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March 1, 2021
THE MISSION OF GOD

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

“But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,” (Numbers 14:21)

Do you ever wonder why God chose to create in the first place? Do you ever wonder why God didn’t just wipe everyone and everything out after Adam and Eve and start over? Do you ever wonder why God doesn’t step in and eradicate all evil and suffering once and for all? Here in the Book of Numbers we find our answer. God’s primary purpose in creation is to share His glory. It’s why He made human beings in His image. It’s why He gives human beings the mandate to “be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth.” God’s stated goal is to send us out bearing His image and glory to the ends of the earth.

Tragically, we reject this high calling. We exchange God’s glory for our own. We seek our own good above His good. We abandon His mission and instead exploit creation for our own selfish and greedy ends. And if God were not faithful. If His steadfast love did not endure forever. If His grace was not extended to generation after generation. We would be dead. We would be destroyed. Our penchant for rebellion is simply too hard to resist. Our pride is too much to overcome. Sin corrupts everything we think and do on some level.

The people of God quake in fear at the report of the spies. They mutiny against Moses and the Lord. They make plans to head back to Egypt. Back to slavery. Back to what was familiar. It reminds me of one of my favorite Proverbs, “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” (26:11) But for the intervention of the Lord, they would have stoned Moses to death! Incredible! So God tells Moses to step aside so He can destroy them and start all over yet again. Once again, Moses is being tested. Once again, Moses is being challenged to stand in the gap for God’s people. Once again, Moses intercedes. He calls on God to remember His own name. To be true to His character. To forgive as He has promised which is what God does.

Friends, God has a mission! His mission is make His name known over all the earth. Not because God needs His fifteen minutes of fame. Not because God wants to be an influencer. Not because God is self-conscious or insecure. But because God is God and we are not. He deserves His glory. He is worthy of His glory. He reigns and rules over all He has made and as such, He will make His glory known. He will accomplish His will. No obstacle will stand in His way. No power will prevent Him from accomplishing this great task! Not sin. Not evil. Not death. “But truly, as I live, and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,” (Num. 14:21) It’s an incredible statement! A mission that drives God even to this day! God’s plan is for God’s people who are made in God’s image to multiply and fill the earth! This is the “Great Commission” given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the people of Israel. Jesus renews this Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s Gospel when He sends His disciples out into all the world to make other disciples and this is how the glory of God fills the earth.

Friends, this is God’s great mission and the greatest obstacle standing in His way is...us! You and me! God’s people! Korah rebels. Dathan and Abiram rebel. The people of God blame Moses and Aaron for their deaths. So once again, God steps in. He must discipline His people. He must teach them to obey. So He sends plagues. He opens the earth. He reminds them of the law. He allows them to be defeated in battle. He makes them wander in the wilderness until an entire generation passes away. Yes, it’s scary.

Yes, it's sobering. Yes, we do not understand why people have to die but God is eternally consistent. He warned us in the Garden that the wages of sin is death and His judgment is righteous.

Friends, God is faithful. Not just to us but ultimately to Himself. God is steadfast. Loyal to His will and His way. God is holy. He will not be mocked. God will not allow His people to derail His mission. So think about your life. Do you intentionally order your life around the will of God? Do you intentionally live in such a way that you bring glory to His name? Is your life oriented towards God and His Kingdom or are you oriented around your own selfish desires? What drives you? Is it the fulfillment of God's mission or is it your own selfish ambitions? What sins are you clinging to, refusing to let go? Is it pride? Is it anger? Is it disappointment? Is it fear? Where are you personally getting in the way of God's mission to fill the world with His glory?

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 19-20, Mark 7:1-13

March 2, 2021
BLAME-SHIFTING

Readings for today: Numbers 19-20, Mark 7:1-13

As a pastor, I do a lot of counseling. One of the most common issues I face is something called “blame-shifting.” Basically, a person commits a wrong and when confronted on it, “shifts” the blame to someone else. This can be their spouse. Their children. Their parents. Even their pastor! :-) I cannot tell you the number of times I have counseled a couple on their marriage only to have them blame me for their eventual separation and divorce. Nevermind the fact they were unwilling to put in the work. Unwilling to do the homework I assigned. Unwilling to change any of their unhealthy behaviors. Unwilling to engage each other at a different level. At the end of the day, because the counseling didn’t “work”, it must be my failure as a pastor.

We see this same dynamic in play in Moses’ relationship with Israel. How many times do they accuse Moses of failing to lead them well? How many times do they blame him for not providing water, food, or getting them to the Promised Land? Nevermind their own sin. Their own lack of faith. Their own fear. Their worship of false gods. “And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” (Num. 20:3-5) Over and over again, we hear this refrain. Let’s go back to Egypt. Let’s go back to slavery. You brought us out here to die. You brought us out here to suffer. It would truly be unbelievable if I didn’t see it everyday.

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

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 21-22, Mark 7:14-37

March 3, 2021
THE DONKEY THAT SPOKE

Readings for today: Numbers 21-22, Mark 7:14-37

When I first became a Christian, I started eating at this little pit BBQ place off Arapahoe in Boulder. It was owned and operated by an amazing man named Bruce. Bruce was the son of the famous “Daddy Bruce” who served the homeless of Denver for so many years, making sure they got a full Thanksgiving dinner. Bruce Jr. was cut from the same cloth as his father. He not only served the homeless of Boulder well, he also was a strong believer in Jesus Christ. I don’t know that I’ve ever met someone quite like him. He literally could quote you chapter and verse from the whole Bible. He would quiz me every time I came in before he would make me any food. He would tell the best stories about how God had worked in his life. One day, he was sharing with me his frustrations with how biblically illiterate Christians tend to be. He was a black Baptist preacher and could preach with the best of them. I still remember the crescendo of his sermon that day...”Doug, when I’m in need don’t you give me Footprints in the Sand! I don’t need no Prayer of Serenity! Tell me about the donkey that spoke! Now that’s in the Bible!” I still chuckle to this day every time I think about it!

Today we read a crazy story about a fortune-teller named Balaam and his donkey. Israel is moving towards the Promised Land. God is going to fulfill His promise to Abraham. But it won’t be easy. The land is already occupied. There are forces arrayed against them along the way. Nations and tribes and cities whom they will have to fight in order to claim this promise as their own. Arad. Amorites. Bashan. All fall before Israel. All are put to the sword. Devoted to destruction. And now it’s Moab’s turn. (If you remember, the Moabites are descendants from Lot who was Abraham’s nephew. His oldest daughter got him drunk and slept with him in order to get pregnant. So these are distant cousins of Israel.) One can almost imagine living in those days. Getting word of a new superpower rising from slavery. Defeating the Egyptians. Overrunning all who oppose them. Fear and trembling seize the Moabites. So Balak, their king, sends for Balaam. His hope is that Balaam will use his magic to put a curse on Israel, thus weakening them so they can be defeated. But Balaam is visited by God. God commands Balaam not to go with the princes of Moab. However, Balaam eventually relents to the pressure Balak brings to bear. So he mounts his donkey and begins his journey. It’s not long before the donkey freezes in its tracks. It can see the angel of the Lord blocking their path. Balaam, in his blindness both physically and spiritually, is unaware. God opens the mouth of the donkey (insert your favorite Shrek scene) and speaks to Balaam. The net result of all this is that Balaam will indeed go to Balak but will only speak blessings over Israel.

So what are we to make of all this? Magic? Fortune-telling? Donkeys that speak? The point here is that God uses all things to accomplish His purposes. Even our superstitions. Remember when Jacob peeled poplar and almond trees in order to breed a specific kind of goat and sheep in Genesis? Does anyone actually believe the power was in the trees? Or was it God using even Jacob’s foolishness to accomplish His purposes? Or what about the bronze serpent on the pole? Is it really the talisman that saved Israel from the poisonous snakes that were killing them? Or was it God using even their delusions to deliver them? Think about the fallacies we live with today. The “invisible hand” of Adam Smith from his famous book, *Wealth of Nations*. The myth of universal human rights in a world where every tribe or nation seems to place a different value on human life. The notion that democracy is transcultural and can be universally applied in the way we apply it here in America. (A mistake that cost us dearly in Afghanistan and Iraq...) The reality is we too believe in magic. We too believe in myths. They may be couched in more sophisticated language and political or economic theory but they are fairy tales nonetheless.

So what's a Christian to do? We have to push past our superstitions and look to God. We have to push past the "bronze serpents" we create and stop looking to "fortune-tellers" to show us the way. We have to dig deep into God's Word. We must fix our eyes on Jesus! See Him lifted high on the cross! Paying for our sin! Showing us the way home! Showing us how to live a life with and for God! He is our only hope! He is greater than any bronze serpent! He is wiser than any Balaam! He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life!

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 23-25, Mark 8:1-21

March 4, 2021
DEVOTION

Readings for today: Numbers 23-25, Mark 8:1-21

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

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

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

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

Friends, God will not be mocked. God will not tolerate our sin. We cannot pretend there won't be consequences for our rebellion. It may not be Phineas with his spear but it could be much, much worse. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not

prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name? And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matt. 7:21-23)

What sin are you indulging in your life right now? What thoughts do you entertain? What feelings are you holding onto? What activities are you engaging in that will bring down God's judgment? A man by the name of H. Richard Niebuhr once argued that too many Christians want to believe in a "God without wrath bringing men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross." If you have fallen for this lie, you need to repent. If words like "judgment", "sin", "wrath", etc. have fallen out of your vocabulary, you are in danger of missing out on the heart of the gospel. Yes, God is love. But because God is love, He hates our sin. Because God is love, He sent His Son to die. Because God is love, He bore the wrath we deserved. Paid the price we owed. Satisfied the judgment we earned. God's love is not some warm fuzzy. It is fierce. Jealous. Loyal. Steadfast. True. And it will not tolerate any rivals.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 26-27, Mark 8:22-9:1

March 5, 2021
DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPHEHAD

Readings for today: Numbers 26-27, Mark 8:22-9:1

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

For example, consider the case of Zelophehad's daughters. "Now Zelophehad the son of Hepher had no sons, but daughters. And the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah." (Numbers 26:33) Their story is a remarkable testimony and worth recapping again...

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

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

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

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

The Bible is a history of God's interactions with many different human cultures. Human culture, by definition, is always corrupt and unjust. Thankfully, God condescends to speak to us through our

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 28-29, Mark 9:2-29

March 6, 2021
SACRIFICE

Readings for today: Numbers 28-29, Mark 9:2-29

It is important to read the Bible honestly because the text begs all kinds of questions. For example, today's reading details the enormous number of sacrifices the people of Israel were called to make on a regular basis. Anyone else wonder how they accomplished it? The logistics alone must have been incredibly complex! Not only that but why all the sacrifices? What's the deeper meaning behind all this instruction?

The first thing one has to understand is that the Book of Numbers was not written as a math textbook anymore than Genesis was written as a science textbook. Israel often reported their "numbers" collectively rather than individually and sometimes spoke hyperbolically to make a deeper point. For example, Numbers 11 talks about God giving quail to Israel to eat after they complained about the manna. One skeptic, doing the math, suggests God would have had to send 29 trillion quail if we take the calculations literally. Obviously, this is a misreading and the careful reader is able to make room for hyperbole without losing sight of the larger point. The Torah is not a system of equations to solve which is why Biblical numerology is junk science.

Having said that, it doesn't mean every detail of these stories should be taken allegorically or metaphorically. These events did actually take place. There is real truth here that needs to be teased out. So, Israel's sacrifices. Without a doubt, life in ancient Israel was a virtual slaughterhouse. Practiced literally, the priests would be sacrificing millions of animals every single year. Here again the principle of representation applies as it is entirely possible one man's sacrifice would "represent" an entire family, clan, or tribe. Furthermore, considerable latitude was given in ancient near east cultures when it came to the practical application of the law. What I mean is that it's highly unlikely Israel ever truly lived up to the standards Moses set for them. At the same time, the sacrificial fires were kept burning day and night. By the time we get to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Talmud depicts priests wading knee deep in blood. Some passages describe up to 1.2 million animals being slaughtered in a single day, something the Roman historian Josephus confirms. Archaeological evidence from dumps outside the city seem to confirm these findings as well. The reality is the sacrificial system of Israel created an enormous economic system that had to be supported by trade, animal husbandry, a literal army of priests, etc.

But why? Why all the blood? Why all the slaughter? Why all the sacrifice? What's God trying to prove? The sacrificial system's main purpose was to remind the people of Israel of their utter dependence on God. Everything they "owned" was given to them by Him. He held first claim to their harvests. To their flocks. To their lives. Making these regular offerings reminded them they were simply stewards of God's gifts. Nothing more. Second, the constant shedding of blood reminded them of their sin and their need to remain pure before the Lord. The people of Israel were human beings just like you and me. All of them had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. All of them stood in constant need for forgiveness and grace before the Lord. Third, the sacrificial system set them apart. It made them different than the pagan nations around them. Israel enjoyed a special, unique relationship with God. They were His chosen race. His royal priesthood. A people for His own possession. As such, they maintained a particular, even peculiar, way of life that reminded them constantly of their exalted status.

What does all this have to do with us? Well, I love how the writer of Hebrews puts it, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2) Jesus is our perfect, eternal sacrifice. Through His suffering and death, He lays claim to our lives. Through the shedding of His blood, we are purified from sin. Through His resurrection, we now enjoy the same unique relationship with Him that Israel enjoyed with Yahweh. This is why the author of Hebrews challenges us to keep our eyes on Christ. To find daily, weekly, monthly, even annual rhythms that will draw us continually back to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: None

March 8, 2021
JUDGMENT

Readings for today: Numbers 30-33, Mark 9:30-10:34

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

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

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

This is scary stuff. Especially for the 21st century American reader. It doesn’t square with our cultural notions of a loving God who always shows mercy and grace to the sinner. When we read passages like this, we think of modern-day terrorists. Suicide bombers. Religious extremists like ISIS and we cannot understand how God could ever command His people to act in such ways. At the same time, there’s an instinct in all of us that longs for God to judge evil. Longs for God to confront evil. Longs for God to

eradicate evil. How many times have we wondered how God could tolerate a Hitler? A Stalin? The KKK? A Jeffrey Epstein? And what do we imagine God's judgment on them might look like? Numbers 31 gives a window for just as God uses His people as instruments of salvation so He will use them as instruments of judgment.

This is where we come face to face with God's holiness. God's righteousness. God's justice. The stark reality is this...evil makes God angry. Idolatry is an offense. He does not let it go. He does not overlook our sin. He does not turn a blind eye to our rebellion. This is why the cross is itself so brutal and horrifying. There God pours out the full measure of His righteous wrath and judgment on His Son. Satisfying the demands of divine justice through Jesus' suffering and death. On the cross, the truly innocent One dies in our place.

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

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 34-35, Mark 10:35-52

March 9, 2021
THE DEATH PENALTY

Readings for today: Numbers 34-35, Mark 10:35-52

I worked for two years at New Jersey State Prison as a volunteer chaplain. NJSP is where the state of New Jersey sends the worst of the worst. Murderers. Violent criminals. Sex offenders. Gang leaders. Mafia dons. It is also where they used to house death row. I never was allowed into death row itself but I remember standing outside the door, looking in. It was a sterile environment and the men housed there were cut off from the general population. New Jersey abolished the death penalty in 2007, five years after I left. But from 1960 to 1963, they executed 361 people.

The death penalty is a thorny subject for Christians. In theory, it does have biblical support drawn mainly from passages like we read today in Numbers 35. A careful reading of the passage reveals many fascinating details. Cities of refuge. Premeditated murder vs. accidental death. Avengers of blood. Congregational trials. Evidence. Witnesses. Motives. Methods. It's a very specific passage that actually places limits on vengeance in a way that would have been striking to other ancient near east cultures. It employs the principle of lex talionis or "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Proportional justice. It keeps vendettas from forming between families and clans that last generations.

Those who support the contemporary use of the death penalty on biblical grounds need to wrestle with the boundaries this passage sets. Provision must be made for the safety of the murderer while he/she awaits trial. Motive must be carefully discerned and the accuser is the one to carry out the sentence. If there was no premeditation, then the congregation is allowed to judge and show mercy by assigning the person to a city of refuge for a certain duration. (Lifetime of the current high priest.) There must be more than one witness to the crime. And you cannot tolerate murder in the land lest it become ritually polluted.

Obviously, it's quite the challenge to apply ancient near east law codes in a 21st century context. Layer in the obvious problems we have in our legal system with racial and economic injustice (statistically ethnic minorities and the poor are far more likely to be convicted in our culture), as well as the frequency with which our justice system convicts the wrong person (DNA evidence has been a game-changer here) and one can see why many would argue we should abolish the death penalty altogether. Furthermore, what are we do to with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount? "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." (Matt. 5:21-22) Clearly, Jesus is accusing all of us of being guilty of murder in our hearts!

So what do we do? We must carefully and prayerfully consider our position on the death penalty. We must ask if it is just...not as an abstract concept but as a concrete practice. We must make sure our practices are just and if there is a hint of incompetence or injustice in the way we prosecute then we must forbear. Furthermore, we have to come to grips with the gravity of our actions. Executing another human being is deeply significant. The shedding of blood is not something to take lightly. Unjust killing pollutes the land in which we dwell. Furthermore, to take the life of another human being before they accept Christ as Lord and Savior consigns them to an eternity in hell. All these factors must weigh heavily on us as we wrestle with this issue in our society.

Readings for tomorrow: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Mark 11:1-14

March 10, 2021
ONE LAST SERMON

Readings for today: Numbers 36, Deuteronomy 1, Mark 11:1-14

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

The Book of Deuteronomy is a sermon. In fact, it is Moses' final sermon to God's people. His last will and testament as it were. His final chance to encourage. Challenge. Confront. Comfort. He's now led Israel for decades. And he was no spring chicken when he got started! He's led them out of Egypt. Led them through the wilderness. Led them through the ups and downs of the wilderness journey. He has personally witnessed the miracles of God. Delivered the Ten Commandments. Issued the Law. Now he's at the end of his life. He's not going over the Jordan. He will not set foot in the Promised Land. Under the mighty hand of God, he has created a system of worship, governance, economics, and military organization that will long outlast him. It is a remarkable accomplishment.

I've often wondered what kind of legacy I will leave once I retire or pass on to glory. Am I working to create something that will long outlast me? Am I actively working myself out of a job? Can the system I've created survive - or better yet thrive! - once I am gone? I truly hope so because none of us are essential to God's Kingdom. While all of us are uniquely loved by God, He doesn't need us to accomplish His mission in the world. This is a good thing! It's humbling. It relieves all the pressure. We simply do all the good we can for as long as we can in every way that we can until the day God calls us home. Then we hand the baton off to the next generation and cheer them on as they run. This is essentially what Moses does for Joshua and for Israel. So what about you? What would you say in Moses' position? Given one last chance to address God's people, what would be on your heart and mind? What would you want them to know moving forward? What lessons would you hope they learned?

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

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

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 2-4, Mark 11:15-33

March 11, 2021
THE MERCY OF GOD

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 2-4, Mark 11:15-33

Over the course of my life, I have been blessed to spend time with some truly great Christians. Men and women of profound spiritual depth who have exerted a shaping influence on the church and the world through their speaking, teaching, and writing. Their names are well-known. They've founded and led great ministries, churches, and organizations. Some of them have passed on from this life. Others are still very much engaged in their work. And for reasons I still do not know or frankly understand, they have chosen to spend some of their valuable time with me. It's deeply humbling to be on the receiving end of such mercy. It was not something I achieved. It was not something I earned. It was not the result of my hard work or effort. I simply lucked out. For whatever reason, they chose me.

I think of these experiences as I try to wrap my mind and heart around the words we read in our text for today. "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?" (Deuteronomy 4:7-8) It's been decades since that first meeting between Moses and God at the burning bush. In that time, Moses has seen the most incredible things. He watched God take a rag-tag group of slaves and turn them into a nation. He watched God humble the greatest ruler of the greatest empire in the world. He bore witness to God's love and mercy as He carried His people through the Red Sea and delivered them to the Promised Land. He grieved at the faithlessness of God's people that caused them to wander in the wilderness under judgment for forty years. His life has been rich and full and blessed in so many ways. Perhaps the most marvelous thing about it all is Moses never loses his sense of awe over God's mercy. Here he is at the end of his life and he still can't get over the fact that among all the nations of the earth, God chose Israel.

Not only did God choose Israel but God remains faithful to Israel. Despite her constant whining and complaining. Despite her hard hearts and stiff necks. Despite her many sins and acts of unfaithfulness. Despite the fact that God knows she will fail over and over again. He remains true. He lives up to His promises. "But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice. For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them." (Deuteronomy 4:29-31) God is so good. His mercies endure forever. His covenant love never fails.

Why does God do all this? Is it for Israel? Is it for us? On some level yes. God has chosen us from before the foundations of the earth to be the object of His great love. But more than that, God has chosen us to be His instruments of mercy as well. His great desire is to use us to draw an unbelieving world to faith. God wants the whole world to look on us in wonder and awe just like Moses. To stand and stare in disbelief that the God of the universe would choose a people for Himself. Forge them through fire and trial and struggle and war into a people for His own possession. A chosen nation. A royal priesthood. Set apart to declare His glory to the world. "For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by

great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

Friends, there is no end to the mercy of God. If you seek Him, you will find Him. If you turn to Him, you will find His arms wide open. If you ask Him, He will come into your heart and into your life and you will be saved.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 5-7, Mark 12:1-27

March 12, 2021
THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 5-7, Mark 12:1-27

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

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

There is a lot packed into today's reading. So many reminders of God's great faithfulness to His people. Despite their sin. Despite their grumbling. Despite their complaining. God remains steadfast. This is the essence of the covenant of grace God has made with His people. Fast forward a few thousand years to Jesus. A lawyer challenges him one day to identify the greatest of the commandments. Jesus goes right back to the Shema. "And Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40) Not only did Jesus place the Shema at the center of His life but He demands His followers do the same.

How are you seeking to love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength? What does that practically look for you in your life? If you do not know, let me challenge you to memorize Matthew 22:37 and ask God to give you the wisdom to know how to place the Shema at the center of your life like Jesus.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 8-10, Mark 12:28-44

March 13, 2021
SACRED MEMORY

Readings for today: [Deuteronomy 8-10, Mark 12:28-44](#)

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

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

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

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

“Yet the Lord set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day.” (Deut. 10:15)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 11-16, Mark 13:1-14:9

March 15, 2021
THE END OF POVERTY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 11-16, Mark 13:1-14:9

Poverty is a very real issue in our world today. Despite major advances in the global war on poverty - and the progress has truly been miraculous as over 1 billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty since 1990 - the struggle remains. Part of the problem comes from how we define "poverty. There are some objective measures defined by the World Bank and others. Extreme poverty is defined as living on less than \$1.90/day. Moderate poverty is less than \$3.10/day. But then there is the idea of "relative poverty" which measures the economic distance of an individual from a certain percentage of the median household income in a particular community. Our response to the problem of poverty will depend to some extent on which definition we are working from and this, in turn, will shape how we approach our interpretation of the Biblical text.

Deuteronomy 14 contains part of the national tax code for the nation of Israel. Every year, the Israelites were expected to contribute a tithe (10%) to the Lord. This essentially provided income and food for the Levites since they had no property inheritance among the tribes of Israel. A second tithe was contributed to provide food and income for the Israelites themselves during those seasons when they celebrated the required feasts and were not able to work their land. In addition to these first two annual tithes, a third tithe was required every three years to provide for the poor, orphaned, widowed, foreigner, and Levites who lived in the community to make sure everyone was provided for and no one went hungry. "At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do." (Deut. 14:28-29) For those keeping score at home, that places the annual tax rate for an Israelite household at about 23%. In addition, they would contribute freewill offerings over and above their tithes to the Lord for the blessing of the community.

Is an end to poverty possible? Yes, according to Deuteronomy 15:4-5. "But there will be no poor among you; for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess— if only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today." If God's people will obey God's voice, contribute their tithes and offerings as commanded by the Law, and give generously to the foreigner, orphan and widow in their midst then the problem of "absolute poverty" disappears. However, this will be a continual process. A continual test the Lord will put before them according to Deuteronomy 15:11. "For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.' Human society is unequal by definition. People are not all given the same gifts and talents. People are not all given the same opportunities. People are not all given the same resources. Furthermore, there are forces beyond our control that make a huge impact on our economy. Natural disasters. Wars. Death. Disease. Famine. Drought. Availability of natural resources. All exact a toll. Throw in the fact that some human beings simply work harder and smarter than others and the gap between rich and poor only seems to grow.

God recognizes this human trend which is why He demands generosity from His people. We who are blessed must in turn bless others. As believers, we understand our blessing did not come from ourselves but from God. He commands Israel to always remember their time as slaves in Egypt. To remain humble and compassionate towards those who have experienced economic hardship and therefore sold

themselves into slavery to pay off their debts. When the Sabbatical Year comes (every seven years), they are to release their slaves, forgive their debts, and help them get started in their new life. “And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.” (Deut. 15:13-14) The Sabbatical Year serves almost as an economic “reset” as the wealth of the nation - which God has provided - is redistributed in a way that closes the gap between rich and poor. This effectively addresses the “relative poverty” of the country and provides hope and opportunity for those who wouldn’t otherwise have it.

It’s an open question how often Israel actually kept the Sabbatical Year or what practical application it could have in today’s global economy. But the principle remains. If we live our lives with the understanding that all we have has been given to us by God. All our wealth. All our talent. All our opportunity. Then it becomes a whole lot easier to live generously. If we remember the relative poverty from whence we came. How we came into this world with nothing and will leave with nothing. Then it becomes a whole lot easier to provide for others. To sacrifice our own lifestyles so that we might relieve the burden of poverty for those around us. Whether they live next door or on the other side of the globe. Jesus confirms what God said in Deut. 15:11 when he says, “For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.” (Matt. 26:11) This statement is not meant to make us throw up our hands in helplessness or just accept the current state of affairs. Instead, it is meant to drive us to generosity. To live like Jesus did. To lay down our lives so that others might live.

We’re in the middle of tax season. It’s a great time to evaluate our generosity. What does our giving reveal about the state of our hearts? How can we grow in generosity in the coming year? Be praying for opportunities to bless the poor within your midst. The poor within your reach. The poor within your sphere of influence. Be the blessing God intends for you to be.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 17-19, Mark 14:10-31

March 16, 2021
LEARNING HUMILITY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 17-19, Mark 14:10-31

Humility is a cornerstone Christian value. It is also the most elusive. How does one work on humility? How does one get “good” at humility? How does one become a humble person? Well, first and foremost, we need a good definition of humility. One that not only avoids the obvious which is pride but also one that avoids the less obvious and more subtle which is false humility. Diminishing oneself in order to appear humble. I love how Tim Keller defines humility in his little book, *The Art of Self-forgetfulness*. Humility, he argues, is not thinking more highly of yourself than you ought or thinking less of yourself than you ought but simply thinking of yourself less. I love that.

In today’s reading, we run across these words from God to those who be kings in Israel...“Only he must not acquire many horses for himself or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses, since the Lord has said to you, ‘You shall never return that way again.’ And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold. “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.” (Deuteronomy 17:16-20) What is God up to here? What is the big deal about horses and wives and great wealth? Why make every king write out a copy of the Law for themselves? Why make it required daily reading? Doesn’t the king have more important things to worry about?

Friends, God cares more about our character than He does our accomplishments. He cares more about the people we are becoming than the things we do. The accumulation of many horses was the key to military power in the ancient near east. The accumulation of many wives was the key to forging strategic alliances with other nations to increase one’s political influence. The accumulation of much wealth was, and still is, the single greatest measure of worldly success. Any king who pursued these things would find themselves falling away from God in a hurry. Solomon being the pre-eminent example.

Pride was the bane of kings in Israel. When they sought the Lord in humility, He provided all the wealth and power they needed. When they forgot the Lord in their pride, they came under His judgment and lost everything. Ancient near east kings believed they were divine. Egypt. Mesopotamia. Babylon. Assyria. All the great empires of the ancient world were ruled by kings who believed they not only held a divine mandate but that they were the living representatives of their gods on earth. As such, they believed the accumulation of power and wealth was their divine right. Their words and actions carried divine sanction and authority. To resist them was to resist their god which is why their conquests were so brutal and terrifying. The kings of Israel were to be different. They recognized they were not Yahweh’s representatives on earth. They were not a law unto themselves. They were no different than anyone else in Israel. Their words and actions carried divine authority only insofar as they followed God’s law.

And this is why God prescribes a very specific course of daily study for anyone who would be king over His people. They are to write out by hand a copy of the law. They are to study that law each and

every day throughout the course of their reign. The goal being to learn to “fear the Lord” and to not “lift their hearts above their brothers.” This is unique among ancient near east cultures. Pride was a virtue in other nations but a vice in Israel. Humility was despised in other nations but held in highest esteem in Israel. As Keller points out so well, pride is thinking more highly of oneself than one ought. It is the placing of oneself on the throne of one’s life just like the ancient kings of old.

Humility is acknowledging God’s Lordship over our lives. It places Him on the throne. And this is why spending time in God’s Word on a daily basis is still so critically important. It reminds us we are not in charge. We are not in control. It reminds us not to place our trust in power or influence or wealth but in God alone. The reality is we live like kings. Many of us have access to the kind of wealth and freedom and privilege the ancient kings could only dream of. We have accumulated power through position and success. We have made alliances that give us opportunity and access. We have gained great wealth through our hard work and it is tempting to believe that we have done all these things through our own effort. Our own ability. Almost like we have divine sanction for the way we live. But we must be careful. We must not place our trust in our own strength. We too must learn humility just like the kings of Israel. Does that mean we should copy the Bible by hand? That actually wouldn’t be the craziest idea! More importantly, we must read it all the days of our lives so we too will learn to fear the Lord and not lift our hearts above our brothers and sisters.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 20-22, Mark 14:32-52

March 17, 2021
THE CURSE

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 20-22, Mark 14:32-52

Buried in all the discussion today about who gets stoned for what and when is this key passage that the Apostle Paul will pick up later in Galatians and apply to Christ. "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance." (Deut. 21:22-23)

Blessings and curses are a huge theme in Deuteronomy. If you do well, you will be blessed. If you rebel against the commands of God, you are cursed. And not just you but your family, your land, your friends and neighbors because every action we take has communal consequences. This is why God is constantly telling His people to expel those who break His law lest they defile the land.

Enter the Apostle Paul. He picks up on this theme of "blessings and curses" in the Book of Galatians. He is writing to a group of largely Gentile believers who are doing their best to keep the Law of Moses. The entire book is a forceful critique that draws a sharp contrast between life under the Law and life under the Spirit. "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith." But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:10-14) Basically, Paul argues that when we seek to justify ourselves by keeping the Law, we take on the curse because no one can actually achieve what the Law demands. Furthermore, he tags Abraham and reminds God's people that it is not the Law that justifies in the first place but faith! Abraham believed God and was justified. What then happens to the Law? What about the all the curses that have piled up over the centuries through the failure of God's people to keep it? Christ literally becomes the curse for us! He literally takes our place and perfectly satisfies the Law's just demands. And the sign of this great salvific event is the cross. The place where Jesus literally hangs on a tree, becoming cursed on our behalf. As we know, He doesn't hang there all night but is buried that same day in accordance with the instructions given in Deuteronomy so even in His death, He fulfills the Law.

This, in itself, is incredible news but Paul's not done. Not only did Christ remove the curse by His saving death, He also unleashed all the blessings. All the promises God made to His people from Abraham forward are now ours in Christ Jesus. All the blessings of obedience are given to us because of Christ's great faithfulness. This includes the very Spirit of God which is now our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God.

It is so easy to read Deuteronomy and get crushed by the weight of expectations. We read about the blessings and curses and think immediately of our own lives and how often we fall short. We start to wonder and question our faith in God. We immediately recognize the gap that exists between who we are and who we should be. We look at the list and see all the things we should do that we don't do and all the things we do that we shouldn't do. An honest person knows they've sinned and fallen short of God's glory. An honest person knows they have done things that bring them under the curse. An honest person looks at the sin of their life and experiences deep grief over what they have done. Strangely enough, this is the whole point of the Law. To put an end to our pride. To put an end to our self-

sufficiency. To drive us to Christ who meets us with open arms. Embracing us with hands still bearing the scars from where He hung on the tree.

Friends, hear the good news of the gospel! The curse has been broken. The sentence lifted. The price paid. All has been accomplished. All the work has been finished. In Christ, we are saved. In Christ, we are set free.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 23-25, Mark 14:53-72

March 18, 2021
SWIMMING UPSTREAM

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 23-25, Mark 14:53-72

One of my favorite theologians is a man named John Walton. He teaches at Wheaton College. Specializes in Ancient Near East cultural studies of the Old Testament. One of his most important insights - for me at least - is that while the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. It was written to a people immersed in their own cultural stream. Written to a people living in a particular time and place with a particular understanding of the universe and all that is in it. Written to a people whose thoughts and ideas were formed by the world around them. A world full of Hittites and Canaanites and Egyptians and Assyrians and Babylonians, each with their own pantheon of gods and goddesses. Each with their own particular worldview. The “cultural stream” of the ancient world flowed through all of these cultures and included currents regarding communal life, divine right of kings, centrality of temples and sacred space, spirits and magic, etc. The Israelites sometimes swam with these currents - to their detriment - and at other times swam against these currents as they pursued a deeper understanding of their God. But at no time were they able to step outside their stream. They always found themselves standing fully within it.

What does all this have to do with today’s reading? Or any of our reading thus far? It’s critical to remember the Bible was written to a people immersed in a cultural stream far different than our own. It’s why so many of their laws seem strange, archaic, even racist like in today’s reading about the eternal exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites. (Something seemingly contradicted by the Book of Ruth.) There is a progression to God’s revelation. He always speaks to us in and through the culture we inhabit. He comes to us in the cultural stream we find ourselves swimming in. This is why Genesis 1 has so little to do with modern science. It’s written to a people immersed in an ancient near east cosmology. It’s why so many of the laws issued throughout the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy having to do with food, clothing, economics, etc. have so little to do with modern-day capitalism. They are written for a people who lived in a world far removed from our own.

Does this mean the Old Testament is worthless? Does it render God’s Word meaningless? Far from it! It simply makes our work that much harder as we seek to bridge the cultural gap that exists between our world and the “strange new world of the Bible.” (Karl Barth) We have to work hard to learn first what the Bible meant to the people it was primarily written to before we can understand what it might mean for us. This is one of the main principles guiding Biblical interpretation. It’s called “authorial intent” and it is critical if we are to rightly understand what God is saying.

Let me use some examples from our readings today...

“You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you.”

“You shall not charge interest on loans to your brother, interest on money, interest on food, interest on anything that is lent for interest.”

“If you go into your neighbor’s vineyard, you may eat your fill of grapes, as many as you wish, but you shall not put any in your bag. If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.”

"And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord your God."

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brothers or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns."

"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge..."

"When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow."

Yes, each of these passages relate to a specific set of economic practices within ancient Israel. They were designed for a world where slavery was a given, women were property, and the poor held no social standing. They challenged Israel to "swim upstream" from the pagan cultures around them. They set Israel apart. Marked her as God's chosen people. But how do they apply to our world today? Well, imagine a society where people truly cared for the poor? Imagine a society where women and children and the most vulnerable were protected rather than exploited? Imagine a society where profit was not the goal but love for our neighbor? Imagine a society where justice was defined by how we treated the immigrant, refugee, orphan or widow? This was God's design for Israel and it is God's design for His church today. This is the heart of the law, friends. Through His people, God wants to give the earth a foretaste of heaven. He makes us a light to the nations. An example for all humanity to follow.

Any people or nation or church seeking the blessing of God must do things His way. Follow His commands. Push beyond our fear and place our faith in God's provision and protection. Anyone who claims to serve God must do all they can to protect life from the womb to the tomb. The protection of life must form the foundation of our entire legal and social system. The welfare of all people must be our aim and passion. Anyone who prays for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven must stand ready to actually live according to the heavenly code. We must exchange earthly expediency for heavenly authority. We must be willing to swim upstream against our own cultural currents if we are to remain faithful to God.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 26-27, Mark 15:1-20

March 19, 2021
THE PRINCIPLE OF FIRSTFRUITS

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 26-27, Mark 15:1-20

“A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which you, O Lord, have given me.’ And you shall set it down before the Lord your God and worship before the Lord your God. And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house, you, and the Levite, and the sojourner who is among you.” (Deut. 26:5-11)

The principle of firstfruits is an important one in the Bible. Simply put, when we produce whatever it is we produce, we are to take the first portion. The best portion. And offer it to the Lord. Before we take care of ourselves. Before we meet our own needs. Before we pay the mortgage. Before we head to the grocery store. Before we pay the bills. Certainly before we take that vacation. Before even putting money into savings or paying off debt. (Sorry Dave Ramsey...) We are to give unto the Lord first.

Why? Is God short of cash? Does God need our money? Isn’t this just a way for churches to stay solvent? Doesn’t this give license for unscrupulous preachers to manipulate the vulnerable? How do we make sure the money actually gets to God or the people God loves? After all, we’ve all seen the celebrity pastors buying their multi-million dollar homes. We’ve all watched ministries spend all kinds of money on stuff that’s not important rather than helping people. We’ve seen the abuse. We’ve seen the waste. Furthermore, we may have all kinds of opinions on what our church should spend their money on. We may not agree with the way they do ministry or what they emphasize or how they operate. Why then should we give them any money at all?

Those are great questions. And if we’re honest, we’ve all probably asked them. But let’s go a level deeper. Let’s bring it closer to home. How are we spending our money? Are we actually any better than the church or organization we criticize? If we were to open our personal books and give ourselves an audit, what would we find? How much money did we waste in last year? What extravagances did we indulge in? How much did we spend on stuff that’s not important rather than helping others? It’s a sobering exercise, is it not? The reality is we are all corrupted by sin and our natural tendency is to hoard our wealth. To spend it primarily on ourselves. To make sure we improve our lifestyles. To make sure we get our needs taken care of. To make sure we get to live the lives we believe we deserve. And after we accomplish all we desire then maybe we’ll send a little money God’s way just to hedge our bets. Throw Him a bone on autopay. Keep Him happy by dropping a \$20 in the plate when it passes by. And we walk away feeling like we at least did something.

According to recent research, the average Christian gives 2.5% of their income away. (For comparison, during the Great Depression the average was 3.3%) Average giving by adults in Protestant churches across the United States is \$17/week. 37% of regular church attenders don’t give at all. And the higher the income, the less likely a person is to tithe or give 10%. Only 1% of those making 75k or more tithe their income. That’s the bad news. Here’s the good news. About 10 million Christians give 10% or more, totaling \$50 billion dollars a year to churches and non-profits! That’s awesome! 77% of those

who tithe actually end up giving between 11-20% of their income away! Even more awesome! And charitable giving has grown in recent years in the US with the increase coming from individuals, corporations and foundations. Of course, the pandemic will impact these trends but it remains to be seen whether it will be positive or negative overall.

But back to the principle of firstfruits...why is it important? It serves as a reminder that everything we have comes from the Lord. Israel was descended from a wandering Aramean named Abraham. A man of no consequence other than the fact God chose Him to become the father of a mighty nation. His descendants immigrated to Egypt where they grew into a large and prosperous people until the Egyptians felt threatened and enslaved them. For hundreds of years they suffered until they cried out to the Lord for deliverance. God brought them out from Egypt with miracles and signs and wonders. He fought on their behalf. He defeated Pharaoh and his army. He provided for them in the wilderness. Fed them with manna. Brought water from a rock. And now He would bring them into the Promised Land. A land flowing with milk and honey. A land full of natural resources where they would flourish. None of this was their own doing. None of this happened through Israel's strength or ability or hard work. They are not masters of their fates or captains of their souls or in charge of their own destinies. They are God's people. His treasured possession. Among all the nations of the earth. So in recognition of this special status that they did not earn...they give. They offer the first and the best of what they have to the Lord.

What about us? Do we do the same? Do we live our lives in recognition of all God has done for us? Do we offer Him the honor He deserves? Do we thank Him for where we were born? The family we were born into? The nation in which we get to live? The talents we are naturally endowed with? The opportunities He's given us along the way? The gifts we've received that we did not earn? And do we acknowledge His sovereign grace over our lives by offering back to Him our firstfruits of time, talent, and treasure? This is truly what it means to love God with all our hearts and souls.

Readings for tomorrow: Deuteronomy 28, Mark 15:21-47

March 20, 2021
THE WAY

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 28, Mark 15:21-47

Deuteronomy 28 may be one of the most abused and misunderstood passages in all of Scripture. Mainly because we get the cart before the horse. We begin with the wrong end in mind. We look at all the blessings and curses and start to reverse engineer our lives, falsely believing this is the point. But nothing could be further from the truth. As the people of God, our focus should not be on the blessings or the curses for that matter. It should be on God. Loving Him. Enjoying Him. Growing deeper in our relationship with Him. He is the proper end. He is our main goal. He is the prize. If we make Him our supreme treasure, then all the rest falls into place. Jesus says as much in Matthew 6:33, “Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the rest will be added unto you.”

So why do we fall into this trap? Well, if we’re honest, it’s because we value our lives in this world more than we do our life in the next. The horizons of our lives are set here on earth rather than in heaven. We want to experience all the blessings this life has to offer. We want to enjoy the rewards of this earth. We want the good life. The beautiful life. A life without care or worry. So when we read a passage like the one from Deuteronomy today, our hearts naturally start to put an equation together. Blessings flow from obedience. Rewards result from keeping God’s Law. If I receive good things in this life then it must mean God is pleased with me. But this is false doctrine. It’s a heresy called “health and wealth” gospel. And like all heresies, it is a dangerous trap to fall into. Why? Because none of us can keep the law. And if none of us can keep the law then we fall under the curse. And if we fall under the curse then God must be displeased with us. And if God is displeased with us then we are lost. A people to be most pitied. We will live our lives under fear and the constant threat that what we say or do is the key to earning or losing God’s favor. Furthermore, there are plenty of examples in Scripture of successful, wealthy, powerful people who are among the most faithless to have ever walked the earth. So clearly, worldly abundance is no measure of true godliness.

Again, I go back to the words of Jesus. Seek first the Kingdom of God. Seek first His righteousness. Store up your treasure in heaven. Run the race as if to gain the heavenly prize. Fix your eyes on Jesus. After all, was He not the most blessed man on the face of the earth? And yet, was He not also the most cursed? Was He not the Father’s highly favored One? And yet, was He not forsaken on the cross? Jesus experienced the fullness of both blessing and the curse and yet never lost sight of righteousness. Never loosened His grip on His Father’s Kingdom. As a result, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. At His name, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. In short, all the rest has been given unto Him.

Jesus is the Way, friends. His path is our path. His road is our road. His life is our life. If we seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, all the rest will be added unto us. In this life or the next. If we take care of the things God cares about, He will take care of the things we care about. If we love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength, we will be fully and completely satisfied in Him. The things of this earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace. So let me encourage you to stop focusing so much on the blessings or the curses and start focusing more on Jesus. Stop striving and planning and reverse engineering your life in order to earn the blessings of God and instead rest, relax, and receive the good gifts your Heavenly Father has stored up for you. Remember the words of the most ancient benediction in Israel from Numbers 6:24-26, “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His faces to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.” All the promises of God are “Yes” in Christ. Trust Him. Believe Him. Set your heart on Him today.

Readings for tomorrow: None

March 22, 2021
THE SONG OF MOSES

Readings for today: Deuteronomy 29-34, Mark 16, Luke 1:1-38

As we finish the Book of Deuteronomy, we need to pause for a moment and reflect on the life of Moses. Miraculously saved at birth. Raised in the palace of Pharaoh. Exiled for murder. Bedouin shepherd. Husband. Father. Called late in life to save Israel. Prophet. Miracle-worker. Deliverer. Spiritual and political leader of a nation of wandering ex-slaves. His life, especially the last third, was marked uniquely by his close relationship with God. Now we are at the end. Now the people stand on the borders of the Promised Land. Now he's on a mountain looking over at the fulfillment of all God has promised. Now is his last chance to share with his people all he has learned in his years of walking with the Lord.

So Moses sings them a song...(Deut. 32:1-43)

“Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak, and let the earth hear the words of my mouth. May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distill as the dew, like gentle rain upon the tender grass, and like showers upon the herb. For I will proclaim the name of the Lord; ascribe greatness to our God! "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He..." For Moses, everything begins with God. God's faithfulness. God's steadfast love. God's enduring grace. Without God, he is nothing. Without God, the people of Israel are nothing. Without God, they would still be slaves in Egypt. If God had abandoned them, they would have died in the wilderness. If Moses is going to sing about anything, it will be about the greatness of God! The glory of God! The majesty of God!

“They have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, you foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you? Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders, and they will tell you...” Moses also sings of the people he has served. He boldly reminds them of the truth. They are sinners. They are broken. They are rebellious. They despised God. They abandoned God. They doubted God. They disobeyed God. He sings, eyes wide open to the reality of their condition. He pulls no punches. He's not interested in sentimentality. This is his last chance to speak and he's not going to waste words on empty flattery.

“But the Lord 's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. "He found him in a desert land, and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him, no foreign god was with him. He made him ride on the high places of the land, and he ate the produce of the field, and he suckled him with honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock. Curds from the herd, and milk from the flock, with fat of lambs, rams of Bashan and goats, with the very finest of the wheat— and you drank foaming wine made from the blood of the grape..." Back to God. It was God who first called Jacob. Found him in the wilderness. Loved him. Nursed him. Cared for him. Taught him how to walk. Taught him how to live. Guided him along the way. Always protecting. Always providing.

“But Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked; you grew fat, stout, and sleek; then he forsook God who made him and scoffed at the Rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods; with

abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth..." What was the response of the people? Again, rebellion. As they grew strong and prosperous, they forgot God. They started going their own way. Doing their own thing. Forgetting God. Seeking to be their own gods. They repeated the sin of Adam and Eve. They fell for the original temptation of the evil one. They gave in, wanting to live like gods themselves.

"The Lord saw it and spurned them, because of the provocation of his sons and his daughters. And he said, 'I will hide my face from them; I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness..." So God judged them. Disciplined them in his wrath. He sought to purify and sanctify them through suffering. Through exile. Through wandering. Through defeat. He was faithful to remind them they held no power of their own. They had no strength of their own. All they had achieved had come via the mercies of God. He would not allow their illusions and self-deceptions to stand.

"For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants, when he sees that their power is gone and there is none remaining, bond or free...See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand...Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land." It took God forty years to bring his people to their knees. But the long years of wandering were not in vain. Now they knew God. Now they saw God. Now they understood God. They submitted. They surrendered. They repented. And they were ready to enter the land He had promised.

Friends, this isn't just Moses' story. It's not just Israel's story. It's my story. It's your story. And this begs a really important question...when the years grow short and your strength begins to fail and you're surrounded by your family and those you love, what song will you sing? Will you sing of God and His great faithfulness? Will you sing of His mercies and kindness? Will you declare His glory and majesty? Will you make known His mighty works to the next generation? What song will you sing?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 1-2, Luke 1:39-56

March 23, 2021
SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

Readings for today: [Joshua 1-2, Luke 1:39-56](#)

“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” (Joshua 1:8)

When I became a Christian in college, I began a mentoring relationship with a man named Don Bachman. Don was a retired IBM executive who had cut short his career to pursue a calling to mentor young college men. The impact this man has made on my life and the lives of so many I know is truly extraordinary. Despite growing up in church, I really didn’t know much about the Christian faith. I rarely paid attention in worship and the youth group I attended focused more on how to be a good person than building a personal relationship with Christ. Don changed all of that for me. He relentlessly pointed me to Jesus, constantly challenging me to stay in the Word and in prayer. He held me accountable and wasn’t afraid to get in my face when I failed. He encouraged me regularly and faithfully and I grew in my faith as a result.

Growing in Christ isn’t rocket science. It simply requires faithfulness. Don taught me how to do three things. First, he challenged me to spend time daily with God. The verse above was one of the first I memorized because it emphasizes meditation on God’s Word every day. It teaches us to immerse ourselves in the Bible. To listen for God’s voice. To hear and obey His commands. Prayerfully reading and reflecting on Scripture daily is an essential practice for everyone who would follow Christ.

Second, attend corporate worship every week. Intentionally place yourself under the teaching of God’s Word. I know many Christians who believe they don’t need the church. They believe they can practice their faith on their own. This is a borderline heresy that is completely foreign to Scripture. God calls us into community. One cannot claim to love Jesus without also loving His Bride. Yes, church can be hard. Yes, the church is full of sinners. Yes, the church can be abusive at times. I’m not minimizing these things at all. Sadly, such has always been the case. This is why God commands us to practice forgiveness and extend grace to one another. One cannot forgive in the abstract. One cannot extend grace in the abstract. One cannot love in the abstract. These things must be done face to face and that is why we must worship together.

Third, find a small group with whom you can study the Bible and simply share life. Intentionally invite other believers into your life with whom you can share your deepest, darkest secrets. As human beings, we have a great desire to be known. Building deep relationships with a few other believers who will pray for you, love you, confront you, encourage you, and hold you accountable is another essential practice if you want to grow in Christ.

Finally, I would add we all need a place to serve. A mission to give our lives to. A ministry where we can put our gifts and talents and abilities to work for God’s Kingdom. Do these three (four) things and you will grow in Christ. That’s what Don taught me and he was absolutely correct.

I have been a Christian for over twenty-five years. For more than a quarter century I have devoted my life to prayer and meditating on the Scriptures. I have endeavored to attend worship every week with my brothers and sisters in Christ in all sorts of contexts. I have always had a small group of other believers to lean on as I went through the ups and downs of life. And I have given my life in service to

my Lord and Savior. God has been faithful. The intimacy I enjoy with Him is profound. It dwarfs all other relationships in my life. And I am thankful. It's never too late to start, friends! Believe me when I say God loves to make up for lost time! If you feel disconnected or distant from God, let me encourage you to take the advice Don gave me all those years ago. Put these spiritual disciplines into practice and watch your faith begin to deepen and grow.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 3-4, Luke 1:57-80

March 25, 2021
TAKING SIDES

Readings for today: Joshua 5-6, Luke 2:1-21

“When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” And he said, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.” And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped...” (Joshua 5:13-14)

Whose side is God on? A college football team wins the national championship. Music is playing. Students rush the field. Confetti flies. A reporter catches up with the star of the game and asks, “How’d you do it?” “God was with us...” he replies. Truth? Does God really pick sides in football games?

Whose side is God on? A piece of legislation is proposed. A scandal hits the administration. The next election is on the line. Both political parties claim the sanction of God. Both claim to better represent His will. Both claim the moral high ground and argue their platform is more pleasing to God. After the results are in, the winner basks in the glory of victory often proclaiming, “God was with us tonight!” Truth? Does God take sides in our morally bankrupt political system? Does He go with the lesser of two evils?

Whose side is God on? Harsh words are said. Feelings get hurt. A relationship fractures. Friends rush to either side for support. Quick to justify the actions of the one they care about. Quick to dismiss the one who has hurt their friend and loved one. Surely God is on our side, right? Surely He has seen the hurt we’ve experienced? Truth? Does God bless our brokenness and take sides in a divorce? Or a falling out between friends?

Whose side is God on? Joshua was standing out by Jericho. Scouting the opposition. Looking up at those formidable walls. Wondering how he’s going to win a victory. Suddenly, an angel appears. Not a baby wearing diapers playing a harp. Not some precious moments cherub with the rosy cheeks. A terrifyingly powerful being wearing armor and carrying a monstrous sword. “Whose side are you on?” Joshua asks. It’s the most natural question in the world. Are you for us or against us? If you’re for us, we’ll easily win the victory. If you’re against us, we will clearly suffer defeat. But the angel hasn’t come to “take sides.” This isn’t about God blessing the work of Joshua’s hands. This is about Joshua and Israel taking the Lord’s side. Joshua falls down in worship. He humbles Himself before the angel. He submits himself to the Lord. Now he’s ready to take the city.

We spend so much time wondering whose side God is on when the reality is we should be trying to figure out how to get on His side. We talk about “being on the wrong side of history.” We fear being on the losing side of an argument or a game or an election. We struggle when we see relationships around us break up and we try to figure out who’s wrong so we can cast blame. The reality is we are always wrong. Only God is right. Only God is faithful. Only God is true. Our cause is never pure. Never truly just. Never holy. Rather than spend so much time trying to figure out how we can get God on our side, we should be spending that time in prayer and meditation on God’s Word so we can get on His side.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 7-8, Luke 2:22-52

March 26, 2021
GROWING UP JESUS

Readings for today: [Joshua 7-8, Luke 2:22-52](#)

What are your impressions of Jesus when He was young? Can you imagine Him as a baby in Mary's arms? As a toddler in Joseph's carpentry shop? Playing in the sawdust? Learning how to drive a nail? Can you see Him running around with the other boys in Nazareth? Do you think He ever felt awkward? Did He have a sense that He was not like the rest? I imagine Jesus did. I imagine He felt set apart from a very early age.

Many myths and stories have been told about the so-called "lost years" of Jesus. The years of Jesus' childhood that none of the gospel writers bother to write down. Some say Jesus went to study with the gurus of India. Some say He spent time with the Essenes and His cousin John. Still others believe He traveled to England with Joseph of Arimathea. All of these theories are completely bogus of course. Tales spun to satisfy a curiosity that simply will not accept the truth. Jesus lived a very ordinary life as the oldest son of Joseph and Mary. He apprenticed in His father's carpentry business. He studied Torah with the rabbi's. He simply "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)

Of course, there were glimpses of the extraordinary in Jesus' life. Like the time at the Temple when He was twelve years old. Joseph and Mary make their annual trek to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover. After the celebration is over, they begin to make their way home. Since villages all tended to travel together, they assumed Jesus was with their group. However, after they get a day's journey out, they realize Jesus is not with them and they panic. They rush back to Jerusalem. Search the city for three whole days only to find Him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, listening and asking questions. "Why have you treated us like this?" Why disrespect us? Why not obey us? Why did you not come when it was time to go? Their anger and frustration is palpable. Jesus responds by humbling himself and returns with them to Nazareth.

Meanwhile Mary adds this event to the list she's treasuring in her heart. Angelic visitations. Miraculous conception. Awe-inspiring birth. Shepherds, wise men, and others worshipping her little boy. Old Simeon proclaiming Him to be the Messiah. 84 year old Anna saying the most amazing things. Surely Mary must have seen something special in Jesus. Something she did not see in her other children. And now this latest episode where her twelve year old son, displaying a wisdom beyond His years, astounding the teachers of the law in the Temple with His understanding. What a privilege to have a front row seat to all that God was doing in and through her Son. To watch Him grow in wisdom and stature and favor with both God and man. Mary could not have been more proud.

So let me ask you this question...is Jesus growing on you? Do you find yourself trusting in His wisdom? Trusting in His strength? Is Jesus "increasing" in your eyes? Has He found favor with you like He has for so many billions throughout the world today?

Readings for tomorrow: [Joshua 9-10, Luke 3](#)

March 27, 2021
HOLY WAR

Readings for today: Joshua 9-10, Luke 3

The Book of Joshua contains some of the most challenging readings in all of Scripture. It forces us to grapple with the nature and character of God on a deep level. His judgments. His wrath. His command to His people to “devote destruction” entire cities and tribes. This is jihad. It is holy war. And honest readers of Scripture should find the reading deeply unsettling. My goal today is not to rescue us from such feelings but to make sure we place them in their proper cultural context. This is yet another example where the gulf between 21st century American culture and ancient near east culture is vast and almost insurmountable. First, let’s get a sampling of the texts in front of us...

“As for Makkedah, Joshua captured it on that day and struck it, and its king, with the edge of the sword. He devoted to destruction every person in it; he left none remaining. And he did to the king of Makkedah just as he had done to the king of Jericho.” (Joshua 10:28)

“And the Lord gave Libnah also and its king into the hand of Israel. And he struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it. And he did to its king as he had done to the king of Jericho.” (Joshua 10:30)

“And the Lord gave Lachish into the hand of Israel, and he captured it on the second day and struck it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it, as he had done to Libnah.” (Joshua 10:32)

“And they captured Eglon on that day, and struck it with the edge of the sword. And he devoted every person in it to destruction that day, as he had done to Lachish.” (Joshua 10:35)

“So Joshua struck the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings. He left none remaining, but devoted to destruction all that breathed, just as the Lord God of Israel commanded.” (Joshua 10:40)

Herem is a notoriously difficult Hebrew word to translate. Roughly it means to “put something/someone under the ban” or “devote to destruction.” Less an act of war, it was more about ritual cleansing. It reflects God’s righteous, holy, and terrifying judgment against idolatry. Israel was His instrument. Chosen to enact this judgment against the Canaanites. And it was a brutal as it sounds. It was jihad. Holy war. Yahweh-sanctioned genocide. And we cannot - again, if we’re being honest - shrink back from the horror of it all.

Too many preachers attempt to justify God’s actions here. Soften them to make them seem more palatable. Glorify them as if this was the set of an epic movie scene. I will do no such thing. What I will say - and what we must grasp - is that Herem is fully in line with God’s eternal character. It is who God has revealed Himself to be. A God of righteousness and judgment and holiness. A God who hates evil and sin. A God who literally fights to eradicate these things from the earth. (i.e. “throwing large stones from heaven...”) And we want God to be this kind of God. We need God to be this kind of God! How else will things be made right? How else will judgment come on 20th century evils like Nazism, Stalinism, or the killing fields of Pol Pot? Don’t we demand God to be a God of justice when faced with these atrocities? Didn’t we, on some level, consider ourselves to be acting on God’s behalf...in service to His righteous cause...when we stormed the beaches of Normandy? Or defeated the “evil

empire" of the Soviet Union? Were not those actions a form of jihad? Holy war against an unholy enemy?

But how does this God square with the God we see revealed in the New Testament? The God of love Jesus spoke so eloquently about? Here it is essential we remember how God defines love. It is not an abstract category or warm fuzzy feeling in the heart. It is not soft and sentimental. No, God defines love as sacrifice. Specifically, the sacrifice of His Only Begotten Son. "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10) What we have to understand is the only reason we get to receive the grace of God...the mercy of God...the love of God...is because of what Jesus Christ endured on our behalf. The Father essentially put His own Son under the ban. Devoted Him to destruction so that we may live. This, friends, is the love of God! The Father pouring out His righteous wrath and judgment on the Son. The Son willingly offering Himself up as the sacrifice for all humanity's sin. Enduring unimaginable pain. Unimaginable suffering. Separation from His Father. Death. Hell. God descending to the uttermost darkness. It was without a doubt the most horrible act of Herem in the history of the world. More terrible than genocide is deicide. God allowing Himself to be murdered by His own beloved creation.

All this He did for us. All this He did for the world. All this He did to cleanse the earth of the powers of sin and idolatry and evil and death. 1 John 2:2 says, "Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." God is the same yesterday, today and forever, friends! There is perfect congruence between the God of the Old and the God of the New Testaments. He acts in perfect concert with Himself. Always within His character and nature. He never deviates. As the old hymn suggests, "There is no shadow or turning with Thee! Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not. As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be!"

Does this make our readings any easier? No. Does it help to suggest that some of this is clearly hyperbole? Maybe. It's clear from later reading in Scripture that all the people Israel was commanded to destroy were, well, not destroyed. And what about the innocent? Why are they killed along with the guilty? Here we have to be careful about layering our 21st century assumptions onto the text. According to Scripture no one is innocent. We are all born in a state of guilt and sin. The culture of the ancient Canaanites was rife with violence like child sacrifice. Nothing innocent about it. Friends, God always speaks to us in a language we can understand. He meets us where we are, in the cultural waters in which we swim, speaking to us out of the thought world we inhabit. This was true for ancient Israel and it is true for us today and it is absolutely critical to keep in mind as we read these ancient words.

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 11-14, Luke 4:1-41

March 29, 2021
THE FAME OF JESUS

Readings for today: Joshua 11-14, Luke 4:1-41

“And reports about him went out into every place in the surrounding region...when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.” (Luke 4:37, 40-41)

In recent years, my heart has been growing increasingly unsettled. I have this sense that a tsunami of pain is about to hit our shores, if it hasn't already. All around us, the labor pains of a new world are beginning. Our children are losing any sense of healthy identity. Mental health crises are on the rise. Suicide rates are trending upward. Substance abuse is skyrocketing. Our culture is filled with an increasing amount of rage and anger. Death threats are now common against those with whom we disagree. It seems like everything is taken to the extreme. It makes for a very hostile and dangerous environment especially for those living in marginalized communities. Add in the strain of a global pandemic along with the economic chaos it has caused and it begs the question...where do we go from here? Are we doomed to live the rest of our lives under threat? Constantly drawing our relational boundaries ever tighter in order to protect ourselves and those we love or perhaps withdrawing altogether? Surely there has to be a different way?

First century culture in Palestine was little different than our own. Pharisees. Saduccees. Essenes. Herodians. Roman collaborators. It was a divided society where different religious/political factions dotted the landscape. Each having an agenda. Each vying for power. Each seeking supremacy so they could eradicate their opposition. Each seeking to bring about the Kingdom of God in their own strength and according to their own wisdom. This was the world into which Jesus was born. This was the world in which Jesus launched his ministry. And what a ministry it was! So different than all the rest! Jesus welcomed the outcast. Ate with sinners. Spent time with the ritually unclean. He lifted up women. He cleansed lepers. He restored the isolated and lonely to community. As his fame grew, many people came from all over to bring him their sick. Their diseased. Their hurting. Their wounded. The demon-possessed were set free. He healed all their afflictions. And this only drew more hurting people to him. God was glorified. The Kingdom drew near. Salvation came to so many. All in the name of Jesus.

What if the church took a similar stance today? What if the church made it her aim to serve her community? To share the GOOD news of the gospel? Bring healing in Jesus' name? Freedom in Jesus' name? Hope in Jesus' name? What if the church was known as a refuge? A place of safety and security amidst the turmoil and violence of our world? What if the church was known for love rather than hate? What if she were known for grace rather than judgment? Faithfulness rather than hypocrisy? What if we made space for people to come as they are? Wherever that may be? What if we committed to walk beside anyone...anytime...anywhere...for as long as they will let us? Would not the fame of Jesus increase? Would not people be drawn to the care and comfort we provide? What if we laid aside our agenda? Our internal ideological squabbles? Our insider theological tussles and instead linked arms to serve? What if we stopped stabbing our wounded in the back and instead embraced the Jesus way of life? What if we put aside our need for political/social/cultural influence and power and instead sought to prayerfully engage across these various spectrums? What if our posture were humility rather than pride? Peace rather than war? Kindness rather than outrage? Service to others rather than to self?

Friends, true followers of Jesus are known more by what they're for than what they're against. Jesus was certainly against many things in his day but he was known more for his love and compassion and ministry among the poor. The outcast. The sinner. Thankfully there are many churches who follow his lead. What about you? What about your church? How can you represent Christ in your community more faithfully today?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 15-17, Luke 4:42-5:26

March 30, 2021
FINISHING STRONG

Readings for today: [Joshua 15-17, Luke 4:42-5:26](#)

The key is not how we start the race but how we finish. I remember running in my first 5K when I was a young boy with my brothers. It was the Denver Symphony Run in downtown Denver. I remember the day was dreary and rainy. I remember pushing my way to the front of the start line with my brothers. I remember the starting gun going off and the three of us sprinting to the front of the pack. We led the race for about the first 50 yards. You probably can imagine what happened next. We spent the next three miles alternating between jogging and walking as we struggled to finish. It was a painful experience.

Israel sprints out of the gates in their conquest of the Promised Land. They win victory after victory. Joshua's leadership is exceptional. His tactics strong. His strategic decisions brilliant. Always in the right place at the right time. Anticipating. Attacking and counter-attacking. It reminds me of the movie, When We Were Soldiers, and how Colonel Hal Moore seemed to make every right move. The first campaign comes to an end. Israel is now firmly and deeply entrenched. They are the new power to be reckoned with in the region. But Joshua cannot be everywhere all at once so now it is up to each tribe to go out and secure their allotment. They are to go out with the same boldness and courage that so marked Joshua and complete the conquest. They are to place their trust in God and His ability to fight on their behalf. But they fail. They fall short. They lose heart. So the Jebusites remain in the territory of Judah. The Gezerites remain in the territory of Ephraim. Other Canaanites remain in the territory of Manasseh. As they struggle to uproot those already living in the land, they start to grow afraid. Afraid the military might of those who oppose them. The iron chariots and those fortified in the hill country. They are afraid they won't succeed. They take their eyes off of Yahweh. They forget His faithfulness. They give into their fear and the conquest is never fully completed.

Finishing is hard. How many folks start this race we call the Christian faith only to wither along the way? Their dreams turning to despair as they battle the inevitable disappointments along the way. Their hopes shattered by the trials and tragedies and trauma that often happen. Their initial love quenched by suffering and pain and heartache. Jesus knows how hard this life can be. He knows how hard it is to hold onto faith when it feels like the whole world is falling apart. Most importantly, He knows the fickle nature of our hearts. He even tells a story about it. There was once a farmer who went out to plant his seeds. Some seeds fell on the hard path. Some seeds fell among the rocks. Some seeds fell among the weeds. Other seeds in good soil. Each tried to take root. The seeds on the path had nowhere to go so they were eaten by the birds. The seeds among the rocks had no place to put down roots so they sprung up quickly but then died. The seeds that fell among the weeds also sprung up but were eventually choked off. Finally, the seed that fell on good soil produced a bountiful harvest. Are you allowing the Spirit to till the soil of your heart? Are you allowing the Spirit to provide all the nutrients you need to make your heart a welcoming place for the gospel? Have the seeds of the gospel found purchase in your heart? Or did they spring up only to die for lack of roots? Did the cares and the worries of this world choke off your faith? Or are you producing a harvest of righteousness? Are you finishing the race?

Readings for tomorrow: [Joshua 18-19, Luke 5:27-39](#)

March 31, 2021
LEVI'S FEAST

Readings for today: [Joshua 18-19, Luke 5:27-39](#)

“Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.” (Luke 5:31-32) This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It's one I take literally mainly because I used to be that sick person in need of healing. I was a borderline addict in need of freedom. I was a broken man needing to be made whole by Jesus. It's probably why I try to spend so much time with lost people. Listening. Loving. Living life alongside them for as long as they let me. I frankly don't care if they are rich or poor. Republican or Democrat. Powerful or powerless. Gay or straight. Black, white, or brown. I don't care what language they speak or culture they come from or nation they represent. My calling is simply to meet them where they are. Serve them in whatever way I can. And trust the Spirit to minister in and through me to their deepest needs.

Levi is sitting in his tax booth. Most likely alone as tax collectors were some of the most hated people at the time. They were seen as traitors to their nation. Collaborators with Rome. Men who profited off the exploitation of their own people. Most people would have given Levi a wide berth. They would have avoided him like the plague. Jesus does not. Jesus marches right up to him and says, “Follow Me.” I cannot begin to fathom the reaction of the other disciples. Especially Simon the Zealot. Before Simon became a follower of Jesus, he belonged to a group of people who literally would knife guys like Levi in the streets. He had dedicated his entire life to the eradication of such traitors to Israel. Now they would become brothers.

It's a stunning invitation. One that Levi embraces. Not only that but he wants all his friends and colleagues to know why he's left his tax booth. Why he's put aside his wealth and power to follow an itinerant preacher. Why he's given up his sinful ways. So he throws a feast. It's a motley group of people to say the least. Tax collectors. Sinners. The dregs of society. Jesus loves it. He “reclines at table” with them meaning He makes Himself one of them. Sharing a meal in 1st century Middle Eastern culture was incredibly significant. It meant identifying with and becoming connected to those you ate with which is why the Pharisees go nuts. They can't believe a rabbi of Jesus' stature would lower Himself in such a way.

They simply don't understand Jesus. And frankly, many Christians today don't understand Jesus either. Philippians 2:5-11 tells us Jesus emptied Himself in order to become one with us. Emptied Himself of all His divine glory and power to become utterly dependent on His Father. He emptied Himself to become a human being. He emptied Himself further to become a servant of humanity. He emptied Himself completely by dying on a cross for humanity. Perhaps most stunning of all, He emptied Himself for me. This kenosis or “divine emptying” remains one of the most glorious yet mysterious aspects of the gospel. And it is the source of our salvation.

So let me ask you a question...how are you emptying yourself in order to follow Jesus? What are you relinquishing? What are you sacrificing? What are you giving up? Do you find yourself more at home with sinners or do you only relate to saints? Do you find your heart broken for the outcasts and marginalized in our society or do you mainly spend time with those who look like you? Act like you? Spend money like you? Would you have gone to Levi's feast or would you have grumbled like the Pharisees? Are you willing to risk your reputation to build relationships with those who do not believe so that they might find salvation?

Readings for tomorrow: Joshua 20-22, Luke 6:1-26