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February 1, 2021
OPEN HANDS

Readings for today: Exodus 16-19, Matthew 19:16-30

“Walk with open hands.” I remember when God first spoke these words to me. I was in my final year at Princeton. I had passed my ordination exams. I was completing my degree and getting ready to graduate. I was looking forward to what was next. I had applied to over thirty churches across the United States but had no idea where the Lord would take us. I had a good friend who took the opposite approach. He drew a circle around his hometown. 45 minutes in each direction. Only looked for churches within that window. He and I talked about the differences in our respective approaches. He believed God would never call him to leave his hometown. I believed the opposite. By limiting God, he really struggled to find work and when he did, he didn’t last long. For him, geography trumped ministry fit and it led to heartbreak. As I wrestled with my own sense of call and my own desire to be close to family and friends, I realized God often calls us away from home. God often calls us from what’s familiar into the unknown. God often calls us to leave home, kindred, and country to follow His call on our lives. Along the way, God also calls us to trust. Trust Him to lead. Trust Him to provide. Trust Him to deliver us safely to the destination He has laid out for us.

Walk with open hands. This, in essence, is what God is teaching Israel in our reading for today. Meat. Manna. Water. All of it had to be provided by God in the wilderness where resources were scarce. The command regarding the daily collection of manna always strikes me. “And when the dew had gone up, there was on the face of the wilderness a fine, flake-like thing, fine as frost on the ground. When the people of Israel saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.’” And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack. Each of them gathered as much as he could eat. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over till the morning...On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two omers each. And when all the leaders of the congregation came and told Moses, he said to them, “This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil, and all that is left over lay aside to be kept till the morning.’” (Exodus 16:14-19, 22-23) The people of God literally had to walk with open hands every single day. They had to trust the Lord to provide their food for that day and it was always just enough. There was never any left over. There was never any lack. It was always just right. If they tried to save some for the next day, it would spoil overnight. Except on the sixth day. On that day they gathered twice as much so they could observe the Sabbath. It’s a powerful lesson about the miraculous provision of God and it’s one the Lord reinforces in the prayer He taught His disciples to pray. “Give us this day our daily bread...”

Walk with open hands. Our lives are not our own, friends. We’ve been bought with a price. Jesus Himself now claims us as His own. We are His treasured possession to do with as He pleases. God continues to reinforce this idea in my own life. He’s loosened my grip on things especially over this last year. My plans. My calling. My job. My home. My children. My life. I’ve learned how much I need to come before Him for the strength and wisdom I need for each and every day. I cannot rely on yesterday’s manna. I cannot borrow from tomorrow’s supply. I must make do with what the Lord provides today and trust it will always be just enough.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 20-22, Matthew 20:1-16

February 2, 2021
MT. SINAI

Readings for today: Exodus 20-22, Matthew 20:1-16

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 descendants (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: 23-25, Matthew 20:17-34

February 3, 2021
GOD'S LAW

Readings for today: Exodus 23-25, Matthew 20:17-34

Someone recently asked me a great question, "If God were to come down and speak to us today, would his laws be the same or changed for the current day?" The laws we read about in Exodus, or later in Leviticus, definitely seem foreign and strange to us. They have to do with the customs of the ancient near east and while they represent in many cases significant advances in human rights for the time, we don't often see them as such because of how far human civilization has advanced.

One key to answering this question can be found in the difference between Exodus 20:1 and 20:22. In Exodus 20:1, God gives the Ten Commandments. They are written on stone tablets by His very hand. They are words directly from the mouth of God. However, in Exodus 20:22, a shift takes place. Now Moses will become the lawgiver. He will be the one to flesh out the details of the laws that will govern the daily life of Israel. Some of these laws will be ceremonial in nature, governing the worship of God. Some of these laws will be civil in nature, governing the emerging national life of Israel. Some of these laws will be moral in nature, governing God's people in every time and place. These distinctions are important to keep in mind as you read and they are the main reasons God's people have historically kept the Ten Commandments but not necessarily kept all the laws of Moses as they are written.

A second key to answering this question is pushing beyond the letter of the laws themselves to the principles they represent. This is where our study of these laws becomes very fruitful even for our own 21st century American context. For example, it's worth considering the dignity the Hebrews assigned to slaves, women, children, and families. Again, these were utterly unique among ancient law codes and represent a trajectory towards our modern understanding of universal human rights. Or consider the laws of proportional justice which limit revenge by making the punishment fit the crime. This principle still undergirds much of our modern legal system today. The principle of restitution is another one we understand and practice. As is God's concern for widows, orphans, and the poor.

Applying these principles in our modern, 21st century American context requires wisdom but it certainly isn't impossible. Let's take one example that is a political hot button today. Immigration. What does the Bible have to say about the principles that should shape our policies in this area? Consider the following verses, "You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21) "You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9) "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." (Ex. 23:12) God makes it very clear to His people that they should treat the immigrants within their midst with compassion and mercy and kindness and care. The same principle would apply to refugees. Those fleeing their homes due to political, social, or religious persecution. Why? Because this is how God treated them when they were immigrants in Egypt. Does this mean we should have open borders? No security? Just let everyone come on in? I don't think so. But I also believe that when immigrants come, in whatever way they may come, we need to treat them with as much care and compassion as possible. Their treatment at our borders should be modeled off of the love God has shown us. This is just one example of where truly seeking to follow the principles laid out in Scripture would make America a "light" to the nations.

Fundamentally, the Truth that undergirds the entire law of God is the idea that we should treat one another as we have been treated by God Himself. We should extend to others the same kindness,

compassion, mercy, and forgiveness that God has shown us. We should deal with one another righteously not just because “God said so” but because God DID so with us! This is what it means to keep and follow God’s law and it’s something Jesus Himself will affirm in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) which, by the way, is simply a restatement of the Ten Commandments.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 26-28, Matthew 21

February 4, 2021
AS IT IS IN HEAVEN....

Readings for today: Exodus 26-28, Matthew 21

In yesterday's reading, we came across this incredible story. "Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank." (Exodus 24:9-11) It's a powerful scene. Moses and the leadership of Israel going up the mountain to meet with God. The plain sense of the text suggests they actually enter heaven. They see God face to face. I try to imagine what that journey must have been like. One moment they are climbing over rocks and boulders and the next they're walking on sapphire pavement. One moment they are surrounded by smoke and fire and a great cloud and the next they can see for what feels like miles. One moment they're weary and tired and struggling for breath and the next they're sitting down at God's table to eat and drink.

"Mountaintop experiences" are part of the Christian life. Moments in time when it feels like the veil between this world and God's world grows very thin. It might happen on a retreat. It might happen during a worship service. It might happen on a mission trip. These are powerful experiences meant to propel our faith forward. When we have them, the temptation is to make them normative. To do all we can to hold onto them. I think of Peter, James, and John on a mountain watching Jesus become transfigured before them. Their response? Let's set up camp and hang out here forever! I imagine Moses and the rest of Israel's leadership must have felt the same way. But life isn't lived on the mountaintop. It's lived in the valley. So back down the mountain they go.

Then they come down and immediately construction on the Tabernacle begins. The place where God will meet with His people. The literal "tent of meeting." Tabernacle. Altar. Courts. Lamps and lamp stands. Curtains. Even the priestly garments of Aaron and his sons who will minister before the Lord. All have their antecedents in heaven. All are copied from the heavenly Tabernacle where Moses and the elders had just met with God. All are attempts to approximate what they had just seen and experienced. If you ever wonder why there is such attention to detail in these chapters, put yourself in their sandals. Would you not do the same? If you had just come from heaven, would you not want to recreate everything you have just seen?

Furthermore, they know they are building at God's direction and command. Pause and think about that for just a moment...the Living God who rules and reigns over the universe desires to meet with His people! He gives them plans to create a holy space where He can come down and dwell among them! Amazing! God claiming physical space on the earth which will be His space. Sacred space. Heavenly space. To enter this space is to enter heaven itself. To enter this space is to enter the presence of God in a very tangible, concrete way. How gracious is our God to condescend to us in this way!

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 29-30, Matthew 22:1-22

February 5, 2021
RENDER UNTO CAESAR?

Readings for today: Exodus 29-30, Matthew 22:1-22

“Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”
(Matthew 22:21)

I have long pondered the meaning of this verse. When I was younger, I subconsciously interpreted these words in dualistic terms. God ruling one sphere of life. Caesar ruling a second sphere of life. Keep God’s stuff apart from Caesar’s stuff. Don’t co-mingle your faith with the rest of your life. Pay your tithes to God. Pay your taxes to Caesar. Never the twain shall meet.

As I grew older, my thinking shifted. Is there a single square inch in all of creation over which Jesus does not reign as Lord? Does not God own it all? Including Caesar? Should I not render everything to God? Caesar has no claim on me. He has no claim on anything I have. He has no claim on what I believe or think or say or do. This led me to take a more hostile, rebellious approach to the world. To treat “Caesar” as an enemy and to resist his authority. I went from dualism to monism and missed the mark of what Jesus was saying yet again.

Now I find myself in a third theological space. A space where the distinctions between God and Caesar are maintained but God’s authority over all spheres is never compromised. God does indeed reign and rule over all. His reign and rule extends over even Caesar in this world. This, of course, is what the Pharisees were hoping Jesus would affirm so they could charge Him with sedition. Jesus, however, sees right through their ploy. More importantly, Jesus is operating on a completely different level than his opponents. God does not engage in the petty ways of this world. His authority and power are in no way dependent on any human recognition whatsoever. You have a question about taxes? Money is meaningless to God. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. You have a question about pagan images? Caesar putting his face to a coin? That’s utter silliness because Caesar is nothing in the eyes of God. He is no rival. He is no competitor. He is no equal. So humor Caesar. Give him what he thinks he deserves. Pay him whatever homage he asks for. Just make sure to never worship him as God. Never confuse him with anything other than a weak, sinful human being.

Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s but make sure to render to God what is God’s. Render to Him all your worship. All your devotion. All your praise. Give Him your total and complete allegiance. Surrender all to Him. Submit to His authority. Make any sacrifice He demands. Make Him your first love. Treat Him as your supreme treasure. Honor Him above everything else in your life. This is what it means to render unto God what He truly deserves and demands.

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 31-33, Matthew 22:23-46

February 6, 2021
WORSHIP

Readings for today: Exodus 31-33, Matthew 22:23-46

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 baffling display of weak leadership, plays to the crowd's desires. He fashions a calf. Builds an altar. Declares a feast unto the Lord. But this is not what God wants. Now we do need to keep in mind 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 is 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 whom 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. 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. Praying not for mercy but trusting God to be true to Himself. 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 and so Moses prays his prayer in 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 who 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 deeper 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 sent from the Lord as well as 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: None

February 8, 2021
KNOWING GOD

Readings for today: Exodus 34-38, Matthew 23:1-22

Today's reading is one of the most significant in all of Scripture. Moses appearing before God yet again on the top of Mt. Sinai. Moses receiving a second copy of the Ten Commandments as God turns aside his wrath and renews His covenant. Moses getting a chance to see the Lord as He descends in a cloud. "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) Can you imagine actually hearing the sound of God's voice? Actually seeing the rocks tremble and cry out at the coming of His presence? It's incredible.

Even more incredible is God's desire to be known. You see, God isn't interested in simply giving us a set of laws to follow. He wants us to call on Him by name. He wants us to become familiar with His presence. He wants us to trust His character. He is not just any god. He's not like the gods of the Canaanites, so capricious and arbitrary. No, our God is merciful and gracious. He is slow to anger. He abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation, forgiving all iniquity and sin, while at the same time exercising His righteous judgment on the guilty. He is a God of justice as well as grace. A God of holiness as well as love. And He shares all this with us so we can have a relationship with Him.

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

Fast forward hundreds of years. The same God who revealed Himself to Moses on Sinai. The same God who would meet with Israel in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. The same God who led them with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This same God is born in a peasant home in a backwater town in an obscure province of the Roman Empire. Laid in a manger. Worshiped by foreigners and shepherds and the poor of the village. He attracts the riffraff and the outcast. He eats with tax collectors and sinners. He keeps company with all kinds of strange people, even embracing Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus is merciful and gracious. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. He keeps faithfulness to the thousandth generation even though His own creation turns on Him and kills Him. He forgives all iniquity and sin. He takes on the righteous judgment of the Father, perfectly fulfilling the justice of God. And He does all this so we can have a relationship with Him. There simply are no words.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Exodus 39-40, Leviticus 1, Matthew 23:23-39

February 9, 2021
THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Readings for today: Exodus 39-40, Leviticus 1, Matthew 23:23-39

Leviticus. The bane of all Bible reading plans. It describes a world far removed from our own. A world of ritual purity maintained by a never-ending parade of sacrifices. It's a world of blood and fire and incense and strange worship. It's a world of intentionality where everything takes on a sacred tone. Food. Dress. Health. Wealth. All of it carefully regulated in order to preserve one's right relationship before the Lord. It's a world we frankly do not understand which is why so many of us skim through this book at best. But for those who have the courage and openness to truly enter this world on its terms, there is much to glean about the relationship between God and His chosen people.

First and foremost, I would argue Leviticus - in some sense - really begins at the end of chapter forty of Exodus with the coming of the presence of God into the Tabernacle. "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) The people of Israel have dedicated so much time and energy and resources to the construction of this sacred space. They have followed every command to the letter. They have prepared a house for God to dwell in. A tent to carry with them where God Himself will meet with them. And God is pleased. He comes to dwell in the tent of meeting. During the day, He appears as a cloud. A hovering mist for all to see. During the night, He is the fire that burns from within its folds, giving light to the entire camp. Can you imagine it? God being so fully present you can actually see Him? Speak with Him? Consult Him for wisdom? It's truly incredible and unique in the ancient world.

Second, God's presence among His people does create a problem. God is pure and holy. Sin cannot survive in His presence. God's people are impure and unholy. They are sinful and broken. A way must be made for them to approach God without fear of being consumed. So God institutes the sacrificial system. "The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him." (Leviticus 1:1-4) Israelites, young and old, can bring an offering to the Lord. They bring an animal without blemish to be sacrificed. They lay their hand on the animal's head and all their impurities pass onto the sacrifice. Theologically, this process is called "imputation." God "imputing" their sin to the animal and thus covering or "atoning" for their sin. In fact, the Hebrew word for "atonement" literally means "to cover" and once one's sins are "covered", one is able to approach the Lord without fear.

Christians, of course, see Jesus in this text. He is the great sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world. He is the one who made atonement for all humankind. His blood is sufficient to "cover" all our sin. On the cross, God imputed our sin to Christ which is why we can now approach the throne of grace with confidence. But that's not the end of the miracle. In a beautiful exchange known theologically as "double imputation", Christ's righteousness is now imputed to us. Listen to how the Apostle Paul -

himself an expert in Levitical law - puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus is the perfect Lamb of God. Spotless and without blemish. He is the greater sacrifice of God. Able to not only "cover" our sin but also to make us righteous in God's sight. Because of Him, we are able to draw near to God without fear and instead be embraced in His love.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 2-3, Matthew 24

February 11, 2021
Living Intentionally

Readings for today: Leviticus 4-6, Matthew 25:1-30

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

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 7-9, Matthew 25:31-49

February 12, 2021
SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Leviticus 7-9, Matthew 25:31-49

One of the biggest challenges in reading the Bible is keeping in mind the larger story. It is so easy to get down in the weeds whether we're talking about the laws of Leviticus or the statistics/genealogies in Numbers or the tragic stories in Judges. It's easy to lose sight of the big picture and how each of the books of the Bible ties together to illustrate a seamless whole.

The basic story the Bible tells happens in four acts. Act 1: Creation. God creating the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. Everything is good. Everything is right. Everything is beautiful. Humanity reigns and rules with God over all He has made. Act 2: Fall. Humanity rebels and decides to go it's own way. Sin enters the world. Creation falls into ruin. Death. Disease. Pain. Suffering. All become commonplace. Act 3: Redemption. God doesn't abandon His creation. Out of love He reaches out in rescue. Deliverance. Salvation. The culmination of His plan is Christ who defeats Sin and Death once and for all on the cross. Act 4: Glorification. The reunion of the heavens and the earth. The joining back together of the two spheres of life that were separated by the Fall. Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of this reality and His promise is that He will return one day to make all things new.

It's important to note that Acts 2 and 3 are running simultaneously throughout the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation, we see humanity rebel over and over against her God. We also see God's grace on display as He relentlessly pursues those He loves. The sacrificial system instituted by Moses in Leviticus is one movement, if you will, within Act 3. It is not the final movement. Rather, it points beyond itself to the climax to come when Jesus will become the Perfect, Spotless Lamb. This entire system with it's different offerings and different requirements and specific instructions is given as a means to prepare God's people for Christ. To get them ready so they will recognize Him when He appears. It's a system designed to prepare the heart and soul for the culmination of God's redemptive purposes.

By reading and reflecting on Leviticus, we are reminded over and over again of the extreme penalty our sin deserves. Death seems to reign throughout this book. You almost can't turn around without stumbling over the carcasses of bulls, rams, sheep, goats, and turtledoves. The sacrificial fires would have been kept burning day and night as the people of Israel - now numbering in the hundreds of thousands - came to make their offerings. The priests must have been exhausted from all the hard work of gutting and dressing and cleaning each animal. The smell would have permeated the camp. Again, all to remind God's people of the monumental effort it took to keep them holy before God.

This should only deepen our appreciation for Christ. Fully God. Fully Man. As God, He is fully able to satisfy the justice of God for all sin for all time. As Man, He is able to truly represent us. Take our place. Become our substitute. In Christ, Act 3 comes to its glorious close! The Father making Him who knew no sin (Christ) to become sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God! (2 Cor. 5:21) Because of what He has done, no more sacrifices are required. No more blood needs to be shed. We ARE holy just as He is holy! This is the glory of the gospel which the Levitical sacrifices foreshadow.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 10-12, Matthew 26:1-19

February 13, 2021
DANGEROUS WORSHIP

Readings for today: Leviticus 10-12, Matthew 26:1-19

We treat worship far too casually. We don't really understand the heart of it all. We don't really grasp the significance of coming into the presence of the Living God. We come and go as we please. We show up if we have nothing better to do. We complain if we don't like the music. We evaluate it based on whether we get anything out of the sermon. In short, we make the experience all about us. All about our feelings. All about our desires. All about our preferences. Then we come face to face with a story like today and we are confronted with how dangerous such attitudes can be.

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 we must challenge ourselves to become more aware of our surroundings. More aware of gulf that exists between an unholly people and a Holy God. More aware of the nature of the One we approach and to make sure we've made the necessary preparations in our own hearts before we come to worship.

The Israelites knew all this, of course. And yet 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 one of our dogs 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.

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 15, 2021
LESSONS ON COVID FROM LEVITICUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 13-15, Matthew 26:20-56

First of all, it needs to be said that Leviticus 13:40 brings great comfort. “If a man's hair falls out from his head, he is bald; he is clean.” :-)

On a more serious note, this is where Leviticus starts to get really challenging. Holy. Unholy. Clean. Unclean. Common. Polluted. Lots of words that we don't think much about in our own context and culture. This begs for some explanation. Scholar Gordon Wenham does a great job describing the distinctions in his commentary.

“Everything that is not holy is common. Common things divide into two groups, the clean and the unclean. Clean things become holy, when they are sanctified. But unclean objects cannot be sanctified. Clean things can be made unclean, if they are polluted. Finally, holy items may be defiled and become common, even polluted, and therefore unclean.... cleanliness is a state intermediate between holiness and uncleanness. Cleanliness is the normal condition of most things and persons. Sanctification can elevate the clean into the holy, while pollution degrades the clean into the unclean. The unclean and the holy are two states which must never come in contact with each other.” (pp. 19-20)

Why does all this matter? Because God's stated goal for His people is for them to be holy as He is holy. “For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not defile yourselves with any swarming thing that crawls on the ground. For I am the Lord who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:44-45) Yes, in Christ the ceremonial laws of Leviticus have been fulfilled. We no longer need to worry about clean and unclean animals. (See Peter's vision in Acts 10 as an example.) We no longer need to fear being made unclean by touching lepers or coming into contact with the dead. Through His shed blood, Christ has not only washed us clean (in the Levitical sense) but also sanctified us permanently! This is incredible to think about as we read about the rituals the Israelites had to perform!

In addition, it is fascinating to read these passages in the middle of a global pandemic. Leprosy was considered a highly contagious disease in ancient Israel. One they took very seriously not only for the reasons stated above. Those with leprosy were removed from community. They were isolated. Quarantined. Often grouped together in colonies where they struggled to survive. They were not allowed to mix with healthy people. They were barred from corporate worship. The local priests - who also served as frontline healthcare workers in their communities - monitored their care closely with the goal of restoring them to fellowship as soon as possible.

It's so tempting to read the Bible through western eyes. We read these chapters and immediately our hearts go out to those individuals who've contracted leprosy. We react to their pain on a visceral level as they are cast out of their homes and separated from their families. We fundamentally believe such measures are unjust and unrighteous. But there is another angle here as well. Reading these chapters through Middle Eastern eyes brings us to a much different conclusion. While we acknowledge the pain and suffering of the individual, we privilege the need to protect the community. When an individual becomes unclean either through personal sin or contracting a disease, they must be isolated lest the contagion spread and the community suffer. Practically speaking, these chapters from Leviticus show us what it means to put the needs of others before our own. To put the needs of the wider community above our own. To sacrifice for the greater good of those around us.

These are good words to prayerfully consider in the midst of the ongoing public health crisis. What has been your response to COVID over the last year? Have you been more focused on the health and safety of those around you in your community or have you been more concerned about your own personal freedom? How have the needs of others factored into your decision-making? It's not a simple process and there are no easy answers. COVID-19 has impacted every sector of society and the public health issues are multivalent. Economics. Education. Marriage and family. Mental and spiritual health. The suffering is immense. The challenges are enormous. Continue to pray for our political leaders to seek the wisdom of God so our communities can be restored as soon as possible. And, as you pray, consider how your own response to this crisis might lead to the restoration of community as well.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 16, Matthew 26:57-75

February 16, 2021
THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 16, Matthew 26:57-75

Matthew 26 is a powerful chapter that speaks to the humanity of Jesus. Eating at a table with his disciples. Enjoying one last meal with his closest friends before his arrest and execution. Then there is his time in the Garden of Gethsemane. He is sorrowful and troubled. His fears and anxieties rise. His soul in great distress. In agony, He weeps. He sweats great drops of blood. Some theologians speculate that what Jesus was experiencing in that 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 girl 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 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: Leviticus 17, Matthew 27

February 17, 2021
THE BETRAYAL OF JESUS

Readings for today: Leviticus 17, Matthew 27

This is one of the most gut-wrenching chapters in the Bible. Over and over again, Jesus is betrayed by those He loves and those He came to save. It begins with the abandonment of His disciples and the denial of Peter. Judas, overcome by guilt and shame at what he has done, changes his mind and tries to turn back the clock. Pilate, the one man with the authority to stop the charade, washes his hands of the whole episode. Even the crowds who had sung His praises just a few days before now turn on Jesus. Given the chance to set Him free, they choose Barabbas instead.

Then comes the Cross. Nothing beautiful about it. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. It represents the ultimate betrayal. 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. The soldiers 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?" Is this even possible? The Father forsaking - dare I say betraying - His only Begotten Son? 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. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul. 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. Betrayed by 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. On this Ash Wednesday, it is good for my soul to consider the depth of my betrayal. To ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 18-20, Matthew 28

February 18, 2021
THE GOLDEN RULE

Readings for today: Leviticus 18-20, Matthew 28

Raise your hand if you knew the Golden Rule came from Leviticus? 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."

These laws are so applicable in our world today! Could you imagine a community of people who sought to put these into practice? 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 21-23, Mark 1:1-28

February 19, 2021
SACRED RHYTHMS

Readings for today: Leviticus 21-23, Mark 1:1-28

Sabbath. It is a core, foundational principle in Scripture. Hardwired into our system at creation so that we could find rest. One day out of every seven. One year out of every seven. One year out of every fifty set aside for rest. Set aside to honor God. Set aside for not only our rest but that of the land. Animals. Basically, all of creation. A pattern God Himself followed at creation. Six days God labored to make the universe and all that is in it and on the seventh day He rested.

We ignore this command at our peril. Not just because God commands it. This is no arbitrary rule God puts in place to test us. It's not divine busy work just to make sure we are listening. No. God has hardwired the human body for rest. Our best medical professionals will tell you the source of so much of the depression, anxiety, fear, and pain we suffer from is due to the stress of feeling like we have to work 24/7. We are being crushed under the weight of the burdens we carry. The responsibilities. The obligations we've taken on as a family and as individuals in our world. Social media only exacerbates this problem with its never-ending stream of connection. The reality is we were not built to be "on" all the time. 100% productivity is a goal that will kill us if we achieve it.

I remember seeing this play out when I worked as the Manager of Patient Access Services at Boulder Community Hospital. The stated goal of the Human Resources department was to get maximum productivity from each employee. They actually had an equation they followed to determine how much each employee was expected to produce. They kept our available workforce as lean as possible in order to achieve this goal. The result was a much higher number of sick days, lower quality of life in the workplace, and therefore, lower productivity. In their effort to achieve maximum efficiency, they lost sight of the very real human cost.

That was almost thirty years ago. Things have not gotten any better. As a pastor, I watch as people try to squeeze 28 hours worth of work into a 24 hour time period. I see them running from dawn to dark, giving themselves barely any space to breathe, much less sleep. The result is broken marriages. Broken families. Broken lives.

The Sabbath is designed to create a "speed bump" in our lives. To get us to slow down. To rest. To let God be God. It is perhaps the most tangible expression of our faith because it forces us to relinquish control over our lives. When I Sabbath, I am letting God back onto the throne of my life because I am specifically choosing NOT to produce anything. And that's a good thing. Even a godly thing.

God loves His people. The feasts of Leviticus 23 set up a sacred rhythm in the national life of Israel. A rhythm designed by God with their good in mind. It was a rhythm intended to remind them of their need for God. Their need for His saving work in their lives. The need for His presence. His holiness. His justice. His mercy. His grace. It was a rhythm put in place to prepare them for the coming of the Messiah. According to the Book of Hebrews, Jesus is the Sabbath rest of God. Jesus is the Passover lamb who was slain from the foundations of the world. Jesus is the firstfruits of the new creation. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Embrace Jesus, friends. Embrace your Sabbath rest. Before you fill your schedule with all your pre-pandemic activities, make sure to build in the sacred rhythm God set up for you so you might experience the blessings He intends for your life.

Readings for tomorrow: Leviticus 24-25, Mark 1:29-45

February 20, 2021
LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Readings for today: Leviticus 24-25, Mark 1:29-45

Leviticus 25 is one of my favorite chapters because it gives us a snapshot of what life looks like under the reign and rule of God. If you've ever wondered what life will be like once heaven comes to earth and Jesus returns again, spend some time meditating on these verses. Consider the care God exercises for His creation. Ponder God's perspective on personal property. Think deeply about God's special love and provision for the poor. Fundamentally, these laws are designed to build trust.

Will you trust God to provide when you give your land a Sabbath rest? Will you trust the land to yield up enough of a crop on its own to feed your family and your livestock? Will you trust God to bless the land and make it fruitful? Allowing land to lie fallow for a period of time is important. It allows nutrients to replenish so it can produce during the years where you sow seed. We see similar practices in our own time as farmers rotate crops to allow certain sections of the land to rest for a year.

Will you trust God with your personal property? The Year of Jubilee was designed to serve as a reset for the people of Israel. All property was returned every fifty years to the original owners. Those who had fallen on hard times over the previous fifty years and were forced to sell off their inheritance as a result had the opportunity to get it back and start over. Those who had accumulated much and grown wealthy during the previous fifty years were reminded who truly owned the land and therefore were set free to be generous. While there is no evidence Israel ever declared a Year of Jubilee, the principle is a beautiful one. We are all essentially "stewards" of what we've been given. Everything we own is God's and is intended to be used for the blessing of others.

Will you trust God as you care for the poor? No charging him interest. No enslaving him for economic gain. No price gouging or huge markups to take advantage of his helpless condition. Quite the contrary. You are called to take him into your home. Care for him as you would your own. Treat him as part of the family. You do this to honor the memory of your family's slavery in Egypt and to honor the redemption of God.

Can you imagine how different life would be if we would follow these principles? Imagine a world where the church were on the front lines of caring for creation, caring for the poor, and held all things in common. You actually don't have to imagine it. Just look to the early church. This describes the life they pursued and it's what gave their witness such power. From the first to the fourth century, the number of believers grew from a few thousand to almost twenty million! They literally conquered an empire! Not by military might but by the sacrificial way they lived.

I know there are many praying for revival in our nation today. Many praying for the spiritual renewal of the church. I am too. I join them in those prayers. However, I also know revival comes through repentance. And repentance is about turning from the sinful, exploitative ways of this world to the generous and gracious ways of God. May the church hear and respond to the call of the gospel! May our lives become a reflection of what it means to live in God's Kingdom!

Readings for tomorrow: None

February 22, 2021
A NEW EDEN

Readings for today: Leviticus 26-27, Numbers 1, Mark 2

What is God's will for my life? What is God's will for our life together? What is God's will for His people? His church? Here at the end of Leviticus, we catch a glimpse of the new Eden God desires to create on earth. It's the fulfillment of the prayer Jesus will later teach His disciples to pray - "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is an echo here of eternity as God once again reaffirms His desire to walk with His people in the Garden in the cool of the day. "I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect." (Leviticus 26:11-13)

God has always intended to make His dwelling place on earth. To live in intimate relationship with the creature He made in His own image. This is why God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. It's why He calls them a chosen race, a holy people, a royal priesthood, a people for His own possession. It's why He gives them the Law on Sinai. It's why He shapes their national and communal life through the Levitical code. It's why He sets up a priesthood and gives them plans for a tabernacle. God is seeking to set His Kingdom up on earth. His plan is for His people to be the city on a hill that cannot be hidden. The light of the world that cannot be quenched. The salt that is spread far and wide to bring flavor and preservation to all of life. Israel is intended to be a new Eden. An Eden the nations can actually see and touch and taste and feel. In this new Eden there is abundance. There is overflowing life all around. There is peace. There is safety and security. Listen to how God describes it, "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last to the time of the grape harvest, and the grape harvest shall last to the time for sowing. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land securely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid. And I will remove harmful beasts from the land, and the sword shall not go through your land. You shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred of you shall chase ten thousand, and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. I will turn to you and make you fruitful and multiply you and will confirm my covenant with you. You shall eat old store long kept, and you shall clear out the old to make way for the new." (Leviticus 26:3-10) Sadly, Israel does not keep God's commands. Israel quickly abandons God's ways. Instead of blessings, all the curses of God fall. The nation is shattered. The people are scattered. Their glory becomes a byword to the nations of what happens when one fails to walk in faithfulness with God.

The same is true for us. God's plan hasn't changed. He still longs to make His dwelling among us. He longs to walk with us in the cool of the day. He longs to be our God and for us to find our true identity in belonging to His people. If you have doubts, all you need to do is look to Christ. In Christ, the Word of God became flesh and blood and made His dwelling among us. In Christ, the Word of God walked with us and talked with us. Healed us and comforted us. Suffered for us and died for us. In so doing, He broke the bonds of slavery to sin and death. No longer do we need to be afraid. No longer are we held captive by our anxiety. Christ has broken the bars of our yoke once and for all and caused us to walk erect once more. Shoulders back. Heads held high. We are now sons and daughters of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So why then do we so often fail? Why then do we face so much hardship and pain? Why do the rains not always come on time? Why do the harvests fail? Why is there so much violence in our land? Why do we feel so afraid? It's because we've abandoned our covenant with God. We no longer find our truest and deepest identity in Christ. We lose sight of Him and instead chase our own ambitions. Our own dreams. Our own desires. We are double-minded people. Caught between worlds. On the one hand, we long to live in Eden. We long for God's Kingdom. On the other hand, we kind of like our lives in this world. We like our stuff. We like our lifestyles. We like to be in control. We are no different than our spiritual parents in Israel. We struggle to live in perfect dependence on God and this is why the "edens" we create are but a pale reflection of the paradise God has planned for us.

So what's the answer? What shall we do? We look to Christ. We seek our greatest satisfaction in Him. We place our faith in His finished work. We follow Him out of love and devotion not obligation. We deny ourselves. We lose our lives. We seek to serve rather than be served. We give our lives as a ransom for many just as He did for us. This is what it means to pick up our cross and follow after Christ. And this is what gives us access to a new Eden. A life with God that never ends.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 2-3, Mark 3

February 23, 2021
WAS JESUS CRAZY?

Readings for today: Numbers 2-3, Mark 3

I want you to close your eyes for a moment and engage in a thought experiment. Imagine you have a son who decides to quit his job one day and begin a protest movement against the government and the social injustices of his day. Imagine him earning no income. Living off the generosity of others. Imagine him traveling the region and gathering large crowds. Imagine him with a bullhorn out front preaching. Imagine him calling out the authorities. Confronting them on their corruption. Insulting them at times. Posing a direct threat to their power. Imagine hearing rumors about plots on his life. Imagine him speaking up for the poor and marginalized. Those who've suffered injustice or oppression. The forgotten of society. Imagine hearing all kinds of crazy stories about him healing people or casting out demons. Now imagine everyone knows he's your son. Everyone knows he belongs to your family. And the people back home are whispering. Rumors are spreading. It's getting embarrassing. The local police drop by and interview you. You begin to wonder if your son's behavior is putting your life in danger. How would you respond?

Perhaps like Jesus' family? "And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind"....And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." (Mark 3:21, 31-32) It's hard to believe. Jesus' own family standing in opposition to Him. Jesus' own flesh and blood opposing Him. It's part of the story we often forget. The images we have of Mary, Jesus' mother, are at the manger or at the cross. We rightfully honor her for her faithfulness but she too had her moments of doubt. We read the words of James in the New Testament and we marvel at his deep faith but he wasn't always a true believer. Initially, they thought Jesus was crazy. They believed He was insane. And so they did what any good family would do. They did everything they could to bring Him back home.

We tend to forget the radical nature of Jesus' ministry. We tend to think Jesus was widely accepted and esteemed by all who knew Him. But the Bible clearly tells us otherwise. It wouldn't be until after Jesus' resurrection that the reality of who Jesus is would click into place. Before this, He was seen as just another itinerant preacher. A miracle-worker. A good teacher. A rabbi. A holy man. Yes, people came from all over to hear Him but they all had their own agendas as well. Some came because they needed healing. Some came because they needed freedom. Some came because they needed community. Some came because they wanted in on the new revolution. This was true for Jesus' disciples as well. Each of them joined the movement for various reasons and each of them needed to have their lives re-oriented around the Kingdom of God.

What about us? Why have we signed up to follow Jesus? Is it because of some personal agenda? Some need we have inside that only He can fill? There's nothing wrong with being honest. This is where all discipleship starts. At the same time, growth in the Christian life should lead to a more radical commitment to Christ and His agenda. It should lead to greater surrender, greater relinquishment, and humble submission to His will. Fair warning, this will put you at odds with the world. The categories the world uses to classify us simply will not fit any longer. Those around you will think you are odd, weird, perhaps even a bit crazy! You may even be considered a threat. Take heart! Jesus has walked this road before you! He knows the way! He's blazed the trail! He's charted the path! Stay close to Him and let Him be your guide. He will take you on the adventure of your life!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 4-5, Mark 4

February 24, 2021
SOWING SEEDS

Readings for today: Numbers 4-5, Mark 4

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 the Word and over time, they bear much fruit.

Now it's time for an honest assessment. We've been reading for a two months. Where do you find yourself? What have you learned thus far? What lessons have you sought to apply to your life? Put another way, 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 known. How will we respond?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 6-7, Mark 5:1-20

February 25, 2021
THE BLESSING

Readings for today: Numbers 6-7, Mark 5:1-20

One of the ways I've found comfort in the last year is listening to representatives from churches all over the UK sing a song called, "The Blessing", over their nation. I can't tell you the number of times I've gone to YouTube just to pull this song back up. It's brought me hope in the midst of my despair. It's brought me encouragement when I feel down. It's lifted my spirits when I was overwhelmed. In short, this song does what Aaron's blessing is intended to do! Lift our eyes above our circumstances to the One who loves us and is for us.

THE BLESSING song <https://youtu.be/PUtil3mNj5U>

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 8-10, Mark 5:21-43

February 26, 2021
WAITING ON GOD

Readings for today: Numbers 8-10, Mark 5:21-43

I'm reading a devotional book this year titled, "Waiting on God" by Andrew Murray. There are readings for each day of the month and each day's reading posits a reflection on what it means to wait on God. The Bible talks a lot about waiting on God. But more often than not, I find myself "translating" that message in my own mind to mean "waiting on God to do something." I wait on God to heal. Wait on God to deliver. Wait on God to fulfill His promises. Wait on God to intervene on my behalf or on the behalf of those I love. I wait on God to revive our church. Revive our nation. Fill us with His Spirit. None of these things are bad. In fact, all of them have their place. But waiting on God is different. It's literally waiting on His presence. Waiting on my awareness of Him to catch up with the reality that He is always with me. It's waiting for my eyes to be opened. The fog of my life to lift. The cacophony of voices to die down. It's waiting for the things of this earth to grow strangely dim in the light of His abiding glory and grace.

Israel knew what it meant to wait on God. In fact, the account we read today describes it in great detail. "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 the people of Israel set out, and at the command of the Lord they camped. As long as the cloud rested over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. Even when the cloud continued over the tabernacle many days, the people of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not set out. Sometimes the cloud was a few days over the tabernacle, and according to the command of the Lord they remained in camp; then according to the command of the Lord they set out. And sometimes the cloud remained from evening until morning. And when the cloud lifted in the morning, they set out, or if it continued for a day and a night, when the cloud lifted they set out. Whether it was two days, or a month, or a longer time, that the cloud continued over the tabernacle, abiding there, the people of Israel remained in camp and did not set out, but when it lifted they set out. 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." (Numbers 9:15-23) Imagine literally walking in the light of the Lord. Imagine moving at His command. Imagine setting out when God sets out and settling in when God settles in. Remember, Israel did not know where they were headed. They were walking into the great unknown. All they had was Moses' word and God's promise that the land they were going to was flowing with milk and honey. Life in the wilderness was hard. They had already suffered many things. They had struggled to remain faithful. And yet God abides. God endures. God never fails.

Think about everything that has taken place over the last year. A global pandemic caused by a strange new, highly contagious, virulent disease that has taken the lives of half a million Americans and over 2.5 million worldwide. Racial tensions spilling into the streets resulting in violence and billions in property damage. Political differences ratcheting up in intensity, taking on an apocalyptic tone, leading to an insurrection at United States Capitol. Economic shutdowns putting millions of Americans out of work. Children falling behind in school as they try to adjust to online learning. And, as usual, the poor and powerless tend to suffer the greatest. Fear and anxiety are driving us like the fire-breathing horses of Ares to self-destruction.

So where is our hope? Our hope comes as we wait on God. Wait on His presence. Abide under the shadow of His wings. Sit at His feet. 1 John 4:18 tells us, “There is no fear in love for perfect love casts out all fear...” God is love. He is Perfect Love. And as we abide in His presence, we experience the perfect love that drives out our fear. Calms our anxiety. Settles our hearts. When we are deeply aware of God’s presence in our lives, all the uncertainties and unknowns of the future. All the cares and worries about tomorrow seem to fade away. God is enough. And in His presence there is peace. This is what the nation of Israel experienced on their wilderness journey. The cloud by day and the fire by night served as a constant reminder of God’s faithfulness. God’s holy presence in their midst. In God’s presence, they experienced safety and provision and direction. And the same is true for us. As we cultivate an awareness of God’s abiding presence - of “Emmanuel - God with us” - we too find blessing and strength and hope for the journey.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 11-13, Mark 6:1-29

February 27, 2021
HUMILITY

Readings for today: Numbers 11-13, Mark 6:1-29

There seems to be this yearning in the human heart for deep connection. To God. To other human beings. There is a real craving in the world today for authenticity. A desire to “be real” and be known. I hear it all the time and I feel it down in my bones as well. The problem, of course, is most of us don’t really want to engage on an authentic level because things get messy when we do. We run into all kinds of warts and sin and ugliness and we’re frankly not very good at accepting each other’s faults. We aren’t very good at showing each other grace. We aren’t very good at forgiveness and reconciliation because such things take a lot of work. So we settle. We settle for less in our human relationships. We settle for not being known. Not being understood. Not being connected. And worst of all, we settle in our relationship with God. We only let Him in so far. We only let Him reign and rule over parts of our lives, not the whole. We submit only halfway and the result is a lot of pain and suffering and heartache.

This is nothing new. The people of God have struggled with these things for thousands of years. In fact, the struggle is hardwired into our system by the Fall. (Remember that tragic event in Genesis 3? It frames everything.) Think about the blessings Israel enjoyed. A literal pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. God visibly present among them. God’s Shekinah glory filling the Tabernacle. Moses literally speaking to God on their behalf. Silver trumpets blowing every time they went forth to remind them God would be with them. The parting of the Red Sea. Deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Rescue from the plagues. Manna in the wilderness. The miracles they experienced were incredible! And still they complained! Still they struggled to believe!

“And the people complained in the hearing of the Lord about their misfortunes, and when the Lord heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.” (Num. 11:1)

“Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, “Oh that we had meat to eat!” (Num. 11:4)

“Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” And the Lord heard it.” (Num. 12:1-2)

“And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.” (Num. 13:33)

Loving God’s people has never been easy! There is always complaining. Always whining. Always criticism. But guess what? That’s real! That’s authentic! That’s people being themselves! And if we’re honest, none of us are immune. Even Moses complains, “I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me.” (Num. 11:14)

So what’s the answer? Humility. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Numbers 12:3, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.” What. A. Statement. Moses’ leadership was not based on his power or eloquence or influence or wealth or talent. It was based primarily on his humility. His meekness. And because Moses considered others more important than himself, he wasn’t threatened when God put His Spirit on other leaders. He wasn’t

threatened when God's Spirit showed up in other parts of the camp. He wasn't crushed by the betrayal of Aaron and Miriam. He remained faithful.

Humility gives us the ability to accept other people for who they are...warts and all. It gives us the ability to extend grace even in difficult circumstances. It gives us the ability to address the log in our own eye first before we go to pluck the dust out of our brother or sister's eyes. Most importantly, it is humility that allows us to submit our lives to the Lord and to follow in His ways.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 14-18, Mark 6:30-56