Noah. Noah's call came to Abraham. Abraham's call came to Moses. Moses' call came to David. David's call would eventually come to a man named Jesus. God Himself re-imaging Himself into the broken world He still loves. The good and sovereign God refusing to let go of all He had made. Through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the power of sin and death was broken. The forces of evil defeated. And what we are experiencing today is simply the aftershocks of that great victory that will one day find completion when the good and sovereign God returns to make all things new.

Until that day comes, we walk by faith. We hold fast to our belief that God is good. He is holy. He is pure. He is righteous. And we hold fast to our belief that God is sovereign. All-powerful. Almighty.

Ruler of the heavens and the earth. And we trust He knows what He's doing. We trust He sees things we cannot see. We trust He knows things we cannot know. And He is at work. The good and sovereign God has not abandoned His world to its fate. He is with us. He is near us. He is for us. And His promise is that He will bring to completion the good work He began.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Chronicles 23-26

May 21, 2020

LEGACY

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 23-26

“When David was old and full of days, he made Solomon his son king over Israel.” (1 Chronicles 23:1)

Legacy. It’s something all of us will leave. To our children. To our grandchildren. To those we work with. To those we serve. For several years, I served my denomination as the chair of our Ministerial Committee. In that position, I had the privilege of walking alongside several pastors as they made the transition into retirement. It wasn’t always easy. Some of those transitions were smooth. Some were rocky. Some were planned. Some were unplanned. Some felt affirmed on their way out. Others felt pushed out by the people they loved. My biggest takeaway? We either plan for the day when we will no longer be around or someone else will plan it for us.

David made plans. He understood with all his wisdom and experience that he could set his successor, Solomon, up for success. So he organizes the Levites. Helps them transition from service to the Tabernacle to service in the Temple. Gives them new roles and responsibilities that fit the new situation they will find themselves in. He organizes the priests. Casts lots so they can be established in their terms of service. He sets up the musicians in their service. And then the gatekeepers, treasurers, and other officials. It is a massive undertaking. A complete reorganization from top to bottom of the entire leadership structure of a nation. Imagine would might have happened had David left this to Solomon to figure out? Imagine the infighting. The jockeying for position. The currying for favor. Imagine the chaos that might have resulted as the sons of Eleazar fought with the sons of Ithamar for the power of the priesthood. Imagine the sons of Levi, set free from their obligations to carry and care for the Tabernacle, refusing to care for the sacred elements of the Lord. Imagine the gatekeepers and musicians each deciding to do their own thing. Solomon would have had a mess on his hands for sure!

But David was faithful. He knew a significant part of his role was to finish well. To pass on a strong legacy to his son. Not just for Solomon’s sake but for the sake of Israel as a nation. Because of my experience walking alongside so many pastors, my wife and I talk a lot about our legacy. Though I am still young, the years pass by so quickly. How am I preparing to pass on what has been entrusted to me? Should the Lord tarry and give me a rich and full life on this earth, I might have twenty-five good years of pastoring left. What will those years look like? How will I spend them? When will I know it is time to raise up my successor? How can I set them up for success? My children are beginning to leave home and head off to college. What kind of spiritual legacy have I given them? How have I prepared them to take on the roles and responsibilities of an adult? My parents are getting older and will begin to face the challenges that come along with aging. Am I prepared to care for them? Assist them? Make sure they continue to live a rich and full and vital life alongside their grandkids? These are important questions to ask and ponder and pray over no matter what season of life you find yourself in.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 131, 138, 139, 143-145

May 23, 2020

THE HARD WORK OF GENEROSITY

Readings for today: 1 Chronicles 27-29, Psalms 68

The global economy has lost trillions due to the pandemic. Throw in a super-cyclone in southern Bangladesh and a locust infestation in the Horn of Africa and some of the poorest people in the world are now in danger of a famine of biblical proportions according to the latest news from the WHO and UN. They are setting up "hunger hospitals" in the most vulnerable countries in order to help provide food security during this time when global supply chains are disrupted and local markets shut down due to the virus. It's heartbreaking. Some ask where is God in the midst of all of this? I believe God turns that question back to us. Where are you? Where are my people? Why do you not take what I have given you and use it to bless others in my name? You see, the reality is God has given us all we need to take care of every single human need in the world today. According to the New York Times, it would take 10 billion dollars a year to provide clean drinking water to the world. Sounds like a lot, doesn't it? It's 1/10 of what Europe spends on alcohol each year and about half of what the US spends on dog food. According to the UN, it would take about 30 billion a year to solve the world's food crisis. According to the WHO, it would cost $58/person to provide everyone with access to basic healthcare. About 371 billion by 2030. The impact? 97 million premature deaths could be averted, including more than 50 million children who never live to see their 5th birthday. 20 million deaths from non-communicable diseases like diabetes, cancer, and heart disease would be prevented. Life expectancy would jump anywhere between 3-9 years. Incredible!

How do we get from here to there? How do we become a more generous people? The kind of givers God loves? King David shows us the way. First and foremost, we must love God supremely. We must love God more than our wealth. More than our lifestyles. More than our safety. More than our comfort. We must love God with our whole hearts. Listen to what David tells his son Solomon. "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever." (1 Chronicles 28:9) Essentially, the key to Solomon's success. The key to his kingship will be his love for God.

Second, we must recognize God is the giver of all good gifts. "Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name." (1 Chronicles 29:10-13) We don't own a single thing. Everything we have comes from God's own hands. He chose the place of our birth. He endowed us with gifts and talents and abilities. He sovereignly orchestrated the opportunities we've been given. All these things were outside our control and yet they are the secret to our success. Of course we work hard. Of course we do our best. We are not passive in this process. But the foundation of whatever success we've achieved in this life was not laid by our own hands but by God Himself.

Third, we must acknowledge we are unworthy of such divine attention. "But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding." (1 Chronicles 29:14-15) The world is constantly telling us we "deserve" all we have. We've "earned" all we've received. We are "good" and "righteous"

and “worth” every penny of our wealth. The Bible calls this a lie. We are unworthy sinners. Unworthy of God’s attention. Unworthy to come into His presence. We are sinners in desperate, desperate, desperate need of grace. Our days are like a shadow. There is no abiding. In a generation or two, all we have accomplished will be dust and no one will even remember our names. But God loves us. And has dealt bountifully with us. And has secured for us an eternal home in the heavens if we will receive His greatest gift. Jesus.

Fourth, once we’ve set our hearts on Christ. Once we’ve acknowledged God as the “sole proprietor” of this world and all that is in it. Once we’ve humbled ourselves in our unworthiness before Him. Our hearts and hands quite naturally open. Our fists unclench. Our fears and doubts fade. And we give. Give generously. Freely. Cheerfully. “I know, my God, that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness. In the uprightness of my heart I have freely offered all these things, and now I have seen your people, who are present here, offering freely and joyously to you. O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, our fathers, keep forever such purposes and thoughts in the hearts of your people, and direct their hearts toward you.” (1 Chronicles 29:17-18)

When it comes to your money...is your heart directed towards God? When it comes to your wealth...do you see it as a tool in God’s hand? In these uncertain times, do you find yourself holding tighter onto what you have? Hunkering down? Doing all you can to preserve your lifestyle? Or are you becoming even more generous? Even more sacrificial as you see the needs around you grow? We face these same questions as a church. We’ve been blessed. Through careful stewardship, we’re debt free and stable financially. To whom much is given, much is expected. It’s why we’ve sent money through the Petros Network to help ward off starvation in Ethiopia. It’s why we’ve given funds to Bishop John Rucyahana in Rwanda as he seeks to serve the poorest of the poor. It’s why we’ve sent money to help Pastor Martin rebuild in South Sudan. And we’re seeking to do even more. Not just around the world but in our own community as well. As America goes back to work, I fully expect our economy to rebound. It will not be nearly as easy for most of the rest of the world. Will we lead the way in generosity? Are we willing to be “strong and courageous”, sacrificing our own needs, wants, and desires so the world can have clean water, nutritious food, and basic healthcare? Especially in light of this pandemic? In the wake of WWII, America established the Marshall Plan to help rebuild Europe. It set us up for a century of greatness. Imagine what could happen if we did the same for the world?

May 25, 2020

MEMORIAL DAY REFLECTIONS

Readings for today: Psalms 111-118

"O Israel, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. O house of Aaron, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield. The Lord has remembered us; he will bless us; he will bless the house of Israel; he will bless the house of Aaron; he will bless those who fear the Lord, both the small and the great. May the Lord give you increase, you and your children! May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth!" (Psalm 115:9-15)

Today is a special day in our country. A day when we remember those who gave their lives to protect our freedoms. Those who sacrificed so much and, in some cases, paid the ultimate price to defend our country. I think of my own family. My wife has two grandfathers buried at Fort Logan Cemetery in Denver, CO. Her father did three tours with the Navy in Vietnam. My father served as well during that era. It's humbling to reflect on their dedication. So each year we set aside a day to remember. A day to celebrate. Proclamations will be read. Speeches will be given. And all of them will end asking for some kind of divine blessing on our nation.

Israel was no different. She too sought God's divine blessing. Today's reading is filled with all kinds of nationalistic language. Israel praising God for His steadfast commitment to His covenant with them. Israel praising God for His mighty works on their behalf. Israel praising God for lifting them up above the other nations around them. At the same time, it's important to note Israel's focus. It's on God and not on themselves. They extol God for His character. His nature. His glory. They praise Him for His righteousness. His justice. His mercy and grace. They recognize their own blessing is wrapped up in their obedience to His commands. They will not receive what the Lord has stored up for them unless they walk in His ways.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever!" (Psalm 111:10)

"Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!… Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and righteous. It is well with the man who deals generously and lends; who conducts his affairs with justice. For the righteous will never be moved; he will be remembered forever. He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the Lord. His heart is steady; he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries. He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever; his horn is exalted in honor." (Psalm 112:1, 4-9)

"Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!" (Psalm 115:1)

The Psalmist understood a profound truth. If we seek to lift up ourselves. If we seek to put ourselves first. If we seek to protect ourselves. Promote ourselves. Indulge ourselves. God will bring down judgment. Selfishness is the very definition of what the Bible calls "wickedness." But the nation that serves others. The nation that gives generously. The nation that sacrifices for the sake of those who are poor and needy and less-fortunate. That nation reflects the very heart of God and will be blessed in order to be a blessing.

I love America. I am thankful for the freedoms we enjoy. I am grateful for the material blessings we've worked so hard to earn. I'm especially humbled by the example of those who have gone before us who have made all this possible. I've also seen the alternative. In my line of work, I've traveled the world. I've seen oppression firsthand. I've stood at the mass graves. I've spoken to the victims of abuse and terror. I've seen the fear in their eyes. I've had to be careful at times because I knew there was a good possibility I was being monitored. Thankfully, those are things we do not have to worry about here at home. At the same time, I am concerned. I fear we are losing our grip on what's made America great. I am grieved over our inability to come to grips with our racist past. I am continually shocked at our lack of concern for life. I am heartbroken over the political divisions that threaten to tear us apart at the seams. I am deeply concerned by the growing sense of entitlement, selfishness, and greed, My fear is we will lose whatever blessing we've enjoyed unless we repent and turn back to God.

The founders of our country wrote these words in the historic Preamble to the US Constitution… "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." I pray for the day when we reclaim the original vision on which this country was founded. I pray for the day when we truly make it our aim to form a "more perfect union" rather than exacerbate the social, racial, economic, and political divisions that exist. I pray for the day when we will establish justice for the oppressed. Tranquility for the fearful and anxious among us. Defend the weak and vulnerable. Promote the welfare of all who come to our shores seeking asylum. And secure the future not just for ourselves but for those who will follow in our footsteps. On that day, I believe we will truly be able to proclaim with the Psalmist, "Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 117:1-2)

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 119:1-88

May 27, 2020

THE BLESSINGS OF OBEDIENCE

Readings for today: Psalms 119:1-88

Jesus says, “If you love me, keep my commandments.” (John 14:15)

There is a strange dichotomy growing in the American church today. It’s the idea that we can accept Jesus as Savior but reject Him as Lord. Sure, no one will put it quite that bluntly but it comes with the territory when you meet someone who claims to be a Christian while at the same time rejecting the commands of Scripture. I think of the number of Christians over the years who have told me God was calling them to get divorced. Not for adultery. Not for abuse. Not for abandonment. They simply had fallen out of love with their spouse. The relationship had gotten too hard. They felt trapped. So they justify in their minds and hearts an act of disobedience under the premise that God will simply forgive and forget. I think of the number of Christians I know who lie. They lie to their spouses. Lie to their children. Lie to those they work with or live among. Ultimately, they lie to themselves and they justify it for all kinds of reasons. Political. Social. Economic. Personal. You name it. And they assume God doesn’t care. I think of the number of Christians I know who plead ignorance when it comes to God’s commands. They honestly do not know what God expects from their lives and frankly - if they are totally honest - they don’t really care. They simply want to live their lives the way they want and they hope God gives them a pass.

Contrast that line of thinking with the words of Psalm 119 today…

“With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:10-11)

“I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.” (Psalm 119:16)

“My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times.” (Psalm 119:20)

“Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.” (Psalm 119:24)

Over and over again, the Psalmist proclaims his love for the laws of God. His love is deep. Visceral. Powerful. Emotional. This is a man enraptured not with the rules of his faith but his relationship with God. He understands all relationships have boundaries. All relationships have expectations. All relationships demand something from each party. He is also humble. He knows he is dust and to dust he shall return. He knows he has no business being in a relationship with Almighty God. He understands it is only by grace that he stands. And out of the immense gratitude of his heart, he expresses his devotion to God. He longs to keep God’s commands. His greatest desire is to serve God and love God and honor God with a whole heart.

What about you? Do you know the commands of God? Do you know what God expects from you and why? Do love God’s Word like the Psalmist? Does your soul long to be obedient? “Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart.” (Psalm 119:1-2) God’s blessings are reserved for those who seek to obey Him. Those who love Him enough to honor Him with their lives. Those who express their devotion to Him by seeking to align their lives with His life. They meditate on God’s Word. They memorize God’s Word. They long for their lives to be a reflection of God’s Word. When asked, they

can tell you specifically what areas of their life God is working on even now. They can tell you where they've made progress and where they fall short. They can tell you of their battles with sin and temptation. They can show you the scars from the mistakes they've made and confessed. They know the road of repentance is full of detours and though they stumble like a drunk man from one side to the other, they inexorably make their way to God.

So again, what about you? Do love Jesus? Do you follow His commands? Let me encourage you to start with the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7. Essentially, it is Jesus' interpretation of the Ten Commandments. It's a beautiful picture of what the obedient Christian life is all about. Begin meditating on the sermon. Memorizing the sermon. Letting the words sink deep into your heart and soul that you may discover all the blessings God has for you in this life and the next!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

May 28, 2020

DISCERNMENT

Readings for today: 1 Kings 3-4, 2 Chronicles 1, Psalms 72

“Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?”” (1 Kings 3:9)

We suffer today from a lack of discernment. We live in a post-truth world. Right and wrong are personally defined. There is no such thing as objectivity anymore. People do what is right in their own eyes. We call good “evil” and evil “good.” We are lost as a culture. As a society. As a nation. The pandemic has revealed the fault lines. Our political leaders seem far more interested in using this crisis to further their own political ends. We don’t seem to have many adults in the room. People who will honestly and transparently and humbly lead us through what is an extremely challenging time. The results are deadly. Especially in impoverished areas and communities of color. The structural failings of our system and the fruit of a racist history continue to haunt us. The latest video of George Floyd only adds fuel to an already raging fire. Would that God would raise up a leader for us like Solomon!

Sadly, in a democratic system, you often get the leadership you deserve. If we are honest, they are an extension of us. They are the embodiment of our basest desires and primal instincts. They are ruthless, calculating, greedy, corrupt. Such is the system we’ve created. We’ve polluted the pool of potential candidates with so much dark money, bareknuckle politics, and backroom deals that it’s no wonder we end up with the leaders we have. The only ones can possibly stand above the fray are the uber-rich who can fund their own campaigns but they mostly live lives so disconnected from the normal everyday that it’s hard for them to know what’s best for the average person. How I long for the day when we would have a humble leader in the Oval Office or in the Halls of Congress! A godly leader who was willing to acknowledge their mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and simply do their best for the American people. A leader who would put “We the people” above their political party. A leader who would unite rather than divide. A leader who would speak the truth in love. A leader who was honest and transparent.

One of the things we will see as we read through the Kings is how the character of a leader shapes the nation. The fortunes of Israel rise or fall largely on the godliness of the kings who serve her. When godly kings are in power. Kings who are wise. Discerning. Those who know right from wrong and good from evil. Israel flourishes. When ungodly kings are in power. Kings who are corrupt. Foolish. Narcissistic. Those who could care less about right or wrong as long as they acquire more power. Israel falls. America is no different. Now, more than ever, we need godly leadership at the helm of our nation. Now, more than ever, the character of our leaders matters. May God raise up for us leaders like Solomon who know good from evil and can lead us with wisdom.

Readings for tomorrow: Psalm 119:89-176

May 29, 2020

CLINGING TO TRUTH

Readings for today: Psalm 119:89-176

We live in a post-truth world. Our politicians don't tell the truth. Our media doesn't tell the truth. Even our public health officials don't always tell the truth. Everyone it seems bends the truth to their own agenda. Their own needs. Their own feelings. Their own wants. Their own desires. Furthermore, we seem more committed to our personal ideologies than ever. Left or Right. Liberal or conservative. Democrat or Republican. Socialist or capitalist. You name it, we have an opinion on it. We take a side on it. And we consider those who oppose us to be dangerous enemies who must be dehumanized at every turn. If you don't believe me, scroll through Twitter these days. Listen to any of the cable news shows for five minutes. Watch the press conferences of our politicians. It's macabre theater.

The Psalmist points us in a different direction. He points us to the only sure foundation in life. God's Word. God's Word is eternal. "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens." (Psalm 119:89) God's Word is the source of life. "I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life." (Psalm 119:93) God's Word is perfect. "I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life." (Psalm 119:93) God's Word is the source of all wisdom and knowledge and understanding. "Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts." (Psalm 119:98-100) God's Word teaches us what is good and godly. "Righteous are you, O Lord, and right are your rules. You have appointed your testimonies in righteousness and in all faithfulness." (Psalm 119:137-138) God's Word is more precious than gold or anything of value on this earth. "Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold." (Psalm 119:127)

The fundamental problem in our world - and in our church today - is we have rejected God's Word. We have turned aside from His Law. We have abandoned His commandments. Each of us have gone our own way. Each of us has turned inward towards Self. We have set up idols and we cling to our own understanding. It's why we can never seemingly make any progress when it comes to the persistent sin issues of our day like racism. We keep trying to solve it using human means. We keep trying to bring about the Kingdom but without the king. We keep trying to make heaven come to earth by our own strength and the more we try, the worse things seem to get. The more we clench our fists, the more righteousness slips through our fingers. It's a cycle that repeats itself in every generation. What we need is revival. A fresh movement of the Holy Spirit. But in order to receive such a gift, we have to be humbled. We have to be broken. We have to be forced to our knees in surrender. We have to taken to the end of our strength and wisdom and resources. This is what I see taking place around me today. Our world is on fire. Ideologies are only becoming more extreme. Hatred is on the rise. Violence and suffering will only increase. We stand on the brink of war. It may not be fought with armies but it certainly is being fought on the political and social and economic battlefields of our day. Only Christ can save us. Only Christ can deliver us. Jesus Christ is the Word of God. Only as we cling to the Jesus Truth and walk in the Jesus Way will we find the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

May 30, 2020

SEX AND GOD

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 1:1-5:1

The Song of Solomon is one of the most difficult and least understood books in all of Scripture. It's one we tend to avoid in our sex-saturated culture. The language is far too intimate. The imagery too graphic. We won't let ourselves picture it much less reflect on how the Spirit might speak to us through it. We flip through the pages as fast as we can to get to the end so we can avoid any embarrassment.

But what is the book about? The love for a man and a woman? The love of God for His church? Perhaps both? Are we comfortable thinking about our relationship with God in sexual terms? Or is that a bridge too far? I firmly believe the Bible is inviting us to approach God in the most intimate of ways. The language of the Song is meant to arouse. Meant to touch the deepest places of our hearts. Meant to draw us into intimate embrace with the Father.

Our inability to embrace this book only reveals how corrupt our understanding of human sexuality has become. We see it as dirty yet pleasurable. Something to be enjoyed and yet something to be feared. Our culture boasts of sexual freedom and yet is shocked when such unfettered freedom leads to abuse and violence. If there's anything the #MeToo movement has taught us is that our sexual appetites are almost impossible to satisfy. Sexuality without restraint is actually destructive and traumatic.

And yet, sex is God's creation. Sexuality is something He instilled within each of us. We are created as sexual beings and when the Bible talks about "knowing" another person, it often uses the most sexually intimate of terms. The same is true for "knowing" God. God designed sex to be the ultimate experience of "knowing." A way for us to express our deepest affections. Our deepest emotions. Our deepest vulnerabilities. All within the safety of the covenant bonds of marriage between a man and a woman. All within the safety of the covenant bond we share with Jesus.

So is it possible to see the Song of Solomon as a prayer? As a way to express the deepest desires of our hearts to God? As a way for us to ask for deeper intimacy with Him? Or does our broken human experience of sexuality warp our thinking? Corrupt how we understand this most powerful and primal of drives? Does it poison this well and thus prevent us from fully grasping the depth of relationship God desires to have with us? There's a reason Christ calls the church His "bride." There's a reason God so often refers to Himself in the Old Testament as a "husband" and Israel as his "wife." Marriage is the place where a man and a woman become "one flesh" before the Lord and it is designed to point beyond itself to something even greater...the "oneness" God desires to have with His people for all eternity.

June 1, 2020

THE DEATHLESS LOVE OF GOD

Readings for today: Song of Solomon 5:2-8:14, Psalms 45

“Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If a man offered for love all the wealth of his house, he would be utterly despised.” (Song of Solomon 8:6-7)

I needed hope this morning. I don’t know about you but the events of this past week have weighed heavily on my soul. I’ve shed tears. I’ve spoken words. I’ve checked in on friends. I’ve listened voices far wiser and more bold than my own. I’ve grieved over the senseless death. The senseless violence. The senseless looting. I long for justice. I long for righteousness. I long for a more perfect union when a person will not have to wonder if they are being treated differently because of the color of their skin. And although I know progress has been made, it feels like we still have so far to go.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.” If I’m honest it feels like we still have so far to go and I’m tired. My strength is failing. My hope is fading. And if I’m feeling this way, I cannot imagine how my friends of color must feel. This is where God met me in our reading today. His love is as strong as death. His jealousy as fierce as the grave. I needed those words this morning. You see, the arc of the moral universe may be long indeed. It it certainly longer than my lifespan or even the lifespan of many generations. But God’s reach is even longer. It is God who bends the arc. It is God who is at work in our world to bring justice. And we can trust God to complete His work because of His great love. The floods of racism and classism cannot quench love. The fires burning in our cities cannot destroy love. Even if the richest man on the planet tried to buy it to possess it for his very own, his offer would be rejected out of hand. God’s love is free. God’s love is faithful. God’s love is priceless. God’s love is powerful. It gives strength to the weary. Hope to the hopeless. Help for the helpless.

So we set God’s love as a seal on our hearts. We wear it like a badge on our arms. We let our lives and loves and choices reflect the love of God. We make the love of God our aim in all we say and do not just personally but corporately in society as well. God’s love is the foundation for justice. God’s love is the root for all righteousness. God’s love must serve as the philosophical base for all our laws and public policy. God’s love must guide our leaders when they speak to us and on our behalf. Without God’s love we are lost. Wandering. Foolish. Afraid. With God’s love, we are found. Focused. Wise. Determined. May we cling to God’s love today!

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 1-4

June 2, 2020

THE PATH OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Readings for today: Proverbs 1-4

"But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble." (Proverbs 4:18-19)

I couldn't sleep again last night. Too much grief. Too much anxiety. Fears for our nation. For the utter lack of wisdom being shown by so many. Violence only begets more violence. We're seeing that on display. Every escalation is met by more escalation. Every foolish act only increases the pain. Demonic forces are on the loose. Their only aim is mayhem. They corrupt otherwise peaceful demonstrations. They take advantage of the crowds to wreak their havoc. They sow seeds of chaos. They love the night. They love the darkness. They wear all black. They mask up so no one can know their identities. They do not care who they hurt as long as they get to destroy. And the media covers their every move.

At the same time, there is light. There is hope. The righteous do shine like the dawn. I love seeing police officers kneeling down with the protestors to pray. I love seeing peaceful demonstrators confronting those who are looting. I love seeing wise leaders emerge who take the time to walk among the people. Listening. Honoring. Loving. Diffusing tension. De-escalating conflict. Bringing calm in the crisis. They understand their words have power. Their actions communicate respect. And I'm praying their light shines brighter and brighter with each passing day.

We are reaping what we've sown as a nation. As a country, we've commercialized outrage. The loudest and most obnoxious voices get all the press. Extremists get normalized and platformed. The dumpster fire that is Twitter has now spilled onto the streets. Anyone could have seen this coming. You simply cannot pursue the politics of division without suffering the consequences. Many years ago, political operatives made it their goal to divide the nation into two warring camps. They no longer saw a need to reach out across the aisle. No longer saw a need for compromise. It was a "win at all costs" mentality that resulted in a scorched earth treatment of one's political opponents and the hatred they fostered has now broken loose. But they aren't the only ones to blame. We all need to look into the mirror right now. We need to ask ourselves how we have contributed to the current climate. All of us bear some responsibility for what is taking place. That's the thing about democracy. It is government of the people, by the people, and for the people. So we need to come to grips with the hard truth that what happens in Washington DC is simply a macro-reflection of what happens in many of our local communities. And rather than blame-shift as is our wont in such circumstances, we must confess and repent and humble ourselves before the Lord and before one another.

King Solomon is quite possibly the wisest man to ever live. He specialized in solving intractable problems. Problems like the ones we face over race and power and economics. These things were not foreign to Solomon and people came from all over the world to seek his advice. How would he advise us today? In our situation? In our current cultural moment? I think he would say this, "To know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight, to receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity; to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth— Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:2-5, 7)

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 5-8

June 4, 2020
The Foundation of God's Throne

Readings for today: Proverbs 9-12

"When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices, and when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness. By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted, but by the mouth of the wicked it is overthrown." (Proverbs 11:10-11)

Like all of us, I have watched the recent events unfold with a lot of fear and anxiety. A lot of sadness and deep grief. My heart breaks for the brokenness of this world. Far too many find themselves at the mercy of an unjust society. Far too many find themselves the victims of unrighteousness. Far too many feel powerless. Helpless. Hopeless. Afraid. Far too many feel the wheels of social progress have ground to a halt with their bodies trapped underneath. All around us cities are burning. Communities are struggling. Unrest is growing. Why?

We have abandoned God. The only source of true life and light and love in this world. By His command the world was made and all that was in it. By His command human beings were shaped and formed in His image. By His command we were given a mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. Exercising dominion in His name. This was the pathway to true progress. This was the road to righteousness. This was the journey to justice. But we abandoned His ways long ago. We chose to blaze our own trail. Build our own road. Cut our own path through the wilderness. And where has that gotten us? A world full of hate and anger and fear. A world full of violence and suffering and pain. A world full of injustice and inequality. We have remade the world in our own broken image and are suffering the consequences of our actions.

God calls us to a different path. The path of righteousness. The path of justice. Psalm 89:14 teaches us that God's throne rests on these two pillars. Righteousness is about our standing before God. Clothed in Christ, we seek to become who we already are in Him. We follow His commands. We conform our hearts and minds to His example. We speak His truth. We live for His glory. We surrender all that we have and all that we are to Him. Justice is about the systems and structures we live under. Government. Business. Education. Media. Arts. Church. Family. These are by definition unjust because they are human creations and each generation must engage in the work to align them and re-align them with God's Kingdom. When righteous people are engaged in justice work, the cities and communities in which we live flourish. When unrighteous people engage in unjust work, the cities and communities in which we live burn. This is the power God entrusted to us from the beginning and it is responsibility He has given us as human beings.

The Proverbs are full of all kinds of wisdom regarding the righteousness and justice of God. All of us should be seeking to become more righteous individually and all of us should be working for justice systemically and collectively. This unique gift the church offers the world is Jesus. Governments pass laws. Social policy can be re-written and reformed. Law enforcement can enforce a host of new regulations. But none of it will make a bit of difference without the transformation of the human heart. Friends, more than ever, the world needs Jesus. Who are you sharing Him with today?

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 13-16

June 5, 2020

HOPE DEFERRED

Readings for today: Proverbs 13-16

Proverbs 13:12 says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” As soon as I read these words this morning, it reminded me of something Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “In a sense, our nation’s summers of riots are caused our winter’s delay.” When people ask me why we can’t seem to get past the race issue in America, this is what I tell them. We keep deferring hope for our African-American brothers and sisters and it continues to make our nation sick. Rather than offer up my own words as to why that may or may not be, I humbly offer you the words of the brilliant King himself as he delivered them at Grosse Pointe High School in Michigan less than a month before his assassination. The speech is one he’d give before in several forms and it is titled, “The Other America.” It’s long but worth your time.

Rev. Dr. Harry Meserve, Bishop Emrich, my dear friend Congressman Conyers, ladies and gentlemen.

I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here tonight and to have the great privilege of discussing with you some of the vital issues confronting our nation and confronting the world. It is always a very rich and rewarding experience when I can take a brief break from the day-to-day demands of our struggle for freedom and human dignity and discuss the issues involved in that struggle with concerned people of good will all over our nation and all over the world, and I certainly want to express my deep personal appreciation to you for inviting me to occupy this significant platform.

I want to discuss the race problem tonight and I want to discuss it very honestly. I still believe that freedom is the bonus you receive for telling the truth. Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And I do not see how we will ever solve the turbulent problem of race confronting our nation until there is an honest confrontation with it and a willing search for the truth and a willingness to admit the truth when we discover it. And so I want to use as a title for my lecture tonight, "The Other America." And I use this title because there are literally two Americas. Every city in our country has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many parts, and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one. There are two Americas. One America is beautiful for situation. In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits. In this America children grow up in the sunlight of opportunity. But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair. In this other America, thousands and thousands of people, men in particular walk the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. In this other America, millions of people are forced to live in vermin-filled, distressing housing conditions where they do not have the privilege of having wall-to-wall carpeting, but all too often, they end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. Almost forty percent of the Negro families of America live in sub-standard housing conditions. In this other America, thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education. Every year thousands finish high school reading at a seventh, eighth and sometimes ninth grade level. Not because they're dumb, not because they don't have the native intelligence, but because the schools are so inadequate, so over-crowded, so devoid of quality, so segregated if you will, that the best in these minds can never come out. Probably the most critical problem in the other America is the economic problem. There are so many other people in the other America who can never make ends meet because their incomes are far too low if they have incomes, and their jobs are so devoid of quality. And so in this other America, unemployment is a

reality and under-employment is a reality. (I'll just wait until our friend can have her say) (applause). I'll just wait until things are restored and. . .everybody talks about law and order. (applause)

Now before I was so rudely interrupted… (applause), and I might say that it was my understanding that we're going to have a question and answer period, and if anybody disagrees with me, you will have the privilege, the opportunity to raise a question if you think I'm a traitor, then you'll have an opportunity to ask me about my traitorness and we will give you that opportunity.

Now let me get back to the point that I was trying to bring out about the economic problem. And that is one of the most critical problems that we face in America today. We find in the other America unemployment constantly rising to astronomical proportions and black people generally find themselves living in a literal depression. All too often when there is mass unemployment in the black community, it's referred to as a social problem and when there is mass unemployment in the white community, it's referred to as a depression. But there is no basic difference. The fact is, that the negro faces a literal depression all over the U.S. The unemployment rate on the basis of statistics from the labor department is about 8.8 per cent in the black community. But these statistics only take under consideration individuals who were once in the labor market, or individuals who go to employment offices to seek employment. But they do not take under consideration the thousands of people who have given up, who have lost motivation, the thousands of people who have had so many doors closed in their faces that they feel defeated and they no longer go out and look for jobs, the thousands who've come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. These people are considered the discouraged and when you add the discouraged to the individuals who can't be calculated through statistics in the unemployment category, the unemployment rate in the negro community probably goes to 16 or 17 percent. And among black youth, it is in some communities as high as 40 and 45 percent. But the problem of unemployment is not the only problem. There is the problem of under-employment, and there are thousands and thousand, I would say millions of people in the negro community who are poverty stricken - not because they are not working but because they receive wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. Most of the poverty stricken people of America are persons who are working every day and they end up getting part-time wages for full-time work. So the vast majority of negroes in America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. This has caused a great deal of bitterness. It has caused a great deal of agony. It has caused ache and anguish. It has caused great despair, and we have seen the angered expressions of this despair and this bitterness in the violent rebellions that have taken place in cities all over our country. Now I think my views on non-violence are pretty generally known. I still believe that non-violence is the most potent weapon available to the negro in his struggle for justice and freedom in the U.S.

Now let me relieve you a bit. I've been in the struggle a long time now, (applause) and I've conditioned myself to some things that are much more painful than discourteous people not allowing you to speak, so if they feel that they can discourage me, they'll be up here all night.

Now I wanted to say something about the fact that we have lived over these last two or three summers with agony and we have seen our cities going up in flames. And I would be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view. I'm absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. And I feel that we must always work with an effective, powerful weapon and method that brings about tangible results. But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our

society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the negro poor has worsened over the last twelve or fifteen years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.

Now every year about this time, our newspapers and our televisions and people generally start talking about the long hot summer ahead. What always bothers me is that the long hot summer has always been preceded by a long cold winter. And the great problem is that the nation has not used its winters creatively enough to develop the program, to develop the kind of massive acts of concern that will bring about a solution to the problem. And so we must still face the fact that our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nations winters of delay. As long as justice is postponed we always stand on the verge of these darker nights of social disruption. The question now, is whether America is prepared to do something massively, affirmatively and forthrightly about the great problem we face in the area of race and the problem which can bring the curtain of doom down on American civilization if it is not solved. And I would like to talk for the next few minutes about some of the things that must be done if we are to solve this problem.

The first thing I would like to mention is that there must be a recognition on the part of everybody in this nation that America is still a racist country. Now however unpleasant that sounds, it is the truth. And we will never solve the problem of racism until there is a recognition of the fact that racism still stands at the center of so much of our nation and we must see racism for what it is. It is the nymph of an inferior people. It is the notion that one group has all of the knowledge, all of the insights, all of the purity, all of the work, all of the dignity. And another group is worthless, on a lower level of humanity, inferior. To put it in philosophical language, racism is not based on some empirical generalization which, after some studies, would come to conclusion that these people are behind because of environmental conditions. Racism is based on an ontological affirmation. It is the notion that the very being of a people is inferior. And their ultimate logic of racism is genocide. Hitler was a very sick man. He was one of the great tragedies of history. But he was very honest. He took his racism to its logical conclusion. The minute his racism caused him to sickly feel and go about saying that there was something innately inferior about the Jew he ended up killing six million Jews. The ultimate logic of racism is genocide, and if one says that one is not good enough to have a job that is a solid quality job, if one is not good enough to have access to public accommodations, if one is not good enough to have the right to vote, if one is not good enough to live next door to him, if one is not good enough to marry his daughter because of his race. Then at that moment that person is saying that that person who is not good to do all of this is not fit to exist or to live. And that is the ultimate logic of racism. And we've got to see that this still exists in American society. And until it is removed, there will be people walking the streets of live and living in their humble dwellings feeling that they are nobody, feeling that they have no dignity and feeling that they are not respected. The first thing that must be on the agenda of our nation is to get rid of racism.

Secondly, we've got to get rid of two or three myths that still pervade our nation. One is the myth of time. I'm sure you've heard this notion. It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And I've heard it from many sincere people. They've said to the negro and/to his allies in the white community you should slow up, you're pushing things too fast, only time can solve the problem. And if you'll just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out. There is an answer to that myth. It is the time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I'm sad to say to you tonight I'm absolutely convinced that

the forces of ill will in our nation, the forces on the wrong side in our nation, the extreme righteous of our nation have often used time much more effectively than the forces of good will and it may well be that we may have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people who will say bad things in a meeting like this or who will bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time. Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, it comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.

Now there is another myth and that is the notion that legislation can't solve the problem that you've got to change the heart and naturally I believe in changing the heart. I happen to be a Baptist preacher and that puts me in the heart changing business and Sunday after Sunday I'm preaching about conversion and the need for the new birth and re-generation. I believe that there's something wrong with human nature. I believe in original sin not in terms of the historical event but as the mythological category to explain the universality of evil, so I'm honest enough to see the gone-wrongness of human nature so naturally I'm not against changing the heart and I do feel that that is the half truth involved here, that there is some truth in the whole question of changing the heart. We are not going to have the kind of society that we should have until the white person treats the negro right - not because the law says it but because it's natural because it's right and because the black man is the white man's brother. I'll be the first to say that we will never have a truly integrated society, a truly colorless society until men and women are obedient to the unenforceable. But after saying that, let me point out the other side. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also.

And so while legislation may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men when it's vigorously enforced and when you change the habits of people pretty soon attitudes begin to be changed and people begin to see that they can do things that fears caused them to feel that they could never do. And I say that there's a need still for strong civil rights legislation in various areas. There's legislation in Congress right now dealing with the whole question of housing and equal administration of justice and these things are very important for I submit to you tonight that there is no more dangerous development in our nation than the constant building up of predominantly negro central cities ringed by white suburbs. This will do nothing but invite social disaster. And this problem has to be dealt with - some through legislation, some through education, but it has to be dealt with in a very concrete and meaningful manner.

Now let me get back to my point. I'm going to finish my speech. I've been trying to think about what I'm going to preach about tomorrow down to Central Methodist Church in the Lenten series and I think 1'11 use as the text, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

I want to deal with another myth briefly which concerns me and I want to talk about it very honestly and that is over-reliance on the bootstrap philosophy. Now certainly it's very important for people to engage in self-help programs and do all they can to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. Now I'm not talking against that at all. I think there is a great deal that the black people of this country must do for themselves and that nobody else can do for them. And we must see the other side of this question. I remember the other day I was on a plane and a man starting talking with me and he said I'm sympathetic toward what you're trying to do, but I just feel that you people don't do enough for yourself and then he went on to say that my problem is, my concern is that I know of other ethnic groups, many

of the ethnic groups that came to this country and they had problems just as negroes and yet they did the job for themselves, they lifted themselves by their own bootstraps. Why is it that negroes can't do that? And I looked at him and I tried to talk as understanding as possible but I said to him, it does not help the negro for unfeeling, sensitive white people to say that other ethnic groups that came to the country maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty years voluntarily have gotten ahead of them and he was brought here in chains involuntarily almost three hundred and fifty years ago. I said it doesn't help him to be told that and then I went on to say to this gentlemen that he failed to recognize that no other ethnic group has been enslaved on American soil. Then I had to go on to say to him that you failed to realize that America made the black man's color a stigma. Something that he couldn't change. Not only was the color a stigma, but even linguistic then stigmatic conspired against the black man so that his color was thought of as something very evil. If you open Roget's Thesaurus and notice the synonym for black you'll find about a hundred and twenty and most of them represent something dirty, smut, degrading, low, and when you turn to the synonym for white, about one hundred and thirty, all of them represent something high, pure, chaste. You go right down that list. And so in the language a white life is a little better than a black life. Just follow. If somebody goes wrong in the family, we don't call him a white sheep we call him a black sheep. And then if you block somebody from getting somewhere you don't say they've been whiteballed, you say they've been blackballed. And just go down the line. It's not whitemail it's blackmail. I tell you this to seriously say that the nation made the black man's color a stigma and then I had to say to my friend on the plane another thing that is often forgotten in this country. That nobody, no ethnic group has completely lifted itself by it own bootstraps. I can never forget that the black man was free from the bondage of physical slavery in 1863. He wasn't given any land to make that freedom meaningful after being held in slavery 244 years. And it was like keeping a man in prison for many many years and then coming to see that he is not guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. Alright good night and God bless you.

And I was about to say that to free, to have freed the negro from slavery without doing anything to get him started in life on a sound economic footing, it was almost like freeing a man who had been in prison many years and you had discovered that he was unjustly convicted of, that he was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted and you go up to him and say now you're free, but you don't give him any bus fare to get to town or you don't give him any money to buy some clothes to put on his back or to get started in life again. Every code of jurisprudence would rise up against it. This is the very thing that happened to the black man in America. And then when we look at it even deeper than this, it becomes more ironic. We're reaping the harvest of this failure today. While America refused to do anything for the black man at that point, during that very period, the nation, through an act of Congress, was giving away millions of acres of land in the west and the mid-west, which meant that it was willing to under gird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. Not only did they give the land, they built land grant colleges for them to learn how to farm. Not only that it provided county agents to further their expertise in farming and went beyond this and came to the point of providing low interest rates for these persons so that they could mechanize their farms, and today many of these persons are being paid millions of dollars a year in federal subsidies not to farm and these are so often the very people saying to the black man that he must lift himself by his own bootstraps. I can never think ... Senator Eastland, incidentally, who says this all the time gets a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a year, not to farm on various areas of his plantation down in Mississippi. And yet he feels that we must do everything for ourselves. Well that appears to me to be a kind of socialism for the rich and rugged hard individualistic capitalism for the poor.

Now let me say two other things and I'm going to rush on. One, I want to say that if we're to move ahead and solve this problem we must re-order our national priorities. Today we're spending almost thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight what I consider an unjust, ill-considered, evil, costly, unwinable

war at Viet Nam. I wish I had time to go into the dimensions of this. But I must say that the war in Viet Nam is playing havoc with our Domestic destinies. That war has torn up the Geneva accord, it has strengthened, it has substituted…(Interruption)…I just want to say in response to that, that there are those of us who oppose the war in Viet Nam. I feel like opposing it for many reasons. Many of them are moral reasons but one basic reason is that we love our boys who are fighting there and we just want them to come back home. But I don't have time to go into the history and the development of the war in Viet Nam. I happen to be a pacifist but if I had had to make a decision about fighting a war against Hitler, I may have temporarily given up my pacifism and taken up arms. But nobody is to compare what is happening in Viet Nam today with that. I'm convinced that it is clearly an unjust war and it's doing so many things--not only on the domestic scene, it is carrying the whole world closer to nuclear annihilation. And so I've found it necessary to take a stand against the war in Viet Nam and I appreciate Bishop Emrich's question and I must answer it by saying that for me the tuitus? cannot be divided. It's nice for me to talk about ... it's alright to talk about integrated schools and in integrated lunch counters which I will continue to work for, but I think it would be rather absurd for me to work for integrated schools and not be concerned about the survival of the world in which to integrate.

The other thing is, that I have been working too long and too hard now against segregated public accommodations to end up at this stage of my life segregating my moral concern. I must make it clear. For me justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Now for the question of hurting civil rights. I think the war in Viet Nam hurt civil rights much more than my taking a stand against the war. And I could point out so many things to say that. . . a reporter asked me sometime ago when I first took a strong stand against the war didn't I feel that I would have to reverse my position because so many people disagreed, and people who once had respect for me wouldn't have respect, and he went on to say that I hear that it's hurt the budget of your organization and don't you think that you have to get in line more with the administration's policy ... and of course those were very lonely days when I first started speaking out and not many people were speaking out but now I have a lot of company and it's not as lonesome now. But anyway, I had to say to the reporter, I'm sorry sir but you don't know me. I'm not a consensus leader and I do not determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or by kind of taking a look at a gallop poll and getting the expression of the majority opinion. Ultimately, a genuine leader is not a succor for consensus but a mold of consensus. And on somepositions cowardice ask the question is it safe? Expediency asks the question is it politics? Vanity asks the question is it popular? The conscience asks the question is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politics nor popular but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right.

Now the time is passing and I'm not going to… I was going into the need for direct action to dramatize and call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment. I've been searching for a long time for an alternative to riots on the one hand and timid supplication for justice on the other and I think that alternative is found in militant massive non-violence. I'll wait until the question period before going into the Washington campaign. But let me say that it has been my experience in these years that I've been in the struggle for justice, that things just don't happen until the issue is dramatized in a massive direct-action way. I never will forget when we came through Washington in 1964, in December coming from Oslo. I stopped by to see President Johnson. We talked about a lot of things and we finally got to the point of talking about voting rights. The President was concerned about voting, but he said Martin, I can't get this through in this session of Congress. We can't get a voting rights bill, he said because there are two or three other things that I feel that we've got to get through and they're going to benefit negroes as much as anything. One was the education bill and something else. And then he went on to say that if I push a voting rights bill now, I'll lose the support of seven congressmen that I sorely need

for the particular things that I had and we just can't get it. Well, I went on to say to the President that I felt that we had to do something about it and two weeks later we started a movement in Selma, Alabama. We started dramatizing the issue of the denial of the right to vote and I submit to you that three months later as a result of that Selma movement, the same President who said to me that we could not get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress was on the television singing through a speaking voice "we shall overcome" and calling for the passage of a voting rights bill and I could go on and on to show. . .and we did get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress. Now, I could go on to give many other examples to show that it just doesn't come about without pressure and this is what we plan to do in Washington. We aren't planning to close down Washington, we aren't planning to close down Congress. This isn't anywhere in our plans. We are planning to dramatize the issue to the point that poor people in this nation will have to be seen and will not be invisible.

Now let me finally say something in the realm of the spirit and then I'm going to take my seat. Let me say finally, that in the midst of the hollering and in the midst of the discourtesy tonight, we got to come to see that however much we dislike it, the destinies of white and black America are tied together. Now the races don't understand this apparently. But our destinies are tied together. And somehow, we must all learn to live together as brothers in this country or we're all going to perish together as fools. Our destinies are tied together. Whether we like it or not culturally and otherwise, every white person is a little bit negro and every negro is a little bit white. Our language, our music, our material prosperity and even our food are an amalgam of black and white, so there can be no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white routes and there can ultimately be no separate white path to power and fulfillment short of social disaster without recognizing the necessity of sharing that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. We must come to see. . .yes we do need each other, the black man needs the white man to save him from his fear and the white man needs the black man to free him from his guilt.

John Donne was right. No man is an island and the tide that fills every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. And he goes on toward the end to say, "any man's death diminishes me because I'm involved in mankind. Therefore, it's not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." Somehow we must come to see that in this pluralistic, interrelated society we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And by working with determination and realizing that power must be shared, I think we can solve this problem, and may I say in conclusion that our goal is freedom and I believe that we're going to get there. It's going to be more difficult from here on in but I believe we're going to get there because however much she strays away from it, the goal of America is freedom and our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrim fathers landed at Plymouth we were here. Before Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence we were here. Before the beautiful words of the Star Spangled Banner were written we were here. And for more than two centuries our forbearers labored here without wages. They made cotton King, they built the homes of their masters in the midst of the most humiliating and oppressive conditions and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to grow and develop and if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face including the white backlash will surely fail.

We are going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the Almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. So however difficult it is during this period, however difficult it is to continue to live with the agony and the continued existence of racism, however difficult it is to live amidst the constant hurt, the constant insult and the constant disrespect, I can still sing we shall overcome. We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

We shall overcome because Carlisle is right. "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right. "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right. "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne." Yet that scaffold sways the future. We shall overcome because the Bible is right. "You shall reap what you sow." With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children all over this nation - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at Last, Free at Last, Thank God Almighty, We are Free At Last."

Readings for tomorrow: Proverbs 17-20

June 6, 2020

PASSING THE TEST

Readings for today: Proverbs 17-20

"The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts." (Proverbs 17:3)

I want to pose a challenging question this morning. What if what we are seeing in our nation is the Lord's judgment? After all, we've read how pandemics were often a sign of the Lord's judgment in the Old Testament. Same with civil unrest. Economic downturns. What if God is finally bringing judgment on America for her sins? Her capitalistic greed? Her lust for political power? Her obsession with outrage and hate? Her deep and persistent racism? What if the conflation of a global pandemic, racial tensions and protests, economic recession, and social distancing/quarantines are all part of God's plan to test us? Refine us? Purify us? Would we let Him? Are we willing to engage in personal as well as corporate self-examination? Are we willing to engage in personal as well as corporate confession? Are we willing to engage the works that lead to repentance personally as well as corporately? Or will we continue to blame-shift? Avoid responsibility? Traffic in conspiracy theories? Close our eyes to the truth?

The reality is we will never know for sure why these things happen. Israel frankly didn't know either. It was only upon reflection. Only upon looking back that they could see clearly how the hand of the Lord was at work. Today is the 76th anniversary of D-Day. On this day so many years ago, over 160,000 men stormed a 50-mile stretch of heavily fortified French coastline to set the world free from the tyranny of Nazism. They came from all different ethnicities. All different nationalities. All of them joining together to fight the worst kind of evil. The battle wasn't easy. They struggled up those beaches. They suffered traumatic wounds and mass casualties. Those who survived often never spoke about it again because the pain was simply too great. But still they fought. Still they endured. Still they persevered until the great day of victory. Looking back, I believe we can see the Lord at work in their efforts and sacrifice which is why we honor them as heroes.

Sadly, the very evils so many gave their lives to defeat have come home to roost in our nation today. White supremacy. Runaway corporate greed. Politics of division. Police brutality. Violence as a form of protest. And a media utterly committed to fanning the flames of resentment and fear as they highlight the absolute worst in us. The furnace we find ourselves in is only growing hotter and hotter with each passing day. How will we respond? How can we pass this test?

By following the way of Jesus. The way of sacrificial love. The way of mercy and compassion. The way of grace and peace. This, friends, is what our world needs and it is what God demands from His people. In a world so quick to hate, we offer love. In a world so driven by greed, we offer generosity. In a world so divided and full of identity politics, we proclaim every human being's inherent dignity and worth because they are made in the image of God. In a world where violence and brutality are often measures of first resort, we offer non-violence and peace. We refuse to de-humanize groups of people because of their race or profession. We understand when one of us hurts, all of us hurt. When one of us suffers, all of us suffer. When one of us experiences injustice, all of us experience injustice. We believe Jesus and we trust Jesus when he says hate can only be overcome by love. Evil can only be overcome by good. Anger can only be turned away by gentleness. Enemies can only become friends through prayer and compassion and sacrifice.

The way of Jesus is not easy. It requires great faith. Faith in the One who left all the privileges and glories of heaven to come to earth. Faith in the One who willingly relinquished all of His power and authority to become a servant. Faith in the One who refused to return evil for evil, an eye for an eye, violence with violence. Jesus went through the crucible of this life. He endured the flames of the fiery furnace on our behalf. Jesus was tested by His Father and when He hung on that cross interceding for us even as we killed Him, He passed. And we received salvation. Jesus is still in the salvation business, friends. Only this time He sends us. His people. Holy and beloved. Set apart for His purposes in this world. If you want to know what you can do to meet the demands of this cultural moment, love like Jesus. Listen like Jesus. Serve like Jesus.

June 8, 2020

PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL

Readings for today: Proverbs 21-24

"Haughty eyes and a proud heart, the lamp of the wicked, are sin…"Scoffer" is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride." (Prov. 21:4, 24)
There is no greater sin than pride. Pride lies at the root of all sin. It was pride caused Satan to fall from grace and glory when the heavens were young. It was pride that caused Adam and Eve to reject God's command and go their own way. Cain's pride was wounded so he killed Abel. It was Joseph's pride that got him in trouble with his brothers. In his pride, Moses thought he could deliver Israel without God. Saul, in his pride, refused to make right sacrifices. David's pride caused him to number Israel so he could see how powerful he was. Solomon, in his pride, thought he could worship lots of different gods and still remain faithful to Yahweh. Over and over again in the Scriptures, we see pride creep up in God's people with devastating effect.

Pride is still our greatest sin. Pride makes us think we know best how to live our lives. Pride makes us think we can stand in judgment over God's Word and determine what is relevant. Pride makes us think we are like God, discerning good from evil. But how's that working out? When we look at the world around us, is it not pride that is the root cause of the violence? The suffering? The pain? Is it not the pride of nations that causes them to go to war? Is it not the pride of privilege that causes some to look down on others? Is it not the pride of wealth that causes us to accumulate more and more while others go without? Is it not pride that drives our decision-making on a daily basis? We do what's best for us first without a thought for others. Haughty. Proud. Wicked. Scoffer. Arrogant. These are the labels God uses for us when we fall into this trap.
So what's the answer? Humility. Not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. Or less of ourselves than we ought. But simply thinking of ourselves less. When we think of ourselves "less." When we consider others before we consider ourselves. When we have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus who – though He was God – did not consider His prerogatives as God something to hold onto. We begin to become humble. We take on the form of a servant. We begin to look like Jesus. And humility comes with its own reward. "The reward for humility and fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life." (Prov. 22:4) God blesses the humble. God blesses those who put Him first. Who put others first. He grants them His favor and they often find the very things they were chasing so hard after coming into their life. The difference, of course, is that these things no longer have any hold on us because Christ now has the tighter grip.
So are you a humble person? Are you the kind of person who needs compliments? Needs to be told how good you are? Are you the kind of person who hates compliments? Hates it when you are recognized for something you did? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who receives rebuke? Correction? Critique? Or do you grow resentful and angry? Are you the kind of person who crumbles at the first sign of disapproval? Both are signs of pride, friends. Are you the kind of person who chases achievement? Are you the kind of person who avoids achievement? Both are signs of pride, friends. God wants you to think of yourself less. The truly humble person accepts honor and praise for the things they do well because they recognize God has blessed them. The truly humble person is generous with praise of others. Looks for opportunities to build others up. To spread the praise while taking responsibility for any failures. The truly humble person rejects any attempt of the enemy to make them feel worthless, afraid, or of less value in the eyes of God. A truly humble person is free because they do not live for praise nor in fear of praise. So are you a humble person? Pray for God to show you the way.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

June 9, 2020

MORIAH

Readings for today: 1 Kings 5-6, 2 Chronicles 2-3

"Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to David his father, at the place that David had appointed, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite." (2 Chron. 3:1)

I love today's passage mainly because of how it ties so many different threads together. Mount Moriah is the Temple Mount. It's the place where Solomon built his Temple. But as Chronicles mentions, it's also the place where David saw the angel of the Lord relent from his destruction of Jerusalem. 1 Chron. 21:16 tells us, "David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven..." This is really what temples were all about in the ancient world. They were the places where heaven and earth meet. Where God's presence literally dwelt on earth. It was the place you came when you wanted to speak to God. Encounter God. Worship God. These were deeply sacred spaces. Thin spaces where the veil between this world and the next grew thin.

This isn't the only place Mount Moriah appears in the Scriptures. Moriah is also the place where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac. And those of you who remember the story from Genesis 22, probably recall it was the angel of the Lord who stayed Abraham's hand. Thin space. Sacred space. The Lord providing a ram in the thicket to sacrifice on the altar. And, of course, for those who believe in the rapture and certain streams of end times theology, Mt. Moriah is the place where Jesus will return when He comes again. It's where the New Jerusalem will be located. It's the throne from which God will reign for all eternity.

What to take away from the building of the Temple? First of all, I think it's important to recognize sacred spaces in our lives. Places where God showed up in a powerful way. Bending the heavens to come to earth to perform a miracle or do a mighty work in our lives. It could be a healing. It could be miraculous provision of some kind or another. It could be a moment where God came through when we felt desperate or helpless. Those spaces will hold a special place in our hearts as well they should. But these spaces aren't just personal, they're communal as well. I think of the sacred space being created right now as so many march for justice. The sacred space being created in laboratories all over the world as so many race for a cure for COVID. I think of the sacred space many communities will create as they gather to listen and love and work for a more united future. All of these point to the reality that sacred space is not just out "there" but in each of our hearts. The Bible declares that those who trust in Christ are now "temples" of the Holy Spirit. Walking, talking "Moriahs" due to the abiding presence of the Living God. God has touched down in our lives. He has done something in our hearts. And we need to praise Him continually for the miracle of spiritual rebirth.

It also means there is a certain "sacredness" that all human beings share. Made in the image of God. Endowed with dignity, worth, and honor as a result. Broken? Yes. Sinful? Yes. Prone to wander? Lord, I feel this deep in my bones. But beloved nonetheless. Friends, you encounter the sacred everywhere you go and in everyone you meet. As C.S. Lewis once said so well, "There are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal." Everyone you meet destined for immortality. Either with God or without. Make sure you give them the chance to see Jesus in you today!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

June 10, 2020

POWERFUL PRAYER

Readings for today: 1 Kings 7-8, Psalms 11

The prayer of King Solomon at the dedication of the Temple is one of my favorites in all of Scripture. It's serves as a great model for us as we think about our own prayer life or prayers during times of great cultural upheaval like the one we're currently living in. It begins with an ascription of praise for who God is and a recognition that He is utterly transcendent.

"O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and showing steadfast love to your servants who walk before you with all their heart..." (1 Kings 8:23) Solomon acknowledges the greatness of God. His majesty. His glory. His splendor. He is not just one among many gods. He is alone is the true God of the heavens and the earth. He is also a God defined by faithfulness. Eternal loyalty. Steadfast love for His covenant people who are the humble recipients of His blessing. This attitude is truly the starting point of prayer. Prayer must begin with an understanding of who God is and who we are. We are not the same. We are not on the same level. God is the shepherd and we are the sheep. God is the potter and we are the clay. God is the king and we are his servants. Prayer place us in a humble position before the Lord. This is the ONLY posture one can take when we come before God in prayer.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God, listening to the cry and to the prayer that your servant prays before you this day..." (1 Kings 8:27-28) As we come humbly before the Lord, we are assured of His promise to hear us. To listen. To attend to our prayers. God hears every word. Every cry. He sees every tear. He knows the secret thoughts of our hearts and He delights when we bring those before Him openly and honestly. Solomon makes it clear that the Temple's primary purpose is to serve as a house for prayer. A place where Israel can come before God and lay their requests before Him.

God not only listens to our requests, He also hears our confession. Throughout this prayer, Solomon acknowledges the inescapable reality of sin. It is ubiquitous. It is epidemic. It is simply part of who we are as God's people. So when a man or woman sins. When God's people sin collectively. Whether against neighbor or friend. Through systems of oppression or abuse. When Israel suffers defeat at the hands of their enemies or the rains are shut up in the heavens or famine strikes the land. When viral pandemics rage, economies fail, racial tensions rise, and shelter-in-place orders are laid down. In those moments, if we will humble ourselves and pray and seek God's face, God promises to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know..." (1 Kings 8:39)

God will do all these things in such a way as to make His name great upon the earth. Even in Solomon's prayer, there is a missional, outward-facing component. "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name." (1 Kings 8:41-43) God desires to fill the earth with His glory. Israel is called to serve this very purpose. In the way Israel orders her life and faithfully serves her Lord, she will be a witness to the nations and to all of creation of the steadfast love of God.

You can see why I love this prayer so much! As I said above, it is a great model for us to follow in our own lives as we ponder and reflect on the challenges we face individually and collectively. Passages like this invite us to bring our requests before the Lord and trust Him with the results. Because of Christ, Christians have access to the Father in ways Solomon, in all his wisdom, could never have imagined! Because Christ sits at the Father's right hand interceding for us continually, the door is always open. The way to the Holy of Holies always clear. We have a standing invitation to come before our Heavenly Father with the blessed assurance He will always listen. When you pray for yourself or the world in which we live, pray with this eternal promise firmly fixed in your mind and heart.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

June 11, 2020

HEAL OUR LAND

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 4-7, Psalms 134, 136

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)

If there was ever a verse that spoke directly to our cultural moment, it would be this one. In this passage God is speaking directly to His people. He is telling them that in times of national hardship. When the rains don’t come and there is drought. When the locusts swarm and there is famine. When disease strikes and there is death. One could further add, when there is warfare and conflict leading to death and destruction. When natural disasters hit and there is suffering. When pandemics arrive on your shores. Racial tensions stirred from within. Violent community uprisings. Economic disasters. Shelter-in-place orders that seem arbitrary and capricious. Fears of government takeovers or police brutality. When these things happen, the most important thing God’s people can do is turn to Him.

It begins with humility. We humble ourselves before His face. We lay aside all our pride. All our arrogance. All our thoughts, opinions, and ideas on what’s gone wrong and why. We take all the solutions we come up with and cast them at His feet. We acknowledge our weakness. We acknowledge our foolishness. We acknowledge the simple fact that we are sinners and therefore have this tendency to corrupt everything we create or touch. We confess our natural inclination to make everything about us. Our natural instinct for self-promotion. Self-preservation. Self-indulgence. We come before God with open hands, recognizing there is nothing we bring to the table when we are in His presence except our sinful, broken selves.

Second, we pray and seek God’s face. We come not to offer God our wisdom, our solutions, our thoughts or ideas. We come seeking His face. We come seeking His wisdom. We come seeking His ways. We come with a willingness to obey. A willingness to walk the road He lays out for us. We come seeking His Kingdom, not our own. We come seeking His will, not our own. We come seeking His favor and His grace because we know our resources are all tapped out. This is what it means to pray in faith. We pray trusting God knows what’s best. We pray believing God has what’s best in mind for us. We pray with the sure and certain knowledge that God loves us and longs to save us.

Finally, we turn from our wicked ways. We repent. We actually make changes in our life. We actively seek to align our hearts with God’s heart. Our ways with God’s way. Our thoughts with God’s thoughts. We intentionally seek to become more like Jesus. The perfect and beloved Son of God. The One who relinquished all His rights and privileges in order to reach down to save us. The One who traversed the heavens to come to earth to rescue us. The One who gave everything up in order to deliver us from sin and death.

Friends, I know we are living through challenging times. I know 2020 feels like a year we could all just forget and drop in the ocean. But I also know it is times like these where God’s people often do their best work. As we humble ourselves. As we pray. As we repent. As we cry out God, the Holy Spirit goes to work in our hearts and minds transforming us more into the image of Christ. Embrace the work, my friends! And trust God with the results!

Readings for tomorrow: Psalms 146-150

June 12, 2020

HOW GREAT IS OUT GOD!

Readings for today: Psalms 146-150

I love these final Psalms. They extol the greatness of God. I can imagine all of Israel gathered at the Temple singing them at the top of their lungs. Wave after wave of sound ascending to the heavens. Their hearts on fire. Their passion for God enflamed. Their love for Him crescendoing. Their worship overwhelming the senses. It's a powerful thing to witness.

When I am in Ethiopia, I have the privilege of worshiping with a sorts of different churches. Most of them Pentecostal in one form or another. When they sing, it is a whole body experience. Dancing. Swaying. Clapping. They sing without any sense of self-conscious pride. No insecurities at all. No worries about the number of verses or choruses on repeat. No debates over personal preference. They simply sing from their hearts. Their joy is palpable. They love singing together. They love being together. They love worshiping before the Lord. It is powerful.

Like Israel, they praise the God "who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." (Psalms 146:7-9) They recount God's goodness. They praise God's greatness. My interpreter helps me understand each chorus and verse. They sing about God's provision. God's protection. God's miraculous healing. God's deliverance from evil.

Like Israel, they praise the God "determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names. Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure...He covers the heavens with clouds; he prepares rain for the earth; he makes grass grow on the hills. He gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that cry...He gives snow like wool; he scatters frost like ashes...He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow and the waters flow." (Psalms 147:4-5, 8-9, 16, 18) In the rainy season they experience the blessing of abundant water flowing, bringing life to their dry land. Flowers bloom. Crops flourish. Herds increase. The grasslands are rich and full and green.

Like Israel, they know when they praise God, they are joining their voices with the heavens and the earth. The heavenly host and the saints who have gone before them. They join the great cloud of witnesses around the throne of God to give Him the worship due His Holy Name. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts! Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!" (Psalms 148:1-4)

Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can abandon ourselves to worship in the way Israel once did! Oh how I hope and pray for the day when we can put aside all pretense and pride and self-consciousness and insecurity and consumeristic thoughts and attitudes and worship God like our Ethiopian brothers and sisters! Oh how I long for the day when we would come face to face with our God! See Him for who He is! Worship Him in Spirit and in Truth! Give Him the praise He deserves! The worship He demands! Fall on our faces before His throne, casting all our crowns before Him! Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26

June 13, 2020

THE CONSEQUENCES OF NATIONAL SIN

Readings for today: 1 Kings 9, 2 Chronicles 8, Proverbs 25-26

I can't help but reflect on our current cultural crisis as I read the passages for today. God appears to King Solomon a second time after the dedication of the Temple and says this, "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel." (1 Kings 9:3-5) So far so good. If Solomon remains faithful, he and his kingdom will be blessed. If Solomon follows God's rules. Obeys God's commands. Walks in all God's ways. God will be faithful. God will dwell in the Temple. God will watch over Israel and show His great love to her. Furthermore, God will establish descendants who will sit on the throne of Israel forever just as He promised David…Solomon's father…the man after God's own heart.

"But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. And this house will become a heap of ruins. Everyone passing by it will be astonished and will hiss, and they will say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land and to this house?' Then they will say, 'Because they abandoned the Lord their God who brought their fathers out of the land of Egypt and laid hold on other gods and worshiped them and served them. Therefore the Lord has brought all this disaster on them."(1 Kings 9:6-9) Some might ask here if God's promises are conditional. No, they are not. God's discipline is as much a reflection of His love as His blessings. One cannot be in relationship with God and expect only affirmation. God is faithful. He will convict. He will judge. He will right every wrong in our lives, in this life or the next. If Israel stays faithful, she will experience blessing. If Israel abandons her faith, God will not abandon her but she will experience His judgment. The same is true for Solomon. Probably even more so as leaders are held to a higher standard.

Now consider where we find ourselves in this cultural moment. Our leaders have largely abandoned God. Their behavior is often immoral and unjust. Their attitudes arrogant and rude. Their words are crass and inflammatory. They cannot be trusted because they are - by and large - ungodly people seeking their own selfish ends. I know this is a bold and broad statement but I believe their own words and actions convict them. And frankly, the average person is not much better. In a democracy, we elect the leaders who best represent us. So before we criticize those in power, we must look in the mirror. We too are selfish. We too are arrogant. We told have largely abandoned God. Is it any surprise that riots and unrest have broken out? Is it any surprise there is so much anger and outrage in our communities? Is it any surprise that so many other nations are asking what has happened to America?

And still there is hope. Hope for revival. Hope for spiritual renewal. Hope for national repentance as we humble ourselves before God. Christians should be leading the way. Humbly acknowledging our grievous sins against Native Americans, African-Americans, and people of color. Humbly acknowledging our greed and selfishness and pride. Humbly acknowledging our lust for violence and sex and outrage. Humbly acknowledging that none of us is righteous. Not one. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory which means all of the systems we create socially, politically,

economically, etc. are by definition corrupt and unjust on some level. And this means all of us are victims and perpetrators of injustice on some level. We all have a part to play in creating the mess we've made and we all have a part to play in cleaning it up.

God blesses the humble. God blesses those who confess their sins openly and honestly before Him. God blesses the nation that repents. The nation that bows the knee to Him. Now, more than ever, our country needs Jesus. May the church be bold in her witness as she humbly, sacrificially, generously, graciously, mercifully shows the world a different way!

June 16, 2020

PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 1-6

Ecclesiastes. The most depressing book in all the Bible. So depressing in fact that many have questioned why it was even included in the canon of Scripture. Tradition tells us Solomon wrote this book in his old age as he looked back on his life with deep regret. You may remember he started out well. Asking for wisdom from God when he could have had riches and honor and power. But over the years, he fell into temptation. He did all the things kings were not supposed to do according to Deuteronomy 17. Acquiring incredible wealth. Marrying many women. Accumulating great military power. As a result, he began to believe his own hype. Trust in his own strength. Rely on himself and his own wisdom to make his way in the world. He forged alliances with many nations. He allowed for the worship of many different gods. Especially for his harem. Over 700 wives and 300 concubines. Craziness. The result was apostasy. Solomon lost his first love. And it is his regret that we hear so clearly as we read this book and it should serve as a warning to us all. If the wisest and wealthiest and most powerful king in the history of Israel can fall away, so can we. And this is why we must read this book. Because we've been given a window here, friends. An opportunity. Life for many of us, pre-COVID, was simply unsustainable. We were running too fast. Redlining our lives. But then came the shutdown. All of sudden we were reminded what life at a slower pace looks like. We were reminded what meals around the family dinner table felt like. We were reminded of some of the simpler things like evening walks, family games, cooking and cleaning together, lots of laughter and joy. Friends, life doesn't have to go back to the way it was before this crisis hit. You do have a choice. You can keep chasing all the vanities that exist under the sun and be exhausted and busy and miserable most of the time or you can start chasing that which is eternal which only comes from God and leads to happiness.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asks this question. Very similar to the one Solomon asks in Ecclesiastes. What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but forfeits his soul? Or as Solomon puts it, What does man gain or profit by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? Is it wealth? Honor? Power? Pleasure? Wisdom? All these things are vanity according to Solomon. The Hebrew word for "vanity" literally means "hot air." Smoke on the wind. A breath of vapor on a cold day. They are here today and gone tomorrow. There is no substance to them. Certainly nothing eternal about them. Think about all your accomplishments. Everything you've worked so hard to achieve. Think of the hours you've put in. Think of the energy you've invested. Think of the sacrifices you've made. Think of the stress and anxiety you've had to endure. Is it really worth it? A generation comes and a generation goes. How many of you remember know what your great-grandparents accomplished? How many of you even know their names?

The Bible says even the earth is subjected to vanity. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21) And that's why the Apostle Paul will go on to say that all creation is groaning. Just like all of humanity is groaning. Waiting for the day when all things will be made new. All wrongs be set right. The curse of sin broken. The weight of sin lifted. The burden of sin removed. We all know deep down that nothing in this world endures. Nothing done under the sun will go with us. Not our wealth. Not our possessions. Not our reputations. Not our achievements. No matter how great they may be. The things of this world were simply not made to endure and that's why Solomon says there's nothing new under the sun. It's like the world's set eternally on repeat. The things we've said. The things we've seen. The things we've heard. All the things we've done. None of it's new. It has been already in the ages before us. And so

Solomon concludes, It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. The more we see the world for what it truly is, the more our hearts break. All you have to do is look around. Well over 100K dead so far from COVID-19. Millions of dollars of damage from the riots and looting of the last several weeks in cities all across America. Violence between police and protesters. Racial tensions erupting yet again because of how we've failed to face our history honestly and pursue justice and reconciliation for people of color in our country. The more we see these things, the more helpless and hopeless we are tempted to feel. And that's exactly where God wants us. At the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our wisdom. The end of our ideas. The end of our resources. For at the end of it all. Where our groanings meet creation's groanings, there we find yet Another groaning with us. The Holy Spirit. Paul says, The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray so the Spirit Himself prays for us with groanings too deep for words…Friends, what Paul essentially is saying in Romans 8 is that for the Christian – and this is where we have the advantage over King Solomon. King Solomon for all his wisdom focused too much on things done under the sun – and that's why he got so depressed and discouraged - whereas we Christians know the One who reigns and rules over the sun. So as we fix our eyes on Him, we can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work. Searching the depths of our hearts. Gathering up all the broken and shattered pieces of our lives. Pulling together all the vanity of vanities that so often mark our lives and bringing them into the holy of holies to present them as an offering before the Father. And what do we receive in return? Grace. Mercy. Peace. Contentment. Joy. In short, true happiness. Why? Because we have confidence that our Father's work is NOT vanity. And His promise is that He will work all things together – even all the violence and suffering and heartbreak and pain we're seeing and experiencing in our world today – for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

So instead of looking for hope in all our vanity under the sun, we should be looking to the One who reigns and rules over the sun. The One who first set the sun in motion and called the stars by name. The one who built the storehouses for the winds and first filled the streams. The One who dug the ocean's depths with His own hands and raised the mountains high. We look to the One who loved us so much He gave us His only Son. Friends, Jesus Christ redeems us from the vanities of this life. He Himself embraced the vanity of this world so He could set free us from it. He endured the vanity of vanities of the cross so He could save us. And as a result, the work you and I do now carries eternal weight. The lives you and I lead are eternally significant. Because Jesus rose from the dead, our labor is never in vain.

Readings for tomorrow: Ecclesiastes 7-12

June 17, 2020

FINDING JOY AMIDST OUR SORROWS

Readings for today: Ecclesiastes 7-12

Often lost in all Solomon's talk about vanity and emptiness and chasing the wind is the number of times he encourages the reader to enjoy life. Enjoy the time they have been given. Enjoy the hours and days of blessing. Enjoy the seasons when life is good. Yes, you will experience bad times. Yes, you will experience hardship and adversity. Yes, you cannot place your trust in wisdom, wealth, influence, or a good name. But you can still find joy. Simple pleasures of feasting, friendship, and family.

"In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him." (Ecclesiastes 7:14)

"And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." (Ecclesiastes 8:15)

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do...Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going." (Ecclesiastes 9:7, 9-10)

"Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." (Ecclesiastes 11:9)

To be sure, Solomon is encouraging a "sober" joy. A joy tempered by the realities of hard work, adversity, judgment, and death. A deeper joy that transcends superficial happiness. A joy that springs from a deep love of life and all the blessings God has given. The profound joy that comes from a life lived before God in this world. The joyful life for Solomon is not all bubbles and rainbows and unicorns. It's a utterly realistic joy. A joy that acknowledges the harsh truth about our broken world. A joy that walks eyes wide open to pain and suffering. A joy that doesn't run from trouble.

I've been a pastor for over twenty years. I've spent countless hours counseling people from all walks of life. I've served congregations on the East Coast. The Deep South. The Midwest. For the last ten plus years, I've been out West here in Colorado. A common thread running throughout all my conversations is the universal desire for happiness. A craving for joy. But it's a joy without hardship. A happiness without sorrow. An unrealistic expectation that life can be lived...indeed should be lived...without pain and suffering. In the most extreme cases, the person seems to believe God "owes" them such a life. It's why one of the most frequent questions I have to help people wrestle with is "Why, God?" Why did God let this happen to me? Why didn't God protect me from this tragedy? Why does God allow suffering? Why does a good God allow evil to exist in the world? Such questions, at their best, reveal the longing we all have for the world to come. The world where God will wipe away every tear, end all injustice, and heal every hurt. At their worst, however, they reveal a deep misunderstanding of the world around us. A false expectation that this life can be lived without experiencing hardship and pain. Solomon is clearly confronting the latter attitude.

So how do you experience the world? Especially today's world? When you wake up in the morning, what's your expectation? Do you walk into life eyes wide open to both the good and the bad? Are you willing to embrace the ups and downs? Do you understand that life will be filled with pleasure and pain? Accomplishment and adversity? Struggle and success and failure? And do you seek the deeper joy God offers us in Jesus Christ? I love what Jesus himself says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? (Matthew 6:25) You say, how naive! What rubbish! I struggle with anxiety about all sorts of things! My family. My children. My future. My business. My health. And yet, as Jesus continues, "which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? (Matthew 6:27) What has all that worry gotten you besides ulcers? What has all that anxiety gotten you except a prescription for medication? The reality is you can only control so much in this life. Not just personally but corporately as well. Letting go and letting God is a key component to finding true peace in this world. And the good news is your Heavenly Father knows what you need before you even give it voice. "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:34)

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

June 18, 2020

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Readings for today: 1 Kings 10-11, 2 Chronicles 9, Proverbs 30-31

God is steadfast in His love. God's mercies are new every morning. God's forgiveness is unconditional. We know these truths. We declare these truths. We hold fast to these truths. But God is also just. God will not be mocked. God disciplines those He loves. He is faithful to judge as He is to show mercy. God is sovereign. He reigns and rules over all He has made. His commands are to be followed. His laws obeyed. And woe to the one who thinks they are wiser than Him. Woe to the one who thinks he can ignore God. Woe to the one who is faithless. None of us get a pass before the judgment seat of Christ.

"And he said to Jeroboam, "Take for yourself ten pieces, for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Behold, I am about to tear the kingdom from the hand of Solomon and will give you ten tribes (but he shall have one tribe, for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city that I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel), because they have forsaken me and worshiped Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh the god of Moab, and Milcom the god of the Ammonites, and they have not walked in my ways, doing what is right in my sight and keeping my statutes and my rules, as David his father did. Nevertheless, I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of David my servant whom I chose, who kept my commandments and my statutes. But I will take the kingdom out of his son's hand and will give it to you, ten tribes. Yet to his son I will give one tribe, that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name. And I will take you, and you shall reign over all that your soul desires, and you shall be king over Israel. And if you will listen to all that I command you, and will walk in my ways, and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and my commandments, as David my servant did, I will be with you and will build you a sure house, as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you. And I will afflict the offspring of David because of this, but not forever." (1 Kings 11:31-39)

Solomon was one of Israel's greatest kings. His wisdom was unfathomable. His wealth uncountable. His political power unassailable. He lived in glory and splendor all of his days. People traveled the earth to hear him speak. Queens and kings came to pay homage before his ivory throne. He was a legend in his own time. A man of immense gifts. He built cities. He raised the Temple. He contracted great palaces and beautiful gardens. His armies were powerful. Stationed all over Israel, they kept watch and protected the nation. But Solomon grew proud. Arrogant. Selfish. He started to believe his own hype. He believed he was above the law. He felt he was the author of all his blessings. So his heart turned from the Lord. He began to create other temples. Raise other shrines. To the gods of the women he had married. Ashtoreth. Chemosh. Milcom. He made sacrifices to them. He honored them alongside Yahweh. And he was judged. The kingdom torn from his descendants.

You and I are no different. Even as Christians, we come under God's righteous judgment. Yes, we escape the final judgment of hell through the shed blood of Christ but we are fools if we think that God doesn't still judge us for our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We are ignorant if we think we have some sort of "fire insurance" that gives us a pass to do whatever want in this life. Jesus makes it clear in John 14:15, "If you love me, keep my commandments." There is no wiggle room here, friends. If you love Christ, you will love His Word. If you love Christ, you will accept His discipline and rebuke and correction. If you love Christ, you will make it your aim in life to follow in His ways. This is why we see the church so weak in America today. She has lost her first love. She has taken the grace God offers

for granted. She has compromised her faith for the sake of political and social power. The results have been devastating. I believe God is ripping our nation apart in judgment. Tearing us into pieces because we simply will not obey Him. He is raising up adversaries from within and without. He is giving us up to the lusts of our hearts, our disordered passions, and our debased and corrupt ways of thinking. (Romans 1) Our only hope is repentance. Humble submission. Full confession of our sin and reception of His forgiveness. God will mercy if we have but the humility to seek it.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

June 19, 2020

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

Readings for today: 1 Kings 12, 2 Chronicles 10

"If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." (1 Kings 12:7)

We have a leadership crisis in our world today. We see it in politics. We see it in business. We see it in the church. The prevailing model is ego-centric. It cares only for the accumulation of power and wealth and influence and control. It is self-promoting, self-protecting, and self-serving. It tends to attract abusers, predators, and narcissists. The hallmarks of arrogance, deceit, lust, greed are all present. And people are suffering as a result. It may be the abusive father who uses anger to make his wife and children cower. It may be the pastor who uses his position to prey on vulnerable women. It may be the politician who manipulates the gears in the system for his personal benefit. It may be the businessman who continues to rake in billions while taking away healthcare benefits for his employees. It was Lord Acton who once said, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." None of us are immune.

Solomon's son rises to power after his father's death. As he ascends the throne, he calls in his father's counselors. Men who have overseen the most glorious chapter in Israel's history. Men who have also witnesses the moral failings of the wisest king who ever lived. Their counsel to him is to back off. To give the people of Israel rest. They have spent a generation serving their king. Building cities. Serving in the army. Toiling without end. Fulfilling Solomon's every whim. If Rehoboam will but honor them. Love them. Serve them. Consider their good above his own. They will be loyal forever. Sadly, Rehoboam chooses another path. One suggested by the young men who've grown up with him in the palace. They are privileged. Spoiled. Arrogant. Entitled. And they counsel him to try and outdo his father. The plan backfires spectacularly. Rehoboam loses 80% of his kingdom.

Of course, Jeroboam isn't much better. Raised up by God to serve as king over ten of the tribes of Israel, one would think Jeroboam would remain faithful. But he is arrogant and afraid. A deadly combination no matter who you are. He is afraid he will lose his kingdom if he allows his people to worship Yahweh in the Temple. So he creates his own shrines to Yahweh. Golden calves representing the Lord. Perhaps following the example of King Solomon, he reduces Yahweh to yet another pagan deity. He sets his idols up in Dan and Bethel. Appoints his own priests. Establishes his own feast. Attempting to mirror what God has established for His people. The plan backfires spectacularly.

What would happen if we set our hearts to serve rather than be served? What would happen if we set our hearts to love rather than react out of fear? What if we responded to another person's pain and suffering with compassion rather than dismissal and disdain? What if we honored one another as image-bearers of God rather than dehumanize and tear down those we don't know? Can you imagine what the world might look like if instead of trashing Colin Kaepernick when he first took a knee, the NFL took the time to listen to his concerns? Worked with local law enforcement in the cities where they have franchises to develop community programs to help people? Used the wealth and power and influence of both owners and players to address systematic racism and implicit bias in our communities? Sadly, they chose to close ranks and defend their brand. Perhaps they're an easy target. What about each one of us? What if instead of laughing at the racist or sexist jokes at work, we refused to tolerate them? What if we intentionally created space in our lives for those who are different than us? What if we listened more than we spoke? What if we simply called evil "evil" and good "good" rather

than justify it because this or that person is “on our side” in the culture war? What if we stopped settling for the lowest common denominator in our national leaders? What if we stopped watching media outlets who only appeal to our basest emotions? What if we sought to serve in our homes, schools, communities, businesses, and churches?

I believe God is searching for men and women who will faithfully follow Him. Men and women who will deny themselves rather than promote themselves. Men and women whom the treasures of this world have no hold on because their treasure is already laid up in heaven. Men and women filled with the fruit and gifts of the Spirit. Men and women who embrace the way of Jesus who said in Matthew 20:28, “The Son of Man didn’t come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many.”

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

June 20, 2020

NATIONAL PRIDE

Readings for today: 1 Kings 13-14, 2 Chronicles 11-12

"After this thing Jeroboam did not turn from his evil way, but made priests for the high places again from among all the people. Any who would, he ordained to be priests of the high places. And this thing became sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth." (1 Kings 13:33-34)

"When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him." (2 Chronicles 12:1)

Following Jesus is hard. Jesus tells us as much. It is a costly life. A life of perpetual sacrifice. A life of constant self-denial. A life of service to the lost and least and underprivileged. Narrow is the way that leads to salvation and Jesus Himself is that way. As Christians, we exchange our lives for His life. Our ways for His way. Our loves for His love. And this is what makes it so hard. Jesus willingly and gladly for the joy set before Him gave up everything in order to save us. He refused to use political power to accomplish His goals. He refused to use military might to accomplish His aims. He loved His enemies. Prayed for those who persecuted Him. Forgave them with His dying breath. He refused to use violence. Refused to use the awesome power at His command. Over and over again, He met hatred with love. Anger with gentleness. Suffering and pain with empathy. Becoming a Christian means taking on His mantle. It means living according to His truth. Walking in His way. Receiving His life.

The same was true in the Old Testament as well. Over and over again, Yahweh calls His people to trust Him. To believe in Him. To walk in obedience to His ways. Over and over again, they make the same mistake we make. They place their trust in their own power. Their own strength. They make alliances with foreign nations in order to secure their territory. They marry foreign wives to shore up their political position. They lean on their own understanding, creating high places and shrines and temples to different gods. Hedging their bets. Covering all their bases. Compromising their faith. And God's response? Judgment.

And what is God's judgment? It is simply God honoring the choices we make. So when Jeroboam sets up idols in Dan and Bethel and calls his people to worship them, God gives them over to their foolishness. If they are going to place their trust in idols of metal, then they will have to live by the decisions they make. Rehoboam follows God for a period of time but then begins to trust in his own strength. He becomes prideful and arrogant. And God gives him over to his foolishness. If Rehoboam is going to trust in his own military power, then Rehoboam will have to fend for himself against the might of Egypt. It never goes well, does it?

I cannot tell you how many times I have sat in my office counseling Christians who find themselves in crisis. Almost every time they have abandoned God. Sure, they come to church occasionally. Sure, they still acknowledge His existence. Sure, they give a little money here or there. But they have left His ways far behind. They have chased after idols of their own making. It may be the youth sports they've allowed to dominate their family schedule. It may be their work they've allowed to take over their lives. It may be their pride that keeps them from ever truly connecting with a church or other believers. It may be money or success or professional achievement that they're chasing. It may be affirmation or acceptance from others. It could be any number of things but they always end up crashing and burning because God honors the choices we make in this life. He holds us responsible for our sin. He will not

be mocked or used or taken for granted. He is not sentimental, soft, or weak. At the end of the day, either we will say to Him - “Thy will be done” - or He will say to us - “thy will be done.”

And what is true for us as individuals is also true for us as a nation. The challenges we face are a direct consequence for the attitude we have towards God. We have abandoned Him. And I’m not talking about taking prayer out of schools here. I’m talking about our national arrogance. Our belief we are exceptional among all the nations of the earth. Our trust in our wealth and power and resources and ability. We have been far too proud for far too long and God has given us over to the consequences of the choices we have made. The idols of individualism, consumerism, materialism, racism, and classism have failed us. Our absolute hatred for those who are politically or socially different than us is tearing us apart. Our selfishness, greed, and arrogance is killing us. Our only hope is repentance. Humility. Learning to walk in the ways of love and compassion and generosity and grace once again.

June 22, 2020

PRIVILEGE

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:1-24, 2 Chronicles 13-16

There is quite a bit of conversation in our culture today about privilege. Fundamentally, it rests on the premise that we bear some kind of responsibility for the actions of past generations. For Americans, this is a tough pill to swallow. We are hyper-individualists. We do not believe we should be held accountable for something someone else has done. We especially believe we shouldn't be held responsible for the mistakes of our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, etc. We even turn to the Bible to back up our claim. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die…The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." (Ezekiel 18:4, 20) And I certainly affirm this is true. We are responsible - each one of us - for our own choices in life. At the same time, we must listen to the whole counsel of God which clearly teaches that generational sin is also a reality. "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

Think about what we read today. Abijam takes over as king after Rehoboam dies. For three years he reigns in Jerusalem. He walks in all the sins of his father and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord. Of course, not everything he does is bad. The Chronicler paints a bit of a different picture for us. The high point of Abijam's reign was a great victory over Israel that came about because he trusted in the Lord. But in the final analysis, Abijam is weighed and found wanting. "Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam the son of Nebat, Abijam began to reign over Judah. He reigned for three years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. And he walked in all the sins that his father did before him, and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father. Nevertheless, for David's sake the Lord his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem, setting up his son after him, and establishing Jerusalem, because David did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite." (1 Kings 15:1-5) Now if Ezekiel 18 were the only dynamic in play, Abijam would rightfully be judged for his sin and his family deposed. No son to sit on the throne. No lamp in Jerusalem. A new line would begin. But Abijam is the beneficiary of what one could call "Davidic privilege." God choosing to overlook his sin because of His great love for David.

White privilege works similarly but in the opposite way. Whereas Abijam benefits from the righteousness of his great-grandfather, we who are white (especially men) benefit from the unrighteousness of our forefathers. The historical facts are clear. The founders of our country - even going back to the first white colonists in Jamestown - clearly set up a system to benefit wealthy, white, land-owning men. These were the only people eligible to vote. The only ones eligible to hold public office. They were the shapers of public policy. Even the phrase - "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal" - was on the face of it untrue. Those who penned those words did NOT believe such equality should extend to Native Americans or the African slaves they owned. The result was generations of systematic discrimination and oppression towards those of a different color. At the same time, our nation was in its ascendency. Wealth and resources and power and influence was being created at an astronomical rate. But again, only for those who had access. (Read: White, land-owning men) Yes, a civil war was fought and many white men gave their lives to end

slavery but that didn't mean the end to oppression or racism. See this excellent video by Phil Vischer - aka "Bob the Tomato" from VeggieTales - for more information. The point of all of this is that those of us who were born white were born into a system specifically designed for our advantage. Yes, that system has changed over the years. Yes, attempts like Affirmative Action and others have leveled the playing field to a certain extent. But the efforts have fallen too far short. There is still so far to go. The fight for justice and equality is an ongoing, generational one.

So what do we do? Should we be ashamed of the color of our skin? No. Should we feel a sense of shame over the world our forefathers created? Yes. Should we acknowledge it as a broken and sinful system and seek to dismantle it or reform it or align it with God's justice and righteousness? Absolutely. Should we judge our ancestors harshly? Not so much. Like Abijam, each of them was a complex individual capable of great good and great evil just like every one of us. The historical context in which they lived was far different than the one we currently live in. And we should be humble enough to recognize that a hundred years from now, future generations will look back and judge us for our own blindness. Ultimately, equal access, equal opportunity, and equal treatment under the law are aspirations that will only become reality in the Kingdom of God which is why the mission to proclaim the gospel to the nations is so urgent! Only when we bow the knee and cast our privilege before the throne of King Jesus will true freedom, true justice, and true peace appear.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 15:25-16:34, 2 Chronicles 17

June 23, 2020

SHALOM

Readings for today: 1 Kings 15:25-16:34, 2 Chronicles 17

Today's reading highlights what happens when a nation or a people or an individual abandons God. We descend into chaos. We drag everyone down with us. Everyone who is under our authority. Everyone over whom we have influence. Everyone who lives under our rule and reign. Jeroboam was an unfaithful man. Though raised up by God, he quickly abandoned God's ways and refused to obey God's commands. Particularly concerning worship. He set up idols in his cities so his people wouldn't go down to Jerusalem. He set up a new priesthood to replace the Levites. He builds new temples and shrines and establishes new cultic practices. In essence, Jeroboam creates a whole new religion to replace that which God established in His Word. The result is judgment. Jeroboam dies. A battle for the throne ensues. Kings are murdered. Families massacred. Entire households wiped out to the last man. It is brutal. It is bloody. It is like an episode of Game of Thrones.

Chaos is what happens when humanity tries to live without God. This is the central message of the Bible. We are sinful and corrupt to the core. We are selfish and greedy. We have a lust for power that will never be quenched. Given the right set of circumstances, all of us are capable of great evil. If there's one thing history demonstrates beyond a shadow of a doubt, it's that human beings are totally depraved. The evidence is overwhelming. The case is convincing. God's verdict is just. We all deserve death. We all deserve judgment. We all contribute to the chaos of our world either by the things we do or the things we refuse to do. And that's why we need Jesus.

Jesus is the prince of peace. The destroyer of chaos. The one who holds the authority over life and death. Sin and evil. The one who died in order to save. I love how one of my favorite authors, Paul Scherer, once put it, writing in the midst of World War II - "(Christ) stands not at the circumference but at the center of the human experience because sin stands there: to be met in the gospel with more than love; to be met with rescue. (In Christ) all that could become man in God and all that could become God in man got into the world to work out His holy will, not around the edges but from the very heart and core of all that is worst and most irrevocable about living. The 20th century, the death that rains out of the skies, stripped and broken lives wandering forlornly across the frontiers of Europe, war chattering its red insanities on the horizon of every day that dawns, your life, my life, with their old habits that cling like barnacles to a ship's hull, all of it piling up into weird and monstrous shapes! The hand that lays hold of such a world is terrible, crushing empires; but pierced, bringing life again out of death. Lifting all our wrong and all our rebellion until it becomes as it were God's own, and He Himself becomes it's victim. There is no deliverance out of the process of history. There is only deliverance in it, and that by a God who is not alone outside it or against it but in the process Himself."

Friends, the only hope we have for peace in the midst of our chaotic world is Jesus. The Prince of Peace. The Author of our salvation. The Name that is above every name. The Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God. And the good news of the gospel is that He has come to deliver us! He has come to rescue us! He has come to meet us right where we are in the middle of all we are going through! He will never leave us or forsake us! He will never abandon us to our fate! He is with us. He is for us. And if we will simply humble ourselves and turn to Him, we will find Him waiting with open arms. May we turn to Him as a nation. As a church. As individuals. So that we may receive the peace that only He can bring.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 17-19

June 24, 2020

THE WORD OF THE LORD

Reading for today: 1 Kings 17-19

I love the story of Elijah. I love his faithfulness. I love his courage. I love his passion. I love his heart. What makes Elijah so great was his ability to listen to the Word of the Lord. His sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. His humble submission and willingness to sit in God's presence in silence. There was nothing great about Elijah. Nothing unusual. Nothing out of the ordinary. He was simply a human being. A human being like any other human being. A man just like any other man. But he was called to play a specific role in God's Kingdom and the life of Israel.

Elijah was a prophet. A man set apart to hear the Word of the Lord and deliver it to God's people. The Word of the Lord came to Elijah, telling him there would be a famine in the land and to go and live by a brook where the ravens would feed him. When the brook ran dry, the Word of the Lord came to Elijah and told him to go to Zrephath where a widow would care for him. When the widow's son died, the Word of the Lord came through Elijah to raise him the dead. The Word of Lord challenged Elijah to risk his life and confront King Arab. Queen Jezebel. 450 prophets of Baal. After a miraculous victory, the Word of the Lord opened Elijah's eyes to see the coming rain. When Elijah ran for his life, the Word of the Lord again came to him bringing comfort and peace.

Notice where the power lies. Not in Elijah. Not in his strength. Not in his confidence. Not in his power. No, the Word of the Lord has an authority all its own. A divine power to tear down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself against the knowledge of God. It is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, Jew and Gentile alike. And if there is anything that sets Elijah apart, it is his obedience. Simply his willingness to hear and obey, seemingly without question. This is what makes him great.

Do you want to be great in the Kingdom? Do you want to do great things for God? Do you want the abundant life Jesus promises? Do you believe you will do greater things than even Jesus himself? As He promises in John 14:12? "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12) You don't need wealth. You don't need education. You don't need professional success and achievement. All you need is obedience. A humble spirit. A willing heart. God specializes in using such vessels for His glory in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 20-21

June 25, 2020

GRACE

Readings for today: 1 Kings 20-21

One of the things that I'm always amazed by is the grace of God. The verdict on King Ahab is clear. He is not a godly king. He breaks all the commandments. He does not love Yahweh. He is as pagan as they come and yet God still reaches out to him. Still delivers him. Still rescues him from his enemies. It reminds me of what Paul says in Romans 5:10, "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son…"

God's grace is truly unconditional and that seems scandalous to us. We can't wrap our heads and hearts around it. God's grace does not discriminate. It is there for the prodigal as well as the Pharisee. It is there for the sinner and the saint. It is freely offered to any and all whether they be black or white or brown. Rich or poor. Gay or straight. Old or young. God shows no partiality. All He asks is that we receive it. We trust it. We open our hearts to it.

Sadly, we too often reject it. Much like Ahab. Ben-hadad has gathered a massive force to bring against Israel. Thirty-two kings join him in this fight. They bring horses and chariots which were the Sherman Tanks of their day. They invade the northern kingdom of Israel and march right up to the gates of the capital city of Samaria. Ahab knows he can't win. He offers all his gold and silver to buy them off. No deal. The army takes their positions. The trumpets are about to sound. Victory is assured. Israel will be destroyed. Ahab looks on helplessly from his position on the walls. And then he hears a voice at his side. A prophet has been sent by God. "Behold, I will give this great multitude into your hand this day so that you shall know I am the Lord." Why doesn't God leave Ahab to his fate? After all, he deserves it. He's earned it. The just decree would be for Ahab and all who follow him to die. But God is merciful and gracious. He loves us with an everlasting love. God desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. Even an evil king like Ahab.

What about you? Does this give you hope? Some of us have things in our past that we think God would never forgive. We have memories that bring us shame. We have seen things and done things that are terrible and tragic. And yet God still loves us. Warts and all. Does this discourage you? Make you think less of God? Perhaps you're more like me and you wish God were more consistent. Be careful what you ask for! God's grace is baffling to would-be Pharisees like us. That's why Jesus had such problems with them. God's grace seemingly bends and breaks His own rules for the purpose of drawing all people to Himself. Our story today only demonstrates the lengths God is willing to go in order to accomplish His saving purposes in our world. And as remarkable as this story is, it doesn't even hold a candle to the scandal of the cross. God dying to save a world at war with Him. God dying to save a people in rebellion against Him. God dying to turn His enemies into friends. Amazing grace indeed!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

June 26, 2020

ACCOUNTABILITY

Readings for today: 1 Kings 22, 2 Chronicles 18-20

Do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who is willing to be honest? To give it to you straight? Someone who is unafraid to spare your feelings? Do you have someone in your life who holds you accountable? Who asks you hard questions? Who is willing to confront you on your sin? Do you have someone in your life who you listen to? Respect? Love enough to receive their critique well? Sadly, it's my experience that most people, even most Christians, do not have such a person in their life.

Ahab had such a person...and he hated him. "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." (1 Kings 22:8) Ahab was an insecure king. He didn't want to hear the truth. He surrounded himself with people who would tell him what he wanted to hear. Sycophants. "Yes-men." People who did not have Israel's best in mind but only their influence and position before the king. This is one of the reasons power tends to corrupt. The more success and fame and influence one gains in life, the more one attracts such people. Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac and it takes great humility and intentionality to surround oneself as President Lincoln once did with a "team of rivals." Ahab was clearly no Lincoln.

It was so obvious, King Jehoshaphat immediately picked up on it as they planned their attack on Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from the Lord so he asked Ahab to call a real prophet. Someone who was willing to speak the truth. To share God's Word even if it involved judgement. So Ahab calls Micaiah. And Micaiah delivers the bad news. "I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, as sheep that have no shepherd. And the Lord said, 'These have no master; let each return to his home in peace." (1 Kings 22:17) Ahab throws up his hands. I told you so. This guy has it out for me. He never brings me good news. And then Micaiah goes on, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'" (1 Kings 22:19-22)

This section is key. When we refuse to repent. When we refuse to humble ourselves before the Lord. When we refuse to listen to His voice. He brings judgment. He forces us to our knees. He actively opposes the proud. God sends a lying spirit into the sycophants that Ahab surrounded himself with. He uses the very means Ahab had chosen to insulate himself against the Word of God to bring about Ahab's destruction. Let that sink in for a minute. These men were ALREADY lying to Ahab. In fact, they had based their entire careers on deceit and telling the king exactly what he wanted to hear. So God was not treating Ahab unfairly or unjustly. He simply was using their sin to bring about His sovereign will.

So let me ask again, do you have a Micaiah in your life? Someone who can speak hard truth to you in love? Someone who is bold enough to hold you accountable? Someone you submit to in humility? Someone who is close enough as a brother and/or sister and who is faithful enough to confront you on your sin? If you do not have such a person in your life then let me suggest you have made the same mistake - wittingly or unwittingly - as Ahab. You have surrounded yourself with people who do not have your best in mind and you need to go deeper. You need to challenge yourself. Make yourself vulnerable. Empower another person to hold you accountable. The reality is we do not "die to self" naturally. We must be forced to give up our life. We must be challenged to give up self. We must be held accountable as we struggle along this narrow way.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 1-4

June 27, 2020

MIRACLES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 1-4

Today's reading is full of miracles. God healing the waters of Jericho. God filling up a dry land with pools of water. God creating a supply of never-ending oil. God raising a child from death. Miracles are hard for those of us raised in a scientific worldview to accept. We believe such phenomena need to be observable and repeatable or they can't have happened. We believe there must be some kind of natural explanation so we do all kinds of mental gymnastics trying to explain them away. Surely the water wasn't actually bad? Surely the water that filled the pools was a freak rain storm? Surely the woman just wasn't aware of how much oil she did have? Surely the boy was just sick or unconscious or in a coma of some kind.

Miracles are by definition unrepeatable events. They are one-time occurrences where the Lord of the universe intervenes supernaturally in His creation. If one truly believes there is a God then one must conclude He is not bound by the same laws of nature He established that govern His creation. He is the Creator after all. Not a created being. He exists outside of time and space. He is truly free and unbounded. He is not subject to what He creates and therefore is able to act as He sees fit.

I have personally witnessed miracles in my life. I have many friends around the world who testify to miracles they have seen. I have seen God heal those who are sick. I have even witnessed a resurrection. These are awe-inspiring events that drive me to my knees before the Lord. They are humbling because of how they bring you face to face with the power of God. But I also know many who question God's miracles. They wonder why they haven't seen God act in such ways. They wonder why God performs miracles for some and not others. They sometimes reject miracles simply because they seem so arbitrary and unfair. Such thinking only exposes the poverty of our spiritual condition.

We don't deserve miracles. We don't earn miracles. We don't claim miracles. God is not a genie in a bottle who owes us three wishes. He cannot be manipulated or controlled or bound to our will. He is sovereign. He sees all of history and all of creation stretched out before Him all the time. He chooses to act as He wills to accomplish what is often a hidden purpose. Who are we to question His wisdom? Who are we to question His judgment? God never promises us life will be fair. He never promises to treat everyone the same. These are American ideals. Human ideals. And God is not bound to follow our limited understanding of justice. What does God promise? He promises to love us. He promises to be with us. He is faithful to us. He loves each of us with an everlasting love and that should be miracle enough for us.

June 29, 2020

OPEN OUR EYES

Readings for today: 2 Kings 5:1-8:15

I have heard it said that the world has yet to see the power that would be unleashed through one man or woman who's sold out to God. I disagree. I think we see such power all the time. Certainly in Scripture. Take the story of Elisha for instance. He's a one-man wrecking crew when it comes to Syria. Ben-hadad wanted to destroy Israel. Invaded time after time. He had the best generals. Mighty men of valor like Naaman. The odds were surely in his favor. But Israel had one advantage...Elisha. A man who loved God with all his heart. From Elisha's deep faith sprung wisdom and insight and even prophetic utterances. He thwarted the plans of Ben-hadad to such an extent that his counselors believed it was like Elisha was hanging out in Ben-hadad's bedroom!

Elisha posed such a great threat that Ben-hadad sent his entire army on a seek and destroy mission. Find him. Kill him. Destroy whatever city is giving him refuge. So Elisha and his servant wake up one morning only to see the Syrian army arrayed in all its might before them. It must have been an intimidating sight. The servant is immediately afraid. What will we do? How will we survive? But Elisha doesn't miss a beat. He asks God to open the eyes of his servant so that he can see what Elisha sees. Horses. Chariots. The mountains ringed with fire from the army of the Lord.

This is one of my favorite stories in all of Scripture because of the reminder that though my circumstances may seem bleak. Though I may undergo all kinds of trials and tribulations. Though I may suffer and struggle and hurt. Though the enemy wage war against me. Though the government or culture or society grow increasingly hostile to the gospel. No matter what may come, my adversaries - as numerous as they may be - are no match for the armies of the Lord! His sovereign hand continues to lead and guide and protect. His power cannot be measured. His wisdom cannot be fathomed. And if I will simply lift my eyes above the hills, I will see where my true help comes! (Psalm 121)
Think about where we find ourselves as a culture today. We are drifting away from our Judeo-Christian moorings. Morality is changing. Truth is relative. Scores are abandoning faith altogether. We shouldn't be surprised. We have only ourselves to blame. Christians largely became complacent over the last several decades, settling for a cultural form of the Christian faith that held no real power to transform. Rather than preach the gospel, we turned to moral therapeutic deism. Self-help with a little Jesus thrown in. As society continued its drift, we turned to political power, seeking to enforce our vision of the Kingdom of God. But for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. So the harder we tried, the more pushback we received. The result is a nation that is becoming increasing hostile to the Christian faith. Would that we could recapture the spirit of Elisha! He sought no reward for his deeds. He never tried to turn his gifts into political power. Instead, he simply served his people with as much faith as he possibly could and he left the results up to God.
"Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all." (Ecclesiastes 9:11) I frequently find myself in positions where I am weak. I have no power. No authority. I am not strong or swift or wise or wealthy. In those moments, I am tempted to despair. And that's when God has me right where He wants me! God does His best work when I come to the end of myself. God does His greatest work when I get out of the way. God is at His most glorious when I am weak and afraid and lonely and have nowhere else to turn. All I have to do is open my eyes. See the power He has brought to bear. Sit back and watch Him go to work. Trust Him for the victory.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

June 30, 2020

LEAVING A LEGACY

Readings for today: 2 Kings 8:16-29, 2 Chronicles 21:1-22:9

"And he departed to with no one's regret." Woof. That's rough. To come to the end of your life with no one to mourn your passing. No one to make fire in your honor. No words shared at your funeral. Nothing to say in your obituary beyond your birthdate and death date. Perhaps Jehoram earned his fate. After all, he killed all his brothers when he ascended the throne. He enticed the people to abandon the worship of the Living God. He lost several battles. Suffered terribly at the end of his life, dying in great agony. He left Judah far worse than he found it. All in all, a terrible king.

I've performed these kinds of funerals. Funerals where very few people attend. Very few words are said. Very few kind sentiments expressed. I remember a tragic funeral for a young woman who was kidnapped and murdered. She ran with a rough crowd all her life and it tragically caught up to her. All her closest friends could talk about was the way she partied. How much she could drink. It was heartbreaking. I remember a funeral for an older man who died from alcoholism. About three or four people showed up for his funeral and they all wanted it over as soon as possible so they could get out of there. No words to share. Nothing about love. Compassion. Family. He died pretty much alone. To no one's regret.

These moments are burned into my memory. I cannot shake them no matter how hard I try. They serve as a lesson to us all about how we live and why we live. To honor what's truly important in life. God. Family. Friends. Seeking the lost. Serving the least of these in our world. Taking the time and making the time to live not for ourselves but for the sake of others. To give ourselves away in an attempt to make this world a better place. To leave this world better than the way we found it. It may be breaking a generational pattern in your family. Speaking kindly to friends in need. Helping a stranger. Sharing the gospel with someone you know. Maybe it's serving in a particular mission endeavor at home or abroad. Or just taking the time to tuck your kids into bed at night and tell them a story. Sometimes the most significant moments of our lives are the simplest.

Through it all, the most important thing we can do is seek after God. Ask Him for His wisdom to show us the way. To help make our lives count. Serving Christ is the best way to leave a legacy as we have seen over and over again throughout the books of 1&2 Kings and 1&2 Chronicles. The legacies of each king is measured primarily by how they honored God with their lives. Honor God and their lives and subjects were blessed. Dishonor God and their lives and subjects were cursed. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you." (Matt. 6:33) Or, as my friend Ray Noah likes to say, "You take care of the things God cares about (lost people) and He will take care of the things you care about."

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Kings 9-11, 2 Chronicles 21:10-23:21

July 2, 2020

DEJA VU

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

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

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

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

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

July 3, 2020

HIGH PLACES

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Jonah 1-4

July 4, 2020

NATIONAL REVIVAL

Readings for today: Jonah 1-4

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

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

A dear friend of mine shared recently with me that he believes we are living through extraordinary times. He is a pastor. He is a community organizer. He is a leader of non-violent protests in his city. He is African-American and serves a predominantly white congregation in the Deep South. When I asked him how he is feeling about the state of our country, he was excited. He believes there has never been a better time to preach the gospel and that's why he's on the front lines in his own community. He is out there sharing Jesus. Like Jonah, he is walking the length and breadth of his city calling for people to repent and place their trust in Christ. He is an inspiration to me. Now he knows how difficult things have become. He is not blind to the challenges of the global pandemic or the racial tensions or the economic shutdown. He is very aware of the impact these things have had on the people he loves and serves. But he also knows this is a time when the very ground beneath our feet has been shaken. Lives have been stripped down to the studs and there is a new openness to the gospel's call.
Friends, we are living in extraordinary times in our extraordinary country. The task of forming a more perfect union has now come to us. The call to fulfill the vision of a nation where all people are created equal remains. Every generation must accept their responsibility to engage the hard work of bending the moral arc of the universe towards justice and peace. We cannot rest on the work of those who have come before. Each of us must now take our place. Shoulder our part of the load. Bear the responsibility God has called us to bear so that we can leave this nation in a better place than how we found it. Again, not for our sake. Not even for the sake of future generations of Americans. But for the glory of God alone. May we hear clearly the call of the gospel: "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." America will find her greatness as she repents before God and gives herself away for the sake of the world.

July 6, 2020

JUDGE OF THE NATIONS

Readings for today: Amos 1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Amos 6-9

July 7, 2020

HOPE ON THE FAR SIDE OF PAIN

Readings for today: Amos 6-9

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 1-5

July 8, 2020

THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF GOD

Readings for today: Hosea 1-5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 6-9

July 9, 2020

THE WIDENESS OF GOD'S MERCY

Readings for today: Hosea 6-9

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Hosea 10-14

July 10, 2020

THE TENDERNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Hosea 10-14

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 1-4

July 11, 2020

FAITH AND POLITICS

Readings for today: Isaiah 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 14, 2020

THE LORD IS OUR SALVATION

Readings for today: Isaiah 9-12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 1-4

July 15, 2020

DIVINE PARENTING

Readings for today: Micah 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Micah 5-7

July 16, 2020

WHAT IS GOD REQUIRING OF US?

Readings for today: Micah 5-7

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

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

We have a choice, you see. Either we will do justice or God will. Either we will follow God's ways and walk in obedience to God's commands and live the lives He has created and called us to live or He will judge us for our sins. Friends, our sin impacts the world around us. It may be the people we live with. It may be the neighbors next door. The classmates at school. Co-workers at the office. Even people on the other side of the globe. Every word we say has a chance to give life or take life. Every dollar we spend has a chance to help or to hurt. Every vote we cast is a chance to bring God's Kingdom a little closer or drive it further away. Every minute of every day is an opportunity to make an eternal difference in this world. Don't buy it? Check out the studies on the impact of social media on mental health. (https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/blog/centre-mental-health-blog/anxiety-loneliness-fear-missing-out-social-media) Now scroll through your posts from the last week. Are your contributions life-giving or life-stealing? Take a look at your budget or your online check register. Where are your dollars primarily going? Yes, we all have bills to pay. But what about the disposable income? Who's getting the lion's share? Most American Christians are giving less now than they did during the Great Depression! (https://www.sharefaith.com/blog/2015/12/facts-christians-tithing) And what about churches? What do they do with the dollars they receive? How many of them actually take those dollars and deploy them into the world to make a difference for the gospel? According to a survey by Christianity Today, most churches only give around 5% to missions outside their doors. (https://www.pnwumc.org/news/how-churches-spend-their-money) Consider your voting record. Do you carefully consider the policy platform of the candidates you vote for or do you simply vote down the party line? Are you an advocate for policies that reflect God's justice and mercy? Remember, God has entrusted the "dominion" of this world into our hands as human beings. He expects us to pursue justice in alignment with His will so that all creation can flourish under His divine love and care.

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

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

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

July 17, 2020

A FOOT IN TWO WORLDS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 13-17

July 18, 2020

WILL TO LOVE

Readings for today: Isaiah 13-17

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 20, 2020

LOVE FOR ENEMIES

Readings for today: Isaiah 18-22

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 23-26

July 21, 2020

RAW PRAYERS

Readings for today: Isaiah 23-26

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 22, 2020

FULLY DEVOTED

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 27-30

July 23, 2020

COVENANT WITH DEATH

Readings for today: Isaiah 27-30

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 31-35

July 24, 2020

MOTION SICKNESS

Readings for today: Isaiah 31-35

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

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

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

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

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

July 25, 2020

GODLY MOTIVATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

July 27, 2020

TESTING OF FAITH

Readings for today: Isaiah 38-39, 2 Kings 20:1-21, 2 Chronicles 32:24-33

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

July 28, 2020

A PRESENT HELP

Readings for today: Isaiah 40-42, Psalms 46

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

July 29, 2020

CREATED. CALLED. CONSECRATED.

Readings for today: Isaiah 43-45, Psalms 80

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

July 30, 2020

LET GOD CARRY YOU

Readings for today: Isaiah 46-49, Psalms 135

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 50-53

July 31, 2020

SUFFERING SERVANT

Readings for today: Isaiah 50-53

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

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

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Isaiah 54-58

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 they 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 it's life. The clay doesn't worry because the Potter knows what He's doing. He is shaping us for His own glory.

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

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 heartbreaking than sitting in a cell with the door wide open, refusing to leave. This is the state we find ourselves in today. Our culture has made "Self" a god and the result is entitlement. Narcissism. Selfishness. Greed. Self-protection. 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 heartbreaking. He has no regrets.

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

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

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 pridefully 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, heartbreaking grief. As Western Christians we are heavily influenced by Platonic thought whether we realize it or not. We tend to believe God is fundamentally distant. Fundamentally different. Fundamentally beyond all human experience, including emotions. We believe He is untouchable. Unmovable. Unchangeable. We associate emotions with feelings of change. Instability. Unpredictability. And these things cannot be true of God...right?

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

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

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

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

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

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 it's wings. David will not be abandoned. A righteous Branch shall come from his line. A king who will reign with justice and righteousness and wisdom. One who will restore the fortunes of God's people. One who will defeat their great enemy once and for all so they may finally dwell secure. He will even have a name...יְהוָה צִדְקֵנוּ..."The Lord is our righteousness."

Jesus is our righteousness, friends. God made Him who knew no sin to actually become sin on our behalf. To bear the full weight of the world's sin. Past. Present. Future. He took all my sin. All my brokenness. All my fears. He took all my rebellion. All my rejection. All my disdain. He took all my selfishness. All my greed. All my lusts. And He nailed them to the cross. 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 heartbreaking, gut-wrenching exile in Babylon. God is with them. He has not forgotten them. He will eventually redeem them. This is their hope! This is their future! And though they themselves may not actually get there, they can trust God will bring their descendants home.

Readings for tomorrow; Jeremiah 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 it's way into the king's presence for one final hearing. The tension builds. How will the king respond? Will he repent? Will he turn back to the Lord? Will he humble himself and bow the knee? Sadly, the answer is no. He takes out a knife and cuts the scroll to pieces as each line is read and then proceeds to burn it in his fire pit. His rejection of the Word of God is complete and final. So is his doom.

One cannot so easily dispose of God's Word. It has a power all its own. Coming from the Holy Spirit, it is eternal. Unquenchable. 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 all, God raises up Seth only to watch as humanity descends into chaos. He raises up Noah and rescues him from the flood only to watch Noah's descendants rebel and build a tower to the heavens. He scatters them and then raises up Abraham only to watch his descendants end up in slavery in Egypt. God raises up Moses and delivers them from bondage. Brings them to a land flowing with milk and honey only to watch them forget Him and do what is right in their own eyes. So he raises up David. The man after God's own heart and sets him on the throne. But now David's descendants have followed the same path and ended up in the same place as those who've come before. In each case, I am confident the people of God believed God would never leave them or forsake them. I am confident they believed God would remain steadfast, loyal, and true. And I imagine they were incredibly disappointed when judgment came.

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

Friends, we cannot blame God for the consequences of our sinful choices. We cannot blame God for our rebellion. 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 Nebuchadnezzer 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 gives 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 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

September 1, 2020

ROCK BOTTOM

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

I remember hitting rock bottom. It was August 1992. I had just finished my first summer after my first year of college. Things were not good. I had bombed my first year of school. Too much drinking. Skipped too much class. I had been in Maine all summer coaching lacrosse and threw myself into the "camp counselor" lifestyle which involved a lot of drinking and casual sex. Several nights, I woke up passed out at the bar where we partied. I was about as far from God as can be. I came back in a dark place. Depressed. Empty inside. Ashamed of the person I was becoming. My whole life was in a tailspin and I could feel every rotation.

There is only one place to go when you hit rock bottom. You turn to God. Within the first week or so of being on campus again at college, a friend of mine invited me to a student ministry. I figured I had nothing to lose. I didn't realize it at the time but my life changed the moment I walked in those doors. God met me there in a powerful way. Drew me in. Gave me new life. New hope. A sense of joy. I looked around and saw so many students who seemed to have something I did not. I joined a small group Bible study to find out how to get it. Those men loved me. Blessed me. Put up with my foolishness. I remember asking them to hold me accountable to only drinking one beer an hour at the parties I attended. I failed almost every week but they stuck with me. My life was still not going well. I was still drinking far too much. Still missing too much class. But there was something about this group of guys. Spending time with them became my lifeline. The highlight of my week. Going to Late Nite - our student ministry fellowship - was something I looked forward to. It was a bright spot in an otherwise dark time for me.

A few months went by. I found myself walking alone on the way to the Student Center. Right by the parking garage. I can still picture exactly where I stopped and looked up. A realization hit me that day. Looking back, I can see how it had been growing all semester. This sense that God was very real. The young men I studied the Bible with believed Jesus wasn't just some old dusty historical figure they admired. They actually believed He was alive and suddenly I realized I did too. And if that were true then everything in my life needed to change.

Lamentations is an account of what happens when we hit rock bottom. It's ugly. Especially when we're watching the fall of a nation. I've seen what happens when governments fall. When political unrest and instability reigns. I've seen the effects of famine, drought, and starvation. I've witnessed what happens when people lose all hope of ever escaping poverty. I've been approached by women selling their babies in the streets. I've seen disease ravage bodies because they had no access to healthcare. I've held the hands of the dying and prayed over them as they pass from this brutal world. When I read Lamentations and the accounts of the ash heaps, women boiling their children for food, people wandering listless in the streets, and those wishing for a swift end at the edge of the sword; I think of some of the places I've been. This is actually happening today in places like Syria, Yemen, and Somalia. The people in these places suffer tremendously and in their suffering, they look to God. They beg for help. They ask Him to intervene.

The good news is God often does through the efforts of His people. Through organizations like World Relief, World Vision, and International Justice Mission who intentionally go to the front lines of these conflict zones to offer what they can. From the opening pages of Genesis, God had determined to bring blessing to this world through the creatures He made in His image. To them He gave dominion and

authority over all He had made. To them He gave power and responsibility to care for all He had made. To them He gave the command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. And now that call comes to us. What will we do with it? How will we come alongside the suffering? Will we be the ones God uses to lift them up? This is the truth we are forced to confront over and over again. Whenever the question is raised, “Why does God allow such suffering?” We have to look in the mirror and own the fact that we are the ones who created these conditions. We are the ones who tolerate the inequalities that exist in our world. We are the ones who spend our lives building up riches and resources while so many around the world go without. The real question. The honest question. The question we don’t want to face is not...”Why does God allow such suffering?” That’s passing the buck. Playing the same blame game Adam and Eve began way back in the Garden. No, the real question is “Why do WE allow such suffering?” We who have the means and the technology and the resources. Why do we continue to withhold these things from those who need them most?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 1-4

September 2, 2020

APOCALYPSE

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 1-4

Welcome to Ezekiel and some of the strangest writings of the Old Testament! The next several weeks will be confusing if it's your first time through so let me give you a few tools to help you navigate this book. Let's begin with some history on Ezekiel himself. Ezekiel was born into a priestly family, most likely during the reign of King Josiah in Judah. You will remember King Josiah was one of the faithful kings of Judah and dedicated his reign to cleansing the land of idols and restoring the true worship of Yahweh. He was married but his wife died just prior to the siege of Jerusalem in 587 BC. He was taken into exile along with many of the leaders and influential people of Judah and resettled in Babylon. There it appears he held an important leadership position among the exiles even before receiving his call to be a prophet.

What sets apart the leadership of Ezekiel are the strange visions he received from the Lord. Like Daniel and the Apostle John, he is given the gift of being able to see beyond the veil of this world into the next. But what he sees is overwhelming. Confusing. It doesn't make a lot of sense to us 21st century readers. This is a style of writing known as "apocalyptic." Not unique to the Bible, it has parallels in a lot of ancient near east literature. It has several features you will need to keep in mind as you read.

Revelation - The very word, "apokalypsis" in the Greek means "revelation" or "disclosure." Apocalyptic literature is marked by a direct revelation from God to a seer or prophet, usually in visions or dreams, who then writes down what he sees.

Mystery - The meaning of the visions are often shrouded in mystery. They might refer to past, current, or future events. They may include strange images from the world beyond. While the seer or prophet may write them down in great detail, deciphering them is a significant challenge.

Symbolism - The visions are rife with symbols drawn from nature, ancient near east mythology, astral phenomena, etc. These symbols are used by the seer or prophet to make sense of what he sees and could represent coded language in order to pass imperial censors who may be screening their correspondence.

Resistance Literature - Because the prophet is typically writing from an "exilic" perspective where he and his people live under oppression, his focus is on the future rather than the present. The visions are meant to provide hope to a people who are suffering.

God is sovereign - The overarching message of the apocalyptic genre in the Bible is that God reigns. He is supreme. He will judge the nations. He will have the final victory. Despite their present conditions, God's people are to place their trust in Him.

Ezekiel sees a vision. God appears to him in all His glory and splendor. Living creatures with strange faces. Wheels heading in every direction. High winds. Burning coals of fire. And above it all a throne where a majestic figure sits. It's so overwhelming that Ezekiel sits speechless for seven straight days.

What is the content of the revelation Ezekiel receives? His calling to be a prophet. Ezekiel is called to be a "watchman" for Israel. He will speak God's Word to His people. He will embody God's messages through his actions. He will become the vessel through which God will make known His will. This will

not be an easy call. Serving God as His prophet never is! There is always a cost! The people will resist him. The people will reject his message. The people may even beat and attack him. But Ezekiel's job is simply to be faithful. To sound the trumpet. To give fair warning. To confront God's people on their sin.

And what will the confrontation look like? This strange scene where Ezekiel lays on his side for 390 days and 40 days respectively to atone for the sins of each kingdom. The 390 days represents the 390 years between the apostasy of Jeroboam of the northern kingdom of Israel when he set up idols for his people to worship and the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel is now experiencing. (975-c. 583 BC) The forty days represents the final years of apostasy in the southern kingdom of Judah. Taken together, the 430 years represented matches the number of years Israel was enslaved in Egypt before the Exodus, meaning the key to their future hope lies in the faithfulness God has shown them in the past. God will repeat what He has done and deliver them again from slavery but only after they have returned to Him with all their hearts.

What does any of this have to do with us? Wise and discerning Christians will see the similarities between the apostasy/exile of Israel and the reality of our own apostasy/exile in the church. We too have a need for God to raise up faithful "watchmen and women" who will proclaim the Word of God with boldness. Prophets who will speak God's truth regardless of how it is received. Men and women who understand their first call is to please Christ rather than people. This is just as hard for us today as it was for Ezekiel back then. And it is the job of every Christian. The call of every single person who claims to follow Jesus. We are the ones whom God has sent! We are the vessels He has chosen to use for His purposes!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 5-8

September 3, 2020

RETURN TO GOD

Readings for today: Ezekiel 5-8

Today's reading is as brutal as they come. Violence. Disease. Famine. Destruction. Pain. Suffering. God delivering His people over to judgment. It is hard to read. Harder still to try and picture. But the hardest part is to accept is that this is all from God. All a part of His plan. It raises some extremely difficult questions. How can this be the same God who promised compassion and steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love Him? How can this be the same God who will later reveal Himself fully and completely in Jesus Christ? How can this God of wrath be the same God of love? Is this God bipolar? Manic? Schizophrenic? Does He have rage issues? Can He be trusted? Is such a God even worthy of our love?

These are all important questions to ponder but they also ultimately miss the point. God is God. He has made known His will. He has established His covenant. He has made clear His expectations. From the beginning, He has held nothing back. Nothing hidden. Nothing secret. He created us to fulfill His purposes. He is the Potter. We are the clay. Our problem is that we keep forgetting our place. We keep rejecting our role. We refuse to acknowledge His Lordship over our lives. Starting with Adam and Eve, we keep asserting our independence. We keep trying to be our own gods. Do things our own way. Worship as we please. Do things as we choose. And we forget the One we were created to serve. We forget the One we were created to please. We forget God is God and we are not.

We cannot say we haven't been warned. God is more patient with us than we deserve. He forbears for generations as the sin piles up. He continues to reach out in love only to have the door slammed in His face. He continues to show us grace though we deserve judgment. He continues to be faithful though we ignore Him and walk away. There are consequences to such actions. The apostle Paul talks about them in Romans 1, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." And how does that wrath manifest itself according to Paul? God simply withdraws His hand. He "gives us over" to the lusts of our hearts. The lust of our eyes. The pride and arrogance of our lives. And the results are ugly. Harsh. Tragic. Horrifying. Human beings, left unchecked, are brutal creatures. It was Robert Burns who first coined the phrase, "Man's inhumanity to man" in a poem he wrote in 1787 and recent events in our own country only serve to confirm his analysis of the human condition. We are capable of unfathomable evil. We are capable of the most brutal violence. We are capable of the most horrifying, dehumanizing behavior. And if we're totally honest, we all know this to be true. Given the right conditions, all of us are capable of just about anything. (See the infamous "Stanford Prison Experiment" of 1971.)

How should a just and holy God respond? Righteous judgment. Our sin offends God on a level we simply cannot understand. Listen to how Ezekiel describes how God feels, "Then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols." (Ezekiel 6:9) God takes our sin seriously. Our problem is we don't take it seriously enough. We gloss it over. We make excuses. We rationalize our behavior. We justify our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. We foolishly believe we are somehow special and will escape judgment. We presume upon our relationship with God. We are just like Israel who believed they were "immune" because they were God's chosen people.

But God will not be mocked. He vents His fury without mercy. "Thus shall my anger spend itself, and I will vent my fury upon them and satisfy myself. And they shall know that I am the Lord —that I have spoken in my jealousy—when I spend my fury upon them." (Ezekiel 5:13) It is scary. It is frightening. It makes us tremble. And if we aren't careful we will miss what God is trying to do. In our fear, we will focus yet again on all the wrong things. God's judgment is NOT an end in itself! It points beyond itself to something far greater! Far more important!

"That they may know I am the Lord." Over and over again we read this refrain. God using judgment to cleanse His people. To purify. To refine. He disciplines us in His love. He confronts the evil of our hearts. He forces us to come face to face with the depth of our sin and degradation. The utter futility of our idolatry. The full measure of our rebellion. Yes, it is harsh but it is also true. It is just. It is fair. It right. It is good. And it is ultimately so we may return in humility to the Lord. We must be broken. Our hardened hearts must be crushed. Our stiff necks bent. God will indeed force us to our knees through judgment so we may again experience the joy of being in right relationship with Him. This is the point of exile. This is the point of suffering. God wants His people back. And He will not relent until we return to Him.

It's a sobering reality. Especially for us Christians. To think of all that Christ endured as the Father poured His wrath out on His Son. To consider all Christ went through as he experienced the depths of hell and God-forsakenness. He took on the full weight of human sin. As terrifying as the judgment is in Ezekiel, it pales in comparison to the judgment Christ suffered on the Cross. Reading these words through the prism of the Cross should make us appreciate more and more the wonder of Christ's sacrifice for us. We should find ourselves marveling at the great love of God who would take our place. Bring judgment on Himself. Freely lay down His life in order to save us from our sin. Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God wouldst die for me?

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 9-12

September 4, 2020

THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Ezekiel 9-12

It is hard for us to fathom the national catastrophe that befell Israel. Harder still for us to understand the depth of their pain and suffering. Living as we do in the world's most powerful nation, we cannot begin to grasp what it would be like to watch your entire way of life destroyed. However, all of that pales in comparison to the tragedy Ezekiel sees in his vision today. All the destruction. All the loss of life. All the famine and disease. None of that would have compared to the grief he felt watching the Lord leave His Temple.

From the moment God had filled the Tabernacle in the wilderness, Israel had never been alone. They enjoyed His protection. They had enjoyed His provision. He had given them victory after victory. Established them in the Promised Land. Taken up residence in Jerusalem once they built the Temple. Over time, the Israelites began to take Him for granted. In fact, there was a sense in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's time that the Lord was somehow "trapped" in the Temple. They believed they had the Lord caged. He had ceased to be their god and had now become a totem. A magic talisman that kept them from evil. This is why they stubbornly refused to leave Jerusalem when Jeremiah called them to submit to Nebuchadnezzar. They falsely believed as long as they had the Lord locked down in His Temple that they could never be fully defeated.

Imagine their shock when Ezekiel relates his vision of the Lord leaving the Temple. Departing from the east gate. Rising above the cherubim where He normally sat. Heading out of the city that bore His name. Imagine their fear as their one hope departs, leaving them alone for the first time since their days in Egypt. It's difficult for us wrap our minds around simply because we believe God is everywhere all the time. We hold onto the promise that God is always with us. We trust He will never leave us or forsake us.

But what if the Lord is leading us into exile? What if the Lord is leading us into a season of suffering? What if the Lord is seeking to refine us and sanctify us? Are we willing to go where He leads? The reality is we too often take the Lord for granted. We too act as if He's "trapped" in a relationship with us. As if God is "bound" by His unconditional love for us. We falsely believe our thoughts, attitudes, and actions don't matter. We false believe we can reject holiness as a way of life. We falsely believe God's primary goal is our personal happiness. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God does love us with an everlasting love. But make no mistake, God is not "bound" to us. He is not "trapped" in this relationship. He is not co-dependent on us nor does He allow our whims, our feelings, our desires to shape His will for our lives. We sin at our own risk. We run ahead of God at our own peril.

Perhaps the best example of how God relates to us comes from the story Jesus tells of the prodigal son in Luke 15. The younger son comes to his father in the tale and asks for his inheritance. He wants nothing to do with his family any longer. He wants to be on his own. Live according to his own rules. Follow his own path. Find his own happiness. So he takes his money and leaves. The father lets him go. Many years pass. The son has spent all he has on sinful pursuits. He has abandoned all his father taught him. Now he's desperate. Alone. Afraid. Ashamed. One day he plucks up the courage to go home. He has no hope his father will accept back into the family but he thinks he might be able to catch on as a hired servant. But while he is far off, the father sees him. The father's been waiting by the door. Watching out the window. Longing. Praying. Looking forward to the day when his son will come to his

senses. The father runs to him. Embraces him. Gives him a robe to wear and places the signet ring back on his finger. He is home. He is one of the family again.

It's a powerful story. One that reminds us of the great love of God. It should also remind us of the consequences of our sin. The father never stopped loving the son just as God never stops loving us. But the father did let the son go. He did let the son make his own sinful decisions and then face the terrible consequences. The same was true for Israel. God did indeed come to dwell in His Temple. Like the father from the story, He loved His children unconditionally. Over and over He forgave them. But then there came a day when they finally said, "We don't want you here anymore. We don't want to be your children. We want to do our own thing. Live our own lives. Pursue our own happiness. Chase our own dreams. And they don't include you." So the Father did what they asked. He left His home in their hands. He removed His glorious presence. The result is pain. Suffering. Heartbreak. Such is always the case when we abandon God.

At the same time, Ezekiel sounds a note of hope. Presumably, God could have chosen to leave His Temple and head in any direction. He went east. East to where the exiles lived. East to Babylon. East to find His wayward children. East to be with them in captivity. East to comfort them in their diaspora. East to provide for them and make them prosper. East to join them so they never would be alone.

Friends, God's glory doesn't need a Temple. A house made with human hands. A sanctuary covered in gold. The Bible declares that we are temples of the Holy Spirit! Our hearts have become the residence of God Himself! This is why Ezekiel declares, "And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God." (Ezekiel 11:19-20) Furthermore, it's why the Apostle Paul will later declare, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) Because God's Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, we ourselves are "being transformed into the Christ's image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." (2 Corinthians 3:18) Amazing! The great news of the gospel is that God's glory now lives in us!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 13-16

September 7, 2020

IS GOD JUST?

Readings for the day: Ezekiel 17-20

Today's reading poses a very important question. One we all ask. One that seems almost hardwired into our souls. Is God just? God's people have been asking this question for centuries. They look at their history. They look at their circumstances. They ponder their suffering and struggle and strife. And because of the difficulties they face in their lives, they wonder how God could allow such things to happen. They wonder how a good God could allow evil to flourish. They wonder how a loving God could stand by and watch His people endure such pain. They wonder how a gracious God could be so demanding.

I hear these questions all the time. "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just." (Ezekiel 18:25) From the very beginning, we've been avoiding the responsibilities that come with being made in God's image and being given a mandate to care for all creation. We keep trying to find someone to blame for all our problems. Rather than looking at ourselves and the depth of human depravity, we look to God and look to blame-shift. We try to escape the natural consequences of our selfish behavior by pretending that somehow the issue is God's..."He made me this way", "He set up the world like this", "He is the one who allows evil to flourish..." All the while, we refuse to face the truth about the man or woman we see in the mirror.

God will have none of it. "Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" (Ezekiel 18:25-29) God makes it very clear that He will not allow us to skirt our responsibilities. Our sin is the root of the evil we see in the world. Our rebellion is the reason for our difficult circumstances. Our refusal to follow the ways of God is why we face such suffering and hardship with so little hope. It is not God's arm that is shortened or God's strength that has failed or God's justice that has let them down. The failure is their own.

Thankfully, God is merciful. He is gracious. He loves us despite our sin. Listen to His precious words from Ezekiel 18 and be encouraged. "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die." Your soul is God's. Whether you believe or disbelieve. Whether you are good or evil. Whether you feel worthy or unworthy. Your soul is God's. He holds you in His hand. "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." You are responsible for you. You are not at the mercy of your family's dysfunction or broken history. You are not simply the product of your genetic makeup. If you are a Christian, you are a rational, spiritual creature who is endowed by Christ with His Spirit to make godly choices. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" God doesn't delight in your pain. God is not immune to your suffering. God does not derive a sadistic pleasure from the death of anyone, including the wicked. He loves everyone He made in His image and desires all to be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin.

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live." What God desires is NOT perfection but repentance. Humility rather than pride. A broken and contrite heart, God will never despise.

Friends, the secret to a life lived well before God has EVERYTHING to do with submission. Surrender. An honest, transparent acknowledgment of your sin. We come to the Cross on our knees. The ground is level. All are equally guilty in His sight and yet all are equally made righteous by the death of His Son. Nothing about you is left untouched. Unhealed. Unchanged. God will save to the uttermost those who turn to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 21-24

September 8, 2020

PART OF A LARGER STORY

Readings for today: Ezekiel 21-24

One of the biggest challenges we have to overcome...especially when we read the Old Testament...is out tendency to see ourselves as neutral, third-party observers. We read the words and then decide if we believe them to be true or not. We think of ourselves as dispassionate, rational, and objective. We stand outside the biblical story. We take the parts we like and we jettison the parts we don't like. We believe we have options. We believe we get to determine what's true for us. And we cling on to those passages that help us understand how we are to be saved. It's a highly individualistic, highly rationalistic, thoroughly Western, uniquely Protestant approach to engaging the Bible. And it would have been utterly foreign to the biblical writers themselves.

Ezekiel sees himself as part of one long continuous story that harkens all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He sees himself playing a very minor role in the grand sweep of God's epic tale of deliverance and salvation. He understood himself to be caught up in this story. His life as one thread in a much larger tapestry. His job as a Jewish man, much less a prophet of God, was to find his place in this story. To play his part. To do the work his God had called him to do. So as he surveys the landscape of what's happening around him. As he looks to the heavens and charts the courses of the stars or ponders the rise and fall of the great empires around the Ancient Near East or considers the desperate straights of his own people; he interprets all of these things from a theological perspective. He tries to discern God's hand in all that's taking place. Tragically, this includes the death of his own wife.

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke; yet you shall not mourn or weep, nor shall your tears run down." (Ezekiel 24:16) I cannot imagine the pain Ezekiel must feel at the loss of his beloved. We do not know much about their relationship but the fact that God Himself calls her the "delight" of Ezekiel's eyes probably says much. Their love must have been strong. Their intimacy deep. And yet when she passes, Ezekiel is not allowed to mourn. This may strike us as a little weird but for Ezekiel's contemporaries it would have been shocking. Jewish culture is highly expressive when it comes to grief. People in those days would literally hire professional mourners to weep and wail alongside those who had lost loved ones so they wouldn't feel ashamed to express their pain and heartbreak. Funerals would last for days and involve the whole community. Food would be eaten. Stories shared. Tears cried. It was a powerful, visceral ritual designed to help those who had lost loved ones process their grief. But Ezekiel is denied this experience. Why?

Why would God treat his prophet in this way? How could Ezekiel see God's hand in all this? What in the world made Ezekiel think that God was calling him NOT to grieve! NOT to mourn! NOT to weep? Again, it comes back to how Ezekiel understood himself. He lives within a much larger story that is unfolding over the centuries. God making Himself known to His people. God walking alongside His people. God relating to His people. Ezekiel understands all of life to be lived under the sovereign Lordship of Yahweh. Not just in the abstract but in the everyday. Ezekiel believed God was at work in every moment of his life. Every experience. Every success. Every failure. Every joy. Every pain. God ruled over it all and God was using it all for His purposes. So when his wife dies, Ezekiel somehow understands this to be yet another sign from God to His people. Ezekiel's own life. Ezekiel's own heartbreak will be used to demonstrate the depth of God's heartbreak and grief over the sins of His people. "Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God." (Ezekiel 24:24)

I know this sounds very strange to our ears and yet it is the key to understanding the Bible. It is the key to understanding why the people in the Bible did the things they did. It is the key to understanding why Noah built an ark. Sarah's laughter. Abraham going up a mountain to sacrifice his son. Moses confronting Pharoah. Joshua renewing the covenant. Deborah's song. Samuel hearing God's voice. David dancing before the ark. The religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah. The tears of Jeremiah. All of these great men and women believed their lives were not their own. They believed they were instruments in God's hands to use as He saw fit for His own purposes and glory. They had no identity outside of God. No independent existence apart from Him. They had no story to call their own. No, their lives were completely wrapped up in the much larger story God was telling about deliverance and salvation and redemption and final restoration! That's why Ezekiel could look at the death of his wife through a theological lens, even seeing it as yet another prophetic sign for God's people.

Imagine how your perspective on life would change if you saw the world through Ezekiel's eyes! Imagine seeing God's hand at work in every instance. Every encounter. Every experience good or bad. Imagine seeing God's purpose behind every success or failure. Every joy or sorrow. Every moment of every day. Imagine it was God speaking to you through every conversation. God teaching you and humbling you through every trial and hardship. Imagine God showing you His faithfulness as He gives you far more than you can handle. This, friends, is one of the deep and most profound messages running from Genesis to Revelation. God attempting to give us His eternal perspective. God trying to help see things from His point of view. From the vantage point of God's eternal kingdom, everything changes. The rise and fall of nations. The 24 news cycle. The triumphs and tragedies of life. The ordinary and mundane. All of it transformed. Impregnated with eternal significance -or insignificance as it were - in God's hands.

If only Ezekiel were alive today! I think he'd say, "Don't weep for me. Weep for the world. Weep for the lack of faith. The pervasiveness of sin. The rise of evil. The brokenness of God's people. Save your tears for the coming judgment of God."

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 25-28

September 9, 2020

VANITY: THE DEVIL'S FAVORITE SIN

Readings for today: Ezekiel 25-28

"Vanity, definitely my favorite sin." - Satan

This line comes at the end of a movie called, The Devil's Advocate, where Satan (played by Al Pacino) attempts to manipulate and coerce a young lawyer (played by Keanu Reeves) into doing his bidding. Initially, it looks like the lawyer will compromise his integrity for a future filled with wealth and power and privilege. In fact, most of the movie teases out this scenario. But in the end, Reeves successfully resists one temptation only to potentially fall to another. His sacrificial commitment to his ideals makes him a hero in the eyes of the people which in turn makes him just as susceptible to the sin of vanity than if he had taken the compromise in the first place.

Pride is definitely the most slippery of sins and represents the greatest weapon in Satan's arsenal. He uses it to corrupt rich and poor alike. He uses it to attack both the powerful and the powerless. He knows we are all equally vulnerable when it comes to this particular sin. How does he know? Because he was the first to fall prey to it. "You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, emerald, and carbuncle; and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created, till unrighteousness was found in you. In the abundance of your trade you were filled with violence in your midst, and you sinned; so I cast you as a profane thing from the mountain of God, and I destroyed you, O guardian cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was proud because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I exposed you before kings, to feast their eyes on you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries; so I brought fire out from your midst; it consumed you, and I turned you to ashes on the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who know you among the peoples are appalled at you; you have come to a dreadful end and shall be no more forever." (Ezekiel 28:12-19) Yes, this passage is referring to the king of Tyre but as with a lot of prophetic literature, such passages are layered with many different meanings. In this particular case, God is revealing to his prophet what took place way back before the beginning of time. There, in the heavenly realm, when all was good and right and beautiful, God anointed a heavenly being with great power and authority. He placed him in the Garden of Eden and covered him with precious stones. He made him guardian over all He had made. But this being became prideful. He rose up against God. He abandoned his place and sought to take God's throne himself. So God exiled Satan. Threw him from the heavens. Cast him out of his presence.

Satan uses pride to manipulate and control human beings. He uses it to corrupt even the most pure among us. He uses it to destroy marriages as one spouse starts to compete over and against the other. He uses it to destroy business partnerships as one party starts to believe they deserve more than the other. He uses it against nations, convincing them of their own exceptionalism. He uses it to destroy churches, as God's people start to look down on each other as "less spiritual" than others. I've seen it happen so many times it's almost become cliche.

How does one guard one's heart against the sin of pride? By keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. By never taking our eyes off of Him and the great sacrifice He made on the cross for us. By pondering and prayerfully reflecting on the Cross, we are constantly reminded of our great need for Christ and the sheer poverty of our own spiritual condition. We are reminded that every good and perfect gift comes from God and none it is ours to claim for ourselves. We are far less likely to take credit for the good things that happen in our lives and instead, are far more likely to credit God for what He has done. We walk with open hands rather than clinched fists and we let the Lord direct our steps. We understand that entered this world with nothing and will exit with the same. All of our achievements and accomplishments in this world simply cannot be compared to the glory God will one day reveal in us. And so we humble ourselves before the Lord as a continual act of worship.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 29-32

September 10, 2020

MORE ON PRIDE…

Readings for today: Ezekiel 29-32

One of the besetting sins of humanity is our pride. Like Adam, we truly want to become our own gods. Human history is replete with example after example of what happens when a person or tribe or nation achieves a certain measure of power, wealth, and privilege. They become proud. Arrogant. They forget God. They ignore God. They replace God. The most megalomaniacal even believe they've become God. Pharaoh is simply one of the many examples we could cite just from the Bible much less other ancient/modern sources.

Interestingly enough, those who would be gods almost always fall into the same pattern. They almost always make the same mistake. In an effort to prove their "godliness", they build monuments to themselves. Monuments to their own glory. Monuments that stretch as high as possible, reaching up towards the heavens. Think of the Tower of Babel. Think of the obelisks and images and pyramids of Pharaoh. Think of the temples and palaces and structures archaeologists have discovered all over the world in almost every great culture. Now think of our own time. Think of our own country. Think of how those who would be god build monuments to themselves through social media. Marketing. Advertising. The goal is to have the #1 hit single. The #1 bestseller. The largest, multi-national corporation. The most political influence and clout. They use their resources to self-promote, all in an effort to make their own name great. Pastors and churches are not immune. The goal for many is to draw the largest crowds. Raise the most funds. Build the biggest buildings on sprawling campuses across the country.

Do we not realize the risk we are running here? We who would be great should take heed from the warnings God has given through the prophet Ezekiel. "All this is in order that no trees by the waters may grow to towering height or set their tops among the clouds, and that no trees that drink water may reach up to them in height. For they are all given over to death, to the world below, among the children of man, with those who go down to the pit...Whom are you thus like in glory and in greatness among the trees of Eden? You shall be brought down with the trees of Eden to the world below. You shall lie among the uncircumcised, with those who are slain by the sword." (Ezekiel 31:14, 18)

A couple of years ago, during a time of prayer, the Lord spoke to my heart. You see, I am as ambitious as the next person. I am as prideful as any. My heart longs for success and recognition. I too would love to see my name in lights. So the Lord confronted me. And He gave me three words to guide the rest of my life.

Obscurity: God has commanded me to labor in obscurity. To be content with where He has me. To never seek another position. Never seek another raise. Never seek another opportunity. To simply walk with open hands before Him.

Anonymity: God has commanded me to embrace anonymity. To never self-promote. Never seek to make my name great. Never seek out recognition or pride of place. To let others take the credit and in fact, spend my life and influence promoting others above myself.

Insignificance: God has commanded me to acknowledge my insignificance. In the grand sweep of God's eternal plan, my contributions are very small. I am not an essential cog in this machine. I am not

irreplaceable. I simply am one servant among billions who is being called to play his very minor role in God's Kingdom.

Does all this mean success is evil? Does all this mean wealth and power and privilege are to be resisted? Does all this mean we should never aspire to anything? Never work hard? Never try our best? Anyone who knows me, knows that cannot be true. The key is our motivation. True humility is not thinking more of oneself than one ought or less of oneself than one ought. Rather it is thinking of oneself less. Again, it means walking with open hands before the Lord. Letting Him fill them up with His plans for your life.

As I've learned to walk with an open heart before the Lord, it's been amazing to see where He's taken me. Humbling to see what He's entrusted me with. Leadership in an incredible church. A certain degree of influence in my denomination. An adjunct faculty position at Denver Seminary. Opportunities to teach overseas and help lead a revival in the Horn of Africa. He's taught me how to be a better husband and father. A better friend and neighbor. All of this came to me from God's own hands. I did not seek it out nor was I remotely qualified on paper for most of these positions. God simply moved me like a pawn on His great chessboard as He works out His will for the world. And I am happy and content to play my part.

What about you? Do you find yourself aspiring to greatness? Seeking to achieve all you can? Accumulate all you can? Earn the recognition of your peers? What drives you? What feeds your ambition? Is it the Lord or is it your pride? Heed the words of Ezekiel. Take care lest you follow in the footsteps of Pharaoh. Humble yourself before the Lord and let Him guide your steps.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 33-36

September 11, 2020

GOD'S WATCHMAN

Readings for today: Ezekiel 33-36

Long have I prayed over these words in Ezekiel. What does it mean to be a watchman? To be given God's Word to speak to a specific people in a specific place and time? To be able to look out on the culture at large and see the coming judgment? To speak to it not in anger or outrage but in tenderness and compassion and love? To lay aside my natural prophetic zeal and instead kneel in sackcloth and ashes and weep over the sins of God's people? To plead with them to return to the Lord with their whole hearts?

Ezekiel was a faithful prophet. He understood his call from the Lord clearly. He was to speak God's Word to God's people. Only God's Word. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. He was to speak God's Word as boldly and clearly as possible. He was to speak with full conviction and hold nothing back. In so doing, he is creating the conditions whereby God's people might respond in repentance and humility. It's important to note that the watchman is not responsible for the results. They are only responsible for the warning they provide. So Ezekiel's success or failure in ministry doesn't ride on how the people respond. Those who listen to his words will be saved. Those who reject his words will be destroyed. Ezekiel will only be held responsible to speak. Truthfully. Honestly. Openly. Transparently. "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul." (Ezekiel 33:7-9)

At the same time, I imagine Ezekiel loves his people. All good pastors do. We live and die with the decisions we watch people make. We grieve when they fail to turn from sin. We rejoiced when we see true life change. We get discouraged when we see spiritual complacency. We get excited when we see someone finally hit rock bottom and turn to Jesus. So the burden of the watchman is a heavy one. And I imagine Ezekiel felt this weight keenly. Especially as he watches God's people respond to the Word of God preached. Some rest in their own self-righteousness. Others turn from their wickedness. The ups and downs of ministry are reflected in these words from Ezekiel 33, "The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live. "Yet your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by this. Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, I will judge each of you according to his ways." (Ezekiel 33:12-20)

There is nothing worse than seeing God's people choose their own way over God's Way. Nothing more disheartening than for God's people to choose the path of pride and arrogance and selfishness and greed over the path of humility and surrender and selflessness and generosity. Nothing more discouraging than watching God's people reject God's Word and substitute their own truth for God's Truth. It never ends well. God will not be mocked. He will not bless sin nor will He let us escape the consequences of our actions.

I think about all I see happening in our world today. There is such a lack of compassion and empathy and love towards those who are different than us. The differences may be ethnic. The differences may be economic. The differences may be political. The differences may be social. No matter where the differences lie, we seem to have so little tolerance for one another. Our hearts are extremely hard towards those who are not like us. And if we let our hearts continue to harden, we end up expressing only anger and hate both of which are poison to the soul. Sure, we may have all sorts of justifications as to why we treat people so poorly. We may have all kinds of reasons why we feel justified in attacking a person's character or questioning their motives or spreading gossip, rumors, and lies. But at the end of the day, we have to acknowledge that such rationalizations are self-serving at best and do not further the cause of Christ. It is only when we are willing to deal first with the log in our own eye that we will be able to see clearly the speck in our brother's eye. Without us first addressing our own sin, we can never address the sins of our culture, our nation, or our world.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 37-40

September 12, 2020

CAN DRY BONES LIVE?

Readings for today: Ezekiel 37-40

I have spent time in valleys full of dry bones. It may be a loveless marriage. It may be a broken family system. It may be a church that has lost any sense of mission beyond itself. It could be a community where tax revenues are declining and schools are shuttering and all hope seems lost. Walking into such valleys is hard. You can feel the crunch of the bones beneath your feet. You can hear the wind as it whistles through the graveyard. You can feel the presence of death all around. There is no joy in such places. There is only hopelessness and despair. Perhaps that's why I love this particular text from Ezekiel so much.

"The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." I cannot tell you how many times God has asked me this question. Can these bones live? Can this marriage be restored? Can this church be renewed? Can this community come back from the brink? Can our nation be saved? Initially, I would find myself telling God all the reasons why such things were impossible. I had all my human excuses for why we should simply cut bait and move on. But I've been at this long enough now to realize how little I know so I've started answering along with Ezekiel, "O Lord God, only you know."

"Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord." It's a powerful thing God calls us to do. To declare hope in the face of hopelessness. To declare joy in the midst of sadness and mourning. To declare love when it feels like all love has been lost once and for all. To walk by faith in the midst of the mess we've made of our lives and our churches and our society, trusting God make the dry bones live again.

"So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them." The first step is always obedience. To believe. To prophesy as God commands. To listen for the rattling. To watch as God begins to bring the dry bones together. To identity the muscles and sinews and skin as it appears. These are the first signs of hope. They are like the first buds in the spring. They signal something is about to happen. Someone is still at work. Despite what appears to be dead, there is life being renewed and restored. And yet, there is still something missing.

"Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army." It is the Spirit of God that breathes life into our weary souls. It is the Spirit of God that breathes love into loveless marriages. It is the Spirit of God who revives dying churches. It is the Spirit of God that blows fresh through struggling communities. It is the Spirit of God that restores a nation. The Spirit comes from the four winds. It blows across the earth. It comes from

the most unlikely of places and at the most unexpected of times. Note our role in all of this. It's simply to pray. To prophesy. To ask the Lord to pour out His Spirit on His people.

"Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord." (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

I don't know about you but I long for the day when the dry bones of our nation will rise once again. I long for the day when the dry bones of so many depressed and hurting communities across our country will rise again. I long for the day when the dry bones of so many of our churches will rise or the dry bones of so many marriages and families will rise. And when I look around at the bones that surround me, I often feel overwhelmed. But then I remember, my job is not to make the bones rise or even make the bones come back together. My job is simply to believe. To pray. To prophesy. To proclaim God's Truth and point people to the One who holds the power to raise even the dead back to life!

September 14, 2020

THE LORD'S RETURN

Readings for today: Ezekiel 41-44

It's hard to imagine how Ezekiel must have felt when he saw the Lord returning to the Temple. The only thing close to it might be watching the memorial being built after the Towers fell in New York City. To visit Ground Zero or to see the lights shining on a clear night reminds all of us to never forget what happened on that terrible day. I still remember sitting in my car, waiting to make a left turn onto Alexander Road from Canal Pointe Blvd, as I headed into Princeton for school that morning. Classes were canceled. Work was suspended. We all watched in horror as the events unfolded. My wife Kristi remembers being at school when the news came down and scrambling to figure out if any of the parents of her kids had been trapped in the towers as they fell. One of my good friends was mobilized as a National Guardsman and spent the next year serving as a chaplain at the site where they took the remains of those who had been killed so they could be identified. The experience was so traumatic for him that he ended up in therapy himself for almost a year. Another colleague of mine was serving as the senior pastor of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church at the time and when the towers fell, he donned his clerical robe, threw open the doors of his sanctuary, and ran out into the streets to usher people into safety. Living in such close proximity to New York meant we knew people personally who experienced the loss of loved ones. Lisa Beamer, whose husband Todd lost his life heroically in the charge to retake Flight 93, went to church literally a few miles away. As terrible as that day was for so many, it is equally if not more powerful to watch our nation memorialize those who fell. Millions visit the memorial and museum each year to pay their respects. It is a powerful witness and testimony to the resilient heart of the American people.

Now multiply 9/11 many times over. Imagine not only the Towers going down but planes flying into the Capitol building in Washington DC or the White House. Imagine tanks rolling down the highways of our country. Imagine bombs being dropped on every major city. Imagine armies burning and destroying everything in their path. Imagine America in ruins. Imagine living in exile in some foreign nation for decades, wondering if you will ever return home. Now imagine a prophet coming to you and laying out the exact dimensions of a new Capitol being built. A new White House. A new Supreme Court building. Imagine that prophet rolling out the blueprints of every national monument and showing them to you. Imagine him telling you a time is coming soon when you will return and America will be reborn. Can you imagine your excitement and joy? The feeling of national pride that would swell in your heart?

"Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east. And the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters, and the earth shone with his glory. And the vision I saw was just like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and just like the vision that I had seen by the Chebar canal. And I fell on my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple." (Ezekiel 43:1-5) It is impossible to overstate the joy Ezekiel must have felt as he sees this vision the of the Lord's return. As painful as it was for him to see the Lord leaving the Temple in his earlier visions, it is now equally exciting to witness the Lord's return. God had not forgotten His people! God had not abandoned His promises! God would prove faithful! No wonder he fell on his face!

Life is often hard. There are moments, even seasons, where we feel like everything has come crashing down around us. We lose our job. Our cars are repossessed. Homes go into foreclosure. Relationships

break down in divorce. We experience the sudden, tragic loss of someone we love. Global pandemics exacerbate existing social tensions. Rioting and looting and violence breaks out in our streets. Men and women of color seek justice to redress historic wrongs. Law enforcement officers are attacked in the streets. All kinds of extremist organizations try to use the chaos to their advantage. It feels like things are coming apart at the seams. There is so much in this world that brings us pain and heartbreak. It can even feel at times like the Lord has abandoned us. Ridden off on his chariot somewhere far away, never to return. Don't believe the lie! God is faithful! He is true! He is steadfast in His love! He will never forsake or abandon us! He is with us! His glory is our sanctuary and our rearguard! If we walk by faith. If we trust in Him. If we surrender to His will and His ways. He will provide. He will restore the years the locusts have eaten. He will rebuild the ruins of our lives. He will bring forth new growth and new life from the barren ground. This is His promise and He will never fail!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezekiel 45-48

September 15, 2020

LIVING WATERS

Readings for today: Ezekiel 45-48

We love the idea of living water. Water that runs. Water that flows. Water that is constantly moving. Refreshing. Renewing. I think of taking off my shoes and socks after a long day of hiking to dip my feet in a cold mountain stream. I think of the water features I see in so many landscaping plans because the sound of flowing water soothes the soul. I think of the wells I've seen around the world as locals look for fresh sources of water to sustain life. Living water is essential. We simply cannot live without out. And that's why the Bible uses this image over and over again to depict the coming Kingdom of God.

Ezekiel sees a final vision. Water flowing from the Temple of God. It begins as a trickle but soon becomes a mighty river, flowing southeast out of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea. The region around the Sea is a wasteland. A desert. A void. A place where nothing grows. And yet, as the river reaches the sea, this amazing miracle takes place! Trees begin to grow on either side. Fruit appears, providing food and sustenance to all. Leaves bloom and blossom, without withering or fading. The water itself teems with life. Fish of every kind find a home there. As the waters reach the Sea, they bring it from death to life. The saltwater turns fresh and it begins to produce a hundredfold. Yes, there are still reminders of the former days. Still reminders of the death that once reigned here. The marshes and swamps retain their salty character but those simply serve as witnesses to the miracle of resurrection that has taken place!

For the Christian, we recognize the prophetic nature of Ezekiel's vision. Many centuries later, the Apostle Peter will actually stand on the steps of the Temple and preach the gospel for the first time. The Holy Spirit moved powerfully through his words and 3000 gave their lives to Jesus Christ. Along the very stairs where Peter most likely preached are the ceremonial mikvehs where Jewish believers would wash before going into worship. The 3000 who were saved were probably baptized in those very waters! What began as a trickle soon became a mighty river as the Spirit moved in the hearts of those early believers. From 20,000 at the end of the 1st century to over 20 million some two hundred years later to over 3 billion today; the river of the gospel of Jesus Christ just gets deeper and wider as it flows!

God is still on the move, friends! Even after all these centuries, lives are still being changed by the gospel! It moves out into the wasteland of our world. Into the darkest places where death reigns. And it brings life. Hope. Joy. Peace. Churches sprout up along its banks, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to sustain the nations. As they seek Christ themselves, they find their leaves never wither. The world itself is renewed. Restored. Redeemed. Where O Death is now thy sting? Where O Death is now thy victory? The Living Water that Christ offers us fills the void! It becomes a spring of water welling up continually in our souls. Healing our hurts. Easing our pain. Comforting our grief. Sustaining us until the day when Christ will come again to wipe away every tear and make all things new.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 1-3

September 16, 2020

LIVING A GODLY LIFE IN AN UNGODLY WORLD

Readings for today: Daniel 1-3

“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...” (1 Peter 3:15)

Daniel is one of my favorites. He is a man sold out to God. No matter what life throws at him, he never once seems to waver. When he was a young man, he was carted off into exile in Babylon. A traumatic, painful experience. Once he arrived in Babylon, he was identified as a young man of promise and removed from his family. Sequestered in the king’s household, he began training as a wise man. Someone who would counsel the king on the most important matters. Someone who would serve the empire and seek to expand its pagan influence and power. One can easily imagine the internal struggle Daniel must have felt. How does he serve God faithfully while counseling one of the great tyrants in history? How does he speak God’s truth to a pagan power? How does he maintain his integrity even as he counsels a king whose ego is out of control?

The challenges start early. As part of his training, he is presented with unclean food to eat. Right off the bat, he has a choice to make. Will he trust God or will he compromise his convictions? Here it is critical to note how Daniel responds. It will become the pattern for the rest of his life. “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see." (Daniel 1:8-13) First and foremost, Daniel resolves to remain faithful to God’s Law. He will not eat unclean food. At the same time, he recognizes his convictions put the chief eunuch in a tough position. If Daniel and his friends refuse to eat and start to suffer physically, the eunuch is going to be punished so Daniel comes up with a plan. Essentially, let us do it God’s way for ten days and then compare us with the rest of the group. If we don’t measure up, we’ll do it your way. It’s a brilliant approach. Daniel remains faithful to God. He is able to share with the eunuch the reason for his hope. He treats the man with gentleness and respect. And the results speak for themselves. God is glorified and Daniel’s stature rises in the court.

Fast forward a few years. Now Daniel has taken his place among the wise men of Babylon. A decree goes out that everyone is to be killed because no one can pass the king’s test. Once again, Daniel approaches the captain of the guard with gentleness and respect. He asks for an audience with the king. He trusts God to reveal the mystery in prayer. “Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him. To you, O God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for you have given me wisdom and might, and have now made known to me what we asked of you, for you have made known to us the king’s matter.” (Daniel 2:20-23) And when given his audience, he testifies to the greatness and power of God and the king humbles himself before him.

A few more years pass. The king grows so insecure he decides to build a monument to himself and demand everyone fall down in worship before it. It's the height of arrogance. Daniel doesn't appear in this story but his colleagues do. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego follow his example. Confronted with a situation which would force them to break the second commandment, they refuse to bow down in worship and instead stand faithful. The king is furious but the men answer him with grace and truth. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:16-18) They are thrown into a furnace of fire. The king and his courtiers watch, waiting for them to be consumed. An incredible miracle happens as the pre-existent Christ appears and delivers them from death. The result is again the humbling of the king. "Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who has sent his angel and delivered his servants, who trusted in him, and set aside the king's command, and yielded up their bodies rather than serve and worship any god except their own God." (Daniel 3:28)

Daniel is an amazing example of faith to us all. In the way he lives his life, he shows us how to live and engage our increasingly non-Christian world in a faithful way. We do not have to relinquish our faith in Christ to serve in politics or business or education or any other field for that matter. Holding onto Christ in our hearts, we do have to be prepared to give an answer for the hope we have in Him. People will ask. They may wonder why we do the things we do or refuse to act in ways that are dishonest or morally compromised. We may be attacked for our faith at times. Through it all, we are not to respond with violence or anger or fight for our "rights" but instead stand firm with gentleness and respect. We are not to resort to the underhanded ways of this world to accomplish the will of God. We must not use the ways of this world to achieve the purposes of God. Instead, we must let go and let God act as He chooses. Use us as He pleases. Place our lives and our future in His hands.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 4-6

September 17, 2020

LOVING THE LOST

Readings for today: Daniel 4-6

One of the hallmarks of a Christian is her heart for the lost. We are commanded in Scripture to love those who are lost. To have compassion on those who do not yet know God. To reach out to them. To serve them. To bless them in the name of Jesus. The examples from Scripture are legion. From the beginning where God demonstrates His love for Adam and Eve and Cain even amidst their sin. To the love Abraham showed for the people of Sodom, interceding for them when they faced destruction. Moses showed love to his father-in-law, a non-Israelite, raising him to a position of leadership among the people of God. I think of how the Law of God embraces the stranger, foreigner, and alien in the midst of God's people and I think of how we see that fleshed out in the embrace of women like Rahab and Ruth and the critical role they play in the genealogy of our Savior.

Daniel embodies this love as well. His close relationship with the kings he serves is well-attested in the chapters we read today. When Nebuchadnezzer has a dream, Daniel is the man he calls on. It's important to note that Nebuchadnezzer even uses Daniel's Jewish name which is highly unusual as the Babylonians "renamed" people in order to assimilate them fully into Babylonian culture. "At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods…" (Daniel 4:8) And Daniel clearly communicates his love and concern for Nebuchadnezzer as he interprets the dream for him. "Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, "Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you." Belteshazzar answered and said, "My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!" (Daniel 4:19)

Daniel's special relationship with the kings he serves is not limited to Nebuchadnezzer. It extends to Darius as well. "Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other high officials and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him. And the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom." (Daniel 6:3) Clearly, Daniel's reputation precedes him. He is esteemed above all the wise men and satraps and other potential counselors of the king. Furthermore, when their jealousy gets the best of them and they craft legislation specifically attacking Daniel's faith, Darius laments what he has to do and is the first to arrive at the mouth of the lion's den to see if Daniel has survived. "Then the king, when he heard these words, was much distressed and set his mind to deliver Daniel. And he labored till the sun went down to rescue him…Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him. Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm." Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. And the king commanded, and those men who had maliciously accused Daniel were brought and cast into the den of lions—they, their children, and their wives. And before they reached the bottom of the den, the lions overpowered them and broke all their bones in pieces." (Daniel 6:14, 18-20, 22-24)

One can see from such verses how Daniel loved the lost kings whom he served. He loved them as God loved them. He served them out of reverence for Christ. He gave his life to them in an effort to lead and

direct them to a saving faith. And his efforts were not in vain. Nebuchadnezzer gave glory to the God of Israel. Belshazzar was brought to his knees before the God of Israel. Darius issues a proclamation that all the people of the empire would worship the God of Israel. It's a powerful testimony and example to us all.

So…how do you love the lost? Take it one step back…do you love the lost? Do you love those who do not know Christ or do you look down on them? Do you love those who are still enslaved to their sin or do you disdain them? Do you love those who are struggling and wandering and perhaps even living in willful rebellion against Christ or do you seek to reach them, serve them, care for them, have compassion on them? What creates barriers to love in your life? Is it politics? Ethnicity? Economics? Is it lack of forgiveness? Lack of grace? Lack of understanding? Is it anger? Frustration? Lost hope? Let the gospel minister to your soul. Let the gospel restore your faith and renew your love. Remember the gospel is the literal power of God for all those who would believe, Jew and Gentile alike. It is God's desire that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth. This includes even those we would consider our enemies. Let Daniel's example both challenge and inspire you today to reach out to those who do not yet know Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 7-9

September 18, 2020

VISIONS AND DREAMS

Readings for today: Daniel 7-9

If you are like me, you grieve deeply over what you see happening in our nation and around the world. The world is descending into tribalistic chaos. Divisions are turning violent. People have taken to the streets. Not just here in America but around the world. Some of the demonstrations are turning into riots and looting. People are being attacked, hurt, and even killed. It's a troubling time to be sure.

Daniel lived through such troubling times himself. As he lay on his bed at night, God gave him a glimpse of the future. Kingdoms rising and falling. Great empires clashing. Regular people caught in the crossfire as armies march their way all over the earth. It was a scary time. An unsettling time. A deeply tribal time where conflict and violence were part of everyday life. No one really knew when or where an army would appear on the horizon. No one really knew when allegiances would shift. Safety and security seemed forever out of reach.

In the midst of his nightmarish visions, Daniel receives a Word from the Lord. A Word of comfort. A Word of hope. A Word of security. There is one who reigns over the nations of the earth. One who rules the empires of this world. He is the Ancient of Days and to Him is given all glory and honor and dominion and power. "As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened…I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14)

This is a great Word for us today. In a time when it seems like the nations rage and kings plot in vain against the Lord and against His Anointed, it is comforting to know the Son of Man and the Ancient of Days still sit on their thrones. God is in charge, friends. He reigns and rules supreme. His authority is unquestioned and unchallenged. His dominion is from everlasting to everlasting. There will never be a time when God is not in charge. There will never be a time when God abdicates authority. There will never be a time when God is not at work bending even the sinful, broken ways of His creation to His perfect will. Yes, we are sinners. We have sinned individually. We have sinned corporately. No matter how hard we try, we tend to make a mess of things. Thanks be to God that His love is unconditional. His grace undeserved. His mercies new every morning. God is faithful. He will bring to completion the work of redemption He has begun. This is why Christians throughout history have always declared, "Our only hope in life and in death is that we belong body and soul to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

Readings for tomorrow: Daniel 10-12

September 19, 2020

DANIEL'S APOCALYPSE

Readings for today: Daniel 10-12

Biblical prophets speak truth to power. Biblical prophets bring hope and assurance to God's people by reminding them of God's sovereign power and plan. Finally, Biblical prophets often foretell the future. This is certainly the case in Daniel 10-12. Here's a brief timeline...

535 BC - Third year of Cyrus the Great's reign. Daniel is now 85 years old and has been serving pagan kings for seventy years. Daniel's grief is most likely the result of the conflict those who have returned from exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra are facing as they rebuild both Jerusalem and the Temple. Daniel fasts for three weeks but unbeknownst to him, a battle is taking place in the heavenly realm. Gabriel - most likely the identity of the angelic being who visits Daniel - is at war with Satan and his demonic forces and only prevails with the help of another archangel named Michael. Gabriel has been sent by God to comfort Daniel. To give him hope for the future. Hard times are coming. Terrifying times. Forces will be arrayed in heaven and on earth against God's chosen people. Satan is seeking - as he always does - their compete eradication from the face of the earth. God, knowing what is to come, sends his angel to Daniel with a vision of the future so he can record it for future generations.

Three relatively minor kings follow Cyrus on throne. But the fourth referred to in Daniel 11 is Xerxes who ruled from 486-465 BC. His power and might was unrivaled at the time and as he seeks to expand his empire, he will provoke the might of Greece. After a number of years, Alexander the Great (336-323 BC) will unite the Greek into one empire and head east to destroy the Persians. Alexander dies tragically and his empire is then broken up into four pieces, ruled by four of his closest generals. The Ptolemaic (Southern king) faction goes to war with the Seleucids (Northern king) and their battle rages for generations with Israel as the primary "buffer state" in between. Eventually, a brutal tyrant named Antiochus Epiphanes IV will sweep down from the north and cause tremendous suffering for the people of God. "But he who comes against him shall do as he wills, and none shall stand before him. And he shall stand in the glorious land, with destruction in his hand." (Daniel 11:16) He will even seek to place a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies (abomination of desolation mentioned in 11:31) which in turn gives rise to the Maccabean revolt detailed in the Old Testament Apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

All of this is ancient history to us but it was still very much in the future for Daniel. As God unpacks for him what is to come, he sees tremendous suffering ahead for his people. "And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time..." Under the influence of Haman, Xerxes will try to kill every single Jewish man, woman, and child within the borders of his empire. You can read all about this in the book of Esther. The wars between the Ptolemaic and Seleucid factions will take a tremendous toll on both land and people as many of the battles are fought in and around the borders of Israel. Pagan kings will rape and pillage and burn what God's people are trying to build. And the worst of them all - Antiochus Epiphanes IV - will literally torture and kill as many Jews as possible. At the same time these conflicts are raging on earth, there is a battle going on in heaven. Michael and his forces are fighting Satan and his demons and though the battle is fierce, they will prevail just as God's people will prevail on earth. This is why Daniel closes his book with such hopeful words, "But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of

the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:1-3)

What's the relevance of all this history for God's people today? No matter what you are going through, know that God is with you. He is literally fighting at your side. He is bringing about His purposes and His will even amidst your hardships. He will send His messengers to serve you. To comfort you. To bless you. He will bring you peace. Though you may experience suffering for a time, He will preserve your life. In fact, He has a reward waiting for you in His heavenly Kingdom. There the righteous will shine like stars in the sky and will reign with Him forever. As Christians, we do not place our hope in the things of this world. We do not place our hope in the nations of this world or the success of a particular political party. We do not place our hope in what we can achieve in this world. We place our hope in God alone.

September 21, 2020

REBIRTH OF A NATION

Readings for today: 2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra 1-3

"And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away." (Ezra 3:11-13)

Second chances. How many of us have had them? Opportunities given to us in life that we do not deserve. Have not earned. Certainly should not expect. We hit rock bottom and suddenly there reaches down a hand to pull us back up. To lift us out of the pit of our despair. To set our feet on a new path. I know I've experienced several moments in my life where I hit rock bottom. Usually due to the choices I've made along the way. In college, it was my issues with alcohol. In Princeton, it was my addiction to achievement. In Wisconsin, it was my issues with workaholism. In each case, God was gracious to provide a second chance. An opportunity to repent, turn 180 degrees, and move in a new direction.

Israel had been in exile for years. They hit rock bottom in Babylonia. Their nation was wiped from the earth. Their capital city was razed to the ground. Their Temple was completely destroyed. They were forcibly removed from the Promised Land. Somehow, someway they were able to maintain their cultural identity even amidst a foreign land and a pagan people. They still faithfully charted their genealogies. They still maintained their households. They kept up their roles as they waited for God's promised redemption. Decades passed. Kings rose and fell. Empires changed hands. Finally, a new emperor arose by the name of Cyrus. He issued a decree promising the right of return to the people of Israel. A second chance.

I try to imagine what it must have been like to start over. To cross the borders of Israel for the first time in generations. To return back to the village where your family had lived for centuries. To reclaim your ancient inheritance. To rebuild your home. To re-till your fields. To graze your herds. To walk where your ancestors walked. To live where your ancestors had lived. To renew your covenant with the Promised Land. It must have been powerful. Add to that the laying of the foundation of the Temple. The rebuilding of the altar of God. The restoration of the sacrifices and feasts and holy days of celebration. No wonder the old men wept and the young men shouted for joy. This was the rebirth of a nation!

If you are like me, you wonder if our nation will ever experience such rebirth? Will there come a time when we too will see this kind of national unity restored? It's hard to imagine. And sadly, the Bible is clear that such rebirth only comes after terrifying judgment. Like Israel, or any other nation for that matter, we have much to atone for. Our past is littered with sin. We are reaping what we've sown. All of the anger and hate and vitriol present in our culture is directly tied to our arrogance and pride and selfishness and greed. Yes, in many ways, America represents the best the world has to offer right now. Freedom. Democracy. Capitalism. These things have lifted millions out of poverty and oppression and this is worthy of praise. At the same time, human sin knows no bounds. It corrupts all it touches. So even our best efforts fall short. Even our most significant achievements are not pure.

Over and over again, the Bible teaches that every generation must renew their covenant with the Lord. And the reality is we have become complacent over the last several decades. We have been living off the social, emotional, and national “capital” of generations past. Their sacrifices set the table but rather than build on what they have done, we turned inward. We made the same mistake Israel made. We lost sight of what it meant to seek God’s Kingdom first and instead starting building our own kingdom in our own strength with our own hands. Thus, the mess we find ourselves in. Will God give us a second chance? I truly hope so. But I also know it will only come as God’s people repent of their sin - both personally and corporately - before the Lord. The only chance our nation has is for the church of Jesus Christ to humble herself and pray. Seek God’s face and turn from their wicked ways. As we fall on our faces before the Lord, He promises to hear from heaven. Forgive our sin. Heal our land. Only then will we experience new birth.

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 4-6

September 22, 2020

POLITICS IN THE BIBLE

Readings for today: Ezra 4-6

The return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon was a significant political event. Jerusalem was known throughout the region as a powerful and influential city. Once ruled by mighty kings with large armies who refused to bow the knee to the various empires who had attacked her over the years. Rebuilding her constituted a threat to the status quo. A threat to the established peace. A threat to the current political order. Furthermore, rebuilding the Temple was even more threatening. The Temple of God stood as the religious, social, and political center of the nation of Israel. To allow this structure to be rebuilt was to allow the people of God to reclaim their national identity. National identity leads to national pride. National pride would lead to calls for freedom, independence, and the re-establishment of the geographical borders laid out by God Himself. All of this created a lot of fear and unrest among the people who were living in the area at the time of the exile's return. Not only that but when they ask to join in the work, they are rejected. Not arbitrarily but because they are unclean and impure and God's Temple must remain holy as do God's people.

Thus begins a political back and forth. Letters are dispatched. Extensive searches are conducted in the archives of the empire. People leverage their influence and connections to try to either hinder or help the work. Names are dropped. Bribes offered. Anything to frustrate the purposes and plan of God. Initially, the political opponents of Israel are successful. The work ceases for a time. But God sends two prophets - both of whom we will read in a bit - with the message to resume work. To remember who has called them to this work. Who has authorized this work. And who gives them all the resources they need to accomplish this work. They answer to God alone and not to the kings and princes of this world. "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and we are rebuilding the house that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished." (Ezra 5:11)

It is tempting in our world today to think we need political cover to help us accomplish God's plan. It is tempting to cozy up to politicians and seek their approval for all we do. It is tempting to give them a platform at our events or in our churches or even in our pulpits with the hope that we will gain favor with them for the future. It is tempting to align ourselves with one political party or the other. It is tempting to rationalize the ungodly behavior of our political leaders with the hope we will gain access and influence. It is tempting to compromise our convictions in order to gain their support. Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah all remind us otherwise. Our hope is in Christ alone. Our future is held in God's hands. Only He can provide the resources to accomplish His plans. Only He can give us the power and authority to live and to walk in His ways. We serve a greater King and a greater Kingdom, friends! We are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us! We live in this world but we are not of this world! Our citizenship is held in heaven!

At the same time, we do live in the real world. We cannot withdraw or stick our heads in the sand. We cannot pretend like the world around us doesn't exist. We cannot ignore the very real problems our nation faces nor the challenges that confront our political leaders. We must pray for them. We must respect and honor them. Given the opportunity, we must seek to share God's wisdom with them. Influence them in ways that align with God's Kingdom. Confront them gently but firmly on their shortcomings. This is our calling in this world because we serve the God of heaven and earth who reigns and rules over all.

Readings for tomorrow: Haggai 1-2

September 23, 2020

THE SECRET TO THE GOOD LIFE

Readings for today: Haggai 1-2

I talk to a lot of people who want to know the secret to a well-lived life. They spend their days searching for it. Their lives are filled with lots of activity that they hope will help them achieve the "good life" however they define it. But, at the end of the day, it seems forever out of reach. Just over the horizon. Just beyond their grasp. They never quite make it happen. Why? They are searching in all the wrong places. Matthew 6:33 says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added unto you." All these things? What things are we talking about? All the things that make up the good life. The blessings of God. Favor with the people. Deep, intimate relationships. Abundant provision. These are the things God promises to those who seek Him first.

Sadly, we too often put the cart before the horse. We flip flop the clauses of the verse. We seek first "all these things" and put the Kingdom of God on the back burner. And we are not the first to make this mistake. This is what happened to the people of Israel in the prophet Haggai's time. They focused on themselves. Homes. Fields. Crops. Herds. Trying like crazy to make life work in the new land they had returned to after exile. They didn't attend to the things of God. They didn't value the worship of God. They didn't put God in first place in their lives and this was demonstrated by their neglect of the Temple. So God confronts them. "Then the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, "Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now, therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider your ways. You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes." (Haggai 1:3-6) Their lack of provision. Lack of blessing. Lack of favor was a direct result of their unwillingness to seek God first above their own welfare which is why they never seemed to make any progress.

Sound familiar? I cannot tell you the number of couples I know who are stuck in their marriage. I cannot tell you the number of parents I know who feel stuck when it comes to their kids. As I look around our nation today, it seems clear to me that we are "stuck" in a rut of our own making with no hope of escape. What's the answer? Turn to God. Surrender. Relinquish. Let go. Seek Him first. Follow His ways. Commit yourself to serve Him with all that you are and all that you've got. It's the only answer I know and it breaks my heart that so many choose to remain stuck in their ways. If only they could lay hold of the promise Israel received through Haggai, "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts." (Haggai 2:3-9)

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 1-7

September 24, 2020

GOD DRAWS NEAR

Readings for today: Zechariah 1-7

It was hard waking up this morning to the gross injustice suffered by yet another African-American. The death of Breonna Taylor is not just tragic it is evil and unjust. It should never happen. The rioting and violence in the wake of the decision is also not just tragic. It cannot be justified in any way. It is evil and unjust and hurts the innocent. Whether it is the police officers or bystanders caught in the crossfire or it is the homes and businesses that suffer damage as people vent their outrage. Violence only begets more violence. Hatred only leads to more hate. Anger cannot bring about the righteousness of God.

Perhaps you're like me and you've wondered why in the world God would ever want to make His home on earth? Why would God want anything to do with us? Why would God not just wipe us out and start all over? He's certainly justified. Man's inhumanity to man knows no bounds. Evil seems to run amok. Sin corrupts all it touches. The history of the human race is a violent one and little, if any, progress seems to have been made. Ultimately, I have no idea what motivates God to continue to reach our in faithfulness to the creature He made in His own image. I only know it is true. It is what the Bible clearly teaches. From the opening pages of Scripture, God's desire is clear. He longs to walk with humanity. He longs to work in and through us to bring blessing to all He has made. He has given us dominion - not so we will "dominate" - so much as we will serve and care for all of creation. It is why God planted a Garden at the dawn of time. It is why God builds a Tabernacle in the wilderness. It is why God constructs a Temple in Jerusalem. It's why God rebuilds that Temple when the exiles return.

Listen to how the prophet Zechariah describes it, "Cry out, Thus says the Lord of hosts: I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion. And I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; my house shall be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, Thus says the Lord of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem…And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand! Then I said, "Where are you going?" And he said to me, "To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length." And behold, the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him and said to him, "Run, say to that young man, 'Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it. And I will be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst." (Zechariah 1:14-17, 2:1-5)

God will dwell with His people. Of that we can be sure. We see it so clearly in the Old Testament. We see it even more clearly in the New Testament. Jesus Christ. The Eternal, Only Begotten Son of God. The Incarnate Word Himself. Leaves His home in the heavenly dimension and comes to earth. He becomes flesh and blood and makes His dwelling among us. The original Greek literally says Jesus "tabernacles" among us! It takes your breath away. God with us. God for us. God drawing near to us. Even in our sin. Even as we wallow in violence and evil and suffering and pain. God draws near. Now matter what we have done or where we have been or what mess we find ourselves currently in. God draws near. No matter how unjust or oppressive or divided or broken our nation becomes. God draws near. Even in Breonna Taylor's apartment. God drew near. Even in the courtroom where a miscarriage of justice took place. God drew near. Even in the streets in the midst of the riots and protests. God draws near. While we were still enslaved to sin, God drew near. He spread out His hands. He was

nailed to a cross. He took all the sin and evil of the world on His shoulders. Our only hope, friends, in this broken and messed up and unjust world in which we live is that God is near.

Readings for tomorrow: Zechariah 8-14

September 25, 2020

THE DAY OF THE LORD

Readings for today: Zechariah 8-14

Anyone who is familiar at all with the gospel story will recognize the Messianic prophecies embedded throughout Zechariah's visions. This is a critical reminder of the importance of the Old Testament. We have to understand the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of a story that has been unfolding for centuries. Jesus is the true fulfillment of the covenant God first established with Abraham. He is the true seed. The promised Son. The faithful Israelite. He is the perfect embodiment of God's eternal plan and its fulfillment. Throughout the Old Testament, as God interacted with His /. people, He dropped clues as to what was coming. The "Day of the Lord" it was often called. A day when the Messiah would come and Israel would be saved. The people of God looked for this day. Longed for this day. Prayed for this day. Especially in periods of great hardship and suffering. So again, Zechariah is prophesying at a time of great change and upheaval. Decades of exile and slavery has come to an end. The people have survived Babylon. They've survived attempts at genocide. They've survived attempts to forcefully assimilate them into a broader, pagan culture. And now they've returned home. To a ruined city. To ruined homes. To a ruined Temple. Time to start over. Where will life go from here? Will God remain faithful? What life will they build? These are the fundamental questions they're asking and God sends Haggai, Nehemiah, Ezra, and Zechariah - among others - with the answer.

He gives them a picture of the future. When Messiah's Kingdom comes to earth. And so we read familiar words like...

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

"Then I said to them, "If it seems good to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." And they weighed out as my wages thirty pieces of silver. Then the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—the lordly price at which I was priced by them. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord, to the potter." (Zechariah 11:12-13)

"And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn." (Zechariah 12:10)

"And the Lord will be king over all the earth. On that day the Lord will be one and his name one." (Zechariah 14:9)

And these words - often quoted or alluded to throughout the New Testament - remind us God is in control. God reigns sovereign over all the earth. His plan is being worked out. His purposes are coming to pass. His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Until that great Day comes, what should then we do? Cling to hope. Cling to faith. Cling to God. He will never let us down. His promises are sure. His faithfulness is great. His steadfast love is loyal and true. Zechariah encourages us just as he encouraged God's people so many centuries ago. "Thus says

the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain...Thus says the Lord of hosts: Behold, I will save my people from the east country and from the west country, and I will bring them to dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness." (Zechariah 8:3, 7-8)

"On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land. For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty!" (Zechariah 9:16-17)

"I will strengthen the house of Judah, and I will save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back because I have compassion on them, and they shall be as though I had not rejected them, for I am the Lord their God and I will answer them." (Zechariah 10:6)

The Lord is our God. We are His people. When we call on Him, He will answer. When we knock, the door is always open. When we've sinned, there is always grace. Believe this for your life today!

Readings for tomorrow: Esther 1-5

September 26, 2020

#METOO

Readings for today: Esther 1-5

I wish I knew more about Queen Vashti. Her background. Upbringing. Life experience. Faith background. I would love to know what gave her the courage to stand up to her king. It couldn't have been easy. Women in her time were considered more property than people. Their lives utterly dependent on the good will of their husbands. They could be beaten at their husbands request. Kicked to the curb if they displeased their husbands in any way. Killed if their offense was great enough. And yet Vashti finds the strength to refuse when her king asks her to come before him. She publicly shames her king by refusing to be objectified in front of his court. She will not be his sexual plaything. She will not allow herself to be paraded in front of the men of the empire for their perverse entertainment. It's an unprecedented display of female power. One Queen Esther will follow in her own way as well.

Vashti's behavior presents a threat. What will happen if women follow her example? What will happen if women start refusing to obey their husbands? What will happen if women look down on their husbands with contempt when they attempt to subject them to sexual harassment and abuse? This cannot stand! Vashti must be punished! Vashti's behavior condemned! Imagine a world where women were considered the equals of men? Imagine a world where women held power over their own bodies? Imagine a world where men were not the masters of their homes? What kind of world would that be? What kind of chaos would ensue? The threat is dire enough for the king to issue an edict throughout his empire. From India to Ethiopia. 127 provinces in all. In every script and language. Men will rule over their wives. Their children. Their homes. It's almost laughable if it were not so tragically true.

Throughout human history, men have sought to subject women. Women have had to fight and struggle and claw their way to freedom. To full personhood. To equality. And while incredible progress has been made, the fight continues to this day. Think about the number of women who are sexually harassed and abused at some point during the course of their lives. A startling one in five women have reported being raped. One in four women have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner. One in four women report being sexually assaulted. And 81% of women report being sexually harassed. The rise of the #MeToo movement exposed the dark underbelly of our society. It gave many women the courage to speak out about their traumatic experiences. Like Queen Vashti, they refused to subjugate themselves to the men who abused them any longer.

The gospel flips the historic male-female dynamic on its head. Rather than rule over their households like mini-tyrants, men are called to serve their wives. Laying down their lives for them as Christ laid down His life for the church. Men are called to love their wives as Christ loves us. Men are called to sacrifice for their wives, creating an environment in their homes where the women in their lives can grow and thrive and flourish. Godly husbands will put the needs of their wives above their own. They will seek to empower their wives to fulfill whatever calling God places on their lives. They will treat their wives with dignity and honor and respect. There is no place in the godly home for abuse, neglect, or harassment. Indeed, the goal for every husband is to do all he can to present his wife before the Lord, "in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:27)

September 28, 2020

PURIM

Readings for today: Esther 6-10

At a fundamental level, Esther is a story of divine reversals. God turning things on their heads in order to save His people. Mordechai is lifted up. Haman is brought low. Esther becomes Queen after Vashti is deposed. The Jewish people go from mourning to joy. From defeat to victory. From death to life almost overnight. Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the incredible miracle of God's deliverance and many Jews believe this is the one festival they will continue to celebrate even after Messiah comes.

It is impossible to imagine the emotions behind such a dramatic turn of events. One moment, you are cowering in your home in fear as the mob gathers to bring death and destruction. Local authorities are no help. In fact, they are leading the charge at the king's order. I think of my African-American friends who tell stories from their own family histories about the lynchings they witnessed during the Civil Rights struggle of the 20th century. I think of my South Sudanese friends who live in fear of violent retribution by their own government. I think of my Somali friends who are planting churches under the shadow of Islamic extremism. They know this fear well. It is a constant companion. I think of the women I've met who've suffered abuse, sexual or physical or otherwise. They often feel trapped and alone and afraid. I think of the children I've met who've been violently treated within their own family. I have seen the same fear in their eyes. It is crippling. It is paralyzing. It is dreadful.

But then a new edict is read! A new proclamation is issued! Freedom! Deliverance! Salvation! Think of the joy the Persian Jews, living in the midst of a hostile, pagan empire must have felt! They were not helpless! They were not alone! God had raised up a deliverer! A savior! A messiah! In the person of Esther. In the person of Mordechai. God was acting anew to protect His chosen people. Now think of the joy that accompanied the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act or the election of President Obama in our own time. Think of the joy that accompanied the permanent cease-fire agreement in South Sudan. (The terms of which where unfortunately violated almost immediately...) Think of the joy that comes when entire villages are saved by the gospel and delivered from the influence of Islamic extremism. Think of the joy that comes to a woman when she finally finds the courage to leave her abuser, seek healing and help, and start a new life. Or the joy that comes to children as they experienced love for the first time. These too are Purim.

And what about your life? What about the bondage you have faced or currently are facing? Is it addiction? Is it slavery to sin of some sort? Is it the darkness of depression? The painful affliction of a mental, emotional, or physical illness? Where do you need deliverance today? Where do you need a savior? In what corners of your heart do you still cower in fear? Afraid of what tomorrow may bring? Let Esther give you hope! Even at the 11th hour, God is still working to bring salvation!

Readings for tomorrow: Malachi 1-4, Psalms 50

September 29, 2020

WORSHIP IN COVID TIMES

Readings for today: Malachi 1-4, Psalms 50

God doesn't grade on a curve. He will never be satisfied with leftovers. Never be content to take second place. Will not allow us to take Him for granted or treat Him with disdain. God is a refining fire. A purifying fire. A cleansing fire. Malachi testifies to the fact that when the great Day of the Lord comes and Jesus returns in all His glory, all that is evil and arrogant and corrupt in this world will be burned by fire. All that is sinful and impure and ungodly in our lives will be set ablaze. The gold will be refined. The silver purified. Only that which is of the Lord will endure.

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 4:1-3)

It's a sobering vision. One that should challenge and convict us as it did the people of Israel. They had taken their relationship with God for granted. They were not giving their best to God. Their offerings were polluted. The animals brought for sacrifice represented the worst of their flocks. Blind. Lame. Broken. Bruised. They simply didn't measure up to the worship God deserves and demands. The priests refused to honor God's name. They would not listen to His Word. They were unfaithful to the covenant God had established. Therefore they fell under God's judgment and it was terrible. "But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways but show partiality in your instruction." (Malachi 2:8-9)

What is the worship God demands from us? Malachi is clear, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts." (Malachi 1:11) God will be glorified. His name will be lifted up. He will be worshiped by the nations of the earth. The people He loves and created will honor Him by giving Him the full devotion He deserves. They will burn incense. They will bring pure offerings. The best of their flocks. The best of their fields. They will not just go through the motions but with full hearts come to worship the Lord in Spirit and in Truth.

God expects no less from us. We who have been saved by Jesus Christ have seen His glory. The glory of the One and Only Son come from the Father. As such, more is demanded from us. More is expected. God desires our full worship. God desires our full devotion. He will never rest until He has the highest place in our lives. And it doesn't matter what's happening in the world around us. It doesn't matter how difficult life's circumstance may be. It doesn't matter what barriers may exist or what inconveniences we have to endure. God demands our worship. God deserves our worship. Now more than ever we have the opportunity to come before Him and give Him praise.

Throughout history and throughout the world today, God's people gather for worship. They gather in the midst of war. They gather in the wake of natural disasters. They gather in the face of pandemics. They gather because God has called them to come before Him as a people. As a family. We are blessed

in our day and age to gather virtually as well as physically. We are blessed to share communion and receive God's Word. God is using any and all means to make Himself known. He is lifting His name on high. His glory is truly filling the earth. And the amazing miracle is we are invited into this experience! The door is open to His Presence! He is lowering every mountain. He is raising up every valley. He is making every crooked way straight for His people. Friends, may you find joy and peace and strength as you worship God in Spirit and in Truth yourselves!

Readings for tomorrow: Ezra 7-10

September 30, 2020

RACISM IN THE BIBLE

Readings for today: Ezra 7-10

Today's reading definitely presents a challenge. Particularly since we live so far removed from the specific cultural situation Ezra faced as the Israelites returned from exile. It is deeply offensive to our 21st century sensibilities to imagine a group of men initiating a mass divorce simply over race and/or nationality. We rightly wonder what happens to the women and children who are kicked to the curb? Are they left destitute? Is this of the will of God? Or was this an example of early Pharisaism rearing it's ugly head? Zealousness for the Law of God taken to a logical extreme? Moreover, many wonder if this is yet another example of God's Law remaining culturally bound? Irrelevant to our modern lives? After all, how can we respect a God who commands the breakup of so many families?

This is what makes Bible reading such a challenge. We can't just read the words on the page and accept them at face value. We have to dive deeper to understand the cultural currents of the day and how this story fits if we want to understand. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge the cultural assumptions we ourselves bring to the text. We are not objective observers. We too have biases and perspectives that are shaped by current cultural movements like #MeToo, feminism, white supremacy, #BlackLivesMatter, and more. These currents will shape how we respond to the text. It's hard to lay these things aside and try to walk a mile in Ezra's shoes.

So why was Ezra so upset over the intermarriage of Israel with their pagan neighbors? And why does he call for them to "put aside" the foreign women and their children? And what were the social ramifications of such a drastic move? First and foremost, we need to understand that in ancient near east culture, ethnicity, tribal identity, and religion all overlapped. You see something similar in the world today where Islam is so closely identified with the Arabic ethnicity. Tribal kingdoms were defined in a very real sense according to the god they worshiped. Each nation had their own god and their own unique religious practices. Their god ruled over a specific territorial boundary which defined the geographic limits of a particular kingdom. Other features that defined tribal and/or national identity had to do with the personality of the king who ruled, the language they spoke, and then, downstream from the rest, the particular physical features of the people themselves. One can see how different this is from modern racial theory forged in the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust and ethnic purges of the last 150 years.

From a Biblical standpoint then, if one married a pagan, one pledged allegiance in a certain sense to their god. This obviously represents a fundamental break with the First Commandment which is why Ezra reacts so strongly to the news. Furthermore, intermarriage also brought into question one's tribal and/or national identity. It was an open question whether one could actually be an Israelite if one married a non-Israelite. One would always be suspect as would one's children. If/when an invasion took place, whose side would you be on? Could you be trusted? All these were very real questions for a fragile group of people seeking to reestablish themselves and rebuild their nation. Certainly there were options for non-Israelites to become Israelites. The book of Ruth is a great example and a story the people in Ezra's time would have known well. However, in order to become an Israelite one had to renounce any connection to their former god and their former people. "Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God." (Ruth 1:16)

Hopefully, this helps us understand Ezra's dilemma and heartbreak. He is ashamed. He is afraid. He knows his history well and he knows what happens when God's people are unfaithful. "O my God, I

am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today." (Ezra 9:6-7) He tears his robe. He rips his beard. He falls on his face before God and intercedes for the people.

As he prays, a few men come forward with a solution. What if everyone who has taken a foreign wife puts her aside? What if they separated out the foreign women and children as an act of repentance? This seems good to Ezra. The proclamation goes forth. Those found guilty repent. And the story ends. We don't know how it turns out for the women and children. Are they simply cast side? Left to fend for themselves? Surely not as God's Law is just as clear about how we treat the foreigner and stranger and most vulnerable in our midst as it is about intermarriage.

So what happened? No one can say with certainty. Here I can only offer a modern day analogy. In many places in Africa, it is common for the men to take more than one wife. Polygamy is not God's design for marriage so I've encouraged them to choose one wife and essentially "put away" the others. They remain in the household under the economic care and protection of the man of the house but he lives in covenant faithfulness with only one woman. He provides for them. He takes care of their children. He still fulfills all his responsibilities as a husband and father so they are not left destitute on the streets. It's not a perfect solution but it is one offered in an attempt to bring the family into covenant faithfulness to the gospel.

So where do you find yourself today? What does covenant faithfulness look like for you? Where are you living in covenant obedience? Where are you living in disobedience? Is your heart grieved by the brokenness and sin of your life?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 1-4

October 2, 2020

LAYING DOWN OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: Nehemiah 5-7

The call of the gospel is to lay down our lives for others. To do as Jesus did. Jesus is God. As such, He could have chosen to hold onto His divine right to rule. His divine right to reign. His divine right to wield authority and power and compel obedience. But Jesus relinquished those rights. He laid them aside. Taking on the form of a servant. He became obedient even unto death. And not just any death but the most humiliating, degrading death possible. Death on a cross. At any time, He could have called down legions of angels to crush His enemies. At any time, He could have taken back up His authority and destroyed His enemies. But Jesus relinquished His rights because He had a greater prize in mind...the approval of His Heavenly Father. Jesus put no stock in the ways of this world. The accolades of this world. The kingdoms of this world. The treasures of this world. He placed no value on anything this world had to offer and instead looked to the world to come for His hope. This is why His Father exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name. His willingness to lay everything down in humble obedience to His Father's will was vindicated by His resurrection and exaltation.

I see Christ in Nehemiah. A man who was willing to relinquish his rights and lay everything down for the sake of God's people. A man who put service to His nation above his own well-being. He had every right to demand tribute as governor. He had every right to levy taxes and exact a heavy toll on his constituents. He had every right to demand a portion of the interest the wealthy had placed on the poor. But he gave all that up and by doing so, set a godly example before the people. "From the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah...neither I nor my brothers ate the food allowance of the governor. The former governors who were before me laid heavy burdens on the people and took from them for their daily ration forty shekels of silver...But I did not do so, because of the fear of God. I also persevered in the work...we acquired no land...what was prepared at my expense for each day was one ox and six choice sheep and birds, and every ten days all kinds of wine in abundance. Yet for all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because the service was too heavy on this people." (Nehemiah 5:14-19) And how did the people respond to such godly leadership? The rich forgave the debts of the poor. Land was restored to their rightful owners. Interest was no longer accrued. The people were set free. Such acts of generosity were a sign to everyone that God was in their midst.

What about us? We live in a nation consumed with selfishness and greed. Everyone seems out to get "theirs." Everyone is concerned about protecting their "rights." Everyone wants justice. The problem is we don't all share the same view of justice. We believe all truth is relative. We all want an equal share but often refuse to make equal sacrifice. Too many feel entitled to what they have rather than view it as a gift from God. Too many do all they can to protect what they have rather than walk with open hands. Too many hoard all they have rather than give generously. And here I'm just talking about Christians! The very people who claim to follow Christ!

It is estimated by Relevant Magazine that if every American who called themselves a Christian tithed, an additional 165 billion dollars annually could be raised. Think of the global problems that could be solved or tackled with that kind of money! According to the United Nations, it would cost 265 billion dollars to potentially solve world hunger. Our tithe dollars could get us more than halfway there! According to the World Bank, 150 billion dollars could potentially provide clean water access to every human being on the planet. Think of the disease that could be prevented! Childhood mortality rates

would plunge! According to UNESCO, 14 billion could potentially provide literacy to 20 of the world's most illiterate populations. Literacy opens the door to education and job creation and all kinds of economic growth. Imagine how the reputation of the church would change if we got serious about following the example of our Savior and laid down our lives for others? Imagine how the world would change if the church would relinquish her rights and instead sought to serve? Imagine how many lives would be saved if we truly embraced the heart of the gospel like Nehemiah and so many others who have gone before us?

Readings for tomorrow: Nehemiah 8-10

October 3, 2020

GOD'S STORY, OUR STORY

Readings for today: Nehemiah 8-10

Creation. Abraham. Egypt. Exodus. Judges. Promised Land. Kings. Temple. Priests. Prophets. Exile. Return. Whenever the people of God renew their covenant with the Lord, they take time to remember their story. They understood their current situation was but the latest link in a chain of events stretching all the way back to the Garden. All the way back to God Himself at the dawn of creation. But for God, they would have been destroyed. But for God, they would have been erased. But for God, there would be no history. No story to tell. Listen to them tell it again and think about how far they've come...

"You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. "And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters. By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go. You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke with them from heaven and gave them right rules and true laws, good statutes and commandments, and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant. You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them. "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, 'This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,' and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. Forty years you sustained them in the wilderness, and they lacked nothing. Their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell. "And you gave them kingdoms and peoples and allotted to them every corner. So they took possession of the land of Sihon king of Heshbon and the land of Og king of Bashan. You multiplied their children as the stars of heaven, and you brought them into the land that you had told their fathers to enter and possess. So the descendants went in and possessed the land, and you subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they captured fortified cities and a rich land, and took possession of houses full of all good things, cisterns already hewn, vineyards, olive orchards and fruit trees in abundance. So they ate and were filled and became fat and delighted themselves in your great goodness. "Nevertheless, they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them

back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer. And in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hand of their enemies. But after they had rest they did evil again before you, and you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them. Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies. And you warned them in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey. Many years you bore with them and warned them by your Spirit through your prophets. Yet they would not give ear. Therefore you gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands. Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God. "Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress.” (Nehemiah 9:6-37)

Those of you who have been tracking with us through the Bible this year know these stories. You read them in great detail. You pondered them. You prayed over them. You listened for the voice of God in them. Many of you grew frustrated at times. You couldn’t understand why they kept making the same mistakes. You got angry at times. You couldn’t understand the righteous judgment of God. Many of you laughed and cried and wrestled and struggled with the lessons the people were learning. About themselves. About their God. About His plan and His future.

It’s important for us to remember this story. To read it over and over again for it is our story as well. As Christians, we are grafted into this story. Adopted into this family. Warts and all. These people are our people. They are our mothers and fathers. Sisters and brothers in the faith. And we are so like them. If we’re honest with ourselves, we too make the same mistakes over and over again. We too sin and fall short of the glory of God. We too deserve judgment and death. Punishment and exile. But we have the benefit of living after Christ. Jesus Christ took the punishment we deserved. He went into exile for us. He endured the righteous wrath of God so we do not. He stood in our place just as surely as He stands in the place of the Old Testament saints who came before us. He is Savior of the world. Past. Present. Future. He is the Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. His blood is sufficient to cover every sin. As we head into the New Testament, we must hold onto our history. Christ came as the climax of this history. He is the One to whom the Old Testament points. He is the One in whom all prophecies are fulfilled. He is the One every single saint from Abraham forward looked to by faith.

October 5, 2020
A DEPRESSING END

Readings for today: Nehemiah 11-13, Psalms 126

I grew up watching Star Wars as a kid and it is generally accepted that The Empire Strikes Back is the best of the original trilogy, if not the best in the entire series. It's a very dark movie. Evil is on the move and in fact, seems to be winning. The end of this second installment finds the heroes in disarray. Luke Skywalker has lost a hand and his innocence as he finds out Darth Vader is his father. Han Solo has been captured and frozen in carbon so he can be delivered to Jabba the Hut. Leia, Chewbacca, the droids, and Lando aren't quite sure what to do and the hopes of the rebellion seem very slim. It's all a set up of course. The final installment of the series will see the heroes overcome all these obstacles to win an improbable victory against a seemingly invincible enemy. Stop me if this plot seems familiar at all.

The Old Testament - whether you read it chronologically as we have this year or you simply read the books in order - doesn't end well. Israel is in disarray. Despite their return to the Promised Land, they simply cannot get it right. They are unable to remain faithful. They intermarry. They profane the Sabbath. They worship other gods. The whole point of the Old Testament on some level is to drive us to complete and total despair. To bring us to the end of ourselves. The end of our strength. The end of our resources. The end of our wisdom so we will cry out for God. It's to prepare God's people for the coming of the Savior who is Jesus Christ. Because it is impossible for us to remain faithful, He must do it for us. Because it is impossible for us to obey God's Law, He must do it for us. Because the sacrifices are only temporary, Jesus must become the perfect sacrifice on our behalf. Hanging between heaven and earth. Representing both God and humanity. He intercedes for us even as He takes our place.

If you are wired like me, you find the end of the Old Testament incredibly unsatisfying. It goes over like a lead balloon. A wet blanket. It just leaves a bad taste in your mouth. The reason I feel this way is because deep down I want to believe I can be a good person. Deep down I want to believe that if I work hard enough, stay disciplined enough, read the Bible enough, pray enough, worship enough, you name it; I can work my way to God. I can find favor with Him. I can earn His praise. But Ephesians 2:8-9 confronts me with the truth, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Saved by grace. Saved through faith which itself is a gift from God. None of my works matter in the grand scheme of thing because God will not allow me to boast in anything except Christ.

We've spent eight months in the Old Testament. It's a long, hard slog no doubt. We have watched the same pattern repeats itself over and over again. God raises up His people only to watch them fall into sin. Adam and Eve. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Moses and the Exodus. Joshua and the Judges. Samuel and Saul. David and Bathsheba. On and on the list goes until you get to Ezra, Nehemiah and the Exiles. All of them sin and fall short of the glory of God. All of them are like sheep who have gone astray. All of them unworthy of anything but God's judgment. So how does God respond?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

Readings for tomorrow: John 1:4-14, Psalms 106

October 9, 2020

THE DIVINE GENEALOGY

Readings for today: Matthew 3, Mark 1:1-11, Luke 3, John 1:15-34

Today's blog features Greg Daniels. Greg is an elder at Parker Evangelical Presbyterian Church, a good friend, and a great colleague in ministry.

"Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli," (Luke 3:23)

Notice how different this genealogy is from what Matthew shared. Matthew's genealogy for Jesus reads as if it were the worst possible genealogy he could present. First, He is the adopted son of Joseph. Then he is included in the cursed line of Jechoniah. He is associated with men who married women who were not Jewish, one of whom was even a prostitute. This genealogy would have been scandalous to the Jewish people of that time.

The names in Luke are all men. Luke was Greek and a trained physician. This genealogy is consistent with a Roman, or Jewish legal document. The lineage provided is Noble and of high status. There is no scandal listed. The lineage of Jesus is traced from King David's son Nathan, and not Solomon. This avoids connection to any of the kings who did evil. It also avoids connection to the cursed bloodline of Jechoniah. There is a pure bloodline to the kingship of David, to the blessings of Abraham, and to all of mankind through Adam.

With Joseph being Jesus adopted father, the Mark genealogy is not a natural bloodline. The words, "as was supposed" in the Luke genealogy let us know this was the bloodline through Mary. That would be a natural bloodline for Jesus. This poses a problem. Inheritance of property and rights, such as the claim to a Davidic bloodline, are passed from father to son.

How could Jesus claim He was a rightful descendant of David if he did not inherit that right from an earthly father? The answer comes in the story of the daughters of Zelephohad, a man who had no sons. These daughters argued to Moses that their father'sinheritance should not be given outside of his family just because he had no sons. '"Our father died in the wilderness. He was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin. And he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." Moses brought their case before the Lord . And the Lord said to Moses, "The daughters of Zelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them. And you shall speak to the people of Israel, saying, 'If a man dies and has no son, then you shall transfer his inheritance to his daughter.' -- Numbers 27:3

What incredible detail God has given us in the Bible. Jesus was born in the time of the Pharisees, a time where the law was to be followed in painstaking ways. Not even these scholars of the law could find legal fault in the rights of Jesus. In fact, as we read the Gospel stories, we will not come across anyone who finds Jesus at fault. And they tried desperately to. Jesus is the spotless, faultless lamb of God sent to be the sacrifice for all of us who have faults. It is in his perfect, faultless blood that we are made clean. All who call on the great name of Jesus and believe in Him will be saved.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-2:12

October 10, 2020

TEMPTATION

Readings for today: Matthew 4:1-22, 13:54-58, Mark 1:12-20, 6:1-6, Luke 4:1-30, 5:1-11, John 1:35-2:12

”For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

Jesus was fully human. He took on a fully human nature. With all its weaknesses. All its vulnerabilities. As such, He knew temptation. He knew the temptation to provide for Himself. To satisfy His own needs. To put Himself above the will of His Father. “Command these stones to become loaves of bread.” He knew the temptation to make a name for Himself. To perform spectacular feats and miraculous deeds in an effort to extend His “brand.” To lift His name up above that of His Father. “Throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple.” He knew the temptation to compromise. To accomplish His Father’s will by means other than the cross. “I will give you all the kingdoms of the earth and their glory if you will but worship me.” Jesus suffered these temptations and more throughout His life and ministry. And yet, He remained without sin. He remained faithful. Steadfast in His love for His Heavenly Father.

Can you imagine the frustration of the devil? Here is his chance. Here is his opportunity to wreck it all. To take down the very Son of God and destroy the eternal plan of God. He knows he’s no match for God. He knows he is a created being. He knows he exists only because God’s mysterious will allows for it. And yet, he is so bitter and angry and prideful, he wants to do all he can to kill and destroy that which God loves. And what does God love most? His Only Begotten Son. So if the devil can get to Him. Get Him to sin. Corrupt Him in some way, shape or form. Turn Him from the cross then he wins. But Jesus peeps his game. Sees right through his schemes. He raises the shield of faith and extinguishes every single flaming dart of the evil one. He counters every thrust with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and parries every blow. And what happens? The devil flees.

Friends, you and I face temptation every single day. 1 John 2:16 describes it as “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life” and these things are not from the Father but are of the world. They are part and parcel of our experience as human beings. It is a weakness we bear from conception. A vulnerability we all share due to our broken, sinful, fallen natures. None of us escapes. None of us is immune. The temptations may take on different forms or different shapes but, at their root, they remain the same. Learning to identify and resist temptation is a key part of the Christian life. It is one of the keys to deeper intimacy with Christ.

How does one resist temptation? How does one take their stand - as Christ did - against the devil and put him to flight? We do what Jesus did. First and foremost, we cultivate a deep and intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father. Through prayer. Meditation on God’s Word. Worship with God’s people. Regular participation in the sacraments. These ordinary means of grace become extraordinary sources of strength when temptation comes. They are the wells we draw on for water when the devil would put us under siege. Second, we identify the lies the devil is trying to get us to believe. Lies about God. Lies about ourselves. Lies about others. Lies about life in this world. The devil is the “father of lies” according to Scripture and he is constantly seeking to deceive us so we will fall into his traps. Third, we counter the enemy’s lies with the truth of God’s Word. When tempted towards self-reliance, we remind ourselves every good gift comes from God. When tempted towards self-promotion, we remind ourselves it is God who lifts up and exalts those He loves. When tempted towards self-protection, we remind ourselves it is God who is our fortress, our sanctuary, our Protector.

When tempted to build our self-esteem, we remind ourselves we are not our own. We were bought with a price. When tempted to focus on our self-image, we cling to the truth that we were made in the image of God. These temptations are all around us. We are inundated by them every single hour of every single day. Social media. Peer interactions. The different voices in our heads. We are under constant bombardment to define ourselves outside of Christ.

And that is why the writer of Hebrews is so quick to remind us that our great High Priest is faithful. Jesus, though tempted in every way as we are, remains without sin. He lives to intercede for us for He knows the struggle is real. He knows the power of your compulsions and addictions and predilections. He knows what draws you away from Him. And He is faithful to strengthen us. He stands ready to guide and protect us. He is with you always. Even to the end of the age.

October 12, 2020

THE FAME OF JESUS

Readings for today: Matthew 4:23-25, 8:14-17, Mark 1:21-39, Luke 4:31-44

"So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them." (Matthew 4:24)

For many years, I have felt a growing sense of foreboding. A growing sense that the tsunami of pain we are experiencing is just beginning of what's about to hit our shores. Our children are suffering. Suicide rates are trending upward. Substance abuse is skyrocketing. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those who disagree. It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment. Of course it must be acknowledged that what seems new to many of us has been the normative experience for so many of our friends of color or members of the LGBTQ community. They have lived with these threats for decades or more. Add to this the strain of a global pandemic and the economic chaos and the mental health crisis and it begs the question…is this all there is? Is this all we can expect? Are we doomed to live the rest of our lives under such threats? Constantly withdrawing or drawing our boundaries ever tighter in order to protect ourselves and those we love? Or is there a different way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saduccees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. This was the world into which Jesus was born. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As his fame grew, many people came from all over to bring him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. And this only drew more hurting people to him. God was glorified. The Kingdom drew near. Salvation came to so many. All in the name of Jesus.

Could the church serve a similar role today? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? To go out each and every week - having been filled and equipped in worship - to share the good news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate, even as she called the community around her to greater faithfulness? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our internal theological fights and squabbles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced grace as a way of life? What if we put aside our need for political influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully and thoughtfully engage across the political spectrum? And what stops us? Why not start right now? Even today?

Friends, true followers of Jesus should be known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. What is your church known for? And how can you - as a member of that local church - represent Christ more faithfully today?

Readings for tomorrow: John 3-5

October 13, 2020

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...

Readings for today: John 3-5

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." John 3:16-17

It's one of the most famous and beloved verses in all of Scripture. John 3:16. We see it proclaimed at sporting events and graduation ceremonies. Many Christians consider it their life verse and cling to the truth revealed therein. It speaks of the vastness of God's love. The immensity of it all. God loves the world. Not just a part of the world. Not just a particular tribe in the world. Not just the beautiful people of the world or the rich or the powerful. God loves everyone. And because God loves everyone, God sends His Son. The living demonstration of God's love in the flesh. He wants to leave no doubt. Nothing to chance. He wants the world to know He's willing sacrifice that which is most precious to Him in order to save them from sin.

Nicodemus knew this love. A leader among his people. A member of the Pharisee party. He spent his life devoted to Torah. Devoted to the law of God. He was faithful. His heart was true. But there was something missing. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. So he comes to see Jesus. By night, of course, so no one will see him. He's been impressed by the miracles Jesus has performed. They've convinced him Jesus must have come from God. And Jesus is so tender towards him. He loves him. He teaches him. Tells him how to respond in faith that he might be saved.

John the Baptist knew this love. A man fiercely dedicated to the Lord. Elijah reborn. The last great Old Testament prophet of Israel. He came preaching fire and judgment on the people of Israel. He came to prepare the way for the Messiah. He launched a ministry of spiritual renewal marked by a ritual cleansing which involved immersion (baptism) in the Jordan. But when the ministry of Jesus began to eclipse his own, he was happy. He understood. Jesus is the bridegroom and John is merely the "best man." He rejoices at the day when the bridegroom comes for His own.

The woman of Samaria knew this love. Coming to the well in the middle of the day, she clearly is trying to avoid the other women in her village. Perhaps it's her "loose" reputation. The number of men she had been with that makes her ashamed. Furthermore, she is a Samaritan. Someone the Jews considered unclean because of their mixed race heritage. No respectable rabbi would ever be caught dead talking to such a person! And yet Jesus did. Jesus made time for her. Jesus loved her. Jesus engaged her and she went away marveling at all that she heard. She shared the good news with her village. Invited them to come out to hear. She wanted them to experience the same love she had experienced.

Over and over again, the Scriptures proclaim the love of God through Jesus Christ. We see it in all his interactions. We see it in the miracles he performs. He heals the official's son. He heals the paralytic at Bethesda. He preaches God's love to Jews and Samaritans alike. None feel condemned because God did not send His Son into the world to condemn but to save.

Can you imagine if the world experienced the love of God through Jesus' people? Can you imagine if Jesus' people would engage the world like Jesus did? Imagine us sharing God's love with both powerful and powerless. Rich and poor. Black and white and brown. Imagine both abled and disabled experiencing compassion and mercy and healing. Imagine those who are in desperate need finding

hope. Imagine Jesus' people leading a movement in our communities of love towards the outcast and the marginalized and those who feel lost and lonely. We don't have to imagine it. It does actually happen. So many churches in so many communities model this love well. But there's always more that can be done. More love that can be shared. More grace that can be given. And it is the charge God gives to each of us. To follow in Jesus' footsteps and be known by the love God first sent into the world in His Son.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:1-14, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, Mark 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-39, 6:1-19

October 14, 2020

LEVI'S FEAST

Readings for today: Matthew 8:1-14, 9:1-17, 12:1-21, Mark 1:40-45, Mark 2:1-3:21, Luke 5:12-39, 6:1-19

One of the things that always strikes me about Jesus is how much hurting, broken people love Him. He was the kind of person who seemed to love hanging out with the wrong kind of crowd. Prostitutes. Tax collectors. Lepers. Sick and diseased. He hung out with the sexually immoral. The politically corrupt. The outcast from society. The ritually unclean. He loved these people. He met them right where life found them and lifted them up. When challenged by the religious elite to explain his actions, Jesus gives a profoundly missional response…

"Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners." (Luke 5:31-32)

Levi is sitting in his tax booth. Most likely alone as tax collectors were some of the most hated people at the time. They were seen as traitors to their nation. Collaborators with Rome. Men who profited off the exploitation of their own people. Most people would have given Levi a wide berth. They would have avoided him like the plague. Jesus does not. Jesus marches right up to him and says, "Follow Me." I cannot begin to fathom the reaction of the other disciples. Especially Simon the Zealot. Before Simon became a follower of Jesus, he belonged to a group of people who literally would knife guys like Levi in the streets. He had dedicated his entire life to the eradication of such traitors to Israel. Now they would become brothers.

It's a stunning invitation. One that Levi embraces. Not only that but he wants all his friends and colleagues to know why he's left his tax booth. Why he's put aside his wealth and power to follow an itinerant preacher. Why he's given up his sinful ways. So he throws a feast. It's a motley group of people to say the least. Tax collectors. Sinners. The dregs of society. Jesus loves it. He reclines at table with them meaning He is making Himself one with them in a sense. Sharing a meal in that culture at that time was incredibly significant. It meant identifying with those who ate with which is why the Pharisees go nuts. They can't believe a rabbi of Jesus' stature would lower Himself in such a way.

They simply don't understand Jesus. And frankly, many Christians today don't understand Jesus either. Philippians 2:5-11 tells us Jesus emptied Himself in order to become one with us. Emptied Himself of all His divine glory and power to become utterly dependent on His Father. He emptied Himself to become a human being. He emptied Himself further to become a servant of humanity. He emptied Himself completely by dying on a cross for humanity. This kenosis or "divine emptying" remains one of the most glorious yet mysterious aspects of the gospel. And it is the source of our salvation.

So let me ask you a question…how are you emptying yourself in order to follow Jesus? What are you relinquishing? What are you sacrificing? What are you giving up? Do you find yourself more at home with sinners or do you only relate to saints? Do you find your heart broken for the outcasts and marginalized in our society or do you mainly spend time with those who look like you? Act like you? Spend money like you? Would you have gone to Levi's feast or would you have grumbled like the Pharisees? Are you willing to risk your reputation to build relationships with those who do not believe so that they might find salvation?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

October 15, 2020

BUILDING ON BEDROCK

Readings for today: Matthew 5-7, Luke 6:20-49, 11:1-13

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:24-27)

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest sermon ever preached. Period. In it, Jesus casts His vision for His Kingdom. He defines what life looks like under His rule and reign. He sets boundaries around human desire and behavior to protect us from self-destruction and to teach us how to build a life that will last. Sadly, too many of us believe we can choose our own path. Defiantly, we try to chart our own course into eternity. Foolishly, we attempt to bushwhack our way through the wilderness of this world only to quickly lose our way. The results are tragic and heartbreaking.

I wonder sometimes why we find our culture’s pact with sin and death so enticing. What is it about our culture that draws us in? We all know it’s not good for us. We all know the pace we set isn’t healthy. We all are feeling the effects of isolation and loneliness. We all are struggling under the pressure that’s been created and exacerbated through social media. So why do we persist? Why can’t we seem to opt out? Are we truly so addicted we cannot stop?

How many families have to break up? How many pills do we have to take? How many children have to die before we wake up from the nightmare we find ourselves in? When will we stop believing the lie that life is all about me? All about my wants? All about my desires? The world tells us to “follow your heart” and “be true to yourself.” I can think of nothing more devastating. The world tells us we “can be whoever we want to be” and to do “whatever feels good.” I can think of nothing more heartbreaking. Do we not see the pain we are leaving in our wake? The broken relationships? And for what? So we can selfishly pursue our own happiness at the expense of others? Do we not see the toll this is taking? The high price we are paying? The cost to those around us, especially those we love most?

I meet them every single day. In coffee shops and bars all over town. Men and women and children who are suffering. Struggling. Wrestling with a deep sense of existential loneliness because they have tried their best to do this life on their own. They “believed in themselves” but that belief took them nowhere. Like Sinatra, they did life “my way” only to find themselves at a dead end. They tried to be the captain of their own destiny. The master of their own fate. The ruler of their own domain only to discover their reach far exceeded their grasp. In the words of Jesus, they built their entire lives on sand and their ruin was great.

COVID, of course, has only exposed the cracks in our foundation. The global pandemic hit and so many suddenly realized their lives were built on sand. Perhaps that describes you today. You are looking around at the ruins of your marriage. The ruins of your family. The ruins of your professional career. Your bank account is overdrawn. Your energy levels are dangerously low. Your emotional reserves are tapped out. Your relationships are broken. Your heart is aching. And you feel so very alone. Depressed. Angry. Frustrated. Anxious. Afraid. Perhaps you’ve even been tempted to put an end to it

all. Don’t believe the lie! God is with you! Even in the valley of the shadow! Even in the darkest of nights! His presence is always there to comfort and to guide and to bring us back into the light!

But how do we get from here to there? We start building on the rock. We start by surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus. We invite the Holy Spirit to come and take up residence within us so He may transform us from the inside out. Only God can re-orient the desires of our hearts! Only God can re-prioritize the values of our lives! Only God can redirect our loves. As He does this deep work in us, what comes out of us begins to change. Life on the outside begins to reflect the new life that’s emerging on the inside. Regenerate actions flow from a regenerated heart. New wine is poured from new wineskins as God removes our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts that beat for Him alone!

How do we know if we’ve received this new heart? Look at the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than treat it as a list of “do’s and don’ts“ instead consider it more of a diagnostic. Let the words of Jesus dissect your every thought. Your every deed. Your every emotion. Let it stand like a plumb line in your life against which you are constantly measuring yourself. Not because you must earn God’s favor but because you long to bring glory to God. Not because you have to follow some law but because you want to chart the progress the Holy Spirit is making in sanctifying you for His Kingdom. Not because you have to clean yourself up before God can love you or accept you but because you trust He has already done so and is hard at work to present you blameless before His throne.

One can spend a lifetime learning from these few chapters and still never arrive. This isn’t about perfection, friends. It’s about the journey. It’s about following the way of Jesus. And if you are like most, you will find yourself stumbling down the road like a drunk man, swaying from one side to the other. That’s okay. That’s actually quite normal. The key is to keep walking down the road.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

October 16, 2020

HOSTING A DINNER PARTY FOR JESUS

Readings for today: Matthew 8:5-13, 11:1-30, Luke 7

Imagine you're having Jesus over for dinner. You send out invitations. Line up a caterer. Clean your house. Put out tables and chairs. Light your scented candles. Maybe even spring for some live music. You leave nothing to chance. You want Him to be impressed. The day of the affair arrives. Your home is packed with people. These are your friends. Your colleagues. Your family. All of whom cannot wait to meet Jesus. He walks in. What do you do? Do you greet Him? Offer to take His coat? Get Him a drink? Give Him the seat of honor? Do you make sure to serve Him first as your guest? Introduce Him to all your friends by name? Make sure He feels welcomed and honored? Of course you would. You would be embarrassed if you didn't. Your friends would be ashamed of you.

Let's take it up a notch. Imagine what would happen if a homeless man wandered in to your home that evening. Or a prostitute. Or a drug addict. Imagine them disrupting things. Imagine the crowd parting as people stumble over themselves so they don't have to touch them. Imagine the room going silent and all eyes turning to you to see how you will respond. Now imagine those same eyes shifting to Jesus as the homeless man/prostitute/drug addict falls at His feet. Weeping. Shedding so many tears, Jesus' feet literally become drenched. Now imagine the homeless man taking out a dirty handkerchief to wipe His shoes. The prostitute letting her hair down to dry his feet. The drug addict using his ratty t-shirt. You would probably be uncomfortable with the whole scene. Unsure of what to do or how to respond. Embarrassed by their behavior. After all, this whole affair is supposed to be about impressing Jesus!

Imagine Jesus turns to you and tells you a story. Two people went into deep debt to a loan shark. One for five hundred thousand and the other for fifty. Neither could afford to pay. In a shocking move, the loan shark forgave both their debts. Which would love him more? The one who owed him the greater amount, of course. This homeless man. This woman of the night. This poor addict struggle with many things. Their lives are a trainwreck. Your life, on the other hand, is good. You live in a nice home. You are surrounded by people who love and respect you. You make a good living. You enjoy some of the finer things of life. Yes, you know you are not perfect. Yes, you have your own struggles. Yes, life is not always easy. But you have been given much whereas this man. This woman. This addict have been given little. And even what little they did have has been squandered away. Who do you think will love Me more?

The one who is forgiven much, loves much. The one who is forgiven little, loves little. Friends, ask the Father to show you the full measure of your sin. Ask Him to show you how far you have fallen short of His glory. Not so that you will despair but so you can more deeply appreciate the sacrifice He made to save you! God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it! NO! He sent Jesus so the world might be saved through Him! All of us from the richest to the poorest. From the most privileged to the most oppressed. Perpetrators and victims alike need forgiveness. We all need grace. And Jesus stands ready to offer it to us in abundance! Know your sins have been forgiven and let that fan the flames of your devotion to Jesus!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

October 17, 2020

THE TRUE FIGHT

Readings for today: Matthew 12:22-50, Mark 3:22-35, Luke 8:19-21, 11:14-54

Another guest blog…this time from the late, great Dr. Gardner Taylor…

"We war not against flesh and blood, but there is some great struggle going on in the universe. Put it how you want: the struggle between light and darkness, between life and death, goes on in your body and mine right now, between health and sickness, between good and bad, between right and wrong, between God and Satan. There's a battle, a mighty battle, raging through the universe, and evil in that battle is not weak. I hear my Lord on the night of his arrest saying to those who came to arrest him, "This is your hour and the power of darkness." And is it not recorded in the Scriptures somewhere that scarcely shall the righteous be saved? It's not an easy fight. There's a mighty war going on. How will it come out? Who is going to win? When Friday morning began, we got a sign of what's going to happen. The most powerful coalition of evil ever assembled on the face of this earth came together at Calvary, and they threw up all of their battlements and all of their armory against the Son of God. It was a mighty battle, an awful tussle; the earth watching it grew sick at how evil could challenge the very throne of God. The world shivered on its axis and trembled on its foundation.The heavens looked down at it and grew dark because they mourned at seeing evil standing up in God's face. So the curtains of darkness were pulled across the face of the sunlight because the heavens could not watch it. Angels that sing around God's throne grew suddenly silent and somebody wrote that there was silence in heaven for about the space of a half hour. It looked for a while as if God had lost. I hear that awful cry trembling up from that hill underneath a darkened sky - midnight at midday. I hear that awful cry, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" It looked like God had lost, but when the light came back on and the earth righted itself, God's grip held and hell's grip loosened. Jesus cried out, "It is finished." The old account is settled. It has all been straightened out, fixed, the disease has been cured. I know how it's going to come out. I don't know when but somewhere in God's own time, evil is going to bow down once and for all before the Lord. So where and somehow, all that is wrong will be made right. Somewhere and somehow in God's own time, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain will be brought down, every crooked way will be made straight, every rough way will be made plain in God's own time. Sickness and sorrow, pain and death, we will fear no more."

October 19, 2020
RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Readings for today: Matthew 13:1-53, Mark 4:1-34, Luke 8:1-18

How do you respond to the Word of God? How do you feel when you hear it preached? When you read it during your devotional time? When you listen to it on your way to work? Do you find your heart open to its message? Is it comforting? Challenging? Life-changing? Do you find yourself wanting more of the Word or is it a struggle to read? Are you intentional about applying its lessons? Aligning your lifestyle with its laws? Submitting yourself to its authority? Do you trust its promises? Do you believe its truth? Do you hold fast to what it says no matter how much opposition may arise? As you think back over the course of your life, do you seek growth? Spiritual maturity? Are you bearing fruit?

These are important questions to reflect on and Jesus offers a great diagnostic tool for such reflection in the parable of the sower. Jesus is the sower. He is at work even now in the world spreading the seed of the Word of God. He works through preachers and pastors as well as ordinary men and women to spread the good news of the gospel to the ends of the earth. As the seed is sown throughout the world, people respond in different ways. Some hearts are hard. Like a paved road. the seed cannot penetrate. It is rejected. It never takes root. And the enemy comes and steals it away. Some hearts are shallow. There is an initial response. Driven by the emotions of the moment. By all outward appearances, it looks like the seed has taken root. There is joy. There is excitement. But such feelings gradually wane. The seed cannot put down roots. The heart drifts away towards other things. Some hearts are divided. They receive the seed. Roots are put down. But the soil is mixed. There are weeds and thorns and thistles. As the seed springs up so do these other things and eventually the growth is choked off. The fruit never ripens. Their spiritual growth is stunted. Finally, there is the open heart. The humble heart. The heart that is good soil. Ready to nurture and water and grow the seed. These hearts hold fast to the Word and what it teaches. They seek to align their lives with what the Word says. And over time, they bear much fruit.

Now it’s time for an honest assessment. Where do you find yourself in the parable? Is your heart hard? Unwilling to receive what Jesus says? Unwilling to submit to His ways? Unwilling to surrender to His Lordship? Is your heart shallow? You hear the Word but don’t do it. Your devotion to Jesus only goes skin deep. In fact, reading the Bible. Worshipping Jesus. Spending time in prayer. These things are boring and often feel like a waste of time. Is your heart divided? Are there other activities that take priority over spending time with God? Do you find yourself rejecting God’s Word along the way in favor of other desires? Other needs? Other wants? Have you fallen prey to the cares and worries and riches and pleasures of this world? Do you presume on the grace of God and assume God will overlook your sin? Is your heart true? Do you prioritize your time in God’s Word? Do you intentionally seek to submit your life to His way? Do you allow God’s Word to confront as well as comfort? Disrupt as well as affirm? When push comes to shove and God reveals something in your life that needs to go, do you obey? When doubt creeps in - as it always does - do you make the conscious decision to hold fast to the promises of God?

Friends, the seed is being sown. The Word is being proclaimed. God is making Himself know. How will we respond?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

October 20, 2020

DESPERATION MEETS COMPASSION

Readings for today: Matthew 8:18-34, 9:18-38, Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-43, Luke 8:22-56, 9:57-62

I have met Legion. Men and women so tormented and oppressed. I have seen them sitting catatonic in the streets of Harar. I have watched them convulse and tremble behind the bars of a prison cell. I have met them in psych wards where they live for their own protection. Sadly, they feel so cut off from community. So isolated and alone. They feel helpless and afraid. They are desperate for freedom.

I have met the woman with the issue of blood. They live all over the developing world. Without access to basic sanitation and medical care, women are often left to fend for themselves. Their menstrual cycles make them feel cursed. Especially when there are problems. They too feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their families. Helpless and afraid. At the mercy of their biology. They are desperate for freedom.

I have walked with countless families through grief. The loss of someone they love. It's especially tragic when they are young. When they have their whole life ahead of them. The loss of children in particular can make or break a person's faith. I have wept with parents at the bedside of a child dying of cancer. I've been in the hospital room when the doctor delivers the terrible news of a rare and terminal illness. These are incredibly painful and difficult spaces. Those living through them often feel cut off from their community. Isolated from their friends. Helpless and afraid. They are desperate for healing.

What I love most about Jesus is His great compassion. "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matthew 9:36) One can only imagine the pain and suffering He saw as He surveyed the hundreds, even thousands of people who flocked to hear Him speak. He knows their every need. He knows their every desire. He knows their every heartache and heartbreak. He knows how desperate they are for healing. How desperate they are for freedom. And He loves them. He has compassion on them. He reaches out to them. Demons flee. Diseases are cured. The dead are raised. Everywhere Jesus goes, these miraculous signs accompany Him. Everywhere He goes, the Kingdom comes with power and authority. Everywhere He goes, new life breaks forth.

But the needs are too much even for Jesus. He cannot heal every single person. He cannot cast out every single demon. He cannot sit with every family in their grief. So He sends His disciples. They will be His hands and feet. They will minister in His name and under His authority. They will be His ambassadors, Christ making His appeal to the world through them. Christ healing through them. Christ delivering through them.

Our world is still full of desperation. People feel so harassed and helpless. They wander aimlessly through life like sheep without a shepherd. And the question for the church is this...do we have compassion? Are our hearts tenderized by the needs we see all around us? Do we make the time and take the time to come alongside those in pain? Are we willing to re-orient our priorities? Redirect our resources? Re-order our lives in such a way that we make space to care for the lost and lonely who live all around us? This, friends, is what it means to love and follow Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

October 21, 2020

RIGHT HEART. RIGHT BELIEF. RIGHT PRACTICE.

Readings for today: Matthew 10, 14, Mark 6:7-56, Luke 9:1-17, John 6

What does it mean to be a Christian? Over the years, I've heard a lot of answers to this question. Some think it means they raised their hand and prayed a prayer at some point in their life. Others believe it has to do with the fact they were baptized as an infant. Still others believe it means they go to church every Sunday and pay their tithe. Some of the people I've talked to see it as an inheritance. They were raised by Christian parents so they must be Christian. Others see it as a cultural designation. We live in a Christian nation so we are Christian by default. Like I said, lots of different answers to this all-important question...what does it mean to be a Christian?

Sadly, too many people refuse to look to the Bible for their answer. If they did, they would see Jesus offering a pretty clear definition for what it means to follow Him. First and foremost, you have to have what the ancients might have called "orthopathy" or the "right heart." The people who experienced the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand did not chase Jesus around because they loved Him. No, they wanted their bellies filled again. (A big deal in a 1st century subsistence agricultural economy.) They followed Him for selfish reasons. They wanted their needs met. Their illnesses cured. Their diseases healed. Their wants satisfied. And that's why Jesus tells them He is the bread of life. The food they are seeking is not temporal. Their needs are not just physical. They are spiritual and eternal and only the Christ can satisfy them but they must believe. They must have faith. This is what Jesus means when He talks about feasting on His body and drinking His blood and it was too much for some. They turned away. Even many of His disciples stopped following Him. Why? They did not believe. They did not trust. They could not accept the truth of what Jesus was teaching. They did not have the right heart.

The second thing we learn about following Jesus is that it takes "orthodoxy" or "right teaching." Jesus is who He says He is! He gets to define Himself. He gets to reveal Himself. We don't get to accept parts of Jesus and reject others. We don't get to reduce Jesus down to our size. We don't get to make Him comfortable or safe. Jesus is God. He is Lord over disease. Lord over death. Lord over sin. Lord over evil. Lord over this world and all that is in it. He casts out demons. He heals the sick. He messes with the atomic structure of bread and fish to feed five thousand people! He walks on water. He calms the wind and the waves. He is the bread of life. He is the manna from heaven. He alone has the words of eternal life. All of these different events may seem strung together randomly but they are not! They are designed to give the disciples. Give His followers. Give those who believe and trust in Him a true picture of Himself. Jesus wanted them to understand the true nature of His divinity. He wasn't just another prophet or miracle-worker. He was God Himself. True Christians take Jesus at His Word. They accept Him for who He is. They do not try to replace Him with a Jesus of their own making. Right thinking about Jesus is essential for the Christian.

Finally, there is "orthopraxy" or right practice. True Christians live what they believe. Their works flow from a heart that is full of faith. The disciples believed and were given authority to go forth and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Preach a message of repentance. Heal the sick. Cast out unclean spirits. These are the "right practices" that should mark the life of every believer to a greater or lesser extent depending on where one is on their journey.

As Christians, we do not get to pick and choose. We do not get to claim a right heart and hold to a heretical theology. We do not get to claim a right theology and live a heretical life. We do not get to claim a righteous life and yet cling to a hardened heart. It's an all or nothing deal. Now, are we perfect?

Of course not. Is there room to grow in every Christian's life? Absolutely. Is following Christ a journey? Complete with ups and downs? Doubts and fears? Successes and failures? Yes! Yes! And yes! But over the course of time. As days turn to weeks turn to months turn to years, we should be able to see the growth. Our hearts and minds and lives should reflect more and more of Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 15, Mark 7:1-8:10

October 22, 2020

READING THE BIBLE THROUGH 1ST CENTURY EYES

Readings for today: Matthew 15, Mark 7:1-8:10

"And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly." (Matthew 15:21-28)

This is perhaps the most confusing story in the gospels. Read through 21st century western eyes, it appears like Jesus is reflecting the sinful, racist attitudes of his day. Jews and Gentiles simply did not interact in the 1st century. Especially a rabbi and a woman. Jesus was fully within his cultural rights to ignore this woman. Reject this woman. Diminish this woman. Some modern commentators point to this story as an example of Jesus' humanity. They talk about how even Jesus needed correction from time to time. They claim even Jesus needed to progress in his understanding of divine love and the gospel. Nothing could be farther from the truth. True, authentic, honest Biblical exegesis must always begin by approaching the text on its own terms. We must do our best to remove our own cultural blinders and instead do the hard work of reading the passage against its own cultural backdrop. When one does this, the true meaning of the story comes into view…

The first thing to note is the place. Jesus has intentionally traveled to the region of Tyre and Sidon. This was a major economic hub and trade center in that part of the world. As such, it was deeply Hellenized. Jews were the marginalized group. They were the ones being exploited for material gain. So why would Jesus go there? Earlier in his ministry (Luke 4) Jesus likens His ministry to that of Elijah who once miraculously fed a widow in Sidon when she was starving. The point, of course, is that Jesus' ministry will transcend race and culture though He will preach first to His own people.

The second thing to note is the time. Like much of the Middle East today, 1st century Palestine was an "honor/shame" culture. As such, there were strict rules governing the behavior of men and women. When those rules were followed, honor accrued. When those rules were ignored, shame accrued. Men gained honor through acts of courage and generosity in the community while women gained honor through their modesty and privacy in the home and family. It would be crazy for an honorable woman to approach a strange man in public across not only gender but ethnic lines just as it would be crazy for an honorable man - a rabbi no less! - to respond to such a woman. However, in this instance, all bets are off due to the desperation this woman feels as she seeks to save her child.

The third thing to note is how the woman addresses Jesus. She addresses Him by his messianic title. She clearly sees Him as more than an itinerant Jewish preacher and teacher. She clearly recognizes He's no ordinary rabbi. There's something different about this man that makes her abandon all her honor in order to fall at his feet with the beggars standard cry, "Have mercy on me." She would have not have interpreted His silence as insult. In fact, she would have expected it and sought to overcome it.

Finally, there is the actual exchange itself. When Jesus finally answers with, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”, He is not just responding to the disciples but inviting an interaction with the woman. In essence, He’s saying, “tell me why I should help you?” The woman responds by drawing closer. Her cries of desperation turn to the simple plea of “Lord, help me.” And now the so-called “game” is on. In honor/shame cultures there are rules for this kind of dialogue. A challenge is offered. A response is given. Honor is accrued based on who gets the “best” of the interaction. Jesus has challenged this woman. She has responded. So Jesus offers another challenge. “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Dogs in Jewish culture were almost as bad as pigs. They were mangy, half-wild animals who roamed the streets. Jews regularly used this term as an insult to Gentiles but even here Jesus softens it a bit. The term He uses is in the diminutive form - i.e. “little dogs” - which again suggests He’s fully aware of the game that is taking place. The woman doesn’t even miss a beat. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” One can almost see Jesus laugh in appreciation for how she’s “bested” Him and He freely gives her the honor she has “won.”

Now here’s the really crazy thing about Jesus. It’s what I love so much about Him. In such “honor/shame” contests, a person typically gains honor at another’s expense. It’s why such contests were so important in 1st century society. It’s how one climbed the socio-economic ladder and became known in their community. Jesus is different. He isn’t interested in how much “honor” accumulates. Instead, He freely gives honor away at His own expense. What about us? We who have been saved by Christ have been given all the “honor” a person could ever receive! We’ve literally been invited into God’s family and adopted as His sons and daughters. What more could we want? Having been given much, should we not seek to give it away? Should we not seek to share the honor we’ve received from God with those around us? Should we not opt out of the power games our culture still plays and instead take the place of the servant?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-9:1, Luke 9:18-27

October 23, 2020

BIBLICAL IMAGINATION

Readings for today: Matthew 16, Mark 8:11-9:1, Luke 9:18-27

Inspired by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch and their book, ReJesus)

A man trudges up the dusty road. His feet are tired. His sandals about worn through. His robes are torn in several places. His face is streaked with sweat. His hair is more salt than pepper. He's got scars all over his body. He limps. He's hunched over in chronic pain. His eyes glance up at the sign above the door. An inn. A place to rest his weary bones. He opens the door and walks in. Orders a drink. Orders a bit of food. Finds a place at an open table and waits. Several minutes later, the door opens again. The man at the table waves. The new arrival comes and sits. Tells the waiter, "I'll have what he's having."

"How are you doing, Paul?" Peter asks. "You look tired."

"I am that", Paul replies. "I've been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and left for dead. My right arm barely works anymore. My left hip will never be the same. My back aches every morning. I've traveled more miles than I dare to count."

"You definitely have logged some hours, brother. The reports we hear back in Jerusalem about the churches you've planted and the cities you've reached with the gospel are a great encouragement. As are the funds you've raised to help sustain us in our suffering. But how are you doing? How's your heart these days?" Peter asks.

"About the same as yours, I imagine. The Corinthians are fighting among themselves. The Galatians are abandoning the true faith. I am being attacked by fellow Christians. My leadership is being questioned. I fear all this work has been for naught. What about you? How are you feeling these days?" Paul responds.

"Life in Jerusalem is still incredibly hard. We are persecuted by both the Romans and the Jews. Everywhere we go, we have targets on our backs. They kick down the doors where we gather. They drag us before the Sanhedrin. They throw us in jail. You probably heard about James? Herod got hold of him. It was ugly. His death was a huge blow to us all." Peter shares.

"What keeps you going,?" Paul asks. Peter replies, "I keep thinking back to that day when Jesus asked us, 'Who do you say that I am?' I'm not sure where the words came from but almost without thinking I said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!' Jesus told us this revelation did not come from man but from our Father in heaven and He went on to say that He would build His church on the rock of this confession. Initially people thought He might mean me. My name means "pebble" after all! But just look at me! I'm no rock. I'm about as broken and worn down as they come."

"Yeah, and if what I hear is true, you tried to stop Jesus from talking about the cross?" Paul says with a smirk. Peter smiles ruefully. "Not my finest moment." Paul claps Peter on the back. "We've all been there, my friend."

Peter goes on, "You know, in my darkest moments when it seems like I just can't go on, I think of Him. Hanging on that cross. Gasping for breath. Struggling for life. I think of the morning I ran to the tomb and found it empty. I think of Him appearing to me after His resurrection. Forgiving me for abandoning

Him and calling me back into ministry. All of my struggles. All of my suffering. All of my pain. All of my heartaches and disappointments. All my fears and failures. It's all been worth it, you know? Just for the sake of knowing and serving Him." Tears start running down Paul's face. He whispers, "I know exactly what you're saying. I wouldn't trade that moment outside of Damascus for the world. Everything I've done and everywhere I've been since that day has been an absolute privilege. But I have to confess, I sure wish I could have been there with you. To walk with Him and talk with Him." Peter reaches out and grabs his hand. "You are with us now. That's all that matters."

Imagine sitting at the next table, watching this exchange. Watching these two giants of the faith swap stories and encourage each other. Imagine them praying together before they leave, not knowing if this would be the last time they would see each other. Who knows if such a meeting ever took place? What I do know is this...for two thousand years, faithful men and women have taken these words of Jesus to heart. "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:25) They have braved all kinds of dangers. Faced all kinds of persecution. Suffered beyond belief. They have paid the ultimate price in many cases all to bring the gospel to the world. In so doing, they have received a crown of glory not worth comparing to the struggles of this world. They have given up fame and fortune but gained an eternal inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. By their testimony, the church has been founded and established in this world. And the gates of hell don't stand a chance.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 17-18, Mark 9:2-50, Luke 9:28-56

October 26, 2020

ACCEPTANCE VS. AFFIRMATION

Readings for today: John 7-9

“Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more." (John 8:10-11)

We’ve all probably heard the phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” I don’t know about you but I have not found it all that helpful. First of all, those who do not believe are not convinced they are “sinners” and tend to resent the moniker. Second, it’s really hard to do. Separating one’s behavior from one’s identity is growing more and more difficult in our world. In fact, there are many who would argue it is impossible. And yet Jesus seemed to do it.

The beginning of John 8 is a famous story. Maybe one of the most famous in all of Scripture. And though it’s origin is questionable - it doesn’t appear in the earliest and best manuscripts - it just sounds like Jesus so we tend to keep it in. A woman caught in the very act of adultery is brought before Jesus. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are almost gleeful in their condemnation. They can’t wait to pick up the first stone. They throw her down before Him, pretty convinced He will have mercy which in turn will allow them to accuse Him of breaking the Law. Of course, anyone familiar with the Law can already see the problems. If they caught this woman in the act, where is the man? According to Leviticus 20:10 both parties deserve the death penalty. Perhaps that’s what Jesus is writing in the dust? If they caught her in the act, why have they not carried out her punishment? The Law is clear. Perhaps it’s because they don’t really care about her crime but are far more concerned with trapping Jesus?

Then Jesus does this extraordinary thing. He puts the onus back on them. “Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.” He hasn’t condemned her nor has He affirmed her. He hasn’t condemned the Pharisees nor has He affirmed them. Instead, Jesus brilliantly lobs the ball back in their court and forces them to make their own decision. The Pharisees put down their stones and slowly walk away. The woman is left all alone, prompting this famous exchange. “Woman, has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”

I simply love this about Jesus. He accepts people for who they are but loves them too much to leave them there. He meets us right where we are, takes us by the hand, and leads us to a better place. He accepts us, warts and all, without affirming our sin. To the Pharisee, he says, “Are you really without sin?” To those caught in sin, he says, “I do not condemn you.” And to both, he says, “Go and sin no more.”

As Christians, there is a lot in this world we simply cannot affirm. Changing attitudes in gender and sexuality. Abortion on demand. Racism and sexual abuse. Deceit and falsehood. Anger and hate. These things are not of God and yet so many embrace them. Defend them. Use them as means to a greater end. The answer cannot be rejection. Jesus simply will not allow us to walk away from anyone, including our enemies. So we must find a way - as Jesus found a way - to accept people for who they are without affirming their beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. Thankfully, this is the heart of the gospel. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While we were enemies of God, Christ made peace with us. While we were pushing Him away, Christ embraced us. May the Spirit give us the courage to do the same!

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 10, John 10:1-11:54

October 27, 2020

LISTEN

Readings for today: Luke 10, John 10:1-11:54

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27)

Noise. There's a lot of it in our lives. From the moment our alarm clocks go off until we finally put down the phone or turn off the television at the end of the night, our lives are full of noise. So many voices. Telling us all kinds of things. Much of it not good for us. The bully at school who tells us we're worthless. The co-worker who's so negative all the time. The spouse who badgers or berates us. The child who screams when they don't get their way. The commercials that tempt us to think life is all about us. The subliminal messages coming through on social media that constantly invite comparison. The news outlets spinning world events to bolster a particular worldview. The proliferation of fake news, gossip, and a rumor mill run wild. And I don't know about you but it feels like someone cranked the volume in the last several months. Probably due to a confluence of factors such as COVID, election year, economic uncertainty, and mental distress. It's getting harder and harder to hear the still, small voice of God.

Can you hear Him? Can you hear His voice? Amidst all the noise and distractions? When was the last time you sat in silence? I mean true silence. No one around. No devices present to distract. No radio. No television. No social media. Just you and God sitting in silence together. "My sheep hear my voice…" Perhaps one of the main reasons we struggle so much with our faith is we do not take the time to listen for God's voice. We expect Him to compete with all the other voices in our lives. Shout them down. Yell over the top of them. We expect Him to make Himself known to us but we refuse to create space in our lives for that to happen. Instead, we expect Him to push His way in. Elbow His way to the front of the line. Then and only then will we turn and acknowledge Him.

Jesus doesn't work that way. There's a great story from the Old Testament about a man named Elijah. He went out to meet with God. A great storm whipped up. God wasn't in the storm. A great fire raged. God wasn't in the fire. A great earthquake shook the very ground. God wasn't in the earthquake. Then a still small voice. Elijah covered his head. He knew he was hearing the voice of God. "My sheep hear my voice…" Do you want to hear the voice of God? Make time for solitude and silence in your life.

For me, this is happening in the early mornings. I sit in my favorite chair in my office looking out my window at the front range. The sun comes up. The sky turns blue. The deer graze up the hillside. I don't have any agenda. I just sit with hands open to the Lord. Letting Him speak. Sure, it's hard. I have all kinds of voices in my head that demand my attention. What I've found is that I simply have to wait them out. If I sit long enough, they do begin to quiet down and space is made in my mind and heart for the Lord to enter in. That's usually when I open God's Word or journal or pray through our church directory. I think about what's on tap for the day. The meetings. The conversations. The issues I'm facing. I ask myself some questions. What am I excited about? Nervous about? Who will I be meeting with and how can I serve them? What challenges will I be facing and how do they make me feel? And then I lay those feelings before the Lord. I ask Him to speak into them. Sometimes He does. Sometimes He simply reaches out and takes my hand. Let's me know He'll be with me no matter what.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. There's nothing more comforting than walking through life with the Good Shepherd at your side.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 12:1-13:30

October 28, 2020

OVERCOMING ANXIETY

Readings for today: Luke 12:1-13:30

We live in anxious times. I was talking to a family member recently. They expressed their fears over the outcome of the election. They are pondering a potential move out of the country depending on who wins. I talked to another family member who's suffered from loneliness and depression as a result of some of the COVID restrictions that have isolated them from friends and family and any sense of community. I talked to a friend who attends a church in deep conflict. He is struggling. He is hurting. The one "safe" place in his life is now racked with dissension and division. I spoke to another friend who lost their job at the beginning of the pandemic and has now come to the end of their resources. He may lose his home. He may have to move his family out of state. I know others who have contracted COVID and spent time in the hospital. Still others who have other health emergencies they are fighting right now. A young mom fighting cancer. A close friend who suffered an aneurysm. On and on it goes. And that's just my personal experience. What about the friends I have around the world who have it much worse? South Sudan has descended into chaos and civil war. Starvation is rampant and suffering is widespread. My friend Martin is ministering in the midst of it all. He's not the only one.

"Jesus said to his disciples, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? If then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be worried. For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Luke 12:22-34)

Don't be anxious? Surely Jesus isn't serious? Perhaps the people he's talking to didn't have the problems we do today? Perhaps life for them always came up roses and things were all good? Of course we know this isn't true. Life in first century Palestine was often short and brutal. Violence could break out at any time. Disease could devastate a village. Crops could fail. Herds could die. Starvation could set in. Water could be scarce. Life expectancy was low. Infant mortality was high. And still Jesus tells His followers to not be anxious. Why? Because Jesus trusted the heart of His Father. Our Heavenly Father is good. Faithful. True. He delights to give His children good things, even the Kingdom. He provides what we need if we will but ask in His name. He knows our struggles and fears and failures. He knows our sinful desires and wants and passions. He may not act in accordance to our will or in alignment with our schedule but He always comes through.

So how do we learn such trust? Jesus gives us that answer as well. Store up treasures in heaven. Set your mind on the things of God. Seek first His Kingdom and all the rest will get thrown in. As a dear friend of mine loves to say, "You take care of the things God cares about - the lost and the least among

you - and He will take care of the things you care about.” The cure for all our anxiety is to step out in faith to serve God’s mission in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Luke 14-15

October 29, 2020

AMAZING GRACE

Readings for today: Luke 14-15

Lost sheep. Lost coins. Lost sons. Lost managers. What do all of them have in common? They are the recipients of God's amazing grace. The Good Shepherd doesn't cut His losses. He refuses to let even one of His sheep slip from His grasp. Instead, He crosses heaven and earth to find the one who is lost and bring them home. The Faithful Woman carefully stewards every coin. She refuses to let even one go missing. Instead, She turns Her home inside and out in Her search to find that which was lost. The Faithful Father refuses to lose either of His two sons. It doesn't matter how far the country or how much they squander their lives in unrighteous living. It doesn't matter if they stay close to home but are consumed by bitterness and anger. The Father runs to each son. Embraces them as His own. Showers them with grace. The Rich Man in Luke 16 refuses to give His dishonest manager what he deserves. Instead of becoming angry at the endless manipulation and deceit, the Rich Man commends him. For though his sin abounds, God's grace abounds even more.

The unconditional nature of God's grace is a scandal to those inside and outside of the church. We simply do not understand it. We can't wrap our minds and hearts around the idea that God could love us without some kind of effort on our parts to meet some kind of standard. We read the stories from Luke's Gospel and we know deep down we would not make the same decisions. The lost sheep shouldn't have wandered from the fold. The woman should have been more careful with her coins. The father should punish both sons for their insolence and pride. The dishonest steward should go to prison. These are our natural responses and they only serve to illustrate the vast difference between divine and human grace.

Human grace is conditional. It is dependent on the other person meeting certain expectations. Living a particular way. Forgiveness comes only when the other party shows the appropriate level of remorse. I see it all the time. Marriages fall apart. Friendships fracture. Partnerships dissolve. Churches split. All because we define grace according to human terms. Anything else and we start to think we're getting soft. We start to believe people are getting a pass. Justice isn't being done. And that just doesn't feel right.

Thankfully, God's grace bears no resemblance to our own. It places no conditions. It sets no standard. Forgiveness is extended an infinite number of times to any and all who ask. God's grace shows no favorites. It cannot be bought or earned or achieved no matter how hard we work. It is free. It is lavished on our world. Every tribe and tongue and nation. All of us have the opportunity to receive it. All we have to do is believe. Place in our trust in the Author of Grace Himself, even Jesus Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

October 30, 2020

THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

Readings for today: Matthew 19, Mark 10:1-31, Luke 16:1-18:30

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17)

It's a question I hear all the time. In various forms. What must I do to make God love me? What must I do to make God accept me? What must I do to get into heaven? What must I do to earn God's blessing? It's an age old question. It's one that's plagued the human race since it's inception. We have this sense we are not alone. We have this sense we belong to a different world. We are a transcendent species, constantly seeking to rise above the struggles and suffering of this life. And the dissonance that seems hardwired into our souls drives us to wonder…what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus is clear. The one who inherits eternal life keeps God's commands. Specifically, Jesus refers to the Ten Commandments in his answer. Don't murder or commit adultery or steal or lie or defraud and make sure to honor your father and mother. Of course, a careful reader will quickly pick up that he's left out a few. What happened to worshipping God alone? Not making idols or taking His name in vain? Keeping the Sabbath holy? Jesus is baiting the hook for the young man. Will he bite? The young man does. "I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus looks on him with love. Sees his desire to please. Begins reeling him in. "You lack one thing…"

Now here Jesus could have tried the direct approach. Let the young man know his problem was he loved his money, power, reputation, and social status more than God. All of that would have been true. But Jesus wants this young man as a disciple so he offers a test instead. A test that will reveal to the young man where his heart truly lies. "Steel all that you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven…" Jesus, in essence, calls out the one thing holding this young man back. He loves his money more than God and so breaks the first commandment. He's made his money an idol and so breaks the second commandment. He is not a generous person which makes his worship empty so he breaks the third commandment. Finally - and the text doesn't tell us this specifically - but how much of his money was made by working on the Sabbath? You see, there's a reason Jesus didn't mention these four commandments at first. He knows the young man's heart. Knows where his true loyalties lie. And he wants to draw him in.

"Come, follow Me." As I said above, Jesus loved the rich young ruler. He had compassion on the man. He saw the internal struggle in his eyes. Saw how much he wanted to please God and yet saw the hold his riches had over him. Jesus doesn't hate rich people. In fact, He wants them as disciples! But Jesus knows the power wealth can hold over us. So He offers us a way out. The way of Jesus is the way of generosity. We give because we have received. We bless because we have been blessed. We hold loosely onto the resources God has entrusted to us because we know they come from God and they are His to command. We cannot serve both God and money so we need to make a choice and we need to make this choice every single day because we live in constant temptation. Just like the young man in the story. Friends, money cannot save us. Even if we give it all away, we draw no closer to God. Only He can save. The least. The lost. The rich. The powerful. There is no one who stands beyond the reach of His grace. Salvation ultimately will not be determined by the amount of money we give but by the grace that is given freely to us in Jesus Christ.

Honestly, I think this is one of the most difficult passages in all the Scriptures for me. Why? Because I am rich. I don't like to think about it. I don't like to acknowledge it. In fact, when I compare myself to

others in my community, I don’t feel rich at all. But by the world’s standards. By historical standards. I am one of the richest people to have ever lived on the face of the earth. Several years ago, there was a calculator where you could plug in your household income and find out where you stood in comparison to rest of the world. It was based on income figures from the World Bank Development Research Group. When I took the test, I discovered I am not only in the top 1% but am in the top tenth of a percent of the wealthiest people to have ever walked the planet! Isn’t that nuts?! So when Jesus says it is harder for a person like me to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it is terrifying. It sounds impossible. Like the disciples, I find myself crying out, “Who then can be saved?” Thankfully, Jesus has an answer. “With man it is impossible but not with God. All things are possible with God.” (Mark 10:27) Amen.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

October 31, 2020

TWO KINGDOM PRINCIPLES

Readings for today: Matthew 20, Mark 10:32-52, Luke 18:31-19:27

“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

I often wonder how different the world would look if followers of Jesus would take just these two verses literally. Can you imagine the impact we would make if we had the courage to serve as the Son of Man served and seek as the Son of Man sought? Perhaps that’s why I love going to Ethiopia so much. When I’m there I get the opportunity to see this kind of faithfulness in action.

I think of Lydia. A 22 year old woman with two babies who ministers in a Muslim village outside of Dire Dawa. Everyday she travels the streets of her town on foot preaching the gospel in the open air. She suffers verbal and sometimes physical abuse. She has put her life and the lives of her family at risk. But she considers it a privilege to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. God has honored her faithfulness! Street women are coming to faith and leaving behind their former lives of prostitution. Her description of their desperation and the hope they find in Jesus is powerful.

I think of Gedesa. A young man of 25 who is single and serving in among the Muslim and Orthodox in a village 300 kilometers away near Harar. He longs to get married and have a family but has delayed those dreams so he can serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. He gets attacked. Both Muslims and Orthodox are aggressive in their abuse. They disrupt his preaching. They pay his converts to recant. But still he persists. It is inspiring.

I think of Yitsgelu. A Somali man who converted to Christ out of Islam. His family publicly shamed him and drove him from their village. He came to Dire Dawa to serve the least and seek the lost like Jesus. His denomination sent him to a suburb of the city where he ministers among the Muslims, bringing many to Christ. It is not easy work as they suffer just like he suffered. Their families disown them. Their community abandons them. They often lose their jobs. But God is using Yitsgelu’s own story to bring redemption in the name of Jesus.

These are just a few of the stories I’ve heard in my time over there and there are so many more to share. God is moving in Ethiopia. God is also moving here in America. And like the master of the house, He is looking for laborers who will work in His vineyards. He is looking for faithful believers who will answer His call. It doesn’t matter when they come. They could get started at the beginning of their lives or the end or anywhere in between. What matters is that they serve as He serves and seek as He seeks. God is on a mission to save the least and the lost. Will you answer His call?

October 30, 2020

November 2, 2020

ANSWERED PRAYER

Readings for today: Matthew 21:1-22, 26:6-13, Mark 11:1-26, 14:3-9, Luke 19:28-48, John 2:13-25, 11:55-57, 12:1-36

"And Jesus answered them, "Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and thrown into the sea,' it will happen. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith." (Matthew 21:21-22)

I am sure we all have things we've prayed over for years. Prayers for loved ones to come to faith. Prayers for those we care about to be healed. Prayers for direction. Wisdom. Guidance on decisions. Prayers for sin to be rooted out of our lives. Prayers for provision. Prayers for protection. Prayers for opportunities. If you are like me, you read a passage like today and you begin to wonder…do I not have enough faith? Is the reason my prayers aren't being answered my doubts? My fears? My sin?

What does it mean to "have faith?" In my experience, far too many of us equate faith with our feelings. We struggle with faith if we aren't feeling an emotional high during worship. We struggle with faith if we read the Bible and don't feel something. We struggle with faith if we pray and don't sense God's abiding presence. Still others of us equate faith with belief. Our mental assent to the notion that Jesus is who He says He is. We believe He lived. Died. Rose again. And while these certainly are aspects of faith – because we are to love God with all our hearts and minds – they do not represent the sum total of what Jesus is talking about here when he calls his disciples to "have faith."

Having faith means placing our trust in the Father's will. It means surrendering to His ways and His plans. It means setting His desires above our own. It represents a complete and total commitment to God no matter how we may feel or what we may think. Jesus trusted His Father. Jesus had faith. And what marked the faith of Jesus was the fact that He did nothing outside the will of His Father. He only did what His Father willed. Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life like the one He will pray in Gethsemane…not my will but Thine be done? Who knows how many prayers Jesus prayed over the course of His life? How many times He asked the Father to let the cup pass Him by? On the surface, it appears the Father didn't answer those prayers. So does this mean Jesus didn't have enough faith? No. Quite the opposite. Jesus trusted completely in His Father and was willing to do whatever His Father willed so He relinquished His own will. His own thoughts. His own desires. And the Father used Him to "move mountains into the heart of the sea" as the power of sin was broken and death defeated.

Jesus had faith. And because He had faith, He always…ALWAYS…asked for the Father's will to be done in His life. When Jesus encourages His disciples that "whatever they ask for" they will receive, He assumes they will be asking for the Father's will just as He has been asking for the Father's will throughout the course of His own life and ministry. This is a baseline assumption when it comes to prayer. It is foundational to true Christian prayer. When we come before the Father, we do not come simply to present our requests or ask God to bless our will and our way. We come boldly but humbly before His throne. We come with confidence and a surrendered heart knowing the Father already knows what's best for us. We come not with clenched fists but with open hands to whatever the Father desires for our lives. We lift our loved ones up to Him, trusting in His gracious election. We lift those we care about up to Him, trusting Him for healing in this life or the next. We pray for His wisdom to understand our circumstances. We ask for His strength to root out sin in our lives, knowing all the while that His grace is sufficient for us and His power is made perfect in our weakness. This is what it means to "have faith" when we pray.

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

November 3, 2020

POTTER AND CLAY

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

“Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them." (John 12:39-40)
“For many are called, but few are chosen." (Matthew 22:14)

These are some difficult words to hear. How is it that God would choose some and not others? How is it that God would open the eyes of some and not others? How is it God would regenerate some hearts and not others? How is it that God would actively blind eyes and harden hearts to the message of the gospel? Matthew even takes it a step further. Many are called but few are chosen? Is God playing some cosmic game of “duck, duck, goose?” Is that how salvation works?

I will not pretend to probe the mysteries of divine election in this post. Nor will I seek to untangle the Gordian knot of predestination vs. free will. I imagine that debate will last until Jesus’ return. Perhaps even beyond. It is not given to us to understand these things, only to accept them. And this is where our faith is put to the test. Do we believe God is good? Do we believe God is wise? Do we believe God is true? Do we believe God has a plan? Do we believe God is worthy? Do we believe God is righteous? All these things are called into question the very moment we read verses like these and think to ourselves “this doesn’t seem fair.”
It is a dangerous thing to question the nature and character of God. It is a fearful thing for the clay to say to the Potter, why have you made me thus? It is arrogant to demand God give an account to us or answer to our flawed notions of justice or meet our democratic standards of fairness. This is where growing up in America where our leaders must answer to the will of the people hurts us. Our cultural context works against us as we read. God is no democratically elected leader. He is our King. Our Lord. Our Sovereign. He created the universe and all that is in it. We are dust. We are ashes. We are nothing and it is only because God has decided to set His love on us that we are worth anything at all. It is only because God decided to make us in His image that we have dignity and honor. But these things are not our own! They are conveyed to us by God Himself for His own mysterious purposes.

So what if God – desiring to make known His power and reveal His glory – decided to make some vessels for honor and some for dishonor? What if God – desiring to make known His justice and righteousness – raises up some for glory and others for destruction? Does this make God unjust? Does this make God unfair? Does this call into question God’s goodness and righteousness? If we are honest, there can be only one answer. What right do we – created beings one and all – have to question our Creator? As the Apostle Paul says, “What right does the clay have to question the Potter?”
Here is where the rubber meets the road when we talk about surrender. Submission. Sacrifice. We lay it all in His hands. We give it all to Him. He alone is worthy of all glory and honor and power because He stands outside time and space and creation. He is far removed from any of our human notions of justice and righteousness. He does not answer to His creation. Furthermore, humility demands that we accept the fact that He sees far more than any of us do. He has an eternal perspective we cannot grasp. His wisdom is infinite and His knowledge without end. What seems paradoxical to us is logical to Him. What seems contradictory to us makes perfect sense for Him. What seems impossible to us is well within the bounds of His authority and rule and reign. At the end of the day it comes down to this… God is God and we are not. This is good news. Especially on Election Day. Amen?

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

November 4, 2020

ELECTION DAY REFLECTIONS

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

One of the great dangers to our nation today is self-righteousness. We seem utterly convinced of our own virtue and our opponent's vice. We are sure that our cause is good and our opponent's is evil. Our people, our platform, and our party represents justice, righteousness, and the American Way while our opponents people, platform, and party represents oppression, wickedness, and an existential threat to our way of life. Is it any wonder that our nation is literally tearing itself apart?

Self-righteous people can rationalize just about anything. So convinced of their own good, they set themselves up as judge and jury over those who disagree. So convinced of their own way, they refuse to tolerate any dissent. So convinced of their own virtue, they de-humanize their opposition which then leads to violence and chaos. When you attempt to confront a self-righteous person, they deflect. They refuse to listen. They cannot hear anything that does not fit their narrative. When you attempt to work with a self-righteous person, you will find them rigid, legalistic, and unwilling to compromise. In short, it is their way or the highway. In extreme cases, it is their way or you lose your job. Lose your relationship. Lose your freedom if they have their way. Self-righteousness is the fundamental root of all totalitarian societies.

Sadly, it's not new. Jesus himself encountered it. Listen to how he describes it in the Gospels. "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Matthew 23:2-12)

Does that sound familiar at all? How many times have we seen political leaders come up with all sorts of ideas they impose on us while exempting themselves from the same rules? How many times have we seen someone in authority say one thing and do another? How many times have we watched as people of influence and power and great wealth act in self-serving and self-promoting ways? We are a nation of hypocrites which is why we find ourselves in the mess we're in. Jesus calls us to a different path. If we want to be great…truly great…we must become a servant. We must humble ourselves not just before God but before one another. We must decrease so that Christ may increase. We must seek to serve rather than be served.

We have a long way to go, friends. It's going to take years to dig ourselves out of the hole we find ourselves in. It will take each one of us doing our part. We all bear responsibility for the mess we've made. By definition, in a democracy we get the government we deserve. The current political chaos serves as a mirror, reflecting back on us our own worst fears and failures. Change must begin in each human heart. Self-righteousness much be rooted out and replaced with humility and sacrificial love. This is our only hope and it must be our continual prayer if America is ever to thrive again.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

November 6, 2020

THE TABLE OF JESUS

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

Election Day has come and gone and the results still remain in doubt. We don't know yet who won. Who lost. Votes are still being counted. Lawsuits have been filed. Debate rages as those on the political Left accuse the Right of voter suppression and those on the political Right accuse the Left of voter fraud. The outrage in our country is boiling over. Battle lines are being drawn. Apocalyptic pronouncements are being made. Listening to the rhetoric, it feels like we are engaged in a civil war. And perhaps we are. At least on social media. As I scroll, I find myself strangely (?) thankful to God for the diversity of friends He has given me. Friends from across the political spectrum. People of color from all walks of life. Friends who are rich and friends who are poor. Urban friends. Rural friends. Friends who are gay and straight. Most of these friends are Christian. Many, however, are not. And I love them all. But it's hard right now. Those friendships are being tested. The bonds of love are beginning to fray. Political views have become a litmus test for a person's character. Those that fail are not just different. They are evil. They are not just misguided. They are malevolent. They are not just mistaken. They are immoral.
Our politics have taken on a theological edge. Both sides claiming Jesus. Both sides believing He is on their side, defending their cause. Religious wars are always the most brutal because the battle is between good and evil with heaven and hell literally at stake.

But what if Jesus isn't taking sides? What if, instead, Jesus is calling us to take His side? What does that look like, you might ask? It looks like a table where 12 disciples sit, eating a meal together. James and John are there. Two guys who think they're better than everyone else. Simon the Zealot is there giving the stink-eye to Levi the tax collector. Peter is there in all his arrogance and pride. And Judas. The betrayer. The man who was just paid 30 pieces of silver to hand Jesus over. What a crew! The differences could not be more stark! The divisions more pronounced! And yet what does Jesus do? "He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him." (John 13:4-5) "He took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:26-28) If the table of Jesus was large enough to include even His betrayer, could not our tables also be set for those who might disagree with us politically?
Does this mean we gloss over or ignore or withdraw from the political debate? Of course not! Jesus wasn't killed for His love. He was killed because He was politically dangerous. We must defend the cause of the widow and orphan, alien and stranger, unborn and oppressed. We must lift up the poor. Come alongside the hurting and the wounded and abused. We must put an end to violence in our local communities. We cannot tolerate corruption or make excuses for the immorality of our leaders. We have to demand more. More from them. More from one another. More from ourselves.

Friends, we betray Jesus when we attempt to co-opt Him for our cause. The reality is all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Even our righteousness is like filthy rags to Him. Only God is holy. Only God is just. Only God is merciful. And faithfulness to God means following His example. Humbling ourselves. Laying aside our pride and privilege. Taking the place of a lowly servant. Washing the feet of those with whom we disagree. Laying down our lives for others irrespective of their political beliefs. Loving even our enemies, especially on Twitter. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: John 14-17

November 7, 2020

UNITY

Readings for today: John 14-17

“The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:22-23)

There is power in unity. There is power when God’s people abide in Him. There is power when the Holy Spirit comes upon us. This power is not our own. It is a divine power. Tearing down every stronghold and every high thing that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. Tearing down every dividing wall of hostility that stands between us and God, us and each other. It is the power of salvation for all who believe. It’s a power that regenerates hearts. Justifies our very being. Sanctifies our lives. It is a power to make those orphaned by sin into children of the Most High. This is the power of God.

Jesus knew this power. Jesus drew on this power. Jesus understood this power. He lived in close, deep, intimate communion with His Father His entire life and He drew on this power constantly to heal, forgive, cast out demons, calm storms. He drew on this power when He multiplied the loaves and fishes and turned water into wine. He drew on this power when He suffered. Died. And this same power was at work when He was raised from the dead.

This is the power Jesus offers to those who follow Him. Throughout His farewell discourse in John 14-17, Jesus refers constantly to the unity He has with the Father and the unity desires to have with His people.

If you had known me, you would have known my Father also.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

I will ask the Father, and he will give you…the Spirit of truth…You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 14:7, 10, 16-18, 20, 23, 15:5)

The gift Jesus offers us in Himself is beyond comprehension. He literally offers us the same power that created the universe. The same power that raised the dead. The same power that will one day bring all things together and make all things new. This same power is available to us through our relationship with Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is why no weapon that is formed against us can stand! This is why no flaming arrows of the evil one can pierce the shield of faith! This

is why we have nothing to fear! Because we abide in the Vine! We stand on the Rock! We drink from fountains of Living Water!

But what does union with Christ look like? Agreement. Submission. Surrender. It requires us to take our lives. All our thoughts. All our words. All our desires and align them with Jesus. Make His will our own. Allow His Spirit to determine what is True and Noble and Right rather than continuing to do what is right in our own eyes.

As we draw close to Jesus, we will find ourselves drawing close to one another as well. The Body of Christ will discover a collective power in its unity that will make a huge impact on the world. I firmly believe this is the secret to the revival taking place in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti. Almost 5,000 churches have been planted. Over 600,000 lost people have been saved. God is changing the landscape in places like Gojo, Dire Dawa, and Borena. He is changing the landscape in Torit, South Sudan and in northern Uganda. He is just getting started in Djibouti and will move into Somalia in the next few years. All because believers in these regions have put aside their differences and come together as one in Christ. Does this mean they agree on everything? Absolutely not! Unity is not the same as unanimity! No, their unity comes from a deeper source. A spiritual source. A well that never runs dry. Their common faith in Christ!

I love the words of Psalm 133. How good it is when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity! It is like precious oil that overflows! Dew that drenches the mountains, bringing new life! There God commands His blessing…life evermore! In these fractured and divided times, the church has a great opportunity to show the world the power of the gospel in our unity with Christ and each other! May we answer the call of Jesus' prayer!

November 9, 2020

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

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

There is nothing more revealing about the humanity of Jesus than His time in the Garden of Gethsemane. Sorrowful and troubled. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. His anxiety is so high, He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in this moment was the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. The withdrawal of the Father's abiding presence as He begins to take on His shoulders the full weight of human sin. The dark reality of what He is about to suffer hits Him with full force. He begs the Father to take the cup away. But the Father is committed to this course of action. The Cross awaits the Messiah.

The disciples flee. All their hopes are dashed as Jesus commands them to put away their swords. Their secret dreams of an uprising that would overthrow the Romans and re-establish the Kingdom of God on earth come to an end when Jesus heals the wounded soldier. One can imagine their bitter disappointment when Jesus DOESN'T call on legions of angels to fight at His side. So they abandon Him. They finally see where all this headed and it doesn't look good.

But Peter isn't quite ready to give up. He follows at a distance. Maybe waiting for an 11th hour miracle that would justify the last three years of his life. Has it all been a waste? Have all the sacrifices he's made been for naught? Leaving his business? His home? His family? So he sits in the courtyard of the high priest hoping to hear news of the verdict. A servant girls sees him. He denies knowing Jesus and gruffly moves away to the entrance. She follows. Again, he denies knowing Jesus. A crowd has now gathered. Finally, he lets out a curse and swears he has never been with the man. In that moment, Jesus turns and looks at him. Peter sees His Lord on His knees being brutally beaten by the Romans. The religious elite jeering and cursing and spitting on Him. Peter is utterly broken. This is really happening. All hope is truly lost.

I've often wondered what Jesus must have felt in that moment as well. His most faithful disciple. The one He loved perhaps more than any of the others. The man He had poured so much of His life into over the last three years abandoning Him. Betraying Him. Denying Him. Though expected, it must have cut Him deeply. Jesus is now truly all alone. His followers are all gone. The Spirit has withdrawn His presence. The angels are no longer at His side. He must face His suffering alone. He has been forsaken. And this is just the beginning. It is the Father's will that He drink this cup to its dregs in order to save us from our sins.

"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted...Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." (Hebrews 2:17-18, 7:25)

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

November 10, 2020

REVOLUTION

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

Barabbas has always fascinated me. I used to picture him as a common criminal. A wild-eyed murderer with crazy hair. Someone who was probably insane. I could never understand why the people would willingly exchange Jesus for this nut job. Why put a violent criminal back on the streets? Why invite this kind of danger back into the community? Were they truly that angry with Jesus?

But then I began to read a little deeper. Barabbas was not an ordinary criminal. He was a leader of an insurrection. A revolution in the city that threatened to overthrow Rome. As such, he may have been well-known. Famous. Admired for his zeal. Revolutionaries are always popular with the people. Yes, they may be violent. Yes, they may kill for the sake of the cause. But history is written by the victors and one man's murderer is another's freedom fighter.

Furthermore, I believe the people had become that disenchanted with Jesus. We simply cannot overstate their hope that He would be the one to overthrow the Romans. Cleanse the Temple. Purify the priesthood. Get rid of the hated Herodian dynasty. Re-establish the kingdom. Sit on David's throne. Reign and rule over a free, independent, powerful nation of Israel. As such, Jesus' words to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world..." (John 18:36) were brutally disappointing. To adapt that famous line from William Congreve, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, Nor hell a fury like a woman (or a people) scorned." When Jesus failed them, the people turned on Him. Their love turned to hatred. Their devotion to rage. Their fury burned white-hot and, when given an opportunity to exchange Him for another, a revolutionary who understood their cause, they jumped at the chance.

Sadly, we continue to make the same mistake. We simply cannot seem to put aside our fascination with those who would use the tools of violence and anger and hatred to bring about a revolution. The ends justify the means in our minds. So we attach ourselves to Barabbas' of all stripes only to be let down over and over again. And once the revolutionary fires burn out - as they always do - we find ourselves worse off than before. The darkness creeps in. The despair deepens. Hopelessness settles into our hearts.

When will we understand? When will we grasp the full measure of what Jesus is saying? His Kingdom is not of this world! His ways are not our ways! His thoughts are not our thoughts! Our hope can be built on nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else than Jesus' blood and righteousness! He alone is our firm foundation! He alone is the Rock of our salvation! He alone is our sanctuary and fortress! Our refuge and strength! Our very present help in times of trouble! If we have faith in Him, we will not fear! Though the earth give way. Though the oceans roar. Though the mountains fall into the heart of the sea! Nations rage! The kingdoms of this earth come and go! Only God remains. He will not be moved. He will not slumber or sleep. He is the Lord of hosts. When He utters His voice, the earth melts.

Remember, Jesus could have called down legion upon legion of angels and laid waste to the Roman Empire. He could have called on the Heavenly Host to defeat all those who opposed Him. Not a single lash of the whip would have touched Him. Not a single blow would have landed unless He willed it to be so. Jesus chose to turn the other cheek. To let the violence and rage play itself out on His body. He took every stroke. He endured every blow. He willingly suffered every stripe. So that we might be healed. So death might be defeated. So evil might crushed once and for all. This He did for us. And this

He now calls us to do for others. May our engagement in this world look more like Jesus and less like Barabbas.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

November 11, 2020

GOD-FORSAKEN

Readings for today: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

There is nothing beautiful about the Cross. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam - far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. They offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Ontological. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul as well. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. All who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus - fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. And it is good for my soul to sit and ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to sit and reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to sit and contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

November 12, 2020

Resurrection

Readings for today: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

Doubt. Fear. Astonishment. Confusion. Disbelief. This is the full range of emotions that swept the followers of Jesus that first Easter morning. No one - absolutely no one - was expecting a resurrection. They all believed it was over. Their hopes and dreams turned to dust. Some were returning home. Some were hiding out in fear. Some went to the tomb to mourn. All of them grieving in their own way.

It has been suggested over centuries that the disciples didn't know a dead body when they saw one. It has been suggested that Joseph and Nicodemus didn't realize Jesus was still alive. It has been suggested that Jesus merely swooned on the cross. Fainted. And in doing so, tricked the Roman soldiers - among the most brutal killers the world has ever known - into believing He was dead. It has been suggested that this same Jesus. Body broken. Incredibly weakened by blood loss. Was somehow able to roll the stone away from within the tomb and escape. That He then appeared to His followers and convinced them He was alive. Still others have repeated the fake news the chief priests tried to spread about Jesus' disciples - fishermen and tax collectors - somehow stealing His body in the dead of night when the Roman guards were asleep. (Something that rarely happened by the way since the punishment for falling asleep on your watch was death.)

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One cannot dismiss it or ignore it or pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world and a God who loves the world and judges it with righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to live and repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

This is the truth that confronted the disciples. Jesus, whom they saw die, was now alive. They got to see the wounds in His hands, feet, and side. (Notice in John 20:20 how they all needed this evidence before believing...not just Thomas.) And if Jesus was raised from the dead. If death could not hold Jesus. If the grave could not keep Jesus. Then what did that mean for their lives? How would that change their future? They realized there was now no going back. No returning back to life as they knew it. No more fishing boats and tax booths. God was on the move. This gospel must be proclaimed! They were being given a great commission to carry this news to the ends of the earth!

2000 years later, we are still engaged in this same mission, friends! God is still moving! The news of the resurrection has yet to be proclaimed to every tribe, tongue and nation! Each new generation must come face to face with the Risen Christ! They must deal with the truth of His resurrection! He simply cannot and will not be denied!

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110

November 13, 2020

TRUE CONVERSION

Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalms 110

There is this great scene in Voyage of the Dawn Treader by C.S. Lewis where Eustace steals a bracelet and turns into a dragon. After initially enjoying the transformation, he soon realizes it is permanent and he is trapped with no hope of escape. He is terrified at the prospect and tries to cut the bracelet off to no avail. Then Aslan appears. The mighty lion who is the Christ-figure in the story. He asks Eustace if he wants to be free. Eustace shakes his head in an emphatic "Yes!" Aslan stretches out his claws and cuts him to the bone. Strips him naked. Lays him bare. The cut is painful. Deep. It goes all the way to the heart. And yet it is necessary for him to be set free.

I'm always reminded of that particular scene when I read the response of the people to Peter's sermon. Luke, the author of Acts, says they were "cut to the heart." The full weight of what they had done to Jesus hit them like a ton of bricks. They were heartbroken. They were devastated. And they asked Peter what they should do. "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

Repent. Literally an 180 degree turn in your life. A radical re-orientation of your heart away from the Kingdom of Self towards the Kingdom of God. A radical redirection of your desires. Whereas once you were prideful, arrogant, self-absorbed, greedy, filled with negativity and anger and lusts of all kinds. Those desires are now crucified with Christ and in exchange you receive love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness and mercy. Repentance means a radical re-evaluation of your priorities. Whereas once focused on safety, security, and chasing personal happiness. Now you lay those aside in favor of generosity, service, and sacrifice for the sake of God's Kingdom. There is no middle ground. No keeping one eye on heaven while fixing the other here on earth. No standing with one foot in the kingdoms of this world and one foot in the Kingdom that is to come. Repentance represents a total commitment. A complete shift in one's allegiances and loyalties.

Baptism. The primary sign of this shift in allegiance takes place in baptism. Baptism is where we publicly declare our faith in Christ and align ourselves with His Kingdom. We proclaim to the world that we are no longer our own. We no longer serve ourselves. We no longer live according to the corrupt values of our sinful culture. We are in Christ. Our lives have now been taken up into His life. Our future is in His hands. Our resources are His to do with as He chooses. We are simply His servants. Sent out in His name to fulfill His purposes in this world.

Gift of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, God doesn't send us alone. He doesn't send us our ill-prepared. He doesn't send us out helpless or hopeless. He Himself goes with us. He gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit who comes and takes up residence in our hearts. He imparts all the gifts we need to succeed in Christ's service. He strengthens us for every battle. He encourages us in the face of every challenge. He gives us joy in every trial. He grants all the wisdom and understanding we need to make sense of His calling on our lives. The Holy Spirit is quite literally the greatest gift we could ever receive.

Repent. Be baptized. Receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what it means to respond in faith to the work Christ has done on our behalf. Do you believe?

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 5-8

November 16, 2020

GOD HATES RACISM

Readings for today: Acts 9-11

I remember the first truly multicultural worship service I attended. It was in Chicago. In a Latino community called La Villita that is located within the larger African-American community of Lawndale. It was a violent place. Rival gangs running the streets. When kids came to youth group, they had to be picked up in vans with blacked out windows because they crossed gang lines. I was in college at the time and we sent a team to serve a local church in the community over Spring Break. We arrived on Saturday and attended worship on Sunday. That particular Sunday, they had done a pulpit swap with a local African-American church. So the preacher and choir were black. The congregation was mainly poor, immigrant Latinos who only spoke Spanish. And our group was made up of privileged, white college students from Boulder, CO. We got to witness a miracle that day. As the preacher got rolling - as only African-American preachers can!!! - the translator tried his best to keep up. But as the sermon began to crescendo, this incredible thing happened. The translator sat down. The Spirit descended. I watched as everyone heard this man preach in their own language. It was clear that even the Spanish-speakers in our midst were tracking. It was like Pentecost. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.

God's plan was always to move beyond the confines of the Promised Land and the Jewish ethnic group to reach the Gentile nations. In fact, this was part of the initial promise God gave to Abraham! In him, all the nations of the earth would be blessed! And it is precisely this promise that is being re-affirmed in the vision Peter receives from the Lord. What was once unclean is now clean. What was once unholy is now holy. What was once excluded is now included. The Gentiles who had been separated from God were now going to be grafted in. Those who were not God's people were now going to be part of God's people. Centuries of racial prejudice were erased in a moment as God sends Peter to Cornelius to lead him to saving faith. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. Now the gospel will go forth to the entire world. Every tribe. Every tongue. Every nation will have the opportunity to receive Christ. This is the heartbeat of the Great Commission, the underlying theme of the entire Book of Acts, and the main issue Paul will address in every single one of his letters. Jews and Gentiles living together as one family under God.

Friends, God hates racism. Hates racial segregation. Hates how His family has divided along racial lines. His desire is that all should be saved and not only come to a knowledge of His truth but then join together in authentic community as one family. This is not easy. Sunday morning is still one of the most segregated hours in our country. We have a very difficult time building friendships across ethnic lines. We much prefer to gather with people who look like us, live like us, and think like us. Sitting down with someone who comes from a radically different life experience is very challenging. We struggle to listen. We struggle to honor them. We struggle to communicate value and friendship because so often their perspective feels threatening to us. All this was true for the early Christians as well. The Jews who first came to faith could not imagine believing in Jesus without circumcision. Could not fathom following Christ without also following the Law. They had been taught for generations that Gentiles were unclean and unholy and to avoid contact with them at all costs. Now God was doing a new thing. Now Jews were being called to embrace Gentiles as their brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit was being poured out in undeniable ways. How would they respond?

How do we respond? Over the years, I have been blessed with spiritual mentors and friends from a variety of ethnicities and social/economic backgrounds. I have spent time with the urban poor. Been in

their homes. Listened to their stories. Heard their struggles. I have spent time in prisons and with ex-convicts who tell me how hard it is to reintegrate back into life after serving their time. The lack of jobs. The probation process. How easy it is to recitivate because at least the prison system is familiar. I have spent time with African-American friends who have helped me understand what it's like to have to grow up guarded and suspicious because you cannot trust the justice system. I have spent time with Latino friends who've shared with me stories of racial animus that breaks my heart. I have spent time with Asian-American friends who tell me of the challenges they've faced as their families transitioned from their home country to the USA. More recently, I've listened to Ethiopian refugees share their stories of what it's like to seek asylum in our country. It's overwhelming.

The gospel is designed by God to bring us together. It has divine power to tear down every stronghold, every wall, every division that keeps us apart. The gospel gives us the courage to honor one another in our differences. God delights in the diversity of His family. God's goal is not to make us all color-blind or erase our ethnic distinctions. The gospel does not turn us all into one homogeneous lump of clay. Rather it grounds our fundamental identity in Christ which in turn allows to celebrate the beauty and genius of the palate God used to create human beings in the first place! The fruit of the gospel is not a post-racial community but one that is inclusive of all races, each with their own unique perspective and experience.

How do we get started? By simply reaching out. Being intentional. Engaging someone who is not like us in conversation. Listening more than speaking. Withholding the tendency we all have to judge someone else's experience or perceive it as a threat. Cultivating the humility to learn. Willingly relinquishing power and privilege in order to create a safe space for people to share. It's not easy but the gospel makes it possible. In fact, the gospel mandates it. Just ask Peter. ;-)

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 12-14

November 17, 2020

FIRST MISSIONARIES

Readings for today: Acts 12-14

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabas and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabas and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabas because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabas went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed.

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the “the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!” (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: James 1-5

November 18, 2020

REAL LIFE IN THE REAL CHURCH

Readings for today: James 1-5

Real life in the real church is messy. The church of Jesus Christ - this side of heaven - is filled with sinful people who bring all kinds of baggage with them. In my experience as a pastor, hurting people tend to hurt people. Those who are in pain want everyone else to feel their pain. Broken people often try to break others without even realizing it. Life in this world is full of suffering. Trauma. Abuse. Heartbreak. We face trials of various kinds. Temptations around every corner. And we bring all that with us when we join a church.

It wasn't much different two thousand years ago. James, the brother of Jesus, was one of the key leaders in the church in Jerusalem as it was just getting started. He lived in a violent, turbulent time. The Jewish people were beginning to rise up against their Roman oppressors. Each rebellious movement was put down with greater force and greater violence. National unrest would finally break out in open war, resulting in the utter destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD. Throughout this time period, James pastored the church. He pastored a group of Jewish Christians who were trying to figure out how to live the Jesus Life in the midst of all this uncertainty and conflict. They faced trials and tribulations. They suffered tremendously under the Romans as well as the Jewish religious authorities. They were persecuted on every side. One would think such hardship would bring them together. Cause them to link arms against their common adversaries. Unfortunately, this was not the case. They gossiped about each other. Showed partiality. Divided themselves along economic lines. Like all of us, they struggled with doubts and fears. They struggled with anger and frustration. Too many of them resisted putting their faith into action. They fought over position and influence and power. They aligned themselves too closely with the world and its corrupt values. Sound familiar at all?

Too often our response as Christians is to leave the church. We get our feelings hurt. We experience deep wounds. We are disappointed. Let down. Expectations go unmet. Rather than humble ourselves before the Lord and engage in the hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, we simply walk out the door. We think this solves our problem. We think this resolves our pain. But it only compounds our situation. We stall out spiritually. It's like we get stuck in an endless time loop. Never moving on until we actually do what Christ commands which is to leave our gift at the altar and first reconcile with our brothers and sisters. I've seen it so many times and it is heartbreaking.

What's the answer? Follow the biblical guidance from James. Consider it all joy when you face trials of various kinds. Trust God for wisdom to know how to handle each and every situation. Remain steadfast under trial. Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Be doers of the Word not just hearers. Show no partiality. Let Christ tame our tongues. Set our minds on heavenly wisdom which is pure, peaceful, gentle, open to reason and full of mercy. Humble ourselves before the Lord and each other so we will not quarrel or be driven by sinful desire. Live vulnerably before our brothers and sisters so we can receive prayer for healing and strength and be restored gently when we fall into sin. Do these things over the long haul and you will find yourself reflecting more and more the image of Christ. This is what the church ultimately is all about! It is the crucible of our sanctification. The very place where iron sharpens iron and one person sharpens another.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 1-3

November 19, 2020

JUSTIFICATION

Readings for today: Galatians 1-3

I have often wondered about the Pharisees. Cast as Jesus' enemies throughout the four Gospels, they have been caricatured throughout Christian history in a variety of ways. Theologians tending to flatten them out. Make them two-dimensional. Convenient straw men to argue the superiority of the gospel. Thankfully, more recent scholarship is treating them with more respect. We are seeking to understand them on their own terms. See the world through their eyes. Let them speak for themselves. This, in turn, is yielding deeper insights into our understanding of the four Gospels and especially the Pauline Epistles.

Many centuries ago, Martin Luther - an anti-Semite - projected his own insecurities back onto the Pharisees. Because he was consumed with how to get right before God, he assumed the Jews were as well. He perceived their faithfulness to the Law to be a form of legalism. A way of self-justification. He thought wrongly that the Jews kept the Law in order to earn God's love and favor. And this misconception persists to this day in Christian circles.

The Pharisees did not believe keeping the Law would earn them salvation. That's not what "justification" meant within their worldview. For them, justification was "about the whole business of being human; of being Jewish human; of living in a Jewish community; of living in a threatened Jewish community; of living with wisdom, integrity and hope in a threatened Jewish community; of living with zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God within a threatened Jewish community." (NT Wright) Justification, for the Pharisees, was about identity. It was not about going to heaven after one died. It was not about eternal life per se. It was wrapped up and intertwined with what it meant to be God's chosen people in a world full of pagan idolatry. Pharisees believed with all their heart that if one was faithful to Torah, God would resurrect them on the final day, thus "justifying" the way they had lived their lives.

So now imagine you are Saul the Pharisee. Advanced even among his Pharisaical peers. Saul encounters the Risen Christ on the road outside of Damascus. Immediately he is confronted with the reality that if Yahweh has raised Jesus from the dead - the eschatological hope of every Pharisee - then Jesus must be the Justified One. And if Jesus is justified, then Saul is in real trouble. All his zeal is misdirected! All his ferocious loyalty to Torah is misplaced! Everything he has been taught. Everything he believes. Everything he has given his life to is upside down, turned around, and backwards! Jesus rising from the dead changes everything for Saul/Paul.

"We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified." (Galatians 2:16) Saul, now the Apostle Paul, has undergone a radical transformation. All his hopes which once rested on faithfulness to Torah are transferred to Jesus Christ. To crib the NT Wright quote above...Jesus now shows us what it means to be human. Jesus shows us what it means to be Jewish (expanded now beyond the boundaries of race to include those who are "Jewish" by faith) human. What it means to live in community as God's chosen people. What it means to live with wisdom, integrity and hope when the community is threatened as it always is by the pagan forces of this world. Jesus shows us true faithfulness to Torah, to the covenant, and above all, to Yahweh.

Justification comes - not through faithfulness to Torah - but through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. As we place our faith in Him, we are justified by His work on our behalf. His faithfulness in place of our unfaithfulness. His sinlessness covering our sin. His righteousness exchanged for our unrighteousness. This is why Paul exclaims in one of the most beautiful passages in all the New Testament, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 4-6

November 20, 2020

TRUE FREEDOM

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

Galatians is the manifesto for Christian freedom. The freedom we have in Christ. The freedom Christ won for us on the cross. Without Jesus, we are enslaved. Enslaved to our sinful desires. Enslaved to our corrupt thoughts and feelings. Enslaved to the ways of this world. Enslaved by the enemy of this world. It's why when we look at the world around us, we see such pain. It's why human beings are often so hurtful. So abusive. So evil. It's why man's inhumanity to man often knows no boundaries. Paul knew this himself. He had experienced this himself. Before Christ set him free, he was enslaved to his own passions and desires. He persecuted the church. Celebrated their pain and suffering. Rejoiced in their deaths. He relentlessly pursued them. Chased them down. Drug them from their homes and families. He was the chief of sinners. But then Christ came into his life and he was set free. So this freedom of which he speaks is not an abstract concept for him. It is something he experienced deeply, viscerally, and powerfully.

It's why he's so concerned for his Galatian friends. He is in anguish over what is happening to them. Having been set free by Christ, they are submitting themselves again to the yoke of slavery. Having begun so well in the Spirit, they are again seeking to ground their identity in something other than Jesus. Having been saved by grace through the gift of faith, they are now turning to their own work for justification.

So how can we guard our hearts and minds from falling into this trap? Paul lays it out for us in the readings for today. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Galatians 5:1) A great verse to memorize and meditate on. A great verse to remind yourself of when you start to feel the sting of temptation. A great verse to cling to when you feel trapped or defeated or depressed or anxious or afraid. You have been set free! Christ has accomplished all you need! Simply stand in this freedom. Rest in this freedom. Trust this freedom and do not return to the old ways of slavery.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13) Our world doesn't understand true freedom. The freedom it offers is an unfettered freedom. A freedom without boundaries. A freedom without restraint. A freedom that is centered ultimately on the gratification of our own selfish desires. This is not Christian freedom, friends! It is a lie from the pit of hell! It is the path back into slavery! Christian freedom results in service to God and to one another. Christian freedom means offering our lives back to God and to His people. It is a freedom constrained by love. A freedom bounded by grace. A freedom fettered by faith in the Son of God who gave Himself up for us. This is the freedom we were called to in Christ.

And we gain this freedom as we walk by the Spirit. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16) As we surrender our lives to the Spirit and His sanctifying work, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We will stand firm and resist the yoke of slavery. We will refuse to go back to the old ways of living. "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit." (Galatians 5:25) As we keep in step with Spirit - through daily prayer and Bible study and weekly worship with God's people - we will find our lives being transformed. Our awareness of the depth and the breadth of the freedom we have in Christ will grow. Our experience of God's presence will deepen. Our desire to love and serve both God and His people will increase. This is what Paul hopes and prays for his Galatian friends and it is my prayer for all of us as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 15-16

November 21, 2020

CHURCH CONFLICT

Readings for today: Acts 15-16

I frequently come across people who are surprised when conflict takes place in a church. They have this impression that because we all love Jesus we would never have a difference of opinion. Never have an argument or disagreement. They seem to think "unity" is the same as "unanimity" which simply is not true. From the very beginning, the church has struggled over significant issues. Struggled to come to one mind and one accord on various things. Because we are all sinners, it is not easy to discern the will of God.

Today's passage highlights a number of different conflicts. Conflict over circumcision and the role of the Jewish law in a Christian's life. Conflict over restoring an individual who has proved untrustworthy in the past. Conflict over where the Spirit was leading different evangelism teams to go. Conflict in Philippi over the deliverance of a slave girl. Conflict in prison which results in the conversion of the jailer. It is messy. There is division. The process of discernment often involves trial and error. Mistakes are made. I imagine feelings get hurt. Frustrations mount. But through it all, the Spirit is faithful to make His will known. And the result is the churches are strengthened in their faith and increase in numbers daily as God adds to them those who are being saved.

Is it possible that Acts 15 and 16 are paradigmatic for today? Do they reflect real life in the real church? Should we expect conflict? Expect disagreement? Expect arguments over where to go and what to do and who to involve? And if so, how can we resolve conflict peacefully? In a way that glorifies God and brings honor to His name?

One of the keys to navigating conflict in a godly manner is mutual submission. In Acts 15:1, a question is raised. Is circumcision required for salvation? This was no small matter. It was a question of identity. For centuries, the rite of circumcision had set the Jewish people apart. Marked them as God's chosen people. They had suffered for this belief. Been persecuted for this belief. No matter where they found themselves, they were easily identified by the fact they had been circumcised so there was never any place to run or hide. Since Abraham, circumcision had formed the core part of their shared identity and linked them intimately with the covenant promises of God. Now it was being threatened...what should they do? Paul and Barnabus had strong opinions. Based on what they had seen and experienced, it appears the Holy Spirit was moving among the Gentiles. Non-Jews. People who were not circumcised. Why add to what the Spirit was doing? This stirred up quite a bit of dissension and debate. So they decided to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles to make their case. Again, there was much debate. Strong opinions offered on all sides. Finally Peter stood up. Shared his heart. Shared his experience. Sought to apply the Scriptures. Once again, Paul and Barnabus shared about the signs and wonders they had seen in their travels. James called for a decision and the council decided to let circumcision be a secondary matter. Non-essential when it comes to salvation.

This has huge implications and it is notable that their conclusion "seemed good to the apostles, elders, and the whole church." Though the issue will continue to come up throughout the rest of the book of Acts, this moment represents a turning point. A general willingness of all parties to mutually submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. Another aspect that's highlighted is their ability to differentiate between essentials and non-essentials when it comes to the gospel. Again, just because a compromise was reached doesn't mean everyone agreed. Unity is not the same as unanimity. I imagine quite a few of the Pharisees who had come to faith walked away with serious reservations. But they set those

reservations aside for the sake of the unity of the church. They recognized the danger of division and how much harm would come should the church fracture over this issue. They made sure to focus on the essentials - not getting mixed up in idolatry, sexual immorality, and maintaining purity which are all matters of the heart - rather than force Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christian.

Would that modern-day Christians were able to do the same! Instead of fighting over secondary matters like baptismal practices, worship styles, spiritual gifts, etc., can we not exercise mutual forbearance and submission and keep the main thing the main thing? Rather than pull up stakes the moment we disagree with the preacher or the elder board, can we not put aside our differences for the sake of the unity of the church? Rather than bounce the moment we are disappointed or let down, can we not obey the gospel's call to forgive and reconcile? Unity does not mean unanimity so we should never expect we will always agree. The key to doing life together is navigating conflict with a humility that honors God and keeps

November 23, 2020

FAITH ON TRIAL

Readings for today: Acts 17, 18-1-18

One of the more common misunderstandings in Acts is Paul's appearance before the Areopagus in Athens. Because of Luke's editorial comment, "Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21); there is this assumption that Paul was appearing before a kind of debate society. Nothing could be farther from the truth. New Testament scholar, NT Wright, points out in his most recent biography of the Apostle Paul that the "Areopagus" was actually the Athenian Supreme Court. Paul was being charged as a "preacher of foreign divinities" which is actually the same charge that condemned Socrates. As such, Paul had a lot more at stake than winning an argument. His life was on the line. In a very real sense, the validity of the Christian faith was on the line as well.

Paul's defense of his faith is brilliant. Marks him as one of the pre-eminent intellectuals of the ancient world. He truly belongs in the same pantheon as Plato and Aristotle and Cicero. "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." (Acts 17:22-23) Paul understands that God has revealed Himself in all kinds of ways. As pagan as the Athenians were, one thing that could be affirmed was their desire for God. They built all kinds of shrines to all kinds of false gods and while this practice was idolatrous, Paul was able to see past the surface to the deeper reality of their spiritual hunger. He plays on this spiritual hunger by affirming their search and uses it as a springboard to present the gospel. He even goes on to quote their own poets back to them, demonstrating how widely read and engaged he was with Hellenistic culture. This is remarkable for a former Pharisee and deeply instructive for us.

It is so easy in our world to fall into the trap of fundamentalism. Believing our way is the only way and any deviation represents a departure from truth. Fundamentalism infects both progressives and conservatives. It seems to touch every debate these days whether the issue is race, sexuality, gender, abortion, etc. We cast these conversations in sharp binaries. We demand grace and nuance for our position but refuse to extend that same courtesy to others. We spend so much of our time and energy dissecting every single tweet, FB post, or IG story in an effort to uncover deception. We assume the worst about the motivations of our opponents. We seem to feed off the negative energy.

You might have heard the saying - oft attributed to Benjamin Franklin - that a "half-truth is a great lie." You might even agree with such a statement. However, there is a flip side. A half-truth does contain half a truth. And in our rush to point out the "lie" we often miss the opportunity to affirm what may be true and noble and right. This is especially important when engaging seekers. Those engaged in an authentic search for God. They have legitimate questions. Important concerns that need to be heard. Doubts and fears that need to be expressed and taken seriously. Not dismissed. Not diminished. Paul affirms what he can about the Athenians. He affirms their religious hunger. Their spiritual thirst. Paul sees the half-truth reflected in their shrine to the "unknown god" and he makes Him known to them. Even though he is on trial for his life, Paul is so confident in Christ that he finds a way past self-defense and instead uses his time on the witness stand to share Jesus.

Every day our faith is put on trial. By the people we meet, work, and interact with on a regular basis. They ask all kinds of questions. Make all kinds of assumptions. Issue all kinds of statements. As

Christians, we can spend our time and energy deconstructing everything they have to say. Pointing out the intellectual and spiritual inconsistencies. We can focus on winning the argument or we can focus on winning the person's heart. Asking good clarifying questions. Honoring what we can about their beliefs. Pointing out where their truth may unwittingly intersect with the Truth of the gospel. Because our confidence flows from Christ, we don't have to take things personal. Don't have to be defensive. Don't have to feel threatened. We are at peace because we know Jesus has overcome the world and is making Himself known.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

November 24, 2020

TURNING THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN

Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

“For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.” (1 Thessalonians 1:4-8)

I cannot imagine a greater compliment than to be told that my witness had “sounded forth” throughout the region I live and my faith in God had “gone forth everywhere” so that the need for evangelism ceased. And yet this is exactly what happened through the Christians at Thessalonica. Paul and Silas (Silvanus) traveled through their city on their way to Athens. They stopped and preached for three consecutive Saturdays on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many Jews and Greeks and several leading women came to faith as the Word came in power and authority and conviction. However, some disbelieved and they stirred up a mob to attack Paul and Silas. When they could not find them, they attacked Jason and a few others. Dragging them out of their homes into the streets. They brought them before the city authorities with the hope they would be charged with treason for proclaiming a king other than Caesar but Jason paid off the officials and they were released. They then helped Paul and Silas escape during the night. This is the affliction Paul is referencing in his letter to them. But despite the persecution, they held onto to their joy in the Holy Spirit and clearly remained steadfast in their faith to the point that their reputation had spread thus making a return trip from Paul unnecessary.

I love how the crowd puts it in Acts 17:6, “These men have turned the world upside down...” Would that we would live such gospel-centered lives that we too might be accused of such a thing! Turning the world upside down is exactly what the gospel does. It completely reorders all we love. It redirects all our thoughts and desires. It reorients all our priorities. The things we used to hold dear no longer have much of a hold on us. The idols we cling to so tightly become empty and worthless. All our pride and achievement and cast down before the throne of Jesus. All our wealth and privilege and influence and power pales in comparison to the riches and authority Christ offers us in Himself. Our concern for our reputation and the esteem of others diminishes as our fear of God increases. This is what happens when we come to Christ. He fills us with His love. His affections. His joy. His peace. His righteousness. As these things begin to flow in and through our lives, we are transformed. We are renewed. We are set free. And because we have been set free, this world no longer has anything for us. No longer has any leverage over us. No longer can threaten to undo us. For we live for Christ and if we die, we gain!

So what does this all mean for you today? How are you turning the world upside down at your work or school? In your home or neighborhood? As you gather around your table with friends and family for Thanksgiving, what will the conversation sound like? Will the people you spend time feel blessed for having been with you? Will they hear and experience the love of Jesus through you? Will you set the example for those who do not yet believe through your sacrifice and willingness to serve?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

November 25, 2020

GOD IS MY HELPER

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

“To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfill every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power...” (2 Thessalonians 1:11)

A common misconception in the Christian life is that while God performs the act of salvation, the rest of life is up to us. We raise our hands and come forward as a response to the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration in our hearts but then leave the sanctuary with this inner resolve to live by our own willpower. How many sermons have we heard over the years that could double as secular motivational talks? How many Bible studies turn into self-help sessions with a little Jesus thrown in? How many conferences and retreats have we attended where the main message was simply work harder? Do more? Be better for Jesus? I cannot tell you how many times I have picked up a book, downloaded a podcast, or attended a conference hoping to hear the gospel only to be told overtly or covertly that the quality of my life really depends on me. My self-discipline. My ability to resist temptation. The intentional way I live my life. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve fallen into this trap as a preacher myself!

The Bible is clear. We simply do not have the power to live the Christian life. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It’s not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

In the verse above, Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God’s Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

This involves human activity of course. A change in human behavior. But even that is not accomplished through our willpower alone. The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God’s help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength

to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Years ago, a professor challenged me with a quote from Evagrius Ponticus, one of the most influential theologians of the 4th century. Ponticus defined the sin of pride as living as if God were not our helper. So here's the fundamental question…is God your helper? Do you see the hand of God at work in every part of your life? Do you thank God for all His benefits? Do you praise God for the mercies He has shown you? Do you lean on God for all you need for this life and the next?

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 18:19-19:41

November 26, 2020

GIVING THANKS

Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41

"We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3)

"We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing." (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

"For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints…" (Ephesians 1:15-18)

The Apostle Paul was a thankful man. We see it over and over again in his letters. He thanks God for just about every single church. He thanks God for just about every single brother and sister in Christ. He is thankful for the ways he sees God at work in their midst. Amidst hardship. Persecution. Division. He thanks God for His miracles. He thanks God for His blessings. He thanks God for the grace He has lavished on us in Jesus Christ. And when one reads Paul's letters, we might be tempted to think life was pretty good for Paul. He must have had it okay. He must have never faced struggles or temptations or wrestled with anxieties and fears. Friends, nothing could farther from the truth.

Paul suffered throughout the course of his life. Especially after becoming a Christian. He worked long hours. He was beaten. He was imprisoned. Subject to death threats. Five times he received 40 lashes. Three times beaten with rods. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times shipwrecked and at least one of those times he spent a day and night adrift at sea. He lived in constant danger on his travels. Not just from the elements or from the roving bands of highwaymen who often waylaid people on the road but from his own people. He often went sleepless. Often went hungry. Often suffered from exposure. He struggled with anxiety over his churches. Fears of their future. His was no easy life. And yet he was thankful.

How is such a thing possible? In the face of COVID. Economic hardships. Stay at home lockdowns. Fears over physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual safety. How is it possible in a world where death seems to lie around every corner. Cancer. Heart attacks. Strokes. My wife and recently had two college friends suffer brain bleeds. One survived. The other did not. And we grieve with both families. I think about the earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, wildfires, or famine over which we have so little control. The suffering these natural disasters create is enormous. I think about life-threatening poverty around the world. Men and women and children suffering from addiction. I think about the burdens I carry. Anxieties over the churches I serve. Fears for my own family. Uncertainty over the future. It's enough to drive me mad.

God calls us to a different way. The way of thanksgiving. "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1Thessalonians 5:18) He calls us to focus our minds on "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is

commendable, if there is anything of excellence or anything worthy of praise." (Phil. 4:8) He calls us to consider the blessings and the riches of grace which He has lavished on us. (Eph. 1) Finally and most importantly, He calls us to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) This is why we give thanks, friends! God Himself has come into this violent, dark, capricious, unfriendly, unsafe world not to condemn us but to save us! To lift us up out of the pit. Out of the miry clay. Out of the depths of our depression and despair. Happy Thanksgiving!

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 1-4

November 27, 2020

THE MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

Seeking the mind of Christ. It's the primary responsibility for the Christian as we seek to navigate the challenges of this world. It is a higher priority that our own happiness. A higher priority than our own comfort. A higher priority than our own success. It is more important than our pride. More important than our public reputation. More important than our political allegiances. We know we have discerned the mind of Christ when there is spiritual unity and godly humility and mutual submission. We see the mind of Christ in action when there is forgiveness and grace and reconciliation. We recognize it in those who are willing to be last so that others might be first. Those who are willing to decrease so that others may increase. Those who are self-effacing and who practice the art of self-forgetfulness.

Seeking the mind of Christ has never been easy. The early Christians in Corinth struggled mightily with the concept and to embrace the practice. They were divided. They followed charismatic human leaders rather than Christ Jesus Himself. They sought the wisdom of this world. They wanted to be esteemed by the top philosophical thinkers of their day. They boasted in their own ability. The depth of their spiritual maturity. They stood in judgment over those who seemed "less spiritual." They wanted all the credit for the ministry they were building. They refused to share the glory with another. They wanted to be known. They wanted to be influencers. They wanted to be taken seriously and treated with respect by the culturally elite of their day. But the gospel calls us to a different way.

How do we seek and find the mind of Christ? There is only one way path. The path of humility. Relinquishment. Surrender. Listen to how Paul describes it for his Corinthians friends…

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (1 Corinthians 1:21-23, 25)

"But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." (1 Corinthians 1:27-29)

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

These are some of the most powerful passages in the New Testament. They resonate deep within us for we recognize the Spirit who inspired them. God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. God is not bound by human wisdom. God cannot be reduced to human categories. He is completely and utterly free from any constraints in this world. He makes foolish the wise. He makes

weak the strong. So if we are to seek the mind of Christ, we must lay aside our natural inclinations. We must lay aside our pride and ego and desire to be in control. We must lay aside our anxieties and fears. Instead, we must trust Him to reveal Himself in His time and in His way. We must seek to know nothing except Christ. We must seek to follow Christ in His footsteps. We must align our hearts with Christ. As we do, we will find ourselves being built up together as God's Temple. He will come to dwell in our midst. He will come to fill us and sanctify us.

Friends, resist the temptation to believe your own hype. Resist the temptation to believe you are "something" in this world. Resist any notions of power and privilege. Let go and let God have all the glory! The reality is we are simply servants of Christ. We are simply stewards of the mysteries of the gospel. We do not own the gospel. It is not ours to command or control. We do not own Christ. He is not ours to direct nor is He under our authority. God is God and we are not. Christ is Christ and we are not. We serve at His pleasure. We bow before His throne. We live and move and have our being under His sovereign authority. And this sets us free from all the strivings and struggles of this world. Seek the mind of Christ! Let your heart be filled with the love of Christ! Let all you do be motivated by a desire to honor Christ! This is His will for our lives.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 5-8

November 30, 2020

WAIVING OUR RIGHTS

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11

As Americans, we believe every human being is endowed with inalienable rights. Among these are a right to life. A right to liberty. A right to pursue happiness. These rights are embodied in our Constitution. They are explored in further detail in our Bill of Rights. Indeed, once could say our entire legal code is an attempt to flesh out how we define our "rights." We have a "bill of rights" for taxpayers, patients, students, etc. When we arrest people for crimes, the first thing we do is inform them of their rights. We advocate in the global community for the enforcement of human rights and we often take action if we feel such rights are violated. Most of our hottest political debates center around what we perceive to be our "rights." The right to life vs. the right to choose. The right to bear arms vs. the right to keep our children safe. The right to defend our borders vs. the human rights of immigrants/refugees seeking asylum from extreme poverty and violence in their home countries. Even on an individual level, we cling to our "rights" and react strongly if we feel they are being infringed upon or violated.

The Apostle Paul could not be more different. Because he believes with all his heart in the saving grace of Christ, he willingly surrenders his rights for the greater glory of the gospel. Paul has every "right" to assert his authority as an apostle. Every "right" to get married. Every "right" to work for a living. Indeed, he has every "right" to make his living off the gospel just like the Levitical priests. Paul has every "right" to eat or drink whatever he wants since God has set aside the kosher food laws of the Old Testament. He has every "right" to circumcise or not circumcise, depending on the situation. If Paul were to really assert his "rights", he could claim privilege as a Jew among Jews, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." (Phil. 3:4-6) But Paul is more than willing to relinquish any and all of his rights...why? Because "he counts everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ." (Philippians 3:8)

Part and parcel of becoming a Christian means waiving whatever rights we believe we are entitled to as human beings, American citizens, you name it. We have to be willing to lay these things down for the greater privilege of serving Christ. Christ demands total and complete allegiance. He will not allow our "rights" to get in the way of His glory and the advancement of His Kingdom. Not even those most fundamental rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does this mean Christians can never be happy? Never be safe? Never be free? Of course not. What it means is that even these rights we hold so dear cannot get in the way of the gospel. As Paul writes, "we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ." (1 Corinthians 9:12)

Ultimately, "rights" have to do with identity. Wherever we ground our identity, we will guard and protect those rights fiercely. Think about the culture wars that are currently raging and what that reveals about where so many find their identity and thus their "rights" as individuals. Gender. Sexuality. Race. Political affiliation. National citizenship. Economic status. Educational level. All of these things become part of our identity. Some we are born with. Some we achieve over the course of our lives. Christ calls us to lay all of them down. To willingly and joyfully surrender them for the even greater privilege of becoming His disciple! Once our identity is grounded in Him, we realize all the "rights" we've been clinging to are rubbish compared to the magnificence of His amazing grace. This, in turn, gives us unbelievable freedom. I love how Paul puts it, "For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win

Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Friends, what "rights" have you been holding onto? What privileges have you been clinging to? What parts of your identity still need to be surrendered to Jesus? Let go. Open your hands. Open your heart and experience anew the freedom that comes only from the gospel.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 12-14

December 1, 2020

UNFAILING LOVE

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

"Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still "love" each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

To many people have fallen for the lie that they must "love" themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person's needs above one's own is anathema in our culture. Love must be "self-serving." Love must lead to "self-actualization." Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that "love" is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our sexual attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear…God is love, love is not God. It's a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God's love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the "other." It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God's love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don't want to do and we don't do the things we do want to do. We can't help ourselves.

God's love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. "God believes in you." God's love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God's love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desires is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God’s love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God’s love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God’s love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God’s love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God’s love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren’t talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God’s love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 15-16

December 2, 2020

THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16

"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anything close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 1-4

December 3, 2020

JARS OF CLAY

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them bake in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It's simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. " (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God in His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure to be "real" and "authentic." To publicly curate our brokenness on social media in service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They both flip the script and ascribe power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand that the "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustices we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. So we can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it is now poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all he has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 5-9

December 4, 2020

RECONCILIATION

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. Religious lines. All of it taking on a righteous fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable "news" organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I've had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt and rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person's character. Impugning motives. Words like "betrayal" and "wounded" and "abuse" thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person's trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person's past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to "regard no one according to the flesh", meaning we no longer let a person's political, social, sexual, or ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn't mean we try to "erase" their uniqueness. This doesn't mean we try to "whitewash" or "homogenize" everyone. This doesn't mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How weak! How stupid! Only an arrogant, white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual, upper middle class male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that's partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have

listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their “record of wrongs” and marriages are restored. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God’s message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 10-13

December 5, 2020

CRITICISM

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13

I remember when George Herbert Walker Bush died. His passing signaled the end of a political era where one could disagree vehemently with the opposition and yet still grab a beer together after work. President Bush was well-known for his friendships across the aisle and, in particular, for the handwritten notes he would send to all sorts of people he had met throughout the course of his life. Though often lampooned when he was in office, he never seemed to let it get to him. Never retaliated in kind. Never lashed back. He clearly felt it beneath the dignity of his office. He was confident in who he was as a person and his record as a public servant.

As we read these words from the Apostle Paul today, it is important to discern his tone. In our current political climate of manufactured outrage, it would be easy to assume Paul feels as we do. It would be easy to read anger and rage into his words as he defends his apostleship. That would be a mistake. Paul says right up front that he is coming to them in meekness and gentleness. Though confident in his authority as an apostle of Christ, he will not "boast beyond limits" nor will he "overextend" himself to make his point. He calls himself a fool numerous times throughout the reading and mocks his former "credentials." Over and over again, he reminds the Corinthians of his love for them. Reminds them of his great desire to see them restored in their faith. I love how he ends his letter, "Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." (2 Corinthians 13:11) This is Paul's heart on display.

So what is causing the rift between him and his Corinthian friends? Self-proclaimed "super-apostles" who seem to follow Paul around to correct his theology. They take it on themselves to serve as the theological police of the fledgling early church. They often preach that everyone must be circumcised. They attack Paul's methods and speaking skills. They attack his character and reliability. They accuse him of being a conflict avoider. They claim to have the same mission credentials as Paul and a better spiritual pedigree. Their CV's are filled, so they say, with church plants and signs and wonders and visions. This forces Paul's hand. He has to do what he hates. He has to defend his apostleship by citing his own hard-won credentials.

Originally, Paul came to them in humility. He placed no financial burden on them, preaching the gospel free of charge. Living off the support of other churches, like the one in Macedonia which was extremely poor and yet very generous, he was able to live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ. He didn't lord his authority over them. He didn't pass out his resume. He refused to promote his past success. Instead, he came to them in weakness. He shared in their sufferings. He intentionally relinquished his rights in order to build them up as a church. I love how he describes his love for them. "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ." (2 Corinthians 11:2) "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls..." (2 Corinthians 12:15) "For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for." (2 Corinthians 13:9)

Perhaps the most famous part of this set of readings has to do with the "thorn in Paul's flesh." Commentators throughout history have argued over what exactly Paul is referring to here. Is it an illness? An addiction? A persistent temptation? I believe Paul identifies the thorn when he calls it a "messenger from Satan." Earlier in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul writes "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself

as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds." The Greek word for "angel" can also mean "messenger" and it is the same word in both cases. Essentially, Paul believes that these false apostles are being used by God to keep him humble and utterly reliant on grace. God is using these evil men and their lies to protect Paul from pride and arrogance. He is using them to remind Paul of his weakness and dependence on Christ. He wants Paul to understand that the power he possesses does not come from him but from Jesus Himself.

I remember several years ago having a member of my congregation turn on me. For months she would write hate-filled notes and put them in the offering plate for me. When the deacons started to throw them away, she placed them in an envelope with my name on it. Soon that wasn't enough. She began writing in our pew Bibles, calling for me to be fired. Attacking my character. Her anger and hate festered to the point that she even wrote a message on our Communion table cloth! It was brutal. We tried to talk to her. We tried to confront her. Even told her she would not be welcome if she persisted in her behavior. None of it deterred this woman. Eventually, she passed away. She certainly didn't want me anywhere near her funeral. I remember the morning of her memorial service sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my next meeting. As I prayed for this woman and her family, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart. "I have used this woman to keep you humble. To remind you of your need to depend on Me. To teach you the truth about grace and unconditional love. You will miss her. You need people like her in your life to keep you trusting in the sufficiency of Christ." It was a powerful lesson and one I will never forget.

How do you handle hate? How do you handle unfair criticism? Remember God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Rather than lash out, take a step back. What is God trying to show you? What is God trying to teach you? Is His grace truly sufficient for you? Is His power made perfect even in your weakness?

December 7, 2020

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

Readings for today: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:21-26)

I cannot think of a more stunning statement from a former Pharisee of Pharisees. In his former life, Paul was known as Saul. He was a zealous for the Jewish faith. Believed with all his heart in the sufficiently of the Torah to lead one to righteousness. He was passionate about guarding the traditions that had been handed down. He trusted in Yahweh and believed he'd been set apart to protect the true faith. So up the road he went to Damascus. On his way to persecute Christians. Drag them from their homes. Bring them back to Jerusalem. Put them on trial for blasphemy. He was breathing fire against the followers of Jesus. And then he met the Risen Christ. Popular tradition tells us the experience was so powerful it knocked from his horse. The Bible mentions no such thing but clearly something dramatic changed in Saul. He went from being the Grand Inquisitor of the Christian faith to being her greatest evangelist.

What happened? Simply put, the very righteousness Saul had spent his entire life pursuing "manifested itself apart from Torah." As a Pharisee, Saul believed in the resurrection of the righteous. He believed Yahweh would make all things right by raising those who were faithful from the dead. He believed one became worthy of resurrection through faithfulness to Torah or the Law. This had nothing to do with "earning" one's salvation but was more about identity. How did one identify as a faithful Jew in a pagan world? When Saul met the Risen Christ, he was immediately confronted with a problem. If Yahweh had raised Jesus from the dead then, by definition, Jesus was righteous. And if Jesus was the Righteous One, then Saul had misplaced his faith. In the presence of the Risen Christ, it suddenly dawned on him that all the Torah and the Prophets - essentially the Old Testament - pointed to Jesus as Messiah! And this meant that all those who placed their faith - not in Torah - but in Christ would be "righteoused" or justified.

This changes everything for Saul. He changes his name. He changes the course of his life. He essentially does a 180 degree turn. What about us? Most of us are probably Gentiles, meaning we haven't dedicated our lives to pursuing Torah-faithfulness. But all of us have dedicated our lives to something. It could be our jobs. It could be our lifestyles. It could be our kids. It could be ourselves. Whatever "it" is, it becomes a law unto itself. Subconsciously, we believe if we remain faithful to this "law" in our lives then we will be righteous. Then we meet the Risen Christ. And he displaces the "law" in our hearts. He becomes the only source of true righteousness in our lives. Faithfulness to Him means believing in His finished work. Trusting in the sufficiency of His grace. Surrendering our lives into His hands. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Frankly, all of us have sinned and fallen short of our own "law" as well. None of us is righteous not even in our own eyes if we are completely honest. All of us stand in need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. All of us stand in need of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. All of us stand in need of the justification that can only come by faith. Thanks be to God for He has sent His beloved Son into the world for this very purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 5-8

December 8, 2020

FAITH

Readings for today: Romans 5-8

“No unbelief made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:20-22)

What is faith? A feeling? An emotion? Something you experience deep down in your gut? Is it an intellectual belief? Something you hold to be true? For Abraham, faith was “being fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised.” And what had God promised Abraham? A son. A son to be conceived and born through Sarah, his wife who was well past menopause. A son to carry on his line. A son who would be the first among many. A son whose descendants would eventually outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. This was the dream of every ancient near east patriarch and it had been denied Abraham up to this point in his life. He despaired of it ever coming to pass. But now God entered the equation. God made a promise. God declared that he would have a son. With this promise, God guaranteed Abraham’s family legacy. It would have to be a miracle. Abraham was in his seventies when God made the promise. Sarah in her sixties. They would have to wait at least two decades for it to come to pass. But come to pass it did and Abraham never wavered in his confidence that God would be true to His Word. This is what faith is and why it was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Now does this mean Abraham never had a moment of weakness? Never had any doubts? Never had any fears? Of course not! These emotions are all very real. At times, they drive us to take matters into our own hands. It’s not that we doubt God’s ability so much as we struggle to trust His timing. Struggle to see His purposes. Struggle to submit to His will. Abraham wrestled with these things as well and the result was Ishmael! But through it all, one thing remained true for Abraham. He remained fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. Abraham may not have fully understood. May not have known how God would bring this miracle to pass. Maybe he even believed God would use ordinary means like having sex with Hagar to bring His plan to completion. Whatever Abraham may have thought or felt, we know for sure he believed. And it is this unwavering belief in the promise of God that is counted to Abraham as righteousness.

What about us? In our reading for today, Paul contends it is faith that justifies us before God. It is faith that grants us access to God’s grace. It is faith that helps us persevere through suffering. Faith that sets us free from the bondage of sin. Faith allows us to set our minds on the Spirit which brings life and peace. Faith makes us fellow heirs with Christ. Most of all, faith gives us the confidence of knowing nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do you have such faith? Are you fully convinced God is able to bring - and is bringing - these promises to pass in your life? Do you believe God when He tells you there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus? Or do you live a life - like so many do - of self-condemnation and fear? Do you believe God when He says there is nothing that can separate you from His love? Or do you find yourself feeling so depressed and ashamed that you think no one could or would ever love you? Do you believe God when He says the sufferings of this world are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in you? Or is the pain and heartache you’ve experienced simply too much even for God to handle? Do you believe God when He says He will save you from this body of death? Or do you feel trapped by sin? Enslaved by the lusts of your heart? You do the things you don’t want to do and don’t do the things you do want to do? These are just

a few of the important questions posed by the Apostle Paul throughout this section. He wants us to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt - as Abraham did - that God is able to do what He has promised!

This, friends, is the true message of Christmas. God delivering once and for all on all His promises! God breaking the power of sin. God defeating the power of death. God destroying all the works of the enemy. In Christ, God comes into this world to face down evil and suffering. In Christ, God literally takes our place, absorbs the righteous punishment we deserved, and atones for all our sin. In Christ, God makes peace. Offers reconciliation. Tears down the dividing wall of hostility and makes all things new. This is what God did and is still doing in our world. Thanks be to God for His great faithfulness!

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 9-12

December 9, 2020

HONEST QUESTIONS

Readings for today: Romans 9-12

Today's reading is a challenging one. Paul is asking deep questions about the promises and purposes of God. So much of which is shrouded in mystery. So much of which we will never know this side of heaven. Has the Word of God failed? Is God unjust? How can God fault those whom He has not chosen? These questions are important. It is vital to wrestle with them honestly and vulnerably. True faith welcomes such challenges and doesn't settle for easy answers.

To begin, we must check our assumptions at the door. There are no standards of justice outside of God. God is not answerable to any human legal code nor does He subject Himself to human notions of universal fairness. God is the Potter. We are the clay. This fundamental principle undergirds everything Paul will say in these few chapters. The baseline for this discussion begins with God being God and human beings being human beings. The Creator is not the same as His creation. The creation is not the same as its Creator. There is a massive, ontological distinction between the two that must be maintained if we are to find our way through this quandary.

Second, God is God, He has every right to exercise His sovereign choice over all He has made. He chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the families on the face of the earth. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were born. He chose Israel over Egypt. Moses over Pharaoh. The full witness of Scripture makes it clear that God freely chooses some vessels for honor and some for dishonor. Scripture makes clear that God endures with patience the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" so that He might "make known the riches of glory for His vessels of mercy." Over and over again, we see this played out in the Old Testament. There is simply no other way to honestly interpret it.

Third, what are we then to make of what's happening with Israel? God's elect? God's chosen? "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all..." (Romans 9:4-5) Furthermore, what are we to make of the Gentiles? God's non-elect? The pagans who've rejected God all their lives? Though they have not pursued righteousness somehow they attained it by faith! Does this mean God's elect have been rejected? By no means! "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (Romans 9:6-7) Ethnicity no longer matters! What matters is faith and God has maintained a remnant - of which the Apostle Paul is one - who have been saved by grace.

Fourth, God isn't done! God's plan for Israel is not yet complete! So the Gentiles who have been grafted into God's family should not become prideful or take God's grace for granted. "Remember it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." (Romans 11:18) Instead, they should wait and pray for the day when the partial hardening on Israel is softened because the full number of Gentiles have finally come in and God saves all of Israel.

How will that happen? Paul has no idea. He simply knows God is faithful. He will never abandon His people. His love is steadfast, loyal, and true. So at the end of all this deep wrestling there can only be an exclamation of praise. God is God. We are not. Thanks be to God! Or as Paul puts it, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33)

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 13-16

December 10, 2020

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Readings for today: Romans 13-16

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his farse of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground! Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values! Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain! Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. ALL of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi - though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything - including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

December 11, 2020

A LIVING SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

I've always been struck by the words Paul writes to his friends in Rome, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) The phrase "living sacrifice" is the one that intrigues me the most. What is a living sacrifice? What would my life look like if it were offered on the altar to God on a daily basis? How is what I have to offer holy and acceptable? Unblemished like the sacrifices of the Old Testament? Isn't spiritual worship redundant? These questions hit me again as I read through our readings in Acts this morning.

The same man who wrote these words to the Roman Christians is the same man who now faces danger at every turn. He has not ceased to preach the whole counsel of God wherever he has gone. He has planted churches in cities all across the Mediterranean. He has suffered hardship and beatings and been left for dead. He has relinquished all for the cause of the gospel. And what has that gotten him? A broken body in constant pain. An itinerant life with no place to call home. A life of discomfort and uncertainty as he follows the will of the Spirit. And here at the end of it all, his reward is greater persecution. Greater resistance. A price on his head.

"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:22-24)

Paul, indeed, is a living sacrifice. He has offered his body up to be tortured and killed for the sake of the gospel. He willingly walks into danger. He surrenders to the will of the Spirit. He knows his life is in God's hands to use as He sees fit. He has been warned. He knows the fate that awaits him in every city. Word has gotten out about this little Jewish-Christian preacher whose message stirs things up. The authorities are on the lookout. His enemies lie in wait. He has no refuge. No sanctuary. No safe place where he can go. Rather than lament his condition, Paul simply embraces it. He counts his life as nothing. His only goal is to finish his race. With every last ounce of strength, he will proclaim the gospel of the grace of God.

It's a deeply convicting and humbling read. It reminds me of the men and women I know in the Horn of Africa who take the gospel to some of the most dangerous places on the planet. They too are beaten. They too suffer hardship. They too are killed for their faith. But still they go. They refuse to let sufferings of this present life stand in comparison to the glory that will one day be revealed in them. Their names will never be known. They will not write any books. They will not speak at any conferences. They will not become social influencers. They simply go. They simply suffer. They simply die. All for the cause of the gospel of Christ. And they count it an honor to offer themselves as living sacrifices.

It's hard not to compare. My life is so easy. The comforts I enjoy so abundant. The challenges I face seem so small. My sacrifice so paltry. But then I look back at Paul's words again. What makes the living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God? Is it the cost? Is it the amount of suffering? Is it the burden borne? No. It is the mercies of God. By the mercies of God, I was born where I was born. By the mercies of God, I have been given the life I've been given. By the mercies of God, I face the challenges I

face. By the mercies of God, I am to offer what I have as a living sacrifice. This isn't about comparisons. This isn't about who's better or who's worse. Who's more or less faithful. It's simply taking what we have - by the mercies of God - and laying it on the altar. This is our calling and it is unique to each one of us.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 24-26

December 12, 2020

TESTIFY

Readings for today: Acts 24-26

"And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say." (Luke 12:11-12)

I love the Apostle Paul. He is a man singularly devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is a man possessed by his love for his Lord. He gives up everything in order to know Christ and to make Him known. He lays aside his earthly ambitions. He lays aside his desire for a family. He lays aside his budding professional career. All so that he might take the message of Christ to the nations. When he begins this journey, he has no idea where it will take him. No idea that towards the end of his life he will be testifying in front of kings and queens and rulers and authorities. There were no guarantees he would make it this far. No guarantees he would even survive the journeys he's been on. No guarantees he would be listened to along the way. He simply did what he was called to do which was testify to what he had seen and experienced in the presence of the Risen Christ.

Testimony. We hear this word and we think courtroom. We think of witnesses on the stand. We think of them telling a jury or a judge what they have seen. Their role is not to decide the case. Their role is not even to ask questions. Their role is simply to share their experience. As Christians, we give the word another meaning. Testimony is what happens when we stand before our brothers and sisters - often in a worship service - and share what Christ has done for us. Now too often these stories become all about us. But the more powerful testimonies are ones that make Christ known to those who are listening. They focus on Him and His saving work in the life of an individual. They focus on His mercy and grace and the changes He has wrought.

Every Christian has a testimony. Every Christian has a story of how they came to faith. Every testimony is literally a miracle of grace whether you were saved as a young child or you were delivered in the twilight of life after years of rough living. When was the last time you shared your testimony with someone? Have you ever thought about how to do that? How to explain to someone what Jesus has done for you? As the passage from the Gospel of Luke makes plain, you never know when you will be called upon to share your story. You never know when an unbeliever might ask you why you live the way you do. Why you serve the way you do. Why you give the way you do. They might ask you personally. They might ask you over social media. They might ask you to share publicly. And we do not need to be afraid or anxious in those moments because God promises to give us the words to say.

I think about the various places and people with whom I have shared my faith over the years. I think of the early days in dorms on the CU campus or on Pearl Street when I would testify to Christ. I think of the hospital where I worked after college and the many times I was able to share my testimony with fellow employees, those who worked for me, and even those in authority above me. I think of the many times I was able to share my testimony at New Jersey State Prison with the guards and non-Christian inmates. I spent an entire year testifying to a Muslim imam as we both tried to convert one another! ;-) I think of the testimonies I've been able to share with the people in the churches I've served. I think of the testimonies I've shared around the world in places like Ethiopia, China, and South Korea. Always about Christ. Always about His saving work in my life. Always about what He's done for me. The focus always and exclusively on Him.

There have been times when I have been nervous. There have been times when I've been afraid. There have been times when I've worried over how I would be received. There have been times when I've failed to speak. But each and every time I've stepped forth in obedience to Christ's call, the Holy Spirit has more than provided the words I needed to say. Friends, I challenge you to share Christ with those around you who do not know Him this Christmas season. Testify to all He has done for you. Testify to His unconditional love. Testify to His tender mercies. Testify to His amazing grace. Our world is desperate for redemption and it can only be found in Jesus, amen?

December 14, 2020

MISSION

Readings for today: Acts 27-28

A few years ago, a young missionary named John Chau was killed as he tried to reach an unreached people group with the gospel. His death kicked over a hornet's nest of controversy. Some saw him as yet another martyr to the cause of Christ on par with the Jim Elliott's of the past. Others saw him as yet another example of colonial Christianity seeking to impose his views on a tribe who clearly didn't want him on their island. The inhabitants of North Sentinel killed John Chau as he attempted to befriend them, bring them gifts, and, most of all, share Christ. Why the controversy? First and foremost, we live in a culture where evangelism is cast in a negative light. The idea that one person's views are superior in any way to another's is anathema. The Sentinelese had a right to be left alone. Their religious views are no one else's business. Christian missionaries should stay out. Second, we live in a culture where "Christian missions" have too often been used as a cover for Western European colonial expansion. The evidence is legion in Africa, Latin America, and other places around the globe. Western powers using the gospel as a pretext to overthrow governments, manipulate economies, and enslave entire people groups. Third, too many missionaries are naive in their approach. They don't take seriously the potential of introducing life-threatening disease to the local population. They don't take the time to understand the language or learn the culture or use intermediaries who are culturally closer to the unreached group to help make first contact.

By all accounts, John Chau truly made an effort to overcome these barriers and address these concerns. He spent a great deal of time in training. He trained his body. Trained his mind. Trained his spirit to endure the isolation he would experience should he make successful contact. He got the proper immunizations and quarantined himself to protect the Sentinelese from any potential disease. He studied their culture. Studied what was known of their language. He made multiple trips to the region to familiarize himself with the area. He made enough local contacts to provide transport. He clearly was not an agent of some foreign government seeking to extend their influence. Once the dust settled, the picture that emerged was that of an earnest, sincere believer in Christ who clearly felt called to reach one of the most isolated tribes left in the world with the gospel. Time will tell if his death will bear any fruit.

What does this have to do with today's Bible reading? I imagine Paul faced similar challenges in his own journey to Rome. I think about his encounter with the indigenous people on Malta. Having been shipwrecked in a storm, Paul escapes with his life along with the other sailors and soldiers who were aboard. They make their way to the beach where they were greeted with kindness by the locals. A fire was kindled. Food was probably brought. Paul even gets bit by a poisonous snake and survives! Eventually, they are taken to the leader whose father was dying of disease. Paul heals him. Word gets out. The people bring all their sick to Paul to be cured and this gave Paul an opportunity - though the passage doesn't make this explicit - to preach the gospel.

I imagine the same people who criticize John Chau would have criticized Paul as well. The only difference is enough time has past to see the fruits of Paul's labor. His efforts clearly succeeded. The seeds of the gospel he planted bore fruit. An empire was converted. The world was changed. But now Paul's come to the end. The race has been run. The cup emptied. He will be executed in Rome. The latest in a long line of first century martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

What can we learn from the example of Paul? Or the modern day example of John Chau? First, we must have a passion to reach the lost at all costs. There is an urgency to our mission because eternity is

literally on the line. Christ Himself commanded us to make disciples of all nations. He told us we would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This commission has never been revoked so we must be obey. Second, we must be willing to sacrifice comfort, safety, reputation, and resources if we are to accomplish this mission. Evangelism will not make us popular. Many will reject what we have to say. They will criticize us and call us names. They may accuse us of promoting white supremacy, neo-colonialism, etc. But we must fear God more than man. Finally, we have to be wise. We cannot confuse the mission with the methods. We cannot be so wed to a certain way of doing things that we make it more important than the mission itself. We must be culturally sensitive and aware. We must be willing to relinquish power and authority to indigenous leadership. We must be humble in our approach and not pretend we have all the answers. We must study the culture we are trying to reach diligently and honor as much as we can. We must openly acknowledge when we make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

The 29th chapter of Acts is being written even as we speak…what stories will be told about your mission work?

Readings for tomorrow: Philippians 1-4

December 15, 2020

MIND OF CHRIST

Readings for today: Philippians 1-4

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:5) This is often what’s missing from the church today. The mind of Christ. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is ours already through faith in Jesus?

Sadly, we do not take God at His Word. If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in “authenticity” do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humiliation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul’s life. He’s in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probably execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

“Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

”I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.”

Even my sufferings are nothing compared to what I have gained in Christ.

“I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ.”

All my strivings cease as I “press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I want to know nothing else but “Christ and the power of His resurrection.”

Does this mean we should abandon everything we have and go live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer, friends, is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. To get from here to there requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

December 16, 2020

CHRIST-LIKE RELATIONSHIPS

Readings for today: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

What makes a relationship Christian? What is God's design for relationships within His family? How are we as brothers and sisters in Christ to act towards one another? I think about these things a lot. Mainly because I am a pastor and I have a responsibility to help the people I serve grow in their relationships with Christ and with each other. I have often sat down with couples in marriage counseling to talk about the difference between a "Christian marriage" and two Christians getting married. I have often sat down with friends who are struggling to help them see the difference between a "Christian friendship" and two Christians who happen to be friends. I have spent a great deal of time with churches helping them navigate conflict and division and almost inevitably one of the key questions comes down to do they want to be a "Christian church" or just a bunch of Christians gathering together for worship, mission, fellowship, etc.

You might be asking yourself what's the big deal. It may feel like I'm making mountains out of molehills or playing with semantics. But listen to Paul's words to his Colossians friends and ask yourself if these same qualities mark your relationships.

"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12) What do you pray for when you pray for your spouse, children, extended family, friends, or your church family? Do you pray like Paul prays? Do you pray for them to be filled with God's wisdom and understanding? Do you pray for them to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord? Do you pray for them to bear godly fruit in their lives? Do you pray for them to be strengthened and filled with joy? One could easily spend a lifetime simply praying this one prayer from the Bible for those they know and I believe God would honor it in an amazing way.

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Colossians 2:1-3) Do you struggle and wrestle over those you love? The choices they make? The decisions they face? The consequences they have to deal with? Do you long for their hearts to be encouraged? For them to be knit together with you in love? For everyone to reach the full assurance of understanding and knowledge of the mystery of God which is Christ Jesus revealed in human flesh? Do you find yourself weeping over the lost? Crying out to God on behalf of those who are suffering? Doing all you can to come alongside those who are hurting? We live in a world that encourages you to "cancel" those with whom you disagree. Dismiss those who think or act differently than you. Separate from those who have hurt you. Jesus calls us to a different way. He calls us to abide even as He abides. He calls us to remain faithful even as He is faithful. He calls us to forgive and reconcile even with those we once named enemies.

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:2-3) It is so easy to let our minds be shaped by the things of this world. Politics. Economics. Prevailing cultural norms. Different philosophies. Jesus calls

us to set our minds on heavenly things. Heavenly realities. Heavenly truth. He calls us to transcend. To rise above the futile ways of this world. We have died with Christ. Our lives are hid with Christ. Our eternities secure in Christ. So we cannot submit again to the world's yoke of slavery.

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:12-17) In the final analysis, living a Christian life is not what your against but what you are for. It's not just about giving up but putting on. It's not just about relinquishing and letting go of sin as much as it is about taking up and clinging to Christ. Christian relationships require intentionality. They require a pro-active approach to one another. If we are to live in authentic Christian fellowship, we must take on attitudes like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We must bear with one another because none of us is in the exact same place in life. We must practice forgiveness and extend grace. We must be people of peace refusing to engage in the perpetual outrage cycle that consumes so much of our time these days. Above all, we must put on the love of Christ.

Friends, this world will do all it can to pull us apart. It exerts a powerful centrifugal force through the political and cultural wars of our time. The enemy loves nothing more than to sow seeds of division, disunity, and separation in the family of God. Don't give Him a foothold! The love of Christ is strong enough to hold us together! If He truly is at the center of your life and the center of your relationships and the center of your church, you will find Him exerting a centripetal force that will keep you together.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 1-4

December 17, 2020

TROPHIES OF GRACE

Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of God. The gift of God coming into the world. The Word of God becoming flesh and blood. The Son of God becoming one of us. I often wonder why God did it. Why did God come? Why did He send His Son? What was He hoping to accomplish? What did He hope to gain by humiliating Himself to the point of becoming a human being? Then I read these beautiful words from the Apostle Paul...

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:4-7)

When I was young, I had a bookshelf on which I displayed all my trophies. I had a letter jacket on which I displayed all my high school athletic accomplishments. I framed academic certificates for making the honor roll. I wore my Boy Scout uniform with pride because of the many patches and badges it displayed, each representing some kind of achievement including my Eagle. Now I am older but my tendency to put my achievements on display has not diminished. I sit in my office and to my right on the wall are all the degrees I've earned as well as my certificate of ordination and the senior preaching award I won at Princeton. All of us have a tendency to glory in our achievements and there's nothing wrong with being proud of the hard work you've put in or the accolades you've received along the way.

At the same time, we must also recognize success is fleeting. My old trophies are gathering dust in my parent's basement somewhere. My letter jacket and Boy Scout uniform hang in a dark corner of my closet. I can't for the life of me find a single honor roll certificate and I barely glance at the degrees on my wall. These things come and go. They are like the grass that withers or the flower that fades. Even if I were to spend my whole life conquering one mountain after another, eventually my strength will fail. Eventually there will be no more mountains to climb. No more prizes to win. What then?

Thankfully, life is more than what I achieve. Life is more than what I earn. Life is more than what I accomplish. Life. True life. Eternal life is a gift from God. It is unearned. It is unmerited. It is undeserved. While we were dead in sin, God made us alive. How? By His great mercy. Why? Because of the great love with which He loved us. For what purpose? To put us on display as a trophy of grace. Do you realize God's intent is to show you off for all eternity? Do you realize His greatest joy. His greatest delight comes in saving you? Do you understand that God has raised you up and seated you at His right hand so that in the ages to come all will see the immeasurable riches of Christ in you? Forget the plastic trophies we grasp so tightly! Forget the moth-eaten letter jackets and Boy Scout uniforms! Forget the degrees that fade! My life is a trophy of grace! My life is exhibit one of God's mercy! My salvation is God's achievement that will go on display for all eternity...for all to see...all for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

December 18, 2020

EXPERIENCING CHRISTMAS

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

"I cannot wait for Christmas!" How many of us have expressed that sentiment? Especially this year! When we were young, it probably had to do with getting more presents. But as we get older, the sentiment expresses some of the deepest longings of our hearts. We wish there was more kindness in the world. More gentleness. More compassion. As we feel the effects of the social distancing and isolation from COVID, we wish we could spent more time with friends and family and those we love. We wish we could experience more of the beauty that makes up the magic of this particular season. Perhaps most of all, we wish we could connect with God every day like we do when we sing "Silent Night" while holding candles with hundreds, perhaps thousands of other voices at the foot of the manger. In that moment - and perhaps only for that moment - the cares and worries and struggles and heartaches of this world are forgotten as we focus in on the Christ child.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people..." Paul's talking about the miracle of Christmas. He's not only talking about what happened but why it happened and how we can experience a bit of Christmas every single day of our lives. Jesus came to bring salvation to all people. And part of His great salvation plan - the plan that was unveiled for all to see that first Christmas night in Bethlehem - is to train us to live godly lives in this ungodly world. Train us to be little lights in the darkness of our world. Train us to cling to hope amidst the hopelessness and despair of our world as we wait for the day of Jesus' Second Coming. The Second Advent. The Day the promise of Christmas will be finally and completely fulfilled.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." (Titus 2:11-14)

What does it mean for us to experience Christmas on a daily basis? What would it look like to lay claim to the grace God offers us in Jesus Christ each and every day? It has to do with living a godly life. And what is a godly life according to Paul? It is self-controlled. Good and upright. Pure and holy. Notice he does not say "perfect." We are never perfect this side of heaven but Christmas stirs in us the hope that one day Jesus Himself will come. He will redeem us and our world from all lawlessness and sin and evil and death. He will purify us once and for all as He ushers us into His Kingdom. The Kingdom He's been preparing for us from before the foundations of the world.

The reality is we can be kind in this world. We can be gentle. We can be compassionate. We can make more time for friends and family and those we love. We can experience the beauty of God's creation every day in a sunrise or hiking up a 14'er or fishing a mountain stream. We can give gifts year round and seek to bless those around us. We can gather for worship every single Sunday with God's people and sing songs of deliverance and praise to our God. These are things we can do. Even here. Even now. Even in the midst of a global pandemic. Nothing stops us. Nothing keeps us from intentionally living with the "Christmas spirit" year round.

Think of the witness it would be if Christians were truly "zealous for good works." If we were truly passionate about the works of God. Think of how it would change our neighborhoods if we started con-

necting with people even in a socially distanced way? Think about how it would change our work environments if we got there just a little early to make the coffee or sent out a few thank you notes to the rest of the staff? Think about how it would change the social fabric of our schools if Christian students made the intentional decision to love those who are marginalized? Those who are ostracized or bullied? Those who seem so alone? Think of how our churches would change if we extended grace to those who hurt us rather than judgment? If we forgave those who sinned against us rather than leave and head to the church down the street? Think of how the world would change if we saw our wealth and resources as tools in God's hands to bring life and light and health and hope in the name of Jesus? All this is possible for those who know and follow Christ.

If you've ever wished it could be Christmas every day, I have good news for you! It can be! Simply love and obey Christ. Live a life of praise and worship and joy before your Redeemer. Renounce your ungodly and worldly passions. Those things only get in the way. Instead, live your life for Jesus. Invite others to join you. Serve those whom Jesus' loves - the lost and the least in your community - and you will discover the peace the angels proclaimed at Jesus' birth.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Timothy 1-6

December 19, 2020

REAL LIFE, REAL FAITH

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man (think teenager) who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They come to worship. They come to trade. They come to make deposits at the Temple which serves as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. When your mentor Paul first preached here, he threatened the status quo. The gospel turned the entire social and economic system on its head and a riot ensued. And now the church he started is facing significant challenges. And you're the pastor. You're the one called to lead them in the midst of a thoroughly pagan and hostile culture.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up immediately is syncretism (e.g., the merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith). Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Their own syncretistic ways are exposed as they realize how much cultural baggage they've brought with them. Some of it comes from the new believers as they struggle to leave their old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul is warning Timothy about as he begins his letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7)

Why is this so important? First and foremost, eternity is on the line. The primary message of the gospel is "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15) Nothing can be allowed to get in the way of Jesus and those He came to save. Not the myths of the Ephesians nor the laws of the Jews. Second, what we believe shapes how we live. Throughout his letter, Paul will offer Timothy advice on a variety of subjects. Prayer. Leadership. Spiritual discipline. Teaching. Mentoring. Money. All of these are very practical, down to earth realities in the church Timothy serves. All of these probably caused Timothy a rash of headaches over the years. Most of the conflict in the church of today revolves around many of these issues. So not much has changed since the 1st century. And Timothy is young, as Paul points out. He is green. He probably doesn't have a ton of experience to fall back on as he looks to lead his congregation. So Paul encourages him to fall back on his faith. On his call to be a pastor. One that was confirmed by the council of elders when they laid hands on him. Timothy is not to let himself get bogged down but instead is to pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is just as easy for us to get bogged down. We read a letter like this and we get wrapped around the axle on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century cul-

ture. We get so hung up on making sure the finer points of our theology align that we forget the major point Paul is making. “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5) Get this part right and the rest has a way of taking care of itself.

December 21, 2020

A LIVING HOPE

Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "Hope is not a strategy." I tend to agree with it. Even used it myself as I work with people who are struggling with addiction or deep life-change. The reason why it resonates is because we too often equate "hope" with wishful thinking or naive optimism. We connect "hope" with earthly desires or selfish ambitions. We too often associate "hope" with unattainable goals and dreams. Christian hope is different. It is grounded in the most fundamental reality of human existence…the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One of the most striking things about Christians throughout the centuries and even around the world today is their ability to persevere under persecution. I think of the men and women I know who risk their lives in places like North Korea, China, Ethiopia, and South Sudan to bring the gospel to their people. They are often imprisoned. Beaten. Abused. Sometimes they even are killed for the sake of their faith. I think of a man I once met who had been shot point blank in the temple. The bullet passed through his left eye, broke the bridge of his nose, and exited out the other side of his head. Somehow he survived and recovered and continued to preach! Incredible! How is such a thing possible? He had been born again to a living hope.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Friends, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is our guarantee that everything we believe is true. The historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead forms the foundation of our faith. We do not hold to a blind faith. Our hope is not in vain. God has revealed Himself fully in His Son. He has made Himself known to the world through Jesus. In Christ, He has kept all His promises. And when we place our faith in Jesus, we are truly born again to a living hope. A hope grounded in the reality that the Risen Christ now lives and reigns in glory forever.

This reality should frame our entire lives. It should frame how we think, how we feel, how we act. It should frame how we plan and what we pursue. We have an inheritance - guaranteed by God Himself - that is being stored up for us in heaven! It is imperishable. Undefiled. Unfading. God Himself guards it by His sovereign power. Yes, we have yet to attain it. Yes, we will only get a taste of it in this life. Yes, there will be hardships and sufferings and trials and tribulations that may cause us even to question it at times. But if we endure. If we persevere. If we hold fast to our faith, we will find ourselves being refined as pure gold.

This Christmas season. In the midst of all the COVID restrictions. In the midst of the economic fears and hardships. In the midst of the mental health challenges. I pray you find your hope renewed. I pray

you look to the revelation of Jesus Christ in the manger on Christmas Eve and rejoice with joy over His birth. He is the goal of our faith. He represents the salvation of our souls. All that is His will one day be ours in glory. Believe this, dear friends, for it truly is the miracle of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 1-4

December 22, 2020

INCARNATION

Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

Incarnation. It's a big theological word that gets thrown around this time of year. It's a word we use to describe the mystery of God becoming one of us. The Word of God taking on human flesh. The Lord of the universe coming into our world as a helpless human baby. If we're honest, none of us truly grasp this mystery. None of us can wrap our minds or hearts around it. All we can do is gather around the manger in wonder and awe. It's a miracle to behold rather than understand. At the same time, we must probe the mystery. Faith seeks understanding. And the writer of Hebrews is a great guide.

Listen to how he describes the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The miracle that took place that first Christmas. The wonder of the Christ child who lay in the manger.

"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:3) Can you imagine? The same God who shaped and fashioned the world, can barely grasp Joseph's finger. The same God who upholds the universe by the word of His power must now learn his first words just like any human child. The same God who dwells in glorious, unapproachable light is born in the darkness of a peasant home among the animals. And yet, from the very beginning, there was something different about this child. Angelic choirs accompanied his birth. Shepherds left their fields to find Him. Mary and Joseph gazed in awe at their newborn child. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of a virgin womb. God Himself clothed in human flesh.

"But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Hebrews 2:9-10) God subjects Himself to suffering. Why? What would ever prompt such a thing? Why not just eradicate suffering? Why not just do away with all death? Why not just step in and get rid of evil? God desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of His truth. And His eternal plan from the beginning was to accomplish that salvation by becoming one of us. One with us. The One who created the angels subjects Himself to weakness. The One who was crowned with glory and honor subjects Himself to death. The One who exists in eternal perfection is made even more perfect through suffering. This was God's plan from eternity.

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:14-18) Through the sin of Adam, death entered the world. Death is the righteous punishment for sin. But it is temporary. It is not part of the eternal order. Death was never intended to reign forever. According to His sovereign plan, God enters the world at the right time. He becomes flesh and blood just like His children. He dies so that He might destroy the power of death once and for all. He literally becomes sin for us so that we might become His righteousness. Death is no longer to be feared. Death is no longer to hold dominion. Our great enemy is robbed of his greatest weapon. All by the One who became one of us. As the great church father, Gre-

gory of Nazianzus once put it, “That which is unassumed remains unhealed.” God was made like us in every respect. Every facet of human existence is taken up into God’s divine life. He suffered. He was tempted. And this is what makes Him our faithful high priest. He is able to help us because He understands us.

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16) Ultimately, the only reason we can draw near the throne of grace with confidence is because of what Jesus has done. By coming into the world, Jesus opens a door into the very presence of God. He lights the way so we might find our way in. He raises every valley. He brings every mountain down. He makes the crooked path straight and the rough places plain. God did all of this in Jesus Christ in order to save to the uttermost those who would draw near to Him. Merry Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 5-8

December 23, 2020

OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

God is eternally consistent. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, a single story unfolds. God creates the universe and all that is in it. It is good. It is beautiful. It is right and true. He makes a man. Made in His own image. Places him in creation as a “priest” of sorts. One who exercises dominion over all God has made. One who keeps the Garden and makes it flourish. One who lives for God and His glory. But Adam fell into sin. The original high priest unfaithful. The impact is devastating. All of creation falls into ruin for lack of a faithful high priest who will present her to God holy and without spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Time moves on. Another priest is called. Noah. Set apart by God to exercise dominion over a new creation. The new world that emerges from the flood. But again, the high priestly line fails. Rather than be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth; they stick together. They build a tower. A temple to their own name. God looks down. Confuses their languages. Scatters them across the earth.

More time passes. Another priest. Abram. Called out of Ur, he will be the father of a new nation. They will become a holy priesthood. A people for God’s own possession set apart to exercise dominion over the earth. They are to walk in the light of God and teach the other nations to do the same. Once again, the high priestly line fails. They turn inward. They hoard the blessings of God. They become entitled. Prideful. They scorn the Gentiles they are called to serve. God punishes them and sends them into exile.

God goes silent. Four hundred years. God raises up yet another high priest. His only begotten Son. Jesus becomes one of us. Takes on human flesh. Assumes a broken human nature. He lives among us. Walks among us. Teaches us. Heals us. Suffers for us. Dies for us. He experiences all that human life has to offer. The good. The bad. The ugly. All so He can fully and rightfully represent us before the Father. At the same time, He remains God. His divine nature is never relinquished. So He can fully and rightfully take on the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest. His divine and human natures satisfying every aspect of the covenant God first made back in the Garden.

This is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. He lives to make intercession for you. His sacrifice on your behalf has been accepted. You are set free. Receive this free gift from your high priest and place your trust and confidence in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 9-13

December 24, 2020

THE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS

Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

It is fascinating to read the book of Hebrews during the Christmas season. To dive deep into the mystery of the incarnation. To grasp the full sweep and scope of God's salvation plan. Whoever the author of Hebrews is, he is intimately familiar with the Old Testament. He is also skilled at Jewish midrash which is an intepretive method that infused fresh meaning into the biblical texts. Jesus is his interpretive lens. He looks back on the ceremonial religious laws of the Torah and reinterprets them in light of Christ. The priesthood, sacrifices, and Temple are all reimagined. The high points of Israel's history are revisited as are the great heroes and heroines of the faith. It's like a fog has lifted for the author and they are seeing things clearly for the very first time.

Many years ago, I had LASIK surgery on my eyes. I have worn glasses since the fourth grade. My vision was terrible. I was as near-sighted as they come. Then I had the procedure. I remember walking out of the office and it was literally like scales had been lifted from my eyes. I could actually see things like the alarm clock in the morning or the individual leaves on the tree in my front yard. It was an incredible feeling.

I imagine the author of Hebrews felt the same way. You can almost feel the energy coming off the page. If you listen closely, you can sense his excitement and joy as he shares what he's discover. Now it all makes sense! Now it all has become clear! This is why God instituted the sacrificial system and this is how God brings that system to completion! His own Son serves both as High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice. He bears His own Body into the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple and satisfies the just demands of God's Law once and for all. This is the mystery of salvation all of our forefathers and mothers in the faith looked forward to and now it is ours to see and to touch and to taste! The promised new covenant has been given. The new age inaugurated. The gates of heavenly Jerusalem thrown open. The angels gathered, along with the saints who have gone before us, to join the party. A gift is being offered. An unshakable kingdom that will never fall for it's foundation is Christ Himself!

Can you feel him? Can you sense the passion behind his words? You can almost hear him crescendo as he brings his sermon to a close. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking!...Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:22-29) I know I'd be shouting for sure! :-)

Friends, the Christmas gift God offers us in Jesus Christ is nothing short of heaven itself. This is what makes Christmas so meaningful. Yes, we'll get time with dear friends and family. In person or over Zoom. Yes, work slows down and school lets out. Thanks be to God because I know we're all exhausted! Yes, we give and receive gifts with glad and generous hearts. But the most important thing - the one thing we simply cannot miss - is the gift of Jesus! Through Him we receive eternal life in an eternal relationship with an eternal God who reserves a place for us in His eternal Kingdom. To Him be all the praise, honor and glory forever!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Timothy 1-4

December 26, 2020

TRAIL MAINTENANCE

Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude

I joined the Boy Scouts when I was young. By and large, I loved the experience. Loved to camp. Loved to hike. Loved all the adventures. One thing I didn't love was trail maintenance. Our troop adopted a trail down at Hankins Pass. Twice a year we would go there to perform maintenance on the trail. We would cut down trees. Clear any brush. Pick up any trash that had accumulated. The older boys and men would build water bars. Divert streams if necessary. Repair or replace bridges. It wasn't easy work. But because the trail received regular maintenance, it stayed clear and open and many got to enjoy it.

I often think about that experience when I reflect on the journey of faith. When I first came to Christ, it was like I had arrived at a brand new trail head. I was taking a path I had never trod. I was seeking a way where there had been no way. As I stared at the wilderness that lay before me, I realized I would need to cut a new trail in my life. The old ways simply wouldn't do. The old paths I had taken led only to dead ends. Jesus was calling me to a new way. His way. The only way. Listen to how the Apostle Peter describes it in our reading for today…

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:3-8)

The power to follow Jesus does not come from us. I did not have the strength to cut a new trail. I did not have the wisdom to know where to go. But thankfully, Christ Himself grants us His divine power to lead and guide us into all righteousness. In Him, we have everything we need that pertains to life and godliness. With Him at our side, we can cut a new trail of faith through this life. This will require effort. Peter makes this clear. We must make every effort to supplement the faith we've been given with virtue and knowledge and self-discipline and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love. These qualities come only as we continue to walk the path Jesus lays out for us. They come as we remain in step with His Spirit and maintain our walk before Christ. We cannot grow lazy lest our path become overgrown. We cannot neglect the ordinary means of grace like prayer and Scripture reading and corporate worship lest the path of faith become hidden to our eyes as the wilderness of sin closes back in.

Spiritual growth requires constant maintenance. It requires constant vigilance. It requires constant attention. You must go back over the path again and again and again to make sure it remains well-trod. This is true in every area of life. Habits form new pathways in our brains. The behaviors we engage in shape us as much as we shape them. The choices we make in life are often pre-determined by the path we find ourselves on. So here's the question for us as we come to the end of 2020 and look to begin a new year…are you on the narrow way that leads to Jesus? What new trails is Christ calling you to cut in the 2021? How are you preparing yourself? What's the first step? As you look back on the challenges

of the last year, what impact has 2020 had on your trail of faith? What maintenance do you need to do? What repairs will you need to make? What parts of your trail remain well-trod? As you walk back over the trail of your life, what parts of the trail remain familiar and comfortable? Every year represents a new beginning. A new opportunity to grow in our faith in Christ. Reading through the Bible each year is one way to keep our paths clear from the obstacles of sin. I hope you'll sign up and invite your friends and family to join us in the new year!

December 28, 2020

CHRISTMAS: GOD'S GREAT RESCUE MISSION

Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

I love the opening to John's first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

John saw Jesus with His own eyes. Touched Him with his own hands. Heard Him speak with his own ears. He saw the Word of Life manifest itself in the Person of Jesus. He experienced Him. He knew Him. He testifies to Him. He dedicates his entire life to proclaiming Him to the world. Jesus was not a mystery to John. His life, death, and resurrection were real. Tangible. Concrete. His was no blind faith.

John understood why Jesus was sent into the world. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, goes to great lengths to convince those to whom he's writing to believe. To place their faith in Christ. To trust in His saving death. This is what makes John's joy complete. The idea that anyone and everyone who reads his letters would enter into deep, intimate fellowship with the Father through the Son.

Christmas, according to John, is not overly sentimental. It is not so much about the birth of a baby as it is about the mission that baby was sent to complete. Jesus was sent to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) Jesus was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Jesus was sent to cast out fear by laying down His life in perfect love. (1 John 4:18) So yes, celebrate the birth of the Savior! Worship Christ the newborn King! But never forget what our King was sent to do. He was sent to bring life out of death. Light out of darkness. Love out of hate. In order to do that, He had to suffer and die. Become sin itself and descend into the eternal darkness of hell. He had to become the object of hate and rejection and humiliation. All of this, Jesus did for us. Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus did to save us. This is the true meaning of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 1-5

December 29, 2020

SECOND ADVENT

Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

As Christmas begins to fade into the rear view, reality begins to sink in again. We step on the scale and find we've picked up a few more pounds. We make trips to the store to return or exchange some of the gifts we received. We dread the arrival of the next credit card statement. The challenges of this past year add additional layers. Feelings of loss. Feelings of grief. Feelings of frustration over the restrictions that limited our celebrations. Perhaps it is appropriate that we begin Revelation as the year comes to a close. For the deepest longings of our hearts will always go unfulfilled this side of heaven. What we need is the second advent. The second coming of Christ. We look forward to the day when He comes again. The time when the living and the dead are raised. Heaven and earth coming together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure in the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend freedom and grace to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses..."I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

These are important words to reflect on as are the Spirit's warnings to the seven churches. They provide a spiritual barometer of sorts to help us discern how ready we truly are for Christ's return. Have we abandoned our first love? Are we facing persecution for our faith? What idols do we cling to? What sexual immorality do we engage in? Do we tolerate sin? Are we ambivalent towards the gospel? Is our faith lukewarm at best?

These are important matters for prayer as we close out one year and head into another. What lessons have the challenges of 2020 taught you about your faith? What spiritual commitments will you make in 2021 to help nurture your relationship with Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 6-10

December 30, 2020

SEALED. SAVED. SENT.

Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

One of the more common questions I get from the book of Revelation has to do with the identity of the 144,000 listed in Revelation 7. Those who take a “dispensational premillenialist” view of Revelation will argue that after the rapture of the church, the Holy Spirit will set apart 144,000 Jewish believers who evangelize the earth. Others will argue - like the Jehovah’s Witnesses - that this is a special group of believers set apart by God. My belief is that this number is symbolic, representing the full number of those who have been redeemed.

Again, this is muddy water we’re swimming in. Interpreting Revelation is difficult at best and there are godly men and women who take different positions on these issues. So it’s important to hold loosely here to our eschatological positions while we hold tightly to one another in fellowship.

Why do I believe the 144,000 is symbolic? Several reasons. First and foremost, is the fact that the number itself is highly stylized. Numbers are often used symbolically throughout Scripture to communicate a deeper truth. We have already seen from much of the writings of the New Testament that one of the biggest challenges facing the early church was the inclusion of the Gentile believers into largely Jewish fellowships. Remember, John is writing to actual churches who are facing severe persecution and he is seeking to encourage them. So it makes perfect sense to me that in John’s vision from God, an angel of the Lord seals 144,000. A number combining the 12 tribes of Israel with the 12 apostles of Jesus multiplied by 1000 - a number which the Bible often uses to describe a multitude too large to count. Indeed, the very next section talks about “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10)

Second, the list of the tribes of Israel is unique and highly stylized as well. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus is descended from this particular tribe thus giving him primacy over his older brother Reuben. Joseph is listed which is unusual as his place was taken by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi is listed which is also somewhat unusual in that he is left out of some Old Testament lists since he didn’t inherit any land. Also, because room needs to be made for both of Joseph’s sons to be listed. Dan is left out, perhaps because his territory was the center of idolatry in ancient Israel. The point here is that this list is unique and actually not in alignment with Old Testament history which means a more symbolic, theological point is being made.

Third, this number reappears in Revelation 14. The 144,000 is described as the “redeemed from the earth” or “redeemed/purchased from humanity” which is universal language. Furthermore, if one is going to take a more literal view then one has to conclude that the 144,000 represent a special group of celibate, Jewish evangelists sent out to the earth. I tend to believe the language continues to be symbolic here with sexual purity representing the holiness attributed to those who believe - both Jew and Gentile alike - by the blood of the Lamb.

So what’s the point? Are we just arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? I think the larger issue at stake here is this...in this world we will suffer tribulation. In this world we will suffer persecution for our faith. Perhaps we’ve escaped for a time in America but those days are rapidly coming to a close. Christian hegemony has come to an end in the West and we will soon find ourselves

faced with the challenges our brothers and sisters face around the world. John's Revelation will become even more significant in the years ahead not as an intellectual exercise as we try to "crack the code" but as an encouragement in our suffering for Jesus. Just as John wanted to encourage the early Christians to hold fast to our faith even under great trial, so he encourages us to do the same. We have been sealed as God's own people. We have been set apart to proclaim the excellencies of His grace. We have been saved from a crooked and perverse generation and now are sent out to be His lights in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 11-13

December 31, 2020

NEW HEAVENS. NEW EARTH. NEW LIFE.

Readings for today: Revelation 11-22

Admittedly, I'm cheating a bit here. You still have a few days to finish if you want to space it out but if you're like me, you're probably ready to get to the end. Usually by this time in the year, I'm a bit tapped out. At the same time, I'm excited for page one. To begin anew. To start afresh. There's something about a new year that stirs my heart. We will be reading through the Bible again in the coming year. We'll start January 4th. Make sure to jump in and join the groups forming on YouVersion or Facebook or simply keep coming to this page to find new devotionals as you read. However, before you go, it's critical to remind ourselves where all of life, all of human history, everything in this world is headed.

I love the image of a new heavens and new earth. Creation redeemed. Creation renewed. Creation restored to its original glory. God finally putting an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. This is the final fulfillment of God's salvation plan. It's the final act of the divine play that's been working itself out since the opening words of Genesis. What began in a Garden will end in a glorious City with Christ reigning at the center of it all!

First, the new creation will be like a bride adorned for her husband. I remember well my wedding day. My wife has never looked more beautiful. Never more pure. Never more perfect than at that moment she walked down the aisle. (I have never felt more unworthy either!) The same is true for the new creation when it comes. God has always intended to have a relationship with His creation. He desires depth. Intimacy. Complete and total transparency. The kind of relationship we can only dream about this side of heaven. The kind of relationship of which human marriage is but a foretaste.

Second, there is no Temple. God is fully present and we are fully able to bear His presence in our glorified, resurrected bodies. God literally takes up residence with us. He can be seen. Touched. Heard. He wipes away our tears. He heals our infirmities. He makes us finally, completely, and utterly whole. There is no need for sun or moon for God will be our light. There is no need for walls or guards for God is in perfect control. There is no need for judgment or punishment for all the nations of the earth will walk in the light of the Lord and will bring Him the worship He deserves.

Third, there are no divisions in the new creation. No human distinctions to keep us apart. Every dividing wall of hostility will finally be torn down. The New Jerusalem is built on the foundation of the twelve apostles and her gates represent the twelve tribes. In other words, God will gather His people - Jew and Gentile alike - together and make them one. He will gather His people from every tribe, tongue and nation before His throne and all that separates us will fade away like mist before the Lord.

It's a beautiful picture, is it not? Now here's the challenge. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask for the church to be a living reflection of this future glory. We ask for God's will to be done in our lives. In our community. In our nation. In our world. How are we living and acting and speaking and treating others so that they see the new heavens and new earth emerging in our midst? How are we presenting to the world a picture of heaven? How are we giving those around us a foretaste of what's to come through what we say and do? Christians are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God in this world. As you close out your Bible reading this year, I'd encourage you to reflect on the following questions…

1) Is there less of you and more of Jesus than when you began this year?

2) What parts of your life have been crucified with Christ and therefore no longer live?

3) How have you intentionally died to self and sought to live for Christ?

Becoming more like Christ is more a marathon than a sprint. It involves a long obedience in the same direction. I hope you've gleaned that if nothing else from your reading this year. God is at work across the centuries and across the generations. His primary desire is to make us more and more into the image of His Son. To restore us to the image He originally intended for us to bear. May the Lord continue His work in us and among us and through us until He comes again! Maranatha!

2020 BIBLE IN A YEAR – CHRONOLOGICAL

Bible, Discipleship, Following Jesus

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